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**To be or not to be affected**

Together with my friend and colleague Diogo Corrêa, I recently taught a post-graduate class on *The Turns in the Human Sciences* at the State University of Rio de Janeiro.[[1]](#footnote-1) I gather some fifty turns have occurred since Richard Rorty´s bombastic announcement of a linguistic turn in 1969, an almost positivist appeal to his colleagues in the analytic tradition to turn philosophy into a no-nonsense science. The formula to make a turn successful is well known by now: An edited book with a long programmatic essay, followed by a couple of chapters that illustrate the breakthrough, followed by ruthless promotion of the perspective in special issues in academic journals, an international symposium and, finally, to crown the whole thing – a *Handbook of X*. While the promotion of a paradigm (in Merton´s sense), such as analytic sociology, cultural sociology, moral sociology, etc., aims to consolidate various perspectives in a general theory of the middle range, the propagation of a turn does not want to slow down reflection, but to speed it up. The logic of the “turns, twists and flips” is one of continuous subversion, closer in spirit to artistic than scientific revolutions.

We started our course with the mother of all turns: The linguistic turn. It comes in three variants: a German turn (with Humboldt, Heidegger and Gadamer), a French one (with Saussure, Mauss and Lévi-strauss) and an analytical one (with Frege and Wittgenstein). Together with the linguistic, the cultural and interpretative turns form a single, yet rather diverse “historical bloc” that foregrounds the world-disclosing function of symbolic forms: Symbolic forms constitute the world as a meaningful one and structure from within the social practices (perception, action and feelings) that produce or reproduce society. The constitution of this cultural formation is crucial to understand the sequence of turns that will follow. Indeed, while each of the successive turns will radicalize the linguistic turn, leading to the excesses of deconstruction in philosophy, social constructivism in the social sciences and a spate of post-isms (postmodernism, -structuralism, -colonialism) in the humanities, they will also react against it and progressively drift away from the linguistic turn – trying to reach the ancestral depths of a pre-human existence.

Dislocating the attention from “culture structures”, the praxeological turns that are inspired by Wittgenstein and Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Garfinkel, Bourdieu and Giddens, will focus on an array of anonymous, infradiscursive, routinized, skillful, embodied and situated practices that produce and/or reproduce the social world. By zooming in on local contexts, they go for the micro-scale and analyze the elements (objects, subjects, actants) that configure the situation of action and allow the actors to go about without too much thinking.

Radicalizing the praxeological turn, the affective turn reacts to poststructuralism, constructivism and cultural studies by rejecting every form of representation. Moving from the molar to the molecular level, it focuses on vital processes below consciousness that are at once subindividual, intimate and transpersonal. At the molecular level of affects and sensations, one finds the pulse of life. Life is animated. So is matter. It flows, vibrates, and swarms. It is contagious. It moves from one organism to another; by affecting them, it makes them move – like crowds, schools of fish, fads, raves and panics.

The affective turn is a post-poststructuralist approach to social, animal and organic life that harks back to the belle époque – and, ultimately, to Spinoza. To reactualize *Lebensphilosophie*, it draws on Darwin and Nietzsche. Deleuze continuously vibrates in the background. The practice of rescuing lost figures of the past makes affect theory at once fashionable and timeless. At times, systems theory and cognitive sciences, psychoanalysis, post-feminism and queer theory, as well as parapsychology are mixed with Bergson, James, Tarde, Simmel, Whitehead, Simondon and Latour. The result of the amalgamation varies, from the sublime to the patho-logical. While the texts in *The Affect Theory Reader,* edited by Seigworth and Gregg (2010), moved me deeply, the texts in *The Affective Turn*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007), turned me off. At their best, the texts that disclose the world of affects make you understand that one has to be properly affected to gain access to the universe of affects. Indeed, to the extent that the affects affect us, they redouble the feeling – it is exciting to be excited, moving to be moved by affective resonances that circulate about. At their worst, the texts strike you as fashionable, politically correct, pretentious, pseudoscientific verbiage. Paradoxically, while they invoke affects, they are themselves without feeling. It is, perhaps, better for starters to stick to the protagonists of the affective movement: Bryan Massumi, Manuel De Landa, Teresa Brennan, Nigel Thrift and Lisa Blackmann. In any case, two texts are fundamental reading: “The Autonomy of Affect” by Bryan Massumi (2002) and “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins” by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995).

For the mainstream sociology of emotion that takes its cues from Erving Goffman, Norbert Elias, Randall Collins or Rom Harré, affect theory is at first rather puzzling.[[2]](#footnote-2) For three reasons. Firstly, its impetus comes from philosophy, Notwithstanding its invocation of pure data, it is not empirical at all. While it undoubtedly has implications for sociology, it does not really engage sociology. It does not use its central concepts (power, stratification, socialization, institution, interaction, etc.) either. As a radicalization of practice theory, affect theory operates at the ontological level. It tries to conceptually grasp what exceeds concepts – the sensations, flows, ondulations, pulsations and rhythms that generate the practices that produce actions, emotions, representations, as well as interactions, groups, communities, societies and other things that sociologists study. Consequently, affect theory cannot be simply transported from philosophy to the social sciences wholesale. Here as elsewhere, caution is needed. Deleuzian transcendental empiricism, James’s radical empiricism and Bergson’s creative evolution are interesting to rethink the world, but they do not directly apply to the social world.

Similarly, while affects are somehow akin to emotions, they are also rather different. They are not socially constructed by cultural scripts and they do not vary culturally or historically either. They operate at a deeper level below the social, the human and the personal. They are vital and visceral. As anonymous fluxes of pulsing energy, affects are intensities, virtualities, tendencies and potentialities that can be dimly felt, but that overall operate below the threshold of consciousness. Consciousness is a very small window of time indeed – “fifteen seconds at most”, as Nigel Thrift (2008: 6) puts it. Too small to capture the sensations that are felt, but not noticed during 2 seconds at most. Affects and emotions interfere continuously. They are parallel formations. Affects may affect emotions, emotions may trigger reflection, reflection may somehow affect affect. How, remains obscure, however. It is as much a conceptual as an empirical question, though I doubt that the sociology of emotions is ready to tackle these questions.

Thirdly, although affect theory is a radical offshoot of cultural studies, it is not cultural, but material; not social, but animal; not historical, but vital. The transition from post-structuralism to vitalist materialism is an attempt to undercut the linguistic turn with its representations, mediations and categorizations of experience. The affective turn is an attempt to return to unmediated, immediate, pure experience. Consciously, it puts matter back in cultural materialism, the body back into practices, and the spirit back into life. This materialism that pushes back against the excesses of de/construction and constructivism, reanimates life. Dead matter comes alive, structures are dissolved into processes, processes into fluxes, fluxes into a cosmic dance of energies. Unlike emotions, which are socially, culturally and historically constructed in language, affects are material – they circulate in biological bodies (animal and human) as bodily arousals and sensations. Affects are not cultural, but they are naturalized, which raises the problem of how social scientists are going to measure them.

The affective turn challenges some of the basic assumptions of social theory. But social theory, in turn, is well placed to question some of the basic assumptions of affect theory. I see two problems: an ideological one and a scientific one.

The ideological problem has to do with a dubious reactualization of the irrational depths of *Lebensphilosophie,* parapsychology and mysticism. It is all good and well to go back to Spinoza, Darwin and Nietzsche. The philosophies of Gabriel Tarde, William James and Henri Bergson have their attractions too. But if one invokes those honorable figures, what about others like Oswald Spengler, Othmar Spann and Ludwig Klages who espoused similar positions and whose work has been thoroughly discredited by fascism? What about the conservatism of Tarde, Lebon and other mass psychologists? And assuming that one wants to avoid the resurrection of fascism, how is one going to stay clear of the lures of cosmic mysticism and the sirens of panpsychism that loom large in the today’s neo-animistic vitalism? Similarly, if one invokes spirits, charms, voices, energies, telepathy, hypnose, trance, imitation, mimesis and other ghosts that animate contemporary esoteric bazaars, where does one draw the line between philosophy and parapsychology, sociology and soteriology? If the message is the medium, then one might as well come out of the closet and turn science into a séance where seers, feelers and other seekers of sensations are allowed to steal the show.

The scientific problem comes from the infraconscious, transpersonal, molecular nature of affects and sensations. They cannot be perceived by the eye or touched by the hand. As synesthetic events, they can be heard, felt or otherwise dimly sensed by our bodily sensors as vital forces that continuously pulse and flow forward underneath, below and along the doors of perception. To be scientifically perceived, those anonymous forces have to be naturalized in neurophysiological (Massumi) or endocrinological (Brennan) terms and operationalized so that they can be properly detected and registered by technological “inscription devices” (brainscans, electrodes, galvanic tests, etc.). At this point, prehistorical forms of animism that come from the depths of life are technologically joined to the high tech installations of postmodernity. The infrahuman and the posthuman are fused in a pseudo-scientific, postmodern philosophy that pilfers some of its insights from quantum physics, molecular biology and the mathematics of fractals. Deleuze is not far, but neither is Bourdieu. Like the field of positions, the field of energetic pulsations is also a field of forces. Constructed by the scientist as a construct that explains common sense and common sentiments by something that transcends ordinary perception, it is metaphysically enhanced and abducted by speculative philosophers who yearn for something that would be at the same time transpersonal and intimate.

Finally, to conclude, let me return to the beginning – to the course I taught with my former student Diogo Corrêa. Diogo took all the turns in the human sciences and ended up swallowing the vitalist, animist, ontological and speculative turns lock, stock and barrel. He ended up on the other side of the human – beyond symbolic representation and mediation; below correlation and construction. The grandiose scheme of the planes of being that he constructed is built like a cascade. One enters the domain of the human via the top, and sliding down from the human to the animal to the vegetal plateaus of existence, one eventually ends up in a cosmic swamp that feels like an ocean. The bottom, however, and the top are the same. As a reader of Levi-Strauss and Viveiros de Castro, he knows that this is what all human myths are ultimately about. As a reader of Merleau-Ponty, he also knows that the symbolic and the real, the sensual and the cultural, the affective and the emotional are intertwined like a chiasm. There’s no top and no bottom. Only human experience. To the extent that it is and remains human, it is always, invariably and necessarily mediated by culture, society and history.

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1. For an exploration of some of the turns, see Bachmann-Medick, 2016 and Susen, 2015. The syllabus can be consulted on the website of IESP-UERJ: http://www.iesp.uerj.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/As-%E2%80%9Cviradas%E2%80%9D-nas-ci%C3%AAncias-humanas.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. With his pragmatic theory of interaction ritual chains, Randall Collins is both a figurehead of emotional sociology and a bridgehead to affect theory. His Emotional Energy corresponds to waves of affective fluxes that wax and wane as it takes in the energies of its environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)