

John Protevi

Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic.

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Protevi's book addresses the age-old question of human nature. Examining the relationship of the social and the somatic—or 'body politic'—Protevi claims that human nature is, in essence, bio-cultural. The claim is arrived at by means of two main points of reference: the embodied mind school of cognitive science and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Following the success of his *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic* (Athlone Press 1994), Protevi's overarching intention is to bridge the continental/analytic divide.

The book begins with a concise and clear introduction (clarity and precision are the defining traits of Protevi's writing style). The first part outlines the notion of the body politic. The second is a threefold look at the history of ancient (Aristotle), modern (Kant), and postmodern (Deleuze) philosophy, with respect to the philosophical treatment of the organism (as body politic). The third part is a collection of three case studies in which, through the application of the findings from the first two parts, the following events are examined: the Terri Schiavo case; the Columbine High School massacre; and Hurricane Katrina. In addition to cognitive science and philosophy, Protevi's research extends into psychology, sociology, geography, cultural history and theory, politics, and investigative journalism. *Political Affect* is an impressive project that offers a set of novel approaches to some of the fundamental questions regarding the constitution of cognition and corporeality. In what follows I will sketch out the notions of body politic and political affect, and assess the Hurricane Katrina case study.

The goal of *Political Affect* is clearly presented in the first two chapters: to go 'Above, Beyond, and alongside the Subject' in order to arrive at the notion of the 'Bodies Politic'. Protevi identifies three compositional scales of bodies politic: personal (referring to the somatic), group (involving the social), and civic (dealing with the institutional). Similarly, he identifies three temporal scales: short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Indeed, the proposed schematic is only provisional and analytic. Bodies politic are constituted by the imbrications of the social and the somatic – that is, by the interplay of bodies, minds, and social settings. The resources drawn on are numerous and span many scientific and philosophical areas: complexity theory, Deleuze's ontology, Francisco Varela's notion of autonomous systems, developmental systems theory, psychological and neurological theory of emotion, the 4EA (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, affective) cognition school, and so on. While chaos theory moves from simple to complex, complexity theory moves from complex to simple; it can be used as a theory for overcoming individualism

and social reductionism. Below the subject we find the neurological and physiological processes; above the subject, social practices; and alongside the subject, teamwork and technological supplementation. In Protevi's words: 'Instead of being stuck with the all or nothing of free-atomic individuals and organic-determining societies, we can think below and above the subject: below to the myriad physiological and psychological processes whose interaction constitutes the subject, and above to the intermediate level of myriad social groups and networks whose emergent effects are real enough, but whose resonance and dissonance, whose coalescence and dissolution, never add up to a unitary, organic, "social whole"' (9).

Following Deleuze, Protevi's position is decidedly materialistic; however, he does not fall into the poststructuralist trap of declaring the 'death of the subject', but instead focuses on affective cognition as the political economy of consciousness. Embodied cognition is necessarily affective; it represents an attempt to bridge the traditional division of reason and emotion. Interestingly, affective cognition becomes particularly evident in the extreme states of politically induced, de-subjectivizing emotions such as rage and panic (32). As a result of this assertion, Protevi proposes the three case studies as centered around different emotions: love and empathy for the Schiavo case, rage for the Columbine massacre, and fear and panic for Hurricane Katrina.

Despite this seeming diffusion, ecosocially-constituted bodies-politic are still individuating, self-referring bodies and in order to understand this aspect, Protevi resorts to Varela's notion of autonomous systems. Rejecting both Cartesian dualism and (Hobbesian) materialist determinism, autonomous systems theory, as applied to the notion of bodies politic, can be summarized by the following:

There is no mental property (in the sense of full-blown reflective consciousness) attributable to the single-celled organism, but since there is spontaneous and autonomous sense-making, there is no purely material realm in these organisms either. Affective cognition in humans is simply a development of this basic biological capacity of sense-making. (17)

In addition to being autonomous, bodies politic are embedded; developmental systems theory, as a reaction to genetic determinism, helps us understand this embeddedness. The embodied-embedded approach, according to Protevi, can assist us in overcoming both cognitivism and individualism through the addition of a supplementary approach, namely, population thinking. Avoiding the typological tendencies of traditional philosophy, population thinking allows us to approach bodies politic as multiplicities, as being formed through a complex interaction of dynamic social and somatic systems (42).

Perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most comprehensive case study is Protevi's assessment of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Whereas the Terri Schiavo and Columbine High School case studies revolve, respectively, around the affects of empathy

and rage, the Hurricane Katrina case study focuses on panic. Protevi interprets the slow and seemingly incompetent response of the U.S. government in terms of racialized fear which stands opposed to the empathetic communal solidarity of the citizens of the city. The study begins with a geo-political exploration of the natural (land, river, sun, wind, sea) and demographic elements constituting the New Orleans area. The decidedly leftist-materialist interpretation can be compressed into a single phrase: exploitation. Not only were the people exploited (Louisiana was one of the main slave trade posts and sugar cane plantation concentrations), but so was nature (draining the swamp, flood-proofing the river all contributed to the coastal erosion and need for levy construction).

As a result, we encounter a fragile landscape populated in large numbers by descendents of slaves historically portrayed as fundamentally violent and in need of submission and control. When the levees broke, rather than rushing to assist the affected city, the government delayed the effort by first militarizing the situation. In the face of overwhelming solidarity among the citizens of the city, it reacted by containing and controlling the predominantly African-American population. In spite of how some journalists attempted to describe it, the situation on the ground, rather than Hobbesian, was much more Rousseauian, in that it exhibited the fundamentally pro-social traits of human nature:

Yes, we saw images of helpless poor people waiting to be rescued at the Superdome and the Convention Center, but we should never forget that they rescued themselves prior to that, through heroic solidarity, through what we cannot be afraid to call ‘love’ in the sense of *philia*, which was for Aristotle the emotional bond revealing the political nature of humanity. (181)

Political Affect is a very engaging and ambitious project that addresses fundamental questions regarding human nature. Whether or not we accept its conclusions, it is a cogent and comprehensive enterprise that should appeal not only to continental and analytic philosophers, but also to social scientists. I highly recommend it.

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