

## AFFIRMATION, PAIN and EMPOWERMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Feminist theory, not unlike mainstream social theory, has taken an 'ethical turn' in the frame of a globalised world that has seen a sharp increase in structural injustices, flows of migration and perennial warfare. This historical context intensifies but also re-structures the traditional terms of the ethical debate about the role of the other in the constitution of the self and the moral imperative to contain and be responsible to and for the other. The paper addresses this debate and tries to argue against the tendency of much contemporary ethical theory to focus primarily on melancholia, mourning and negativity. My argument favours instead an ethics of affirmation. The key question is: what sort of ethical interaction with others is engendered by an affirmative ethics? If joyful affectivity, following Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, is defined as the force that aims at fulfilling the subject's capacity for inter-action with others and for freedom, what does this mean concretely for ethical behaviour? What are the political implications of this vision of the subject for trans-national feminist politics?

**KEYWORDS:** feminist ethics; affirmation; Deleuze; globalisation; trans-national feminism; empowerment.

### Introduction

There is a consensus among social theorists that the contemporary public debate has replaced an interest in politics, which used to be central to critical theory and radical epistemologies, with a renewed emphasis on discourses about ethics, religious norms and values. This 'ethical turn' has affected most disciplines and discursive areas, including feminism. The debates on ethical values can be seen as a response to a fast-changing globalised social context, in a technologically mediated world in which new master-narratives have arisen. They replace the radical skepticism and the deconstructive mood of the postmodernist era with renewed faith in basic values and they bring back some rather familiar themes. The first is the inevitability of capitalist market

economies as the historically dominant form of human progress (Fukuyama, 1989; 2002). Another is a contemporary brand of biological essentialism, under the cover of 'the selfish gene' (Dawkins, 1976) and new evolutionary psychology. A third crucial master-narrative is about the return of religion, especially in secularised Europe. This 'post-secular' turn has led to the reinvention of new religions, often as compounds of different aspects of monotheistic religions or of proto-religious beliefs and new age rituals<sup>1</sup>. The impact of Eastern religions upon this new social scene is enormous, with Buddhism as one of the fastest-rising philosophies and life practices in the West. I regret that I cannot pursue this further here.

The return of these relatively reactive or at least traditional master-narratives takes place in a global context of great tension. We now live in a militarized global and social space, under the pressure of increased enforcement of security and escalating states of emergency. The Cold war doctrine of Mutually Agreed Destruction (MAD) mutated into the global notion of Self-Assured Destruction (SAD). Nuclear paranoia has given way to constant wars on terrorists. Considering the often unfathomable image of this new kind of enemy, who is often internal to the very nations and systems that are expected to fight him/her, the political economy is one of unspecified fear. We have entered the era of viral politics, which prompts all-encompassing but un-targeted terror and social but also moral panic. Hence the need for total coverage against any eventuality: accidents are imminent and certain to happen and weapons of mass contamination are in store everywhere. The terrorist attack, the blast, the catastrophe will definitely occur: it is only a question of time. Graffiti on the walls of the Tate Modern Gallery, London, says it all: "After Cold War, Global Warming!" In this context, mass political activism was replaced, especially after September 11, 2001, by public rituals of collective mourning. The politics of melancholia became dominant: after being MAD, we're all SAD.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosi Braidotti: 'The postsecular turn in feminism' in *Theory, Culture & Society*, forthcoming 2008.

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’. Moreover, 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 of all sorts proliferate, our political sensibility has taken what I call a “forensic shift”: we are increasingly concerned about ways of dying. Hal Foster (1996) describes our schizoid cultural politics as ‘traumatic realism’: an obsession with wounds, pain and suffering.

‘Reality television’ and talk-shows overflow with instances of this generalized moral and emotional misery, also known as global patho-graphy (Seltzer, 1997). Bio-political modes of management of embodied subjects result in a proliferation of social practices that aim at health, fitness, long age, weight-control and a number of other technologies of the self. The recurrent theme is that of the malleability and hence also the vulnerability of the embodied self and the avoidance of pain. Bio-genetic discourses about inheritance and evolution strengthen this theme. The fear of not being able to live up to the challenges of our technologically mediated social context produce discourses of complaint and anxiety,

Political philosophy reflects this mood: the emphasis on ‘bare life’, with Agamben (1998), exposes sovereign power as the apparatus that regulates modes and degrees of dying. Power marks the liminal grounds of probable destitution of an embodied subject that is becoming-corpse as it speaks. Derrida (2002) rediscovers the mystical foundations of Law and political authority and also their violence. The renewed interest in Schmidt’s political theology (Schmidt, 1996) fits in both with the belligerent mood of our globalised world and with the

demise of high secularism. The same goes for the popularity of Leo Strauss (Norton, 2004) in American neo-theological conservative political thought.

It is both predictable and perfectly understandable that such a context would engender and support a diffuse social climate of mournful resignation, verging on melancholia. I do not want to suggest either that the politics of mourning and the affective economy of melancholia are intrinsically reactive or necessarily negative. A number of critical theorists have argued forcefully the case for the productive nature of melancholia and its potential for creating solidarity (Gilroy, 2004; Butler, 2004a). 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 new forms of resistance. Hence my interest in the ethics of affirmation.

### Transformative or affirmative ethics

The starting point of my case for affirmative ethics is an assumption I drew from poststructuralist philosophies and more specifically from their critique of the vision of the subject implicit in European philosophical humanism. That is a subject who is supposed to coincide with his/her consciousness and rational will. By extension this means that the proper object of ethical enquiry is this subject's universalist core of rational individualism and moral intentionality. This vision of the ethical subject has been challenged by neo-Nietzschean philosophers starting from Foucault and Deleuze in the 1970's. They opposed to it the idea that an ethical subject is to be conceptualised in

terms of the effects of truth and power that his/her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. This position prioritises the ethical relation as a practice, a relation or a technology of the self, rather than the universal moral essence of the subject. The emphasis on the active relation expresses a pragmatic approach that defines ethics as the practice that cultivates affirmative modes of inter-relation, generative forces and values. The ethical good is defined as that which enacts empowering modes of becoming, whereas morality is just the implementation of established protocols and sets of rules (Deleuze, 1968; Ansell-Pearson, 1999). I shall return to this key ideas later on in the text.

The pragmatic and theoretical emphasis on relations, as opposed to moral essences, instils a form of creativity at the heart of the vision of the subject. Ethics has to do with creative becomings, that is to say with the composition of affirmative modes and forms of relation: a sort of orchestration of forces which Deleuze renders also in the mode of a 'dramatization' of affects. To think this through with Nietzsche, the same project can be expressed in terms of a transmutation of negative into positive passions. It comes down to a question of creativity: affirmative ethical relations create possible forms of transformation of the negative by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. The affective forces are the driving energy that concretises in actual, material relations. These relations constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others. What this means practically is that the conditions for politics and ethical agency are not dependent on the current state of the terrain, but are actively engaged in the creation of alternative social relations and other possible worlds. The conditions of possibility for the ethical instance are not oppositional and thus not tied to the present by negation, but are instead affirmative and geared to creating empowering alternatives. This emphasis on the generative aspect includes another crucial element, namely that the ethical relation is not restricted within the boundaries of the human, including the instances of human otherness. It rather opens it up to inter-relations with both

non-human, post-human and inhuman forces: it is a post-anthropocentric, bio-centred approach.

This emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as an eco-philosophy, in that it emphasizes one's reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term: social, psychic as well as natural (Guattari, 2000). Considering the extent of our technological development, emphasis on the ecology of belonging in not to be mistaken for biological determinism. It rather posits a nature-culture continuum (Haraway, 1997) within which subjects construct multiple relations. I also refer to this ethics in terms of social sustainability (Braidotti, 2006), though I cannot pursue this argument further here. According to this ethical approach, the practice or the pragmatics of ethical relations are essential. We need therefore to create the conditions for the emergence of affirmative relations, by cultivating relational ethics of becoming.

Contrary to the Hegelian dialectical tradition – whose legacy is felt in psychoanalysis as well as in deconstruction – 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 emphasize 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 a 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 start with an example. Otherness in most cultures and certainly in Europe, 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 consequently play an important – albeit specular – role in the definition of the norm, the normal, the norm-active 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 by the dominant vision of the subject. By implication this vision depicts a subject that is assumed to be: masculine and heterosexual, non-racialized (to be white is constructed as the 'natural' way to be; ideals of beauty are equated with optimal 'whiteness', etc.) and non-animal/vegetable/earth-bound. These axes of difference function as structures of differentiation, which define the parameters that frame the acceptable, normal and standard vision of the subject. The dominant subject therefore relates to this standard ideal by sameness, in that it coincides with zero degree of deviancy in relation to this implicit norm. In other words: he is male; heterosexual; 'white' or as close as possible to it and human or anthropomorphic.

To say that these 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. As an example: it is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of European 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, disability 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 vision of the subject. In the language of philosophical nomadology, they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities (Braidotti, 2006). They are both sites of oppression, marginalization and exclusion and also empowering instances of emergent counter-subjectivities.

An affirmative ethics for a non-unitary subject based on the quest for empowering relations 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. As I suggested above: this 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 counterparts.

The question of universal values is relevant to this discussion. An ethics of affirmation is capable of a universalistic reach, though it is critical of moral universalism. It expresses a grounded, partial form of micro-universals, 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 bio-centered unity tends to be of the negative



kind, as the recognition of 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" (2000:26), that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats: fear can be a powerful binding factor. 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.

One evident and illuminating example of this trend to broaden our understanding of the universal by grounding it into local and hence partial practices is the 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 (2000); Avtar Brah's diasporic ethics (1996); Edouard Glissant's politics of relations (1997); Ernesto Laclau's micro-universal claims (1995); Homi Bhabha's 'subaltern secularism' (1994); Vandana Shiva's anti-global neo-humanism (1997) as well as the rising wave of interest in African humanism or Ubuntu, from Patricia Hill Collins (1991) to Drucilla Cornell (2002). American black feminist theory has been post-secular for a long time, as bell hooks (1990) and Cornell West (1994) demonstrate.

Edward Said (1978) was among the first to alert critical theorists in the West to the need to develop a reasoned account of Enlightenment-based

universal humanism. Said strongly recommended that we should take into account the colonial experience, its violent abuses and structural injustice, as well as post-colonial existence. French post-structuralist philosophers also argued that in the aftermath of colonialism, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the Gulag – to mention but a few of the horror of modern history- Europeans need to develop a critique of Europe's delusion of grandeur in positing themselves as the moral guardian of the world and as the motor of human evolution. This anti-Eurocentric line is pursued by the critical theorists of the poststructuralist generation and it forms an integral part of their critique of humanism. Examples are: Deleuze's rejection of the transcendental vision of the subject (1968); Irigaray's de-centering of phallogocentrism (1974); Foucault's critique of European humanism (1975); Glissant's emphasis on creolisation (1990) and Derrida's work on hospitality (1997).

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 of drawing easy analogies between them, I want to practice the politics of location and single out their common points. This should be seen as an attempt to synchronize their efforts and tune their respective political aims and passions. To map out points of convergence is not reductive, but rather productive: it is a methodological 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 common shared claims to inter-connections and feminist alliances among different constituencies.

### The question of pain and vulnerability

The question of pain is always raised as an immediate objection to any ethical project that deviates from the standard Kantian norm that is dominant in the West. Changes and transformation and the affirmation of processes of becoming are all very well, argues the objector, but does this imply that all changes are intrinsically good? what about the changes that are for the worse? What about hurt, pain and disenchantment? In other words, the ethics of affirmation, with its emphasis on nomadic becoming as a generative force, may seem over-optimistic and counter-intuitive at first. And yet, the urge that prompts this approach is anything but abstract, it is rather grounded in full recognition of the co-presence of pain in and through processes of political change. It is born of the respect for pain and of the awareness that in-depth transformations are at best demanding and at worst painful. There is a lesson from lived experience here. My political generation, that of the baby-boomers, has had to come to terms with this harsh reality, which put a check on the intense and often fatal impatience that characterizes those who yearn for change<sup>2</sup>. We may all be human, but some are definitely more mortal than others. We lost so many of our specimen to dead-end experimentations of the existential, political, sexual, narcotic, or technological kind and to the inertia of the status quo – also known as the ‘Stepford wives’ syndrome. This is not a complaint, nor is it meant as a deterrent against change. As I stated in the introduction, I consider melancholic states and the rhetoric of the lament as integral to the logic of advanced capitalism and hence as a dominant ideology. The conservative political context of the globalised era moreover, has placed undue emphasis on the risks involved in changes, playing ad nauseam the refrain about the death of ideology and the tragic dimension of transformative politics.

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<sup>2</sup> See Rosi Braidotti : ‘The politics of radical immanence: May 68 as an event’, in *New Formations*, forthcoming 2008.

Nothing could be further removed from my project than this political timidity. I simply want to issue a cautionary note: processes of social change and transformation are so important, ever so vital and necessary, that they have to be handled with care. We have to take into account the component of pain that is involved in transformative politics and see it not as an obstacle to, but as a major incentive for, an ethics of affirmation.

Let us focus on pain for a moment. In European culture, pain is associated to suffering, by force of habit and tradition and hence it is given negative connotations. If we approach this issue however with nomadic lenses, that is to say with Spinozist and Deleuzian feminist tools, we can then de-link pain from suffering and look at pain in itself. What does pain, like other negative sensations and emotions, such as suffering, envy and anger tell us? If we could bring ourselves to de-psychologize the issue, then pain tells us that our subjectivity consists of affectivity, inter-relationality and the impact of others. The core of the subject is affect, that is to say the capacity for interrelations with others: to affect and to be affected by them. De-psychologising this discussion is not a way of denying the pain, but rather of finding different ways of working through it and hence of living with it. If we assume the affective core of subjectivity, for instance with Spinoza's theory of conatus or with the feminist active desire for empowerment, and if we then define ethics as relationality, then the aim of the ethical relation is to cultivate the desire for active and empowering relations to others. Ethics then becomes the expression of the active or productive nature of the desire to relate to others in an affirmative and empowering manner.

This implies firstly, as I argued earlier, that affirmative politics is not about an oppositional strategy. Politics rather becomes multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations. If this is the aim, how do we assess the pain, the risks, the discomfort linked to political processes of social change and

individual transformation? This takes me to the second implication of this position, namely that we need to de-link pain from suffering and re-think the affirmative role pain plays in constituting ethical relations. 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 thirty years we have explored this issue from the initial slogan 'the personal is the political', through the politics of location (Rich, 1987), into the multiple situated perspectives of today. Feminist theory is double-edged and it involves both critique and creativity. In post-structuralist feminism, this issue of how to achieve change has also been discussed in terms of dis-identifying ourselves from familiar and hence comforting values and identities (De Lauretis, 1986; Braidotti, 1994).

Dis-identification involves pain. It is the pain of 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 which, as I stated earlier, is not my aim. What I want to stress is the difficulties and pain involved in the quest for transformative ethics and politics and to raise an awareness of both the complexities and the paradoxes involved in the process of striving for social change. 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 relocations 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 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 (1999) argue that such socially embedded and historically grounded changes are the result of 'collective imaginings' - a shared desire for certain transformations to be actualised, which can also be seen as a collaborative morality.

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. Nomadic subjects of all kinds confirm this same insight: multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss.

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 on the critical re-appraisal of blackness (Gilroy, 2000; Hill Collins, 1991) and on the other to radical relocations of whiteness (Ware, 1992; Griffin and Braidotti, 2002). 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 (Morin, 1987). 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. (Balibar, 2002).

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.

### On affirmation

If we approach the issue of pain in less psychological and more conceptual terms, then we can appreciate some familiar aspects of this debate. The pursuit of affirmative values as a relational project overrides the distinction between good and evil and replaces it with that between affirmation and negation, or positive and negative affects. These are indexed on intensity of forces and relations.

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, disbelief or mourning. Fear, pain and shock have a slightly de-personalizing effect: the traumatic event involves a loss of ego-indexed perception, which inhibits energetic forms of reaction<sup>3</sup>. And yet, an ethics of affirmation assumes that every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken, so that its negative charge can be transposed. The moment of the actualisation is also the moment of neutralization of

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<sup>3</sup> Clinical psychology research on trauma testifies to this and also to the large amount of traumas that end up in a positive resolution, but I cannot pursue this here.

negativity. The ethical subject is the one with the ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalise the event and transform its negative charge. 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. Therefore, 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.

What is negative about negative affects is not a normative value judgment but precisely 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. A vitalist notion of Life as 'zoe' – generative force – 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. What is negated by negative passions is therefore the power of life itself, as the dynamic force, vital flows of connections and becoming. 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 quite a different emphasis from the Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain, or to view pain as the obstacle to moral behaviour and to ethical interaction. 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 and of immunization from potential harm by others. Taking pain into account is the starting point, the aim of the



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 social project.

Feminism teaches us that women are the ethical subjects who are socially expected and encouraged to sustain this process of transformation, of giving what we have not got, of creating possible worlds out of the misery and restrictions of a limited social horizon. It is an enlightening paradox to consider, but 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 already been wounded, 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 are a site of transposition of values. In my earlier work on monsters (Braidotti, 2002) and deviant others, I analysed this paradox in terms of the productive nature of abnormality, of what falls outside the norm, or the normal and desirable ideal. Others, alien, external foreign, monstrous or unfamiliar looking others are the site of powerful promises, of creative potential, of staggering new combinations. It is up to the dominant subjects to open up to them and see this affirmative aspect.

Marxist epistemology, post-colonial and feminist standpoint theory have always acknowledged the privileged knowing position of those ‘others’, who constitute the ‘margins’. There is a great deal of knowledge in the margins and among the marginals. The figure of Nelson Mandela comes to mind as an example, as does the world-historical phenomenon that is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. This is a case of a public ritual of acknowledgment and transformation of pain into a collective ritual of bonding and re-birth. It is a form 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. Endurance is the Spinozist code word for this transformative process.

Endurance has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfolded field of actualization 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, however, 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, as I said above, 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. These painful events are also, however, paradoxically difficult to remember, in so far as re-remembering entails retrieval and repetition of the pain itself, which one is prone to want to avoid.

Psychoanalysis has provided useful insight into this paradox (Laplanche, 1976). The notion of the return of the repressed is the key to the Freudian logic of unconscious remembrance. It is however 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 (1980) expresses clearly the twisted temporality involved in psychoanalysis. Kristeva stresses the structural function played by the negative, by the incomprehensible, the un-thinkable, the other-of understandable knowledge.

Deleuze calls this alterity 'Chaos' and he 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 the purposes of my argument, of negativity. That which is incomprehensible for Lacan – following Hegel- is the virtual for Deleuze, following Spinoza, Bergson and Nietzsche.

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; from constitutive outsides to a geometry of affects that require mutual synchronization; 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, neither 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 (Ansell-Pearson, 1999). 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 (1993) and Susan Sontag (2003) point out – in the mode of empathic co-presence.

### Being worthy of what happens to us

Two more problematic aspects need to be raised. The first is drawn from the truism that our culture tends to glorify pain by equating it with suffering and as a result it promotes an ideology of complaint. Contemporary culture has encouraged and rewarded a public morality based on the twin principles of claims and compensation. As if legal and financial settlements could constitute the answer to the injury suffered, the pain endured and the long-lasting effects of

the injustice. Cases that exemplify this trend are the compensation for the Shoah in the sense of restitution of stolen property, artworks, bank deposits; similar claims have been made by the descendants of slaves forcefully removed from Africa into North America and more recently compensation for damages caused by Soviet communism, notably the confiscation of properties across Eastern Europe, both from Jewish and other former citizens. Another salient example is the discussion about compensation for the Korean comfort-women under Japanese occupation during World War II. A great deal of contemporary mainstream feminism in the USA especially has also moved in the direction of legal claims and financial compensation. I think this trend for resolving a political and ethical issue through legal and financial compensation is not a step in the right direction. The point is to make a difference by working towards transcending the negativity. This makes affirmative ethics of transformation into a struggle against the mainstream.

The second problem built into this is the force of habit. Starting from the assumption that a subject is a sedimentation of established habits, these can be seen as patterns of repetitions that consolidate modes of relation and forces of social interaction. Habits are the frame within which a semblance of unity and coherence gets constructed within the subject. In Deleuzian feminist language: this is how the nomadic, non-unitary and complex structure of subjects get re-territorialized and become fixed, albeit temporarily. One of the established habits in our culture is to frame 'pain' in an equation with 'suffering', as I said before, and to settle them in a social practice that requires rightful compensation and abundant empathy. The moral urge is therefore equated with the tendency to understand and empathize with pain. As a result people go to great lengths in order to ease all pain and a variety of discourse against pain circulate. Again, my aim is neither to dismiss nor to disregard such discourses. 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. What I want to argue however is that in ethical terms, this approach begs the question and is not helpful in the long run.

The first reason for this seemingly radical position concerns the impossibility of compensation. This ethical dilemma was already posed by J.F. Lyotard (1983) and, much earlier, by Primo Levi about the survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Namely that the kind of vulnerability humans experience in face of events on the scale of small or high horror and such systematic evil 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 ‘differend’, or open wound.

The second reason is more pragmatic: a transmutation of negative into positive feelings, that is the road to an ethics of affirmation, achieves the double aim of respecting the pain but suspending the logic of retribution of rights and hence of compensation. This is achieved by de-psychologizing pain, as I argued before, through a sort of de-personalization of the event, which is the ultimate ethical challenge. The dis-placement of the ego-indexed reaction and the suspension of the quest for quantified compensation exposes the fundamental meaningless-ness of the hurt, the injustice or injury one has suffered. “Why me?” is the refrain most commonly heard in situation of extreme distress or great pain. 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 (Arendt, 1963), 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 have to grow worthy of everything that happens to us. We need to de-link pain from the quest for meaning and move beyond, to the next stage of co-existence with the event. That is the transformation of negative into positive passions.

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 meaningless-ness 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, then ? 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. An ethical question had 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. Affirmative ethics is about

freedom from the burden of negativity, freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

### The question of Otherness in transformative ethics.

Affirmative ethics locates the constitution of subjectivity in the interrelation to others, which is not only a form of exposure, availability and vulnerability, but also a mutually empowering relation. Affirmative ethics inherits from poststructuralism the idea that we need to move ethics beyond the logic of recognition, accepting the inter-dependence as a form of open-endedness at the core of subjectivity. The emphasis on the relation is the defining feature of nomadic subjectivity. It entails the necessity of containing the other, the suffering and the enjoyment of others, while pursuing the moral project of expressing the intensity that is constitutive of the subject. An embodied and connecting form of trans-subjectivity emerges from this, over and against the hierarchical forms of containment implied by Kantian forms of universal morality. This nomadic view of affirmative ethics takes place within a monistic ontology that sees subjects as modes of individuation within a common flow of becoming. This also implies a notion of life as generative power or *zoe*. Consequently there is no self-other distinction in the traditional mode, but variations of intensities, assemblages set by affinities and complex synchronizations.

This high degree of dynamic transversality in the reading of the subject is enhanced by reference to non-human relations. 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 radical redefinition of the same-other relation stresses the vital politics of life itself, that is to say the presence of non-human forces. Examples of this: cells, as Franklin (2000) argues; viruses and bacteria, as Luciana Parisi (2004) points out, and earth others, as Bryld and

Lykke have been arguing for a long time (1999). This post-human ethics assumes as the point of reference not the individual, but the relation. This means openness to others, in the 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. This displaces the grounds on which Kantian negotiations of limits can take place. The imperative not to do onto 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 on the harm you do to yourself, in terms of loss of potentia, positivity, capacity to relate and hence freedom.

This is a point of major difference between nomadic philosophy and a number of Continental philosophers, like Jessica Benjamin (1988) in her radicalisation of Irigaray's notion of 'horizontal transcendence' ; Lyotard in the "differend" (1983) and his notion of the "unatoned" and Butler (2004a) in her emphasis on "precarious life". To pursue my dialogue with Judith Butler on this point (Braidotti 2002; Butler 2004b), given that we express different branches of the poststructuralist tradition, let me expand this to the discussion of the role of the other's face in our respective philosophies. 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. Or you can look, as I stated earlier, for the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilizes and allows for flows of affirmation of values and forces which are not yet sustained by the current conditions. That is affirmative ethics.

Bio-centred egalitarianism breaks the expectation of mutual reciprocity and stresses instead the impossibility of mutual recognition and the need for mutual specification and co-dependence. The ethical process of transforming negative into positive passions introduces time and motion into the frozen enclosure of seething pain. It is a gesture of affirmation of hope, in the sense of



creating the conditions for endurance and hence for a sustainable future. This is rich in implications for social theory.

Gatens and Lloyd stress the political relevance of the notion of affirmative ethics in Deleuze and Spinoza's work. By virtue of being interconnected to other human and non-human actors, we share in responsibility even for deeds we have not done ourselves. Here the reference to Hannah Arendt is crucial: the reason for our responsibility is our membership in a group which no voluntary act of ours can dissolve, in so far as we acquire it simply by virtue of being born into a community. As we are all human, humanity is our frame of reference. Human beings belong to a complex multiplicity of potentially conflicting communities, so that their sociability is inherent and it entails affective and emotional bonds. The temporal dimension is again crucial: a location is a spatial but also a temporal site, because it involves a commonly shared memory and sense of the past that continue to affect the present and will carry onto the future. Understanding this is the key both to social citizenship and to the forms of ethical agency that it empowers.

Because each human is defined by his/her desire for freedom and self-expression (conatus), by connectibility and hence sociability, the social and political dimensions are built into the subject. It is like an inbuilt human capacity, which means that there is no rupture between the personal and the political: the common bond of human imagination and understanding ties each individual into a larger whole. The aim of good government is to preserve these rights and to enhance them whereas bad governments repress them or limit them. This is an ethological approach to citizenship. Culture and politics are the storage of rules and suggestions for how to enhance the potentia of each and everyone, thus developing the powers of an idea of reason that also includes affectivity.

This turning of the tide of negativity is the transformative process of achieving freedom of understanding, through the awareness of our limits, of our

mutual dependence and also of our bondage. This results in the freedom to affirm one's essence as joy, through encounters and minglings with other bodies, entities, beings and forces. It is an ontology of empowerment for subjects committed to transformative ethics. Ethics means faithfulness to this potentia, or the desire to become, to go on relating to others and to endure.

Becoming is an intransitive process: it's not about becoming anything in particular: only what one is capable of and attracted to and capable of becoming it's life on the edge, but not over it. It's not deprived of violence, but deeply compassionate. It's an ethical and political sensibility that begins with the recognition of one's embodied and embedded limitations as the necessary counterpart of one's forces, intensity and capacity for inter-relation with multiple others. It has to do with the project of tuning one's intensity so as to set the adequate modes and time of its actualisation or enactment. It can only be empirically embodied and embedded, because it's interrelational and collective.

## **Conclusion**

Affirmative ethics is essentially an ethics of relation that engenders empowerment by transforming negative into positive passions, thus creating the conditions for endurance and sustainable transformations. Virtual futures grow out of sustainable presents and vice versa. Transformative politics works towards the future as the shared collective imagining that endures in and sustains processes of becoming. This results in a nomadic or transversal model of subjectivity: nomadic subjects as mutually embedded nests of shared interests: Lloyd calls this "a collaborative morality" (Lloyd 1996, 74). Because the starting point is not the isolated individual, but complex and mutually depended co-realities, the self other interaction is structured according to a different model. To be a subject does not mean being an isolated individual, but rather being open to being affected by and through others, thus undergoing

transformations and being able to sustain them. An ethical life pursues that which enhances and strengthens the subject without reference to transcendental values, but rather in the awareness of one's interconnections in multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous and non-human 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. Affirmative ethics enables 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 key concept here is the necessity to think with the times and also against them, not in a belligerent mode of oppositional consciousness, but as a humble and empowering gesture of co-construction of social horizons of hope.

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