



LOVE

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The vertigo of techno-modernity is an invasive sense of nothingness. This certainly also registers on the level of what is directly felt, not just thought. Already in 1984 Frederic Jameson referred to a "waning of affect" in postmodern society, an emotional shriveling or retreat. There is a thinness or flatness making its way into this most vital terrain of being human.

Our affective state is the very texture and timbre of our lives. Nothing is more immediate to us than our own feelings. This is constitutive, gives us the "feel" we have of the world, is what actually connects us to reality. Emotions are cultural artifacts, more so than ideas.

In this vein Lucien Febvre (1938 - 1941) called for a history of the sensibilities, and Anne Vincent-Buffault (1986) contributed *Histoire des larmes (History of Tears)*. Are our passions not at the core of our existence?

Every culture has its own emotional climate, every political struggle is an affective one. The fight against the drive of civilization is of course included. Things are felt before they are thought or believed, and so hegemony—or its undoing—has its foundation here. Adam Smith's first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), saw in emotions the thread that weaves together the fabric of society. None of this is a remarkable finding, but we often act as though the field of affect is of no real relevance.

Reason and reflection are somewhat refined expressions of the passions themselves. Antonio Damasio (1999, p. 312), in fact, provides the notion that "consciousness begins as a feeling, a special kind of feeling to be sure, but a feeling nonetheless... a feeling of knowing". His suggestion reknits the mind-body split so essential to life in mass society.

So many debilitating splits: humans from nature, work from play, among others. We are also being moved away from physical sensations, from direct experience. Feelings are embodied, but what is happening to the context of that embodiment? Isolation grows apace and social bonds keep weakening. Friends are exchanged for online network "friends", and the one-person household is an ever-larger percentage of all homes. Where is home? The subject is dispersed and the social, according to Baudrillard, really no longer exists.

We feel all this, even if the depthlessness of the dominant culture does work, as Jameson suggests, to deform and superficialize our emotional core in its image. This core is its own embodiment, perhaps the strongest redoubt of resistance. Otherwise, in a bitter irony, we

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wouldn't be in so much dis-ease. We wouldn't be so viscerally aware of the heart-brokenness of this modern void. We wouldn't be so anxious and in so much pain.

The Affective Turn (2007) reflects by its title current awareness of the centrality of emotion as culture. Introduced by communist Michael Hardt, it is, however, much more an example of the dominant paradigm than a helpful corrective. The leftist commitment to industrialized Progress is a key part of the onslaught against inner nature. Problem, not solution.

We embody a continuous history of love and suffering, bearing witness to what has moved us. Love, as Kierkegaard stressed, is the ground of all significance in life as we know it. We have loves and cares before we learn to formulate anything in language. As Martin Amis put it (*The Times*, 6/11/06), "Love turns out to be the only part of us that is solid, as the world turns upside down and the screen goes black."

But the failure of the event of love in contemporary societies is as obvious as it is painful, as recounted variously in the novels of Michel Houellebecq, for example. Anarcho-novelist Tom Robbins has emphasized the question, "How do you make love stay?" We may well agree with Ecclesiastes (6:16) that "A faithful friend is the medicine of life," but where are the friends? The marked decline in friendship in the U.S. in recent decades is well-documented (e.g. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears, *American Sociological Review*, June 2006).

And it is precisely here that radical theory fails, or fails even to show up. Why is it "desire" (or more alienated still, "seduction", with Baudrillard) that is the focus, not love? As bell hooks reported, "When I talked of love with my generation, I found it made everyone scared" (*All About Love*, p. xix). Yet there's such a need for it in this desert of the spirit, our culture of mounting lovelessness.

The opposite of love isn't hate, by the way, but indifference, hallmark of postmodern cynicism and hipness. So far, all has knelt before productionist existence in the draining technoculture. But we need to summon the depth of relationship against the dominant depthlessness, wherein so very much is shifting and disposable. A key feature is love of the unrealized potential of affective actuality, both in ourselves and in others.

There are of course potential dead-ends and snares in the way. For example, the sexist assumptions that so often compromise romantic love in a patriarchal, male-defined culture. Or the frequently world-denying aspects of religious love, its tendency to retreat from authentic individuality in favor of a devouring identification that negates rather than accepts otherness.

If emotion is a behavior, love is certainly also an action as well as a basic mental process. It is a key to emotional growth and strength that should lead us into greater communion with the world. Love redeems and gives meaning, emphasizing grace and the gift. The gift as the opposite of a merciless present, as the right life.

Luce Irigaray expresses this ably: "The gift has no goal. No for. And no object. The gift—is given. Before any division into donor and recipient. Before any separate identities of giver and receiver. Even before the gift."

To speak of what may be given can be a reminder of what has been taken away. In the 1950s Laurens van der Post encountered people who could carry all that they owned in one hand. He referred to "that wonderful Bushman laugh which rises sheer from the stomach, a laugh you never hear among civilized people" (*The Lost World of the Kalahari*, p. 244). What a feat, the erasure of such joy at being alive on the earth. Freud's psychoanalytic goal was to change neurotic misery into "normal" unhappiness; Lacan's was that the analyst learn to be as wretched as everyone else.

It is striking (e.g. Ronald Miller, *Facing Human Suffering*, 2004) how extremely rare is the mention of terms like suffering, anguish, sorrow in the literature of psychology. Such things are clearly of no real theoretical concern, merely symptoms to be classified under "less emotional" descriptions. Simone Weil went to the factories to understand suffering. The factories are still there, but the immiseration is arguably more generalized now in a more placeless, synthetic society. Elaine Scarry (*The Body in Pain*, 1985) saw torture as "a miniaturization of the world, of civilization" (SCARRY , p. 38). Post-traumatic stress disorder, originally diagnosed as stemming from combat trauma, is now very widely applied as a diagnosis; another commentary on the state of society which contains more everyday blows, even everyday atrocities. Chellis Glendinning's observation (1994) applies: personal trauma commonly reflects the trauma of civilization itself.

It is a commonplace that mental/emotional illness is the nation's leading health problem. And as Melinda Davis has observed (*The New Culture of Desire*, 2002, p. 66), "Anxiety is the black plague—and the common cold—of our days." A helpful exercise, as I see it, is to put all of politics in terms of health, i.e. what in social life is healthy or unhealthy? Isn't this, after all, the bottom line?

The overall picture is indeed well-known. Anxiety and stress undermine the immune system; as many as 50 percent who have an anxiety condition also suffer from major depression. The surge in anxiety occurs against the backdrop of a rise in depression across all industrialized countries (e.g. Pettit and Joiner, *Chronic Depression*, 2006). Interestingly, R.C. Solomon (*The Passions*, 1993, pp 62-63) sees depression as a "way of wrenching ourselves from the established values of our world." Along these lines the poet W.S. Merwin wrote, "And yet his grief is a great guide through this world. Even, perhaps, the surest of guides. As long as guides are needed." (in *Breathing On Your Own*, 2001, p. 192).

At the beginning of May 2008, several reports surfaced about the high incidence of chronic physical pain: almost 30 percent of the U.S. population is so afflicted. To go along with all the rest of it, from increasing numbers of random, rampage shootings to serious obesity now causing diabetes and heart disease in children; kids on behavior-modification drugs from infancy; mushrooming rates of asthma, autism, and allergies; parents killing their children; millions hooked on Viagra; tens of millions dependent on pharmaceuticals for sleep, etc. etc. The whole picture is increasingly pathological and frightening.

It is little wonder that we find tons of self-help books sold, an intense preoccupation with psychological well-being, and an endless pageant of emotional suffering on television and the internet. Notice the rather rapid transit of the succession of four best-selling magazines: *Life*, *People*, *Us*, and *Self*. The narrowing of perspective in an already individualistic society is obvious.

Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* (1979) cited "a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage" in America (p. 74). Writing in 2008, Patricia Pearson concluded that we now inhabit "a state far colder than narcissism" (*A Brief History of Anxiety*, p. 127).

An always accommodating postmodern sensibility proclaims the end of a core self, in favor of a multiplicity of shifting roles to be played. As social ties wither, is there a core anything left? Dispersed, with the human touch as systematically disappearing as contact with nature, we fear being alone with ourselves. A diffused, distracted mode of life represses memories of suffering and longs for a caress.

What is Progress, aka Modernity? "It is the high residues of hazardous and potentially lethal chemicals inside your fat cells. It is you sitting inside and turning on the television or computer on a beautiful day. It is you shopping when you are depressed. It is the feeling you get that something is missing." (Kevin Tucker, "What is the Totality?") It is perhaps odd that Descartes, progenitor of modern alienation, identified wonder as the first of his six primitive passions in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). Where is our capacity for genuine wonder in disenchanting society?

I can tell you that I am moved by the crickets' persevering song, their strong life-voice as summer shuts down in the Pacific Northwest. It is always a special joy to hear the geese migrating high above, their honking sounding to me like dogs softly barking way up there. There is no consciousness separate from an experienced object. What happens when all that is experienced is masses, commodities, images?

The waning of affect, as Jameson put it, as everything else that's alive wanes too. Can we really live meaningless (technified, non-enchanting, indirect) lives? What is vivid and immediate does not exist on a screen. How spiritually impoverished and lacking in vitality is this emotional culture. And what is on the horizon, if not still worse?

We know in what direction health lies. Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess, "Happiness is the deferred fulfillment of a prehistoric wish. That is why wealth brings so little happiness" (January 16, 1898). Simplicity contains everything and in simplicity all is present. Albert Camus (*Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 172) hit this note well: "I grew up with the sea and poverty for me was sumptuous; then I lost the sea and found all luxuries gray and poverty unbearable."