

Willful Feelings: On the Affects of Political Will*

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Will is a canonical concept in political theory, and one which, in a particular form, is enjoying a current revival of interest. Recent radical political theory concerned with the encroachment of the structural forces of the economy on the sphere of the intentional human agency has attempted to revive the political as the location of this voluntary agency through a theoretical focus on the will. This particularly takes the form of an interest in analyzing political movements in terms of popular will, or the closely related concept of popular sovereignty (that is, the popular will united in agency).¹ At the same time as this revival of interest in a politics of sovereignty, however, we also see theorists questioning the conceptual coherence and practical applicability of the concept of sovereignty. Theoretical investigations of the genealogy of the concept of sovereignty locate it in a particular historical context of social and political organization and attempt to describe how the concept is reconfigured in subsequent theoretical or ideological appropriations.² Meanwhile, attempts to understand contemporary political and political-economic organization frequently assert the empirical reconfiguration of the system of sovereign states into some more disaggregated network of supra-national and trans-national organizations.³ This confluence of trends suggests that it is worth thinking more about the role

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1 Two particular examples I am thinking of here are Peter Hallward, "The Will of the People," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 155 (2009) and Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012).

2 The main work here is Foucault's *Collège de France* lectures, especially *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

3 This argument came to particular prominence in left-wing political theory following the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a more recent attempt to map the reconfigurations of sovereignty in contemporary global politics, see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Zone Books, 2010).

played by the concept of sovereignty in political theory, and what a political theory that was *not* organized around sovereignty might look like.

The very centrality of sovereignty to political theory, however, can make it difficult to isolate and analyze its role *within* political theory, so in this paper I will take a slightly oblique approach. I will consider one particular experiential aspect of sovereignty, namely, the feelings associated with exercising sovereignty or control, or what it feels like to exercise the will. I hope that this phenomenological or affective approach to the will can help dislodge some of the assumptions political theorists make about the cluster of concepts around sovereignty and the will. This critical investigation of the contingency of the role played by the will in political theory sets the stage for a further demonstration of how thinking about affects can be helpful to political theory, looking at Sianne Ngai's and Lauren Berlant's investigation of affects associated with limited agency can suggest a different way of thinking about politics from approaches which center the will and sovereign agency.

Will as a Feeling

The will has a central role in a rationalist political psychology which has been, and probably still is, the default psychology of modernity. Will is understood as providing an unambiguous criterion of agency: an act, as opposed to a mere involuntary movement, is one which results from the will. Because the will serves as the mark of agency, it holds a particularly important place in establishing a normative model of the psyche and its place in the world. In this model, there is a smooth chain connecting reason (the reason for acting, the rationally conceived

motive) through deliberation which produces the will, which in turn causes action.⁴ If this smooth chain is interrupted, we are inclined to say that what has taken place falls short of agency, perhaps as a result of mental pathology (an irrationality that might be considered a moral or mental flaw) or physical pathology.

The normative character of the concept of will can also be seen in the way the concept is used in political theory. One canonical and striking example is Rousseau's claim that "the general will is always upright."⁵ Here the general will is a norm that regulates, but is not always expressed in, "the deliberations of the people";⁶ thus any case where the deliberations deviate from the norm can be dismissed as mere appearances: the people only "seem to will what is bad."⁷ I will explore this example in more detail below, in the course of arguing that the normativity of the concept of will is what enables it to function politically in the way it does. I mention this normativity here, though, to raise some post-structuralist suspicions about how this normativity is generated, that is, how is the norm of the rational will separated from the messier realm in which the will acts (or doesn't act, or maybe does, ambiguously), and what is occluded when this norm is generated? This kind of deconstruction of will is central to Sara Ahmed's recent work, in which she shows how contradictions within conventional understandings of the will are projected outwards as "willfulness," a supposedly wrong or improperly directed perversion of will.⁸ Importantly, Ahmed shows that these contradictions exist in the concept of

4 A classic philosophical defense of this view is Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," in *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–20.

5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G. D. H Cole (London: Everyman, 1993), 203.

6 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 203.

7 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 203.

8 Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

the will before its transposition into a political concept, and indeed shape its use in politics; I will come back to the significance of this below.

Ahmed begins her investigation of will phenomenologically, in order to dislodge the assumption that we know what will is or what it means to have a will. Ahmed writes that this phenomenological method approaches the will “not as something we already have, but as something we come to experience ourselves as having.”⁹ The complexity (and historicity¹⁰) afforded by approaching the will through experience is valuable because it allows us to step back from our tendency to identify ourselves with our will, to see will as simply our self as expressed through our acts. As Ahmed writes, this identification needs to be explained: what sort of “self” is involved in this identification with the will? How do we “come to apprehend ourselves as having a will,” and how is it “that an apprehension *of* will allows subjects to experience themselves *as* participating in events.”¹¹

Thinking about will in terms of experience thus allows us to tease apart will and action. Ahmed describes attempts by 19th century psychologists to move away from the apparently mysterious idea that will *causes* action, replacing this instead with a description of will as an experience which accompanies an action, an awareness of or feeling that some action is voluntary. “Willing could be described as consciousness *of* willing,” as Ahmed puts it.¹² The phenomenological or affective character of will, then, brings in to play at least a conceptual separation between will and act – we can will without acting, either in the case where we will but fail to act, or in the case where we experience something as in accord with our will even

9 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 24.

10 Ahmed’s method is an unconventional combination of phenomenology and genealogy (*Willful Subjects*, 25).

11 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 24.

12 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 76.

when it is not an act we ourselves carry out.¹³ “When we use the word ‘will’ or ‘willing’ it implies then an experience a subject has of itself as bringing something about, whether or not the subject is bringing something about. It is possible then to experience oneself as willing something that one does not bring about.”¹⁴

Thinking of will as experienced helps us think more critically about the connection between will and action, and we can take this further than thinking of will as an accompaniment to action. To think of will in terms of affect raises the possibility of will as being affected, that is, the possibility that will might not be something we *do*, but something that happens *to* us.¹⁵ That will has an affective dimension means that will is something we “suffer” in the sense of “to be acted upon, to be passive,”¹⁶ but Ahmed also explores how will can be something we suffer in the sense of something that causes us pain. Augustine dramatically described his experience of will as something “which had the strength of iron chains” that “shackled” him “fast in the duress of servitude.”¹⁷ This will that Augustine suffers from is also the scene of struggle, as his “perverse” will is opposed by a “new will” in what Ahmed described as “a internal war with oneself.”¹⁸ The experience of will, that is, is not always an experience of a unified subjectivity, but rather can be an experience of an internal diversity.

Ahmed argues that internal diversity is a necessary feature of will. The point of the concept of will, after all, is something that denotes an act as a willing act, but this means that there must

13 As Ahmed puts it, to feel that your will is in accord with an act you do not carry out is one meaning of the word “willing” (*Willful Subjects*, 54).

14 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 24.

15 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 76.

16 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989, s.v. suffer.

17 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 8.5.164, cited in Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 28.

18 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 28.

be a distinction between will and act. You will in order that you then act, which means that you will because you have not yet acted; but that “not yet” raises the possibility of “not ever,” of a will that is never completed in an act. “An order to will is a willing to do, and willing to do is a sign of not having done,” Ahmed writes, and so “willing is thus what a subject does – or even must do – when a command *has not yet been obeyed*.”¹⁹ Augustine experiences this as “the agony of not willing what one wills oneself to will,” the disconcerting feeling that you are not identical with yourself.²⁰ It is surprising, however, that this diversity should arise within the will itself, because the will was supposed to be a concept that would serve as the mark of the unified subject. Instead, it turns out that “willing as an activity rest precisely on a subject that is out of time with itself A willing subject is always behind or ahead of itself.”²¹

Ahmed is here revealing an important feature of the concept of will. The assumption that the will is a defining mark of the unified, acting subject turns out on closer inspection to be wrong, but this does not lead to an abandonment of the normativity of will. Instead, the normativity is redoubled within the concept of the will itself. We could see this in Augustine’s characterization of one of the wills battling within him as “perverse,” and Ahmed traces this distinction between perverse and proper will from Augustine through early modern pedagogy to modern psychology, to show how the concept of the will comes to include the idea of disciplining, or unifying. That is to say, rather than being the mark of a subject or agent, the will comes to be seen as an achievement through which the subject is produced. Ahmed calls this “will alignment,” which involves “aligning oneself with ones own will.”²² This achievement of a

19 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 29, Ahmed’s italics.

20 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 29.

21 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 29.

22 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 81.

proper will “can overcome misalignment such that the distinct faculties of a subject are going the same way.”²³

It is this idea of the alignment or unification of wills which lies behind the idea of a general will. Although the general will is central to how the concept of will appears in political theory, Ahmed points out that the term “general will” does not originate in a political context.²⁴ Instead, the idea of the general will originated in discussion of individual subjects in a religious context, only later being transposed to the collective and political context where it is now most familiar. Ahmed discusses how Pascal distinguishes between the particular will and the general will through a metaphor of the body and its organs. Pascal “argues that the will *should tend* towards the general,” that is, that the will of parts ought to be aligned with the whole of which they are a part.²⁵ Pascal imagines each part of the body having its own will, which ought – for the good of both the whole and the parts – be aligned with the will of the person who has those body parts: “in willing only the good of the body, they accomplish their own good.”²⁶ This is a curious image to use, because individual body parts do not, of course, have their own will; the supposedly explanatory analogy begins by assigning a will to parts that do not in reality have their own will. Again we see how the concept of the will involves positing a diversity in need of unification, in order that the will can then be presented as unified. The organic metaphor adds a further dimension to this unification, however, as the unification of organs into a body implies the whole constitutes some kind of order which arranges the parts into their proper place. “A

23 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 81.

24 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 99. Ahmed draws here on Patrick Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

25 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 99.

26 Pascal, quoted in Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 99.

different member of the body is valued as taking part in its own way Each part is valued for what it is with 'is' referred directly to 'does,'" and so "to become a part of a whole is to acquire a duty."²⁷ The general will, that is to say, is a concept of the proper ordering and operation of parts.

This concept of the general will as the duty owed by parts to the whole was developed prior to the use of "general will" in political theory, and is taken up *by* political theory. Thus, to frame a political theory in terms of will, as theories of popular will or popular sovereignty do, is already to organize politics around a particular ideal, and this ideal of will projects ideals of agency, ideals of the people, and ideals of sovereignty. These ideals share in the will's ideal of organization or ordering: the ideal of the will organizes itself by selectively disavowing parts of itself. The history of the concept of will, then, provides one explanation for the particular orderings and disavowals of that structure modern understandings of politics.

I am thinking here especially of the way modern understandings of politics center on a particular understanding of the state as a central location through which sovereignty is exercised. The state in modern politics acts as both a theoretical and practical instantiation of the logic of the will described above. Will appears as unified in contrast to a diversity which is both subsumed under will (the good will which coincides with the general will) and expelled *from* the will (the willful will disavowed as excessive). This is also the logic of the state identified by Marx in "On the Jewish Question."²⁸ In the same way that the general will is general in contrast to particular wills, it is only "above the particular elements that the the state

²⁷ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 104.

²⁸ My reading of "On the Jewish Question" here is strongly influenced by Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), chap. 5.

constitutes itself as a universality.”²⁹ The understanding of politics we inherit from early modern theories of sovereignty takes politics to be the sphere of universality, and this universality is located in the activities of the state, or the people combined in popular sovereignty, defined in contrast to the dispersed particularity of life outside of the political sphere. “The perfected political state is by its nature the general life of man in opposition to his material life,” as Marx puts it.³⁰ That this opposition between general and particular comes to be expressed as an opposition between the universal and the material is important to the argument I am making here, because it explains why applying an analysis of affect to central political concepts can have such a destabilizing effect on these concepts: these political concepts are developed around what Marx calls “the abstraction of the political man,” which is defined against a simplified caricature of “man in his sensuous immediate existence.”³¹ As Marx points out, this process of abstraction itself is a material one, which produces an illusory separation of sensory humanity from human universality. Paying attention to the sensuous and affective, then, can give us critical purchase on the political concepts produced by, but disavowing, these sensuous processes.

Dispersed Feelings

Paying attention, as Ahmed does, to the affective character of will reveals a particular way in which political theory has been or can be narrow. Making certain concepts central to a theory also implies a certain range of affects which attach themselves to the theory. So, political

29 Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 220.

30 Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 220, translation modified.

31 Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 234.

theories of popular sovereignty bring with them feelings of acting and of being in control (which, as Ahmed points out, need not be directly related to actually being in control). This, then, suggests an opening for further research: what would politics look like viewed from a different set of affects? Looking at the role played by different affects in politics might bring into focus different concepts, or suggest different accounts of central political concepts. In the remainder of this paper, I will consider two attempts to reconsider the concept of agency in the light of affects that are not usually considered in political theory: first Sianne Ngai's discussion of "suspended agency," and then Lauren Berlant's theorization of "lateral agency."

In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai presents an analysis of "negative emotions," that is, "minor and generally unpretentious feelings" which have received less philosophical attention than "grander passions like anger and fear."³² Ngai finds these minor or negative affects useful theoretical tools because of their weak relationship to action. The feelings she considers, such as anxiety, paranoia, and irritation, are not strongly motivating feelings; they are feelings associated more with passivity than activity. This is in sharp contrast to the affects associated with will discussed above; Ngai's ugly feelings are "not as strategic as the emotions classically associated with political action."³³ This is what makes these feelings so useful for thinking about a politics which is less centered on action. The conception of politics that Ngai is interested in, that is, attempts to take a step back from the assumption that action is the defining feature and goal of politics,

32 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1, 6. Ngai writes here about feelings and emotions, where recent affect theory has often insisted on the specificity of affect, and particularly the distinction between affect and emotion. Ngai takes a critical stance towards this distinction, arguing that the ambiguity of the two terms is productive. One way in which theorists distinguish between emotion and affect is by arguing that emotions are closely tied to subjects while affects are pre-subjective or intersubjective, but Ngai argues that one of the values of studying emotions and affect is that these terms allow us to break down the sharp distinction between the subjective and the non-subjective (26-8), a point I will return to shortly.

33 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 26.

and considers instead the political possibilities that might exist when action is limited or blocked. In these situations of limited agency we are more likely to encounter ugly feelings than canonical political emotions; and so “the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations ... marked by blocked or thwarted action.”³⁴

Where the will makes agency depend on unification in a singular sovereign, the situations of suspended agency that Ngai discusses are characterized by a high degree of dispersal, where it is difficult to apply sovereign models of agency because it is difficult to identify who are what could act. This is where the diffuse character of affect is analytically useful, because affect allows us to approach the relation of the subjective and the non-subjective dialectically, working productively with the tension inherent in the idea of an agency where we cannot identify an agent.³⁵

Ngai points out that this affective situation of indeterminate agency is central to the operation of capitalism. Ngai explores the series of more-or-less fraudulent transactions that make up the narrative of Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, showing how the feeling of confidence is both the precondition and the object of these trades.³⁶ Confidence is the precondition of exchange because the purchaser needs to feel confident that they will receive the goods they are paying for; but these goods (whether patent medicines or share certificates) are themselves means to some further end, and their physical transfer ultimately only an attempted assurance that the purchaser should have confidence in this delayed reward.³⁷ Because this is a system of

34 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 27.

35 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 28.

36 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 62.

37 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 63.

the circulation of affects, the affect cannot be pinned in one place or tied to one subject, but always exists potentially, as something about to be transferred from one subject to another. As Ngai puts it, this system “runs on a feeling that no one actually feels.”³⁸

This idea of commerce depending on a feeling no-one feels should remind us of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, in which the production and exchange of commodities is regulated by exchange value, the measure of how much abstract labor is objectified in a commodity. But to say that abstract labor is objectified *in* a commodity is misleading; like confidence, exchange value cannot be found at any particular location: “a man knows not where to have it.”³⁹ Just as the continual round of exchanges of confidence keep the narrative of Melville’s novel moving without ever allowing confidence to rest and be located anywhere, the continuous process of exchange of commodities brings into being abstract labor without participants being aware that this is what they are doing: “by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labor as human labor. They do this without being aware of it.”⁴⁰

The impossibility of locating abstract labor is a result of the system of exchange which produces it. It is not just that two individuals exchange goods in the belief that they embody the same quality of abstract labor. Rather, this act of exchange is one that can be, and is, repeated again and again, until these exchanges of equivalents come to dominate all production and

38 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 69.

39 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 138. Marx here is quoting a *double-entendre* from Shakespeare, which perhaps fits with the general burlesque quality of the first chapter of *Capital*, in which use value and exchange value are always swapping places and wearing one another’s coats. Another name for this burlesque is dialectics, as Butler points out (Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Human Reflections in 20th Century France* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 20).

40 Marx, *Capital*, 166–7.

distribution. This is because equivalence is by its nature subject to unlimited iteration or repetition – if 20 yards of linen is equivalent to one coat, and one coat is equivalent to 10 pounds of tea, then 20 yards of linen is also equivalent to 10 pound of tea, or 40 pounds of coffee, or two ounces of gold, and so on and so on.⁴¹ The repetition is crucial, because each iteration derives its validity from all the other iterations, and we cannot point to a single original exchange which establishes the value of abstract labor; the value is only established by indefinite repetition, by the circulation of a feeling which no-one feels.

The idea of a feeling which no-one feels can be seen as a general feature of repetition, and one which leads to unexpected possibilities within repetition. Repetition is repetition inasmuch as it is a repeat of some original act; but because repetition shows that that this original can be copied, repetition calls into question just how uniquely original the original is.⁴² Ngai describes how this works in the language of Melville's *The Confidence Man*, in which the repetition of words and sounds begins to drown out the meanings of those words. "The principle of analogy becomes engulfed by anaphora," in what Ngai describes as a strategy "in which one disrupts a system not by breaking or challenging the rules from above but by adhering to a rule too well."⁴³ The ambivalence of repetition, which can be both a force of conformity and of disruption, is crucial to the political possibilities Ngai sees in situations of suspended agency.

One place where we can see the suspension of agency by repetition – and where we might hope to find possibilities – is in the mechanization of labor that is a key part of industrialization.

41 Marx, *Capital*, 155.

42 This is a point repeated by Derrida, e.g. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 18. Ngai has a fascinating discussion of repetition as introducing ambiguity into identity, which creates possibilities for political collectivity (chapter 3), which I hope I will be able to explore in future iterations of this paper.

43 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 67.

Ahmed discusses industrialization as one example of how parts are incorporated into a general will, in this case how the body of a worker becomes a tool that belongs to a factory owner.⁴⁴ For Marx, this is a key moment in the development of capitalism, when the generic character of abstract labor, and its capture in the form of surplus value by the capitalist, becomes materialized in the way machinery uses human beings as tools. Before the widespread adoption of mechanization, the capitalist benefited from the workers' labor, but the actual process of the work went on largely as it had done previously. In fully mechanized capitalism, however, this is superseded "in the factory proper by converting the worker into the living appendage of the machine."⁴⁵ Ngai describes how this industrial appropriation of body parts is adopted as a method in the animation industry, where the moving parts of a character's body are drawn separately in order to limit the amount that needs to be re-drawn from frame to frame, and so to speed up the animation process.⁴⁶ Ngai points out that this process, based on the representational division of the human body, itself allowed for a division of labor in which individual animators are allocated specific, repetitive tasks (such as coloring in the outlines produced by other animators). It is thus "an animation technology that animated its workers in turn."⁴⁷

We can see here how mechanization functions as subordination, when the will of the worker is aligned with the general will of the factory, that is to say, appropriated by whoever sets that will, whoever owns the factory. However, we do not have to consider this situation solely from

44 Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 108.

45 Marx, *Capital*, 614.

46 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 110.

47 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 110. This process is also the basis for an international division of labor, in which initial design work takes place in America or Europe, while the repetitive parts of the animation process are outsourced to factories in Asia, particularly South Korea, the Philippines, and India.

the perspective of will. What other possibilities might be visible in this situation of mechanistic repetition? Marx himself is surprisingly ambivalent about the effect of mechanization on workers. Marx writes of how the repetitive, meaningless character of mechanized labor “imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law” which is “blindly destructive,” but he immediately follows this with the suggestion that because the repetition of mechanized labor deprives it of specific meaning, it raises the possibility that mechanized work could be the site in which the generic character of abstract labor could develop into a positive universality.⁴⁸ When we think of a Marxist politics of the factory, we are likely to think of heroic images of workers re-subordinating the machinery to their collective will, but here Marx is suggesting that some possibilities exist within the subordination of the worker to the machine.

Ngai explains how the mechanized division of the body in animation techniques creates the possibility of “an unintended, excess animatedness on top of the intended, functional one,” when small errors in the intended animation produce an uncanny effect which draws attention to the artificiality of the “life” that is animating the figure.⁴⁹ With these glitches, introduced by the division of the animated body into separately animated parts, these animated parts “create surplus movement apart from those originally scripted for them, assuming a liveliness that is distinct from the ‘life’ given to them by the animators and that exceeds their design and control.”⁵⁰ It is the mechanistic and repetitive character of animation that is the source of this “unexpected autonomy,” because it is in the process of repeatedly photographing the same scene with only minor, intended, variations that the unintended variations can assume an uncanny

48 Marx, *Capital*, 618.

49 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 116. Ngai here is discussing stop-motion animation, rather than the cell animation she described earlier, but they share the quality of dividing the human body into separately animatable parts.

50 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 117.

significance. Again, we see how repetition destabilizes sameness and can allow for the possibility of creativity different from a sovereign, willed agency.

The specific example of animation Ngai discusses is a late-90s TV show called *The PJs*. The show was controversial for its depiction of African-American characters, particularly the way animation was used to present these characters as caricatures, which seemed to critics of the show all too continuous with a tradition of cartoons perpetuating direct racist stereotypes. Ngai argues that the uncanny “unexpected autonomy” introduced by the animation techniques works to resist this racist stereotyping:

The excess liveliness produced by this particular body part suggests something like the racialized, animated subjects ‘revenge’ The animation of the raced body seems capable of producing an excess that undermines the technologies power to produce the body *as* raced.⁵¹

Nonetheless, Ngai is very clear that these critical possibilities only exist in the context of pre-existing racism and histories of racist representation; so these possibilities are at best ambivalent, or, as Ngai writes, “ugly.”⁵² This raises a more general point about theoretical attempts to locate political possibilities in scenes of subordination, which is the need to avoid romanticizing these conditions, and to pay attention to the various forms of oppression which combine to make possible this subordination – those subject to mechanization, after all, were and are the working class, which globally is overwhelmingly female and non-white. The temptation when looking for alternative political possibilities to heroic exercises of sovereignty is to heroize in turn whatever alternative conditions you find; Ngai’s insistent focus on the ugliness of negative affects can hopefully help us resist this tendency. The need to avoid re-inscribing the heroic

51 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 117.

52 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 32.

narrative of sovereign agency within any alternative forms of agency we might look for is also explored in some detail by Lauren Berlant in her discussion of lateral agency.

Ngai shows us how political possibilities can exist in situations of suspended agency, possibilities disclosed by minor and negative affects which are different from the possibilities emphasized by theories of sovereign will. However, Ngai's focus is primarily on artistic production, how the operation of negative affects in artworks can disclose to us possibilities in these situations of suspended agency. It is less clear, however, how we should translate this theory to an analysis of political situations. It is to extend my analysis in this direction that I turn to Berlant's account of lateral agency.

Lateral solidarity

Berlant criticizes attempts to understand political agency on the model of state sovereignty, on the grounds that this “affords a militaristic and melodramatic view of individual agency by casting the human as most fully itself when assuming the spectacular posture of performative action.”⁵³ Against a theory which equates the political with willed, autonomous agency, Berlant argues that “we need better ways to talk about a more capacious range of activity oriented toward the reproduction of ordinary life.”⁵⁴ Berlant is arguing that there are a wide range of practices which allow for the maintenance of a better or worse life under contemporary capitalist conditions, and that we should attempt to analyze these practices without assuming a

53 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), l. 1300, references are to locations in the Kindle edition. Berlant adds that “this mimetic concept of sovereignty also legitimates as something objective individuals’ affective sense of autonomy,” making a similar point to Ahmed about how will can allow you to feel that you are bringing something about whether or not you are bringing something about (*Willful Subjects*, 24).

54 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1326.

binary in which they are either unchosen and so effectively complicit with neoliberalism, or chosen and so explicit acts of opposition *against* neoliberalism.

The latter is particularly important, because in an admirable attempt to avoid casting people as passive or complicit, left-wing theorists have a tendency to read any activity which is not amenable to contemporary norms as explicit, willed resistance to these norms, to read these acts as “heroic placeholders for resistance to something, affirmation of something, or a world-transformative desire.”⁵⁵ This approach can be equally reductive, if it leads to political theorists valuing activity only to the extent that it can be interpreted in terms of our own favored norms of autonomy or resistance.⁵⁶ Berlant argues that we need to approach these practices with an open mind about what kind of agency we might find, in order to be able to give an honest account of the political possibilities embedded in these practices; this “requires quite a different imaginary in reference to what it means to do something than the transformative fantasy that saturates the concept of resistance and protest.”⁵⁷

Here, Berlant is making a similar point to one made earlier by Saba Mahmood, who points out that even post-structuralist theories that reject the sovereign subject tend to equate agency with subversion or resistance. These theories maintain a “normative political subject” which is “liberatory” in that in it “agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion.”⁵⁸ As an alternative to this binary model, Mahmood proposes that we think about

55 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1336.

56 See Ahmed’s critical remarks on Peter Hallward’s ability to discern, in unforeseen events such as the Arab Spring, the very categories of popular will his theory had previously identified (*Willful Subjects*, 228n1).

57 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 3666.

58 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

how norms are “performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways.”⁵⁹ This provides an alternative way of analyzing bodily practices, in which we do not just consider “the constraining aspects of embodied social power” or “how the body becomes a site of resistance to social inscription,” but consider instead “the different modalities through which the body comes to inhabit or live the regulative power of norms.”⁶⁰

Mahmood’s work is very helpful in showing why it is “crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics,”⁶¹ or why we need to consider the political importance of practices of agency more diffuse than sovereign, willed, resistance, and she shares this interest in non-sovereign agency with Berlant. However, where Mahmood is interested in how subjects come to inhabit norms in diverse ways through different practices, Berlant is more interested in practices of agency which can undo the singularity of the subject. “Most of what we do, after all,” writes Berlant, “involves not being purposive but inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself.”⁶² We seek such vacations because the will is increasingly experienced as a burden, “the obligation to be responsible” cultivated by neoliberalism.⁶³ This obligation is to be a particular sort of subject, a “liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionality and effective will.”⁶⁴ It is in response to this burden that we encounter practices organized around “unconscious and explicit desires not to be an inflated ego deploying power and manifesting intention.”⁶⁵ Hence we find practices of lateral agency

59 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 22.

60 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 27n45.

61 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

62 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1585.

63 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1585.

64 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1585.

65 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1328.

organized around “small pleasures” that “can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways.”⁶⁶ In direct contrast to sovereign will, which draws together and organizes disparate parts to produce a punctual act, lateral agency disperses the self into a suspended time of keeping going.

This idea of pleasures bound up with a dispersal of the self brings to mind Leo Bersani’s insistence that the political importance of sex lies in its ability to shatter the self.⁶⁷ Like Bersani, Berlant does not “romanticize” sex or the other small pleasures she discusses, and doesn’t see them as unambiguously positive or communitarian.⁶⁸ However, unlike Bersani, Berlant does not see these pleasures as unambiguously “anticoncommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving”;⁶⁹ the temporal difference between Berlant’s self-abeyance and Bersani’s self-shattering has important political consequences. Self-shattering, as Bersani describes it, is ecstatic, in that it describes a singular instant that shatters the self and siconnects the self from any kind of relationality or sociality.⁷⁰ Self-abeyance, on the other hand, is episodic, describing a period of time of comparative self-dissolution within a longer time in which the maintenance of some sort of self is more-or-less compulsory. This extended temporality undercuts the exstatic temporality of sexual self-shattering: “orgasm seems to make you shatteringly different than your ego was a minute ago, but in another minute you are likely to be doing something utterly usual, like pissing, whispering, looking away, or walking into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator

66 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1582.

67 Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 217–8, doi:10.2307/3397574.

68 Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” 215. For Berlant’s discussion of the ambivalence of these small pleasures, see *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1788.

69 Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” 215.

70 Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” 217.

door.”⁷¹ In Berlant’s interpretation, it is this banality of sex that makes it, like other pleasures of self-abeyance, politically interesting. Sex has a “comforting conventionality” which allows for the “freeing impersonality of sexual sociability in general.”⁷² Where ecstatic self-shattering disconnects the subject from all relationality and sociality, self-abeyance disperses the subject into the impersonality of sociability in general.

The dispersal of the self into a generic sociality is how lateral agency is, for Berlant, the basis of a “lateral politics.”⁷³ This lateral politics is unlike sovereign politics because, rather than depending on the unification of individuals under one will, lateral politics is organized around the multiple connections of dispersed subjects. Where sovereign politics presupposes that the general will is the form which unites subjects as a precondition of political action, for lateral politics the particular forms of organization are developed in the political process itself. Lateral politics “involves becoming a political subject whose solidarities and commitments are neither to ends nor to imagining the pragmatics of a consensual community, but to embodied processes of making solidarity itself.”⁷⁴ The purpose of politics on this view is to discover and invent forms of solidarity within the reproduction of daily life. This politics arises from “a context where solidarity comes from the scavenging for survival that absorbs increasingly more people's lives The urgency is to reinvent, from the scene of survival, new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself.”⁷⁵

71 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1988.

72 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 1995.

73 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 3425.

74 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 3412.

75 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, l. 3448.

This is a political theory which encourages a certain kind of modesty on the part of political theory. If the development of political forms is itself the object of political activity, we should not expect political theory to be able to tell us what these forms are or should be. Political theory's critical function, however, might be to point out where our political thinking is focusing on particular domains or concepts, perhaps without being particularly aware of this focus; and to imagine other areas that we might want to give some thought to in understanding our own orientation in political activity. I hope I have shown in this paper that thinking about feelings can be a useful way of dislodging our political thinking from a certain set of concepts tied to the will. Thinking about the particular feelings characteristic of our current political moment might also be a way of bringing to light new concepts or new ways of thinking about old concepts that would help us think our way through this political moment.

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