(In)habiting the Present

How might we understand the links among affect, habit, temporality and social transformation – and what might such a critical investigation imply for the ‘here and now’ of cultural and social theory and praxis?¹

Recent (as well as much earlier) work in Cultural Studies, and related fields, has explored the vital role certain affects, emotions and feelings might play in catalyzing radical social and political change. Such narratives of ‘affective revolution’ are often rich, important and inspiring. My sense, however, is that some of these analyses may actually do more to obscure than to enrich our understanding of how ‘progressive’ change might occur and endure in a given context (while side-stepping the vexing question of how to evaluate the concept of social ‘progress’ itself in the current socio-political landscape).

As such, this short piece is animated by the following key questions: Can critical work on habit provide different, and potentially more fruitful, conceptual terrain for understanding the complexities of social stasis and transformation at the current cultural, political and socio-economic conjuncture? And might it do so in ways that enable a reconfiguring of dominant binaries of cognition/embodiment, individual/environment, and human/non-human, while troubling linear notions of time?

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Around this time last year, I finished writing a monograph, Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy (2014a). In the book, I wanted to try to think more critically about some of the very affirmative ways that empathy is called for as an affective balm or solution to all manner

¹ This piece draws from talks I have given over the past year at ‘Rupture Dynamics: Interrogating the Here and Now of Cultural Studies’ in Konstanz, Germany, at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Chicago, USA, and at ‘Theorising Global Politics Affectively’ at the Gender Institute, LSE, UK. I have also adapted some material from my recent article, ‘Cultural Theory as Mood Work’, New Formations, 82: 49-65.
of transnational social, cultural, political and economic problems, conflicts and grievances – whether in Obama’s political speeches and memoirs, international development training programmes or particular strands of feminist and anti-racist theory. I also wanted to explore how we might move beyond, and productively scramble, dominant liberal, neoliberal and neo-colonial articulations of empathy as an imaginative act of ‘putting oneself in the shoes of another’, to consider a wider range of practices of affecting and being affected at the intersection of postcoloniality and neoliberalism.

Something that has stayed with me from this project, and kept me thinking over the last 12 months, is how much of the literature that links emotion with social justice and transformation invests in the power of empathy to spur a kind of affective revolution at the level of the subject or the collective. The idea here is that, through being made to feel deep empathy (whether this is through government officials being exposed to the reality of poverty in the Global South through ‘immersions’ programs in international development, or by privileged white university students reading African American slave narratives), subjects or groups will be so profoundly affected that we will never be the same again: their views of the world will be radically transformed, as will their behavior and actions, in the interests of greater social justice... whatever ‘social justice’ might mean in a given context (Pedwell, 2012a, b, 2013, 2014a).

Clearly, this is a narrative of progressive social change that depends on a radical affective break, a rupture of consciousness that acts as a catalyst for creating personal and collective transformation. Yet is this how ‘progressive’ change (or indeed any enduring social change) works? Does such a radical break or a revolution of the subject at the cognitive/psychic level provide the basis for sustained behavioral, institutional or environmental transformation at a deep embodied and structural level? Or is such affective change more likely to be fleeting, disorienting or, at best, productive of an individualist mode of affective politics divorced from wider structural relations of power?

With respect to questions of temporality, it is worth pointing out that such seductive narratives of social transformation via the affective charge of empathy are often teleological: they imagine a telos or end point at which social and political tensions will be eased and antagonisms rectified (Pedwell, 2013, 2014). As such, the focus in these affective accounts is never really on life in the present, but rather always on a better future on the horizon.
These observations concerning liberal narratives of affective social transformation have led me to an interest in the concept ‘habit’. Might critical work on habit offer a different, and potentially productive, conceptual topography for making sense of the affective and material nature of social and political continuity and change today?

Intellectual concern with ‘habit’ has a long history – from the philosopher and psychologist William James’ observation that we are all merely “bundles of habits” (1914/2004: 1), to Michel Foucault’s account of discipline and governmentality, to Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of socio-economic class and habitus, to Judith Butler’s examination of gender, performativity and repetition. There has also been more recent interest in the potentiality of habit in Cultural Studies, Geography, and Sociology, including a special section of Cultural Geographies (Dewsbury and Bissell, eds., 2015) and a special issue of Body and Society (Bennett et al., eds., 2012), which have both been particularly interested in the legacy of habit in continental theory, namely the work of the French philosopher Felix Ravaisson, (2008 [1838]), and its resonances with the more recent work of Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson and others.

While drawing on these rich analyses of habit, I am also keen, in the wider project from which this piece draws, to foreground the work of contemporary queer, feminist and postcolonial thinkers, who tend to get sidelined in these debates, but have quite a lot to say about the contemporary socio-political and onto-epistemological salience of habit and forms of habituation – as Simon Strick’s engaging contribution to this blog, ‘How do you live: From construction to habitation’, aptly illustrates.

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In pursing the contemporary social and political potentialities of habit, I want to begin with the work of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who had a particular interest in the affective habits of critical theory; that is, in what kind of analysis has become habitual in politically-engaged, left-leaning cultural and social theory.

In her discussion of the dynamics of feeling at stake in what she, drawing on the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, called “paranoid” and “reparative” modes of interpretation, Sedgwick (1996, 2003) was interested in how we have come to understand politically-engaged forms of critical theory as requiring a mode of critique premised on suspicion and paranoia. Paranoia, for
Sedgwick, is a style of interpretation characterised by an implicit assumption that we know what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for us – and social and political life more generally – and that we therefore can split knowledges and practices into those likely to work in the interests of ‘social justice’ and those likely to work against it. Paranoid reading is thus fuelled by a state of constant anxiety and alertness focused on detecting and exposing ‘the bad’ (i.e. pernicious modes of power, oppression, regulation, violence, essentialism and stereotyping) in the belief that making what is bad visible is what is most required to eradicate or change it (see also, Wiegman, 2014, Stacey, 2014; Pedwell, 2014b).

Drawing on Sedgwick’s analysis, we might then say that the narrative of self and social transformation via the affective charge of empathy I outlined at the beginning of this essay participates in a “paranoid” understanding of the dynamics of social and political change. That is, it assumes that progressive transformation is precipitated (and perhaps even guaranteed) through acts of exposure that produce greater affective and social knowledge. Contrary to this, however, Sedgwick argues that generating more, or more accurate, knowledge about a particular phenomenon does not necessarily do anything, or at least does not necessarily do what we think or hope it will do.

Yet, importantly, Sedgwick’s argument was not that we should (or could) do away with so-called “paranoid” modes of interpretation. Rather, she was concerned to highlight how, when “understood to be a mandatory injunction” (2003: 130), this particular style of critical analysis habitually marginalises other ways of doing cultural and social theory – especially, recourse to what she called “reparative” analysis.

Scholars have interpreted Sedgwick’s call for reparative reading practices in a variety of different ways – most commonly perhaps as imperative to approach our research objects with an affective orientation of nurturance, love and a desire to provide sustenance, rather than paranoia and suspicion. Yet I find most compelling and productive Robyn Wiegman’s (2014) and Jackie Stacey’s (2014) readings of reparation as an interpretive practice concerned with inhabiting ambivalence, or, in Sedgwick’s words, with accepting “the simple, foundational, authentically very difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level” (2011: 136). As an affective and analytical practice, inhabiting ambivalence requires relinquishing certainty and the possibility of predication, and thus being open to the possibility of surprise and change.
This emphasis on inhabiting ambivalence as a means to become better attuned to social and political complexity and change resonates with the recent work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

In her book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (2012), which discusses the fate of the Humanities in the midst of the damaging shift from public education to ‘the neoliberal university’, Spivak suggests that both understanding and changing complicated neoliberal structures, processes and atmospheres requires something more than exposing the ways in which they are pernicious and damaging or responding to them with an affirmative effort to provide sustenance.

Like Sedgwick, Spivak is critical of the assumption that the intellectual and political work of consciousness-raising via exposure is a sufficient or necessary catalyst to progressive social transformation. What is required to generate material and political change beyond “the drama of exposure”, Spivak argues, is “patient epistemological care” that cultivates our ability to think, feel and respond ethically at the most deepest levels of embodied being (2012: 519).

It is in this context that Spivak calls for the continuing development of what she refers to as “ethical reflexes”. In its juxtaposition of the politico-ethical and the biological-material, the concept of ethical reflexes points provocatively to the deep, embodied nature of the change in ourselves – and our habits – that she suggests is necessary to make meaningful changes in our world(s).

Importantly, for Spivak, ethical reflexes are not pre-programmed to make us respond to others or our world(s) in any particular or predictable ways. Rather, once cultivated over time, they might make more automatic qualities such as intellectual curiosity, openness to discovery, an ability to sense difference and change, and a capacity to respond imaginatively and critically to the ambivalence of power. Moreover, Spivak suggests, it is precisely through processes of inhabiting ambivalence and complexity – which are enabled by the Humanities via practices of close reading, textual interpretation and linguistic and cultural translation – that such ethical reflexes can be honed.
It is through the ongoing development of ethical reflexes, Spivak contends, that new political atmospheres and structures of feeling might emerge.

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What Spivak’s provocative call for ethical reflexes brings to the fore is the tension, or seeming contradiction, at the root of the concept of habit: On the one hand, ‘habit’ conjures unthinking reflex, repetition, automation, and hence, *stasis*. Yet, on the other hand, without the formation of enduring habits, no substantive embodied, social or political *change* can take shape, and become rooted enough to sustain.

Catherine Malabou (2008) animates this tension in her introduction to the English translation of Ravaisson’s book, *Of Habit*, first published in 1838. Here, she identifies two key philosophical genealogies of ‘habit’: Firstly, a line of analysis beginning with Descartes and moving through Kant, which understands habit as automated repetition that is antithetical to critical thinking, wonder and change; and secondly, an older tradition emerging with Aristotle, taken up by Hegel and resonant with more recent philosophers such as Bergson, which conceptualises habit as the essence of being and becoming.

From Malabou’s perspective, we have perhaps become habituated to the first understanding (habit as automated repetition). Yet we might productively return to the second, older, conceptualisation (habit as being and becoming), and indeed, develop a critical appreciation of how the first and second views of habit are always already imbricated and mutually informing one another.

This is precisely how Malabou interprets Ravaisson’s analysis of habit (2008 [1838]). That is, he demonstrates that there can never be being and becoming without some degree of automated repetition; for it is “one and the same force [...] that produces habit as grace (ease, facility, power) and as addiction” (machinic repetition) (Malabou 2008: viii). For Ravaisson, habit is what ‘remains of a repeated change, it is the residue of repetition’. Yet this “residual being of habit, is in fact constituted by a resource of possibilities”. In other words, habit illustrates, as Malabou puts it, that “if being was able to change once, in the manner of contracting a habit, it can change again. It is available for a change to come”. So, in temporal terms then, for Ravaisson, “habit is a past (as result), but this past makes possible a future” (viii).
But what, we might ask, about the present?

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In order to think more directly about habit and the present, turning to the work of the educational theorist and pragmatist, John Dewey, may be helpful.

Throughout his book *Human Nature and Conduct* (2012[1954]), Dewey is critical of modes of social reform and transformation that depend only on thought (i.e. through verbal instruction of particular moral imperatives) or the production of certain feelings (i.e. through the generation of sympathy, compassion, or moral indignation). The problem with both strategies, he argues, is that they remove thought from embodied action and/or the individual from the environment.

Moreover, with respect to moral instruction in particular, Dewey suggests, it simply does not follow that if you instruct or show someone what ‘the right’ thing to do is, that it will actually happen. Here, he employs the example of the ineffectiveness of repeatedly telling someone with a problem with his posture to ‘stand up straight’. The assumption that verbal instruction or visual demonstration is all that is required here implies that “the failure to stand erect is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire” (2012: 15). Yet, as Dewey stresses, “A man who does not stand properly forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit [...] conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist” (15). Moreover, compelling subjects to focus on what is wrong, on what they should not be doing, could be the worst possible approach because it maintains attention on ‘the bad result’ rather than on a potentially positive change in the making.

What we need, Dewey argues, is a mode of social and political intervention that addresses thought and embodied action, the conscious and the non-or-less than conscious, the individual and environmental conditions at once – that is, change at the level of habit. So, concerning the example of posture, he contends,

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2 In exploring the critical utility of Dewey’s analysis (and other social and philosophical accounts) of the links between habit and ‘progressive’ social change, however, it remains vital not to lose sight of the ways in which habit creation and modification has been, and continues to be,
We must stop even thinking of standing up straight. To think of it is fatal, for it commits us to the operation of an established habit of standing wrong. We must find an act within our power which is disconnected from any thought about standing. We must start to do another thing which on one side inhibits our falling into the customary bad position and on the other side is the beginning of a series of acts which may lead to the correct posture. (2012: 18)

Thus, linking back to Sedgwick, we could say that in Dewey’s understanding of social transformation premised on habit creation, meaningful change cannot depend on ‘paranoid’ modes of knowing and prediction or on a teleological model of progress. Indeed, for Dewey, you can only concentrate on the next possible step ahead (rather than fixing on a desired end point in advance).³

What this means is that, in Dewey’s understanding of the links between habit and social transformation, the present is not deferred to a better future; rather, the present is active, brimming with change and yet impossible to fix or isolate from other temporalities. As Dewey puts it:

employed as a pernicious technology of governance, for example by States in the management and regulation of vulnerable groups and populations (see, for example, Bennett et al., 2012). My thanks go to Lisa Blackman for highlighting this point.

³ Of course, Dewey’s analysis of habit might also be interpreted as teleological given that it usually involves some guiding idea of a desired result (i.e. ‘standing up straight’). What seems important here, however, is that, for Dewey, the ‘desired result’ can only ever be barely glimpsed; it never emerges in clear relief and cannot remain constant. An imagined progressive result or outcome may energize or re-direct a process (or set of processes) of material transformation, but with each new embodied intervention or modification at the level of habit this imagined outcome itself is transformed and re-configure. As such the ‘desired result’, within Dewey’s framework, acts as a mobilising concept/image rather than a fixed endpoint. Moreover, as I explain further below, Dewey does not imagine habit creation as a linear process because ‘habit’ itself scrambles past, present and future. Nonetheless, Dewey’s work is certainly not without its limitations and contradictions. It is read most productively, I suggest, through a critical lens informed by contemporary feminist, postcolonial and queer theory and praxis.

‘Present’ activity is not a sharp narrow knife-blade in time. The present is complex, containing within itself a multitude of habits and impulses. It is enduring, a course of action, a process including memory, observation and foresight, a pressure forward, a glance backward and a look outward. (2012: 110)

Furthermore, in conjunction with the temporalities of habit and social change, it is also helpful to note the relationship between habit and spatiality central to Dewey’s analysis. While habits work by adapting to a given environment (and taking aspects of it in), he suggests, they also function to affect and reconfigure environments – and because ‘environment’ is always multiple, embodied habitus too “is plural” (24). From this perspective, individual and social, institutional or environmental habits are not discrete or fully separable, but rather are always intimately intertwined.

This understanding of habit, time and space leads Dewey to formulate a suggestive understanding of social progress: “Progress”, he argues, “means increase of present meaning, which involves multiplication of sensed distinctions as well as harmony, unification” (110).

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Bringing together Sedgwick’s account of reparative reading, Spivak’s call for ethical reflexes, and Ravaisson’s and Dewey’s analyses of habit, we might say that habit is what enables us to inhabit our worlds, to inhabit the present in all its ambivalence, multiplicity and complexity. From this perspective, perhaps further attention to habit within Cultural Studies would broaden or enhance our understandings of the nature of stasis and transformation at the current socio-political conjuncture, the complexity of contemporary power relations, and the available modes of sensing, instigating and responding imaginatively to social, cultural, political and economic change.

Carolyn Pedwell is Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies and Cultural Sociology at the University of Kent (UK). She has recently been AHRC Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the History of Emotions, Queen Mary (2013-2014) and the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney (2013). Carolyn is author of Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy.
(Palgrave, 2014) and *Feminism, Culture and Embodied Practice: The Rhetorics of Comparison* (Routledge, 2010). She is co-editor (with Anne Whitehead) of ‘Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory’, a special issue of *Feminist Theory* journal (2012). Carolyn is also an Editor of *Feminist Theory*.

**Works Cited**


