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Towards Buen Vivir: Brian Massumi's "The Power at the End of the Economy"

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however, and even those who never heard of Brian Massumi would agree with Deleuze’s notion that capitalism is itself mad:

Everything is rational in capitalism, except capital or capitalism itself. The stock market is certainly rational; one can understand it, study it, the capitalists know how to use it, and yet it is completely delirious, it’s mad. It is in this sense that we say: the rational is always the rationality of the irrational.... so what is rational in a society? It is—the interests being defined in the framework of this society—the way people pursue those interests, their realization, but down below, there are desires, investment of desire that cannot be confused with the investment of interest, and on which interests depend in their determination and distribution: an enormous flux, all kinds of libidinal-unconscious flows that make up the delirium of this society...

For his part, Massumi puts it somewhat differently, trying to unturn the screw and the screwed. This irrationality that is at the “end” of the economy is best understood, if we are going to be able to intervene in political life in any meaningful way, as “the affective arts.” Indeed, as both Massumi and Deleuze suggest, the rationalities of economies, institutions, and even organisms, are emergent from a swirling chaos of movement, what in the quote above Deleuze calls society’s delirium, that pre-exist those rationalities. These movements are not extinguished, however, with the emergence of the institution or subject. They exist within the object after it emerges or is birthed. The forces at work in the fertilization of an embryo that give rise to a human form, for instance, do not die once an organ is developed; they continue to traverse the body throughout its historical existence. In an organism, these movements manifest themselves as intensities and become known to us through emotion, but they are not the same as emotion, for they continue to move and exist in subterranean, unconscious ways, traversing our bodies outside awareness. Sensing intensities on an economic or global scale may seem more difficult because of the difference of scale, but in fact that distance of perspective as well as the cultural accumulation of knowledge reveals that whenever we talk about the madness of capitalism we’re talking about intensity. There is both neither a shortage of capitalism’s madness nor, as the Occupy and other related movements have shown, of its talk. We need more and better talk, and Massumi’s effort to draw our attention to this more microscopic level is a positive, even necessary step towards taking into

account the unseen and poorly understood positive energies that sustain movements and uprisings.

Intensity may name the force of the subterranean movement. Extensity, the movement as it escapes “bodily integuments.” Affect the residue and registration of intensity as it passes or is blocked. Emotion the feelings experienced in the body. Among other things, rationality is all of the dastardly things we do in trying to bend intensity and affect to our will. Will? Power? Their humble beginnings have intensities too. It’s a sort of strange paradox, but whatever we do know is that we have a billion tiny openings through which intensities enter, forming our dreams, emotions, drives, ambitions, and desires. We like to believe our will is our own. Such an idea soothes us. Soothing. That’s an affect too.

So for Massumi one cannot think about what is apparent without recognizing that it is part of a larger affective field, but this larger field is also smaller in scale than the individual. Citing Karen Barad, Massumi holds to the individual as the smallest unit because it houses the swirling mixture of intensities within, and it’s to that scale to which Massumi plumbs. Massumi focuses on the infra-economic or infra-individual, or following Deleuze, just “dividual,” an “intensity mixing and swirling with all the other dividuals in a body.” The infra-individual is what Massumi calls the “end” of the economy. When you’re on your daily jog, it’s when the ocean tells you you’ve reached your turnaround point. What this means is essentially that the level of the infra-individual is the site for revolutionary change. Any one person can be duped into thinking that their daily routine is in their self-interest, but perhaps they don’t recognize that their job they had on an assembly line manufacturing cars resonates with contaminated water. It happens all the time. Trump is surging! The intensities that enter as affect from the socius give shape to capitalism’s perverted demands for how one is forced into self preservation, but Massumi wants to emphasize that that is as deep as they can go, “In the sense that when system wide perturbations blow down its hole, they can go no further. They have nowhere else to go to but to turn around and blow back out.” Although it is not Massumi’s, you can see the slogan forming: “Change the Intensities! Change the World!”

To get at the power of intensity, Massumi’s main objective is to unfold how affect can be understood in its tension with rationality. Massumi draws on

two experiments conducted by researchers working in the burgeoning field of nonconscious studies. In the first experiment, researchers asked participants to choose between a variety of teas and jams based on their taste preferences; no two tastes were similar, each one easily distinguishable from the others, such as the difference between apple-cinnamon and grapefruit. After the subjects had tasted and selected their preferences, the researchers surreptitiously switched their preferred flavor with another that was nothing like it! The subjects were then asked to take a second taste and to explain why they enjoyed that flavor the most. “Two thirds of the times the experimental subjects did not notice the switch.” Why did the subjects provide reasons for their preferences for items they didn’t prefer? The subjects were poised for the second taste to match the first and that expectation, as an affect, was powerful enough to override a sensory experience. “The experimental subjects, poised for a taste, tasted what they were poised for.”

In a more consequential experiment, researchers asked subjects to take a questionnaire that listed various moral and political convictions concerning what is the correct action of behavior in relation to civil authority or whether laws are important in light of the suffering of others. As in the first experiment, the questionnaires were surreptitiously switched. Not only did the researchers return completed questionnaires to the participants they did not fill out, but the new ones contained answers that were diametrically opposed to the originals. The subjects were then asked to provide explanations for these new answers that were antithetical to their own. Again, the majority did not notice the switch and did as they were asked, offering explanations to principles they did not originally support.

Incredulous, no doubt. Shouldn’t we be alarmed? Doesn’t fascism succeed through the exploitation of just such phenomena? Perhaps, but then, while we should be alarmed, we are hardly surprised. Our intuition tells us that this is part of what it means to be human in the neoliberal condition. What Massumi draws our attention to, then, is the “experiential plasticity” that overdetermines any personal preference as having the power to determine action. When the subject reads a statement that s/he did not originally believe and is asked to justify that position, the two poles of rationality (the original position) and affect (the expectation) are suspended, either with the potential to emerge. The respondent can say, “No, that’s not my position. You played a trick on me!” Or the respondent can justify the position s/he did not

originally accept. The point is not whether they passed the test correctly. The point is that the switcharoo creates a stimulation where the specificity of rationality is put into play with the field of expectation. Until the subject chooses, they are both held in suspension. The experiments open the doorway for thinking about what, not who, is at work behind human agency.

What is not lost in the experiments is the subjects's perceived freedom in making a choice, although in actuality the choice has been secretly swiped. In earlier times or in other places, in despotic regimes for instance, this suspension could become coopted and "hardened" towards one pole by the social field so that the perceived freedom associated with choosing would be extinguished. In such a condition, cruelty becomes more visible and the intuitive need to feel as though one has a choice is disregarded if not erased. Harsh oppression leads to revolt, and soft, insidious oppression leads to compliance. It is in this paradoxical gray area where the coercion of capital thrives. This soft power is evident in the experiments above, at the various levels of control in the environments of work, school, and other forms of institutional life. It is "sewed to the wind" through communication networks, where as one listens, watches, clicks, or comments, one has the sensation of decisions being made through them. Even when confronted, in earnest, that our choice has been switched before our eyes, that Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton have lied through their teeth again and again. And yet again....

We allow the lies to pass. Powers are at work in the affective relational field that lead us to allow the specificity of truth to transform at will so long as we can continue to hold on to the perception of freedom. They lied to us. We know! No matter!

But it does matter, as revealed by cynicism's growth in the social body. To counter this power does not mean one should trump the rationality pole over the other as though a reliance of using reason would somehow make our choices clear. Doing so would merely repeat the enlightenment mistake that directs us to live by rationality alone and fails to cultivate the nonrational tendencies operating in and across all scales of the individual and the social body. In other words, the suspension of the two poles can be used for more than herding sheep. If the affective field can be used as a dupe, we must recognize that the soft power of affectivity isn't the sole province of capital.

What is one to do? For Massumi, denizens of neoliberal life must “tend to their tendencies.”

In the third part, entitled “Beyond Self Interest,” Massumi unpacks the tendencies to which we must attend—sympathy, contrast, contrariety, compossibility, creativity, satisfaction, interest, pleasure, taste—in order to work towards an affective, aesthetic politics. Most importantly, Massumi settles on Spinozan joy: Spinoza’s term is best:

joy. Joy is much more than pleasure. It registers the invention of new passions, tendencies, and action-paths that expand life’s powers, flush with perception. It registers becoming. It is an immediate thinking-feeling power of existence, in passionate intensification and tendential increase.... It is not an emotion. It is a vitality effect.

It is around the vitality-effect of joy that Massumi wants to build a politics of affect or dividualism in order to counter the politics of neoliberal individualism. But this book is nothing if not conversational, meandering among related discussions as though a group of some of the most interesting thinkers gathered to build a politics around a Spinozan joy. He contrasts his politics of joy and affect so that it does not get reduced or conflated with notions of “quality of life” or especially, “Happiness Economics,” the latter of which is in itself a reaction to the cynicism and depression commonly felt in the social body. Happiness economics tries to make the best out of a dire situation by aligning itself with capitalism’s orientation to the future. Because capital seeks to profit on today’s investment, its business is the process of converting qualitative surplus value of life today into tomorrow’s quantitative surplus value of profit. Give up your enjoyment today so you can be wealthy tomorrow. Insofar as capital attempts and succeeds at capturing the future so too is our happiness captured by capital’s processes of conversion. Health, friendship, and love are *quantifiably* more valuable than the amounts of money we make or the economic conditions under which we struggle. As such, cultivating these pleasures can help us accept the conditions of powerlessness over which we have little or any control. Flip the script: rather than being unhappy today and wealthy tomorrow, you can be poor tomorrow and happy today! The problem in this scenario, of course, is that friendship, health, and love have been narrowed to calculable spheres of existence, and, as such, they offer a false choice, doing little to counter the

anxiety and cynicism that have become “the emblem of our times.” Rather than a happiness economics, Massumi responds by saying why not let the pleasures of love and friendship become the background to an active politics that takes quality not calculation as its central concern in order to actuate and spread joy through the relational field. Friendship and love aren’t tools to deal with a hopeless condition of “passively surfing the waves”; in the protest-event, they are powers that can “make a splash.”

Change the intensities, change the world...

The final pages of the slim, dense volume discuss the “politics of intensive contagion,” walking readers through various discussions of affect as it works transindividually. Like a sneeze or a laugh, “it” happens in a flash. The distances can be geographical but are not limited to being so. Affect can jump across age, class, gender, religion, and species. It can skip over local intermediaries and catch flame elsewhere. Its power can also be archived through media which allows its temporal delay, all of which helps to show that the contagion of the event unfolds across its own time and rhythm, separate and apart from the clock-time of schedules, calendars, and capital. It re-orient individuals with the speed of slowness, the time of the sun, what in relation to Occupy Wall Street, Massumi calls “the slow-mo expansion of potential.” The “passionate-protests” coming unexpected from a trigger such as Bouazizi in Tunisia are not isolated incidents, for the global field has been primed in such a way that protest events are entangled with one another, not unlike quantum entanglements, but not so that the way one protest turns the others follow, but that such movements are produced through difference:

The event contagion did not produce a spreading conformation. Quite the contrary, what propagated were differencings. Each event along the way, in addition to being stoked by affective strike of the signs of the passion of their other trans-ing itself in at a distance, was also infra-stoked by an event occurring immanently to a more restrained field of relation: infra-trans coconditioning.

Surely, these events perish. They have a life-cycle; they are uprisings against the steady backdrop of an axiomatic machine that recaptures them, but the stirrings persist as “the transindividual contagion” is endowed with a “virtual immortality.” Intensities remain in reserve and later become reactivated in

multiple, unpredictable manifestations. Some are conscious of their resistance to systemic exploitation and corruption, but others (Tea partiers becoming Trump supporters for instance) have been primed by capital and the media differently. Intensities will not die; they are continually emergent, so long as the conditions and particular primings make the relational field conducive for the forward and backchannels of intensity.

Massumi concludes by raising the questions that beg to be addressed through what has been a descriptive, not prescriptive volume, and he ends, correctly (in my view) by resisting such a call. How can a relational field for the cultivation of intensities be built? It is not as though Massumi elides the question but that there is “no general answer.” “How do you learn to self-prime in this direction, in cross-sensitive collaboration with primings at large in the relational field, given the limits of reflective reason?” “In short, how do you machine transindividual autonomies of decision, given their ... autonomy? And in a way as resistant as possible to capitalist recapture?”

There cannot be a general answer because the nature of this power is both elusive to reason and specific to local conditions as they relate to the larger cultural milieu. One of the Zapatista slogans (and the title to a documentary film), *Todos Somos Marcos*, resonates throughout Mexico and even across the globe, but the conditions for building new worlds within the old vary from place to place. Still, this does not mean that “settlements” cannot be developed that seek to nurture spaces for release, proliferation, and contagion. Oaxaca. “There is no way around and trial and error approach.” These events can happen when they are least expected. Standing Rock. There is no reason to wait for the right time. Rojava. They take place on the smallest and most modest scales. Cochabamba. In the end, writes Massumi, “make joy.” Position that making in relation to others and let that become your relation to the future. *Buen Vivir*.

Three closely related points come to mind: First, this book runs the risk of effectively leaving the neo-liberal field unscathed and relying upon the current economic system to promulgate its own resistances. This is, as Massumi is aware, what capital does extremely well, especially under the conditions of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the axiomatic. Capital both manufactures its own dissent and effectively recaptures it. The uprisings of 2011-2012 were so many global wildfires that needed to burn themselves out.

Their virtual dimensions most certainly remain and their reactualizations continue to occur (Black Lives Matter, Oaxaca 2016, and so on), but as the opening experiments show, capitalism is uncanny in its ability to use the affective field to its own benefit. Che Guevara T-shirt anyone? Clearly, I'm falling into my own cynicism here, but if we are to accept this book's hope, examples of the spread of joy taking place in uprisings across the globe are needed.

Second, Massumi limits his analysis and creative fabulation to the level of the subject, something graspable and accessible, but the downside is that the volume follows a familiar model: empire on the one level and on the other an (infra) individual. Massumi explains that neoliberalism operates through what he calls "ontopower," a power that has its origins in libidinal affectivity (D&G's desire), and yet combatting it through an affective field of joy may render differences in scale arguably irrelevant. As mentioned above, he does discuss contagion, how intensities can become extensive, moving from the infra-individual outwards towards the group or from the group towards new members, but the volume would benefit by discussing the relational field of affect across the flows of capital as they play out in groups. That, or perhaps it's better not to think about changing the world at all. The better part of me sees Massumi's work as interested not in changing or reversing the neoliberal course, but instead to use joy as did the Zapatistas—to create new worlds inside the old.

The third thought follows from the second. Missing from the discussion is any historical discussion of affective collectivities beyond 2011-2012, though Massumi does engage, if ever so briefly, a mentioning of vanguard Marxism and the less academic, more clearly understood anarchic uprisings. Perhaps most startlingly, Massumi does not engage in any discussions of autonomous collectivities that have formed for themselves alternative practices of self-governing, direct action, or collective decision making. I can only speculate, but is this lack a symptom of being over-reliant on the European tradition? If there's anything to finding joy in uprising and struggle, today's exemplars are to be found in the South. Take the doctrine of *Buen Vivir* (the good life) for instance, a world view that has become institutionalized in Ecuador and Bolivia, of which we in the North hear so little. Grounded and inspired by pre-Colombian indigenous societies, *Buen Vivir* is an application on a national scale of participatory democracy, where

constitutional mechanisms have been put in place that remove corporations from politics (lobbying is outlawed) and subordinate elected officials. These constitutions also give Nature the same rights to life that are guaranteed citizens. These systems are far from perfect, and their ideals are difficult to sustain in a global environment, but they hold both theoretical and practical treasures for those looking for fitting exemplars to advance the kind of theoretical apparatus present in *The Power at the End of the Economy*.

While these reflections might help to make the volume more complete, it would be a mistake for this book to be ignored by those interested in postcapitalist politics. Just as easily as the remarks that can be made for failing to engage specifics concerning actual practices, projects, and movements, so too can the reverse arguments be made against those who write tirelessly about injustices in so many political spheres too numerous to mention (incarceration, gender inequality, housing, etc.) without ever engaging the powers of affect. While there are often discussions of various emotions of individuals responding to destructive qualities of the neoliberal condition, rarely does one find such nuanced understandings of the virtual operations that pre- and exceed human subjectivity and agency.

Comments



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