

## ON PUTTING THE ACTIVE BACK INTO ACTIVISM

*Rosi Braidotti*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses a paradox: how to engage in affirmative politics, which entails the production of social horizons of hope, while at the same time doing critical theory, which means resisting the present. This is one of the issues Deleuze and Guattari discuss at length, notably in *What is Philosophy?*:<sup>1</sup> the relationship between creativity and critique. It is however a problem that has confronted all activists and critical theorists, namely how to balance the creative potential of critical thought with the necessary dose of negative criticism and oppositional consciousness.

Central to this debate is the question of how to resist the present, more specifically the nastiness, violence and vulgarity of the times, while being worthy of our times, so as to engage with the present in a productively oppositional and affirmative manner. I shall return to this in the final section of my essay. There is a conceptual and a contextual side to this problem and I want to start by discussing each one, before addressing my central concern.

### I. THE CONTEXT

The public debate today shows a decline of interest in politics, whereas discourses about ethics, religious norms and values triumph. Some master-narratives circulate, which reiterate familiar themes: one is the inevitability of capitalist market economies as the historically dominant form of human progress.<sup>2</sup> Another is a contemporary brand of biological essentialism, under the cover of 'the selfish gene'<sup>3</sup> and new evolutionary psychology. Another resonant refrain is that God is not dead. Nietzsche's claim rings hollows across the spectrum of contemporary global politics, dominated by the clash of civilizations and widespread Islam phobia.

The bio-political concerns that fuel our necro-politics and the perennial warfare of our times also introduce a political economy of negative passions in our social context. Thus the affective economy expresses our actual condition: we now live in a militarised social space, under the pressure of increased enforcement of security and escalating states of emergency. The binary oppositions of the Cold war era have been replaced by the all-pervasive paranoia: the constant threat of the imminent disaster. From the environmental catastrophe to the terrorist attack, accidents are imminent and certain to materialise: it is only a question of time.

In this context, mass political activism has been replaced by rituals of public collective mourning. Melancholia has become a dominant mood and

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace, 1989; and *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the BioTechnological Revolution*, London, Profile Books, 2002.

3. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976.

a mode of relation. There is, of course, much to be mournful about, given the pathos of our global politics: our social horizon is war-ridden and death-bound. We live in a culture where religious-minded people kill in the name of 'the Right to Life' and wage war for 'Humanitarian' reasons.

Depression and burn-out are major features of our societies. Psychopharmaceutical management of the population results in widespread use of legal and illegal drugs. The narcotic sub-text of our societies is under-studied and mostly denied. Bodily vulnerability is increased by the great epidemics: some new ones, like HIV, Ebola, SARS or the bird flu; others more traditional, like TB and malaria. Health has become more than a public policy issue: it is a human rights and a national defence concern.

While new age remedies and life-long coaching of all sorts proliferate, our political sensibility has taken a forensic shift: 'bare life', as Agamben argues,<sup>4</sup> marks the liminal grounds of probable destitution - infinite degrees of dying. At the same time European culture is obsessed with youth and longevity, as testified by the popularity of anti-ageing treatments and plastic surgery.

Hal Foster<sup>5</sup> describes our schizoid cultural politics as 'traumatic realism' - an obsession with wounds, pain and suffering. Proliferating medical panopticons produce a global patho-graphy:<sup>6</sup> we go on television talk-shows to scream our pain.

In this context ethics emerges as the guiding principle for political action.

Let me sketch a brief cartography of poststructuralist ethics:

Besides the classical Kantians (see Habermas' recent work on human nature<sup>7</sup>), we have a Kantian- Foucauldian coalition that stresses the role of moral accountability as a form of bio-political citizenship. Best represented by Nikolas Rose<sup>8</sup> and Paul Rabinow,<sup>9</sup> this group works with the notion of 'Life' as bios, that is to say as an instance of governmentality that is as empowering as it is confining. This school of thought locates the ethical moment in the rational and self-regulating accountability of a bio-ethical subject and results in the radicalisation of the project of modernity.

A second grouping takes its lead from Heidegger and is best exemplified by Agamben.<sup>10</sup> It defines bios as the result of the intervention of sovereign power, as that which is capable of reducing the subject to 'bare life', that is to say zoe. The latter is, however, contiguous with Thanatos or death. The being-alive-ness of the subject (zoe) is identified with its perishability, its propensity and vulnerability to death and extinction. Bio-power here means Thanatos-politics and results in the indictment of the project of modernity.

Another important cluster in this brief cartography of new ethical discourses includes the Lévinas-Derrida tradition of ethics, which is centred on the relationship between the subject and Otherness in the mode of infinite indebtedness. Best expressed by critical thinkers like Critchley and Butler, this school of thought stresses the vulnerability and passivity of precarious life-forms and the importance of mourning.<sup>11</sup> I have enormous respect for this

4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, University Press, 1998; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996.

6. Mark Seltzer, 'Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere', *October*, 80 (1999), pp3-26.

7. Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, Cambridge, Polity, 2003.

8. Nikolas Rose, 'The Politics of Life Itself', *Theory, culture and society*, 18, 6 (2001), pp1-30.

9. Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*, Princeton University Press, 2003

10. Agamben, op. cit..

11. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, London, Verso, 2004; Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London and New York, Verso, 2007.

approach, but the project I want to pursue takes as the point of reference bios-zoe power defined as the non-human, vitalistic, and affirmative dimension of subjectivity. This is an affirmative project that stresses positivity and not mourning.

12. Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life. The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

The last discursive coalition, to which this project belongs, is inspired by the neo-vitalism of Deleuze, with reference to Nietzsche and Spinoza.<sup>12</sup> Bio-power is only the starting point of a reflection about the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. Contrary to the Heideggerians, the emphasis here is on generation, vital forces, and natality. Contrary to the Kantians, the ethical instance is not located within the confines of a self-regulating subject of moral agency, but rather in a set of interrelations with both human and inhuman forces. These forces can be rendered in terms of relationality (Spinoza), duration (Bergson), immanence (Deleuze), and, in my own terms, ethical sustainability. The notion of the non-human, in-human, or post-human emerges therefore as the defining trait of this new kind of ethical subjectivity. This project moves altogether beyond the postmodern critique of modernity and is especially opposed to the hegemony gained by linguistic mediation within postmodernist theory.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, London, Routledge, 2001.

In conclusion: in a mournful context where political philosophy rediscovers with Derrida<sup>13</sup> the mystical foundations of Law and political authority; or turns towards Schmidt's political theology,<sup>14</sup> melancholia tends to carry the day. It is in such a context that I want to argue the case for affirmation.

14. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1996.

## II. THE CONCEPTUAL CASE FOR AFFIRMATION

### II.1. *Oppositional consciousness*

The conceptual case of my argument rests on the rejection of the traditional equation between political subjectivity and critical oppositional consciousness and the reduction of both to negativity. There is an implicit assumption that political subjectivity or agency is about resistance and that resistance means the negation of the negativity of the present. A positive is supposed to be engendered by this double negative. Being against implies a belligerent act of negation, erasure of present conditions.

15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977.

This assumption shares in a long constituted history of thought, which in Continental philosophy is best exemplified by Hegel. The legacy of dialectical thinking is such that it positions negativity as a necessary structural element of thought. This means that the rejection of conditions or premises that are considered unsatisfactory, unfair or offensive - on either ethical or political grounds - is the necessary pre-condition for their critique. A paradoxical concomitance is thus posited between that which one rejects and the discursive practice of critical philosophy. This results in establishing negativity as a productive moment in the dialectical scheme which fundamentally aims at overturning the conditions that produced it in the first place and thus engender positive resistance, counter-action or transcendence.<sup>15</sup> The process of consciousness-raising is crucial to the process of overturning or over-coding

the negative instance. This process involves a significant epistemological component in that it requires adequate understanding of the conditions one is critical of. My point is that in the course of time this has resulted in a simplistic equation between critique and negativity and in the reduction of the latter to negation. What I would like to suggest is a change of perspective that aims at re-casting critique as affirmation.

This shift of perspective assumes philosophical monism and an ethical and affective component of subjectivity; it is thus an anti-rationalist position. A subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of power (as repressive - *potestas* - and positive - *potentia*) his/her actions are likely to have upon the world. It is a process of engendering empowering modes of becoming.<sup>16</sup> Given that in this neo-vitalist view the ethical good is equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment, the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others. Oppositional consciousness and the political subjectivity or agency it engenders are processes or assemblages that actualise this ethical urge. This position is affirmative in the sense that it actively works towards the creation of alternatives by working actively through the negative instance by cultivating the relations that are conducive to the transmutation of values.

In other words: the work of critique must not assume that the conditions for the overturning of negativity are necessarily available in the present time or space. Moving beyond the dialectical scheme of thought means abandoning oppositional thinking. This means that oppositions are not tied to the present by negation and hence emerge out of a different set of premises, affects and conditions. Affirmative politics rests on a time-continuum that indexes the present on the possibility of thinking sustainable futures. The sustainability of these futures consists in their being able to mobilise, actualise and deploy cognitive, affective and collective forces which had not so far been activated. How to ethically assess and format these forces becomes a crucial issue for critical theory - in terms of an ethics of affirmation that is also an ethology of forces. These driving forces concretise in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others. WE have to learn to think differently about ourselves. To think means to create new concepts.

To disengage the process of subject formation from negativity to attach it to affirmative otherness means that reciprocity is redefined not as mutual recognition but rather as mutual definition or specification. We are in this together in a vital political economy that is both trans-subjective and trans-human in its force.

Such a vision of the subject, moreover, does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces. The emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as a geo-politics or an eco-philosophy, in that it values one's reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term. Considering the extent of our technological development, emphasis on

16. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968. English translation: *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans), London, Athlone, 1968.

17. Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan©\_Meets\_Oncomouse*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997; Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy*, Sylvere Lotringer (ed), Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 1995; and *The Three Ecologies*, London, Athlone, 2000.

18. Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*, New York and London, W.W.Norton & Co., 2001, p159.

19. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, op. cit.

20. Ansell-Pearson, op. cit.

21. Haraway, op. cit.

22. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge, Polity, 2006

the eco-philosophical aspects is not to be mistaken for biological determinism. It rather posits a nature-culture continuum<sup>17</sup> within which subjects cultivate and construct multiple ethical relations. The concepts of immanence, multiple ecologies and of neo-vital politics become relevant here.

I have argued so far that oppositional consciousness is central to political subjectivity but it is not the same as negativity and that as a consequence, critical theory is about strategies of affirmation. Political subjectivity or agency therefore consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations. As Rich put it in her recent essays the political activist has to think 'in spite of the times' and hence 'out of my time', thus creating the analytics - the conditions of possibility - of the future.<sup>18</sup> Critical theory occurs somewhere between the no longer and the not yet, not looking for easy reassurances but for evidence that others are struggling with the same questions. Consequently, we are in this together.

## II.2. Positioning Otherness

The starting point of my case for affirmative politics is the assumption that the proper object of ethical enquiry is not the subject's universalist or individualist core, His moral intentionality or rational consciousness (the gender is not coincidental), as much as the effects of truth and power that his/her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. The ethical relation is central, rather than the universal moral essence of the subject. The emphasis on the relation expresses a pragmatic approach that defines ethics as the practice that cultivates affirmative modes of relation, active forces and values. The ethical good is that which acts as empowering modes of becoming, whereas morality is the implementation of established protocols and sets of rules.<sup>19</sup> This positions Otherness as the key issue.

This emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as an eco-philosophy, in that it emphasises one's reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term. Considering the extent of our technological development, emphasis on the ecology of belonging in not to be mistaken for biological determinism. It is rather a form of bio-centred egalitarianism<sup>20</sup> that posits a nature-culture continuum<sup>21</sup> within which subjects construct multiple relations. I also refer to this ethics in terms of social sustainability,<sup>22</sup> though I cannot pursue this argument further here. According to this pragmatic ethical approach, we need to create the conditions for the emergence of affirmative relations, by cultivating relational ethics of becoming.

Contrary to the Hegelian tradition - which is also strong in psychoanalysis - alterity is not a structural limit but rather the condition of expression of positive, i.e: non-reactive alternatives. The other is a threshold of transformative encounters. The 'difference' expressed by subjects who are especially positioned as 'other-than', that is to say always already different from - has a potential for transformative or creative becoming. This 'difference' is not an essential given, but a project and a process that is ethically coded.

My position in favour of complexity promotes consequently a triple shift. Firstly: it continues to emphasise the radical ethics of transformation in opposition to the moral protocols of Kantian universalism. Secondly it shifts the focus from unitary rationality-driven consciousness to process ontology, that is to say a vision of subjectivity propelled by affects and relations. Thirdly, it disengages the emergence of the subject from the logic of negation and attaches subjectivity to affirmative otherness - reciprocity as creation, not as the re-cognition of Sameness. In the rest of this section, I will concentrate on this third aspect: affirmation, or the critique of the negative.

Let me give you an example. Otherness in our culture has historically functioned as the site of pejoration or negativity. Difference is postulated on a hierarchical scale that opposes it to the vision of Subjectivity as Sameness. The subject is expected to be the same as a number of assumed values. In our culture these values are framed with reference to humanist ideals that equate the subject with rationality, consciousness, moral and cognitive universalism. This vision of the 'knowing subject' - or the 'Man' of humanism - posits itself as much by what it includes within the circle of his entitlements, as in what it excludes. Otherness is excluded by definition. This makes the others into structural or constitutive elements of the subject: the other functions as a negatively framed fraction of the same. The others play an important - albeit specular - role in the definition of the norm, the norm-al, the norm-ative view of the subject.

These others are: the sexualised other, also known as women, gays and trans-sex; the ethnic, native or racialised others and the natural, animal and environmental others. They constitute the inter-connected facets of structural otherness, which are constructed as excluded. To say that the structural others re-emerge with a vengeance in post modernity amounts to making otherness not into the site of negation, but rather into polyvalent sites of affirmation. It is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of post-modernity are driven and fuelled by the emergent 'others': the women's and gay rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonisation movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements, animal rights included, are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They also mark the crisis of the former 'centre' or dominant subject. In the language of philosophical nomadology, they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities. It is a case of: 'an/and', not of 'either/or'.

An affirmative ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It implies a new way of combining self-interests with the well being of an enlarged sense of community, which includes one's territorial or inhuman, i.e: environmental inter-connections. It is an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings for subjects constituted in and by multiplicity that stands in open disagreement with dominant Kantian morality and its feminist components. This has two corollaries.

23. Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, Jackie Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*, London, Sage, 2000, p26.

24. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race. Imaging Political Culture Beyond the Colour Line*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000.

25. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of diaspora - Contesting identities*, New York and London, Routledge, 1996.

26. Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, English translation *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing (trans), Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

27. Ernesto Laclau, 'Subjects of Politics, Politics of the Subject', *Differences*, 7, 1 (1995), pp146-164.

28. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994.

29. Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy. The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, Boston, South End Press, 1997.

30. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the politics of Empowerment*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991.

The first concerns the question of universal values. An ethics of affirmation is capable of a universalistic reach, though it is critical of moral universalism. It expresses a grounded, partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building. There is a simple sense in which contemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including, but not only the humans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability. Bio-technological advances like the Human Genome project, for instance, unify all the human species in the urgency to oppose commercially owned and profit-minded technologies. Franklin, Lury and Stacey refer to this situation as 'pan humanity',<sup>23</sup> that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats: be it xenophobic populist politicians, or volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis. Again, notice the force of the negative here. But affirmation, as usual, is just around the corner.

The positive elements are twofold: firstly, the global re-contextualisation induced by the market economy also produces a sense of inter-connection. Secondly, the renewed sense of inter-connection produces the need for an ethics. The fact that 'we' are in *this* together results in a renewed claim to community and belonging by singular subjects who have taken critical distance from individualism. Far from falling into moral relativism, this results in a proliferation of locally situated micro-universalist claims. This is what Genny Lloyd called: 'a collaborative morality'.

One evident and illuminating example of this is the brand of situated cosmopolitan neo-humanism that has emerged as a powerful ethical claim in the work of postcolonial and race theorists, as well as in feminist theories. Examples are: Paul Gilroy's planetary cosmopolitanism;<sup>24</sup> Avtar Brah's diasporic ethics;<sup>25</sup> Edouard Glissant's politics of relations;<sup>26</sup> Ernesto Laclau's micro-universal claims;<sup>27</sup> Homi Bhabha's 'subaltern secularism';<sup>28</sup> Vandana Shiva's anti-global neo-humanism<sup>29</sup> as well as the rising wave of interest in African humanism or Ubuntu, from Patricia Hill Collins<sup>30</sup> to Drucilla Cornell.<sup>31</sup> American black feminist theory has been post-secular for a long time, as bell hooks<sup>32</sup> and Cornel West<sup>33</sup> demonstrate.

Thus, the anti-humanism of social and cultural critics within a Western poststructuralist perspective can therefore be read alongside the cosmopolitan neo-humanism of contemporary race, post-colonial or non-Western critics. Both these positions, all other differences notwithstanding, produce inclusive alternatives to humanist individualism. Without wishing to flatten out structural differences, nor to draw easy analogies between them, I want to practice the politics of location and hence try to synchronise their efforts and tune their respective political aims and passions. It is an example of an encounter with otherness as a generative or affirmative force: bio-centred egalitarian post humanism on the one hand and non-western neo-humanism on the other transpose hybridity, nomadism, diasporas, creolisation processes into means of re-grounding claims to connections and alliances among

different constituencies.

The second corollary supports my main thesis, mainly that we need to stress the vital politics of life itself, which means external non-human relations, life as zoe, or generative force. The 'others' in question here are non-anthropomorphic and include planetary forces. This runs against the humanistic tradition of making the anthropocentric Other into the privileged site and inescapable horizon of otherness.

This is a point of major difference between nomadic philosophy and a number of Continental philosophers, like Jessica Benjamin<sup>34</sup> in her radicalisation of Irigaray's notion of 'horizontal transcendence'; Lyotard in the 'differed'<sup>35</sup> and his notion of the 'un-toned' and Butler<sup>36</sup> in her emphasis on 'precarious life'. You can either approach otherness as the expression of a limit - albeit a negotiable one - which calls for an always already compromised set of negotiations. This is the function of the other's face in Levinas (1999) and, by extension, Derrida's ethics. It is also the position defended both by Simon Critchley on the infinite demand of the Other and the non-negotiable nature of 'justice' and 'hospitality'. I prefer to look instead for the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilises and allows for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current conditions. That is affirmative ethics.

I should add for the sake of scholarly accuracy that Levinas' case is complex, as there are significant resonances between his notion of passivity and Deleuze's affirmation. Levinas' brand of immanence, however, differs considerably from Deleuze's life-oriented philosophy of becoming. Levinas - like Irigaray - inscribes the totality of the Self's reliance on the other as a structural necessity that transcends the 'I' but remains internal to it. Deleuze's immanence, on the other hand, firmly locates the affirmation in the exteriority, the cruel, messy outside-ness of Life itself. Creative chaos is not chaotic - it is the virtual formation of *all* possible forms.<sup>37</sup> Life is not an a priori that gets individuated in single instances, but it is immanent to and thus coincides with its multiple material actualisations. It is the site of birth and emergence of the new - life itself. I refer to this generative force as 'zoe', which is the opposite therefore of Agamben's 'bare life' - in that it is a creative force that constructs possible futures.

Traditional moral reasoning locates the constitution of subjectivity in the interrelation to others, which is a form of exposure, availability and vulnerability. This recognition entails the necessity of containing the other, the suffering and the enjoyment of others. I want to argue instead that an embodied and connecting containment as a moral category can also emerge from the radical redefinition of the same-other relation by the vital politics of life itself, as external and non-human forces: cells, as Franklin<sup>38</sup> argues; viruses and bacteria, as Luciana Parisi<sup>39</sup> points out, and earth others, as Haraway has been arguing for a long time. This post-human ethics rests on a multi-layered form of relationality. It assumes as the point of reference not the individual, but the relation. This means openness to others, in the

31. Drucilla Cornell, The Ubuntu Project with Stellenbosch University [www.fehe.org/index.php?id=281](http://www.fehe.org/index.php?id=281), 2002. Consulted on 2 January 2007.

32. bell hooks, *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, Boston, MA, South End Press, 1990.

33. Cornel West, *Race Matters*, New York, Vintage, 1994.

34. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problems of Domination*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1988.

35. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, Collection "Critique", Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1983.

36. Butler, *Precaious Life*, op. cit.

37. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris, Minuit, 1969. English translation: *The Logic of Sense*, M. Lester and C. Stivale (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 1990.

38. Franklin, Lury, Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*, op. cit.

39. Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex. Philosophy, Bio-Technology, and the Mutation of Desire*, London, Continuum Press, 2004.



positive sense of affecting and being affected by others, through couples and mutually dependent co-realities. Containment of the other occurs through inter-relational affectivity.

### III. STEPS TO AFFIRMATIVE ETHICS

#### III.1 *What is affirmation?*

In order to understand the kind of transmutation of values I am defending here it is important to de-psychologise this discussion about positivity, negativity and affirmation and approach it instead in more conceptual terms. We can then see how common and familiar this transmutation of values actually is. The distinction between good and evil is replaced by that between affirmation and negation, or positive and negative affects.

What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed. This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. The slightly de-personalising effect of the negative or traumatic event involves a loss of ego-indexes perception, which allows for energetic forms of reaction. Clinical psychological research on trauma testifies to this, but I cannot pursue this angle here. Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same insight. Multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. Following Glissant,<sup>40</sup> the becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances. Every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken - its negative charge can be transposed. The moment of the actualisation is also the moment of its neutralisation. The ethical subject is the one with the ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalise the event and transform its negative charge. Affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming. This shift makes all the difference to the patterns of repetition of negative emotions. It also reopens the debate on secularity, in that it actually promotes an act of faith in our collective capacity to endure and to transform.

What is negative about negative affects is not a normative value judgment but rather the effect of arrest, blockage, rigidification, that comes as a result of a blow, a shock, an act of violence, betrayal, a trauma, or just intense boredom. Negative passions do not merely destroy the self, but also harm the self's capacity to relate to others - both human and non human others, and thus to grow in and through others. Negative affects diminish our capacity to express the high levels of inter-dependence, the vital reliance on others that is the key to both a non-unitary vision of the subject and to affirmative ethics. Again, the vitalist notion of Life as 'zoe' is important here because it stresses that the Life I inhabit is not mine, it does not bear my name - it is a generative force of becoming, of individuation and differentiation: a-personal, indifferent and generative ...

What is negated by negative passions is the power of life itself - its *potentia*

40. Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing (trans), University of Michigan Press, 1997.

- as the dynamic force, vital flows of connections and becoming. And this is why they should neither be encouraged nor should we be rewarded for lingering around them too long. Negative passions are black holes.

This is an antithesis of the Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain, or to view pain as the obstacle to moral behaviour. This displaces the grounds on which Kantian negotiations of limits can take place. The imperative not to do unto others what you would not want done to you is not rejected as much as enlarged. In affirmative ethics, the harm you do to others is immediately reflected in the harm you do to yourself, in terms of loss of *potentia*, positivity, capacity to relate and hence freedom. Affirmative ethics is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection: one has to endure.

Endurance is the Spinozist code word for this process. Endurance has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfolded field of actualisation of passions or forces. It evolves affectivity and joy, as in the capacity for being affected by these forces, to the point of pain or extreme pleasure. Endurance points to the struggle to sustain the pain without being annihilated by it. Endurance has also a temporal dimension, about duration in time. This is linked to memory: intense pain, a wrong, a betrayal, a wound are hard to forget. The traumatic impact of painful events fixes them in a rigid eternal present tense, out of which it is difficult to emerge. This is the eternal return of that which precisely cannot be endured and, as such, returns precisely in the mode of the unwanted, the untimely, the un-assimilated or in-appropriate/d. They are also, however, paradoxically difficult to remember, in so far as re-membering entails retrieval and repetition of the pain itself.

Psychoanalysis, of course, has been here before.<sup>41</sup> The notion of the return of the repressed is the key to the logic of unconscious remembrance, but it is a secret and somewhat invisible key which condenses space into the spasm of the symptom and time into a short-circuit that mines the very thinkability of the present. Kristeva's notion of the abject<sup>42</sup> expresses clearly the temporality involved in psychoanalysis - by stressing the structural function played by the negative, by the incomprehensible, the un-thinkable, the other-of understandable knowledge. Later Kristeva<sup>43</sup> describes this as a form of structural dissociation within the self that makes us strangers to ourselves.

Deleuze calls this alterity 'Chaos' and defines it positively as the virtual formation of all possible form. Lacan, on the other hand - and Derrida with him, I would argue - defines Chaos epistemologically as that which precedes form, structure, language. This makes for two radically divergent conceptions of time, and - more importantly for me today - of negativity. That which is incomprehensible for Lacan - following Hegel - is the virtual for Deleuze, following Spinoza, Bergson and Leibnitz. This produces a number of significant shifts: from negative to affirmative affects; from entropic to generative desire; from incomprehensible to virtual events to be actualised;

41. Jean Laplanche, *Life and death in Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

42. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.

43. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia University, 1991.

from constitutive outsides to a geometry of affects that require mutual actualisation and synchronisation; from a melancholy and split to an open-ended web-like subject; from the epistemological to the ontological turn in poststructuralist philosophy.

Nietzsche has also been here before, of course. The eternal return in Nietzsche is the repetition, not in the compulsive mode of neurosis, nor in the negative erasure that marks the traumatic event. It is the eternal return of and as positivity. In a nomadic, Deleuzian-Nietzschean perspective, ethics is essentially about transformation of negative into positive passions, i.e.: moving beyond the pain. This does not mean denying the pain, but rather activating it, working it through. Again, the positivity here is not supposed to indicate a facile optimism, or a careless dismissal of human suffering. It involves compassionate witnessing of the pain of others, as Zygmunt Bauman<sup>44</sup> and Susan Sontag<sup>45</sup> point out - in the mode of empathic co-presence.

44. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell's Publisher, 1993.

45. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Picador, 2003.

### III. 2. *About pain and vulnerability*

But what about pain? Affirmative politics, with its emphasis on Life as a generative force, may seem counter-intuitive at first. And yet, the urge that prompts this approach is anything but abstract. It is born of the awareness that in-depth transformations are at best demanding and at worst painful. This is not a complaint, nor is it meant as a deterrent against change. I consider melancholic states and the rhetoric of the lament as integral to the logic of advanced capitalism and hence as a dominant ideology. Many leading intellectuals specialise in and profit from this genre.

I do not want to suggest that the politics of mourning and the political economy of melancholia are intrinsically reactive or necessarily negative. A number of critical theorists argue forcefully the case for the productive nature of melancholia and its potential for creating solidarity.<sup>46</sup> I am also convinced that melancholia expresses a form of loyalty through identification with the wound of others and hence that it promotes an ecology of belonging by upholding the collective memory of trauma or pain. My argument is rather that the politics of melancholia has become so dominant in our culture that it ends up functioning like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves very small margins for alternative approaches. I want to argue therefore for the need to experiment with other ethical relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation.

Our conservative political context moreover, has placed undue emphasis on the risks involved in changes, playing *ad nauseam* the refrain about the death of transformative politics. Nothing could be further removed from my project. I simply want to issue a cautionary note: processes of change and transformation are so important and ever so vital and necessary, that they have to be handled with care. We have to take the pain of change into account, not as an obstacle to, but as a major incentive for, an ethics of transformations.

Let's talk about pain for a moment. Pain in our culture is associated to suffering by force of habit and tradition and is given negative connotations

46. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004; Butler, *Precarious Life*, op. cit.

accordingly. Supposing we look a bit more critically into this associative link, however: what does pain, or suffering, tell us? That our subjectivity consists of affectivity, inter-relationality and forces. The core of the subject is affect and the capacity for interrelations to affect and to be affected. Let us agree to de-psychologise this discussion from this moment on, not in order to deny the pain, but rather to find ways of working through it.

If we assume the affective core of subjectivity, for instance with Spinoza's theory of *conatus* or active desire for empowerment, then the aim of ethics becomes the expression of the active or productive nature of desire. It then follows that affirmative politics is not about an oppositional strategy; it is not another discourse about storming the Bastille of phallogentrism, or undoing the winter palace of gender (Lenin meets Butler there in a metaphorical delirium). Politics becomes multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit. If this is the aim, then what happens to that traditional association between pain and suffering? More specifically, how do we assess the pain linked to political processes of change and transformation? My point is that we need to de-link pain from suffering and re-think its role in constituting ethical relations.

Taking pain into account is the starting point; the aim of the ethical process, however, is the quest for ways of overcoming the effects of passivity, the paralysis brought about by pain. The internal disarray, fracture and pain are also the conditions of possibility for ethical transformation. The qualitative leap through and across pain is the gesture that actualises affirmative ways of becoming. This is a gesture that constructs hope as a collective social project.

It is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury that are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation. Their 'better quality' consists not in the fact of having been wounded, but of having gone through the pain. Because they are already on the other side of some existential divide, they are anomalous in some way - but in a positive way: they have already endured. They are a site of transposition of values. Marxist epistemology, post-colonial and feminist standpoint theories have always acknowledged the privileged knowing position of those in the 'margins'. The figure of Nelson Mandela - a contemporary secular saint - comes to mind. As does the world-historical phenomenon that is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. This is a case of repetition that engenders difference and does not install the eternal return of revenge and negative affects. A massive exercise in transformation of negativity, into something more sustainable, more life enhancing.

### III.3 *Being worthy of what happens to us*

One of the reasons why the negative associations linked to pain, especially in relation to political processes of change is ideologically laden. It has to do with the force of habit. Starting from the assumption that a subject is a molar aggregate, that is to say a sedimentation of established habits, these can be

seen as patterns of repetitions that consolidate modes of relation and forces of interaction. Habits are the frame within which non-unitary or complex subjects get re-territorialised, albeit temporarily. One of the established habits in our culture is to frame 'pain' within a discourse and social practice of suffering which requires rightful compensation.

Equally strong is the urge to understand and empathise with pain. People go to great lengths in order to ease all pain. Great distress follows from not knowing or not being able to articulate the source of one's suffering, or from knowing it all too well, all the time. The yearning for solace, closure and justice is understandable and worthy of respect.

47. Lyotard, *op. cit.*

This ethical dilemma was already posed by J.F. Lyotard<sup>47</sup> and, much earlier, by Primo Levi about the survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Namely that the kind of vulnerability we humans experience in face of events on the scale of small or high horror is something for which no adequate compensation is even thinkable. It is just incommensurable: a hurt, or wound, beyond repair. This means that the notion of justice in the sense of a logic of rights and reparation is not applicable. For the post-structuralist Lyotard, ethics consists in accepting the impossibility of adequate compensation - and living with the open wound.

This is the road to an ethics of affirmation, which respects the pain but suspends the quest for both claims and compensation and resists the logic of retribution of rights. This is achieved through a sort of de-personalisation of the event, which is the ultimate ethical challenge. The displacement of the 'zoe'-indexed reaction reveals the fundamental meaninglessness of the hurt, the injustice or injury one has suffered. 'Why me?' is the refrain most commonly heard in situations of extreme distress. This expresses rage as well as anguish at one's ill fate. The answer is plain: actually, for no reason at all. Examples of this are the banality of evil in large-scale genocides like the Holocaust,<sup>48</sup> the randomness of surviving them. There is something intrinsically senseless about the pain, hurt or injustice: lives are lost or saved for all and no reason at all. Why did some go to work in the WTC on 9/11 while others missed the train? Why did Frida Kahlo take that tram which crashed so that she was impaled by a metal rod, and not the next one? For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with it. That's precisely the point. We need to de-link pain from the epistemological obsession that results in the quest for meaning and move beyond, to the next stage. That is the path to transformation of negative into positive passions.

48. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Viking Press, 1963.

This is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather Nietzschean ethics of overturning the negative. Let us call it: *amor fati*: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. This is not carelessness or lack of compassion, but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the meaninglessness of pain and the futility of compensation. It also re-asserts that the ethical instance is not that of retaliation or

compensation, but it rather rests on active transformation of the negative.

This requires a double shift. Firstly the affect itself moves from the frozen or reactive effect of pain to proactive affirmation of its generative potential. Secondly, the line of questioning also shifts from the quest for the origin or source to a process of elaboration of the questions that express and enhance a subject's capacity to achieve freedom through the understanding of its limits.

What is an adequate ethical question? One which is capable of sustaining the subject in his/her quest for more inter-relations with others, i.e: more 'Life', motion, change, and transformation. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work and as endurance. An ethical question has to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of inter-relations and connections, i.e., how much freedom of action can we endure? Affirmative ethics assumes, following Nietzsche, that humanity does not stem out of freedom but rather that freedom is extracted out of the awareness of limitations. Affirmation is about freedom from the burden of negativity, freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

#### IV 1. ON THE ADVANTAGES OF DIS-IDENTIFICATION

Transformative ethics involves a radical repositioning on the part of the knowing subject, which is neither simple, self-evident, nor free of pain. No process of consciousness-raising ever is. In feminist theory over the last 30 years we have explored this issue from the initial slogan 'the personal is the political', through the politics of location,<sup>49</sup> into the multiple situated perspectives of today. Feminist theory is double-edged and it involves both critique and creativity. In post-structuralist feminism, this has also been discussed in terms of dis-identifying ourselves from familiar and hence comforting values and identities.<sup>50</sup>

Dis-identification involves the loss of cherished habits of thought and representation, which can produce fear, a sense of insecurity and nostalgia. Change is certainly a painful process. If it were not, more people may actually be tempted to try it out. This does not, however, equate it with suffering and hence acquire necessarily negative connotations. To believe this would be a politically conservative position. The point in stressing the difficulties and pain involved in the quest for transformative ethics and politics is to raise an awareness of both the complexities involved and the paradoxes that lie in store.

Changes that affect one's sense of identity are especially delicate. Given that identifications constitute an inner scaffolding that supports one's sense of identity, shifting our imaginary identifications is not as simple as casting away a used garment. Psychoanalysis taught us that imaginary re-locations are as complex and as time-consuming as shedding an old skin. Moreover, changes of this qualitative kind happen more easily at the molecular or

49. Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1986.

50. Teresa de Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986; Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, 1994.

51. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, past and present*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

52. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, Harvard University Press, 2000; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, op. cit.

53. Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale. White Women, Racism and History*, London and New York, Verso, 1992; Gabrielle Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds), *Thinking Differently: a Reader in European Women's Studies*, London, Zed Books, 2002.

54. Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

55. Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, London, Verso, 2002.

subjective level and their translation into a public discourse and shared social experiences is a complex and risk-ridden affair. Spinozist feminist political thinkers like Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens<sup>51</sup> argue that such socially embedded and historically grounded changes are the result of 'collective imaginings' - a shared desire for certain transformations to be actualised as a collaborative effort.

Let me give you a series of concrete examples of how dis-identifications from dominant models of subject-formation can be productive and creative events. First of all, feminist theory is based on a radical dis-engagement from the dominant institutions and representations of femininity and masculinity, to enter the process of becoming-minoritarian or of transforming gender. In so doing feminism combines critique with creation of alternative ways of embodying and experiencing our sexualised selves. In spite of massive media battering and the marketing of political conservatism, there is no credible evidence among European women of a nostalgic desire to return to traditional gender and sex roles.

Secondly, in race discourse, the awareness of the persistence of racial discrimination and of white privilege has led to serious disruptions of our accepted views of what constitutes a subject. This has resulted on the one hand in the critical re-appraisal of blackness<sup>52</sup> and on the other to radical relocations of whiteness.<sup>53</sup> Finally, I would like to refer to Edgar Morin's account of how he relinquished Marxist cosmopolitanism to embrace a more 'humble' perspective as a European.<sup>54</sup> This process includes both positive and negative affects: disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of Marxism is matched by compassion for the uneasy, struggling and marginal position of post-war Europe, squashed between the USA and the USSR. This produces a renewed sense of care and accountability that leads Morin to embrace a post-nationalistic redefinition of Europe as the site of mediation and transformation of its own history.<sup>55</sup>

Beneficial or positive aspects balance the negative aspects of the process. The benefits are epistemological but extend beyond; they include a more adequate cartography of our real-life conditions and hence less pathos-ridden accounts. Becoming free of the topos that equates pain with suffering and links in-depth change to the latter results in a more adequate level of self-knowledge. It enhances the lucidity of our assessments and therefore clears the grounds for more adequate and sustainable relations. This means that the emphasis commonly placed on the force of the negative is out of balance and needs to be reconsidered.

\*\*\*

The ethical process of transforming negative into positive passions engenders a politics of affirmation, in the sense of creating the conditions for endurance and hence for a sustainable future. Virtual futures grow out of sustainable presents and vice versa. Transformative politics takes on the future as the

shared collective imagining that endures in processes of becoming. This results not in egoism but in mutually embedded nests of shared interests. Lloyd calls this 'a collaborative morality'.<sup>56</sup> Because the starting point with Spinoza is not the isolated individual, but complex and mutually depended co-realities, the self other interaction also follows a different model. To be an individual means to be open to being affected by and through others, thus undergoing transformations in such a way as to be able to sustain them and make them work towards growth. An ethical life pursues that which enhances and strengthens the subject without reference to transcendental values, but rather in the awareness of one's interconnection with others and in multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others. The ethical good is the affirmative production of the conditions which will augment our capacity to act in the world in a productive manner - *potentia* as the active engagement with the present, by being worthy of it but also by combining it with the ability and the force to resist the negativity. The ethical-political concept here is the necessity to think with the times and in spite of the times, not in a belligerent mode of oppositional consciousness, but as a humble and empowering gesture of co-construction of social horizons of hope.

56. G. E. R. Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p74.