

# Affect

*Jan Slaby and Rainer Mühlhoff*

---

In this initial chapter of the *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* volume we outline a basic understanding of affect circumscribing a general tendency that we deem fruitful as an analytical perspective. This understanding builds on a notion of affect as *relational dynamics* between evolving bodies in a setting, thus contrasting with approaches to affect as inner states, feelings, or emotions. “Affect” designates specifically those encounters between bodies that involve a change – either enhancement or diminishment – in their respective bodily *capacities* or micro-powers. Thus, affect is inextricable from an approach to power, understood as relations of reciprocal efficaciousness between bodies – human as well as non-human – in a particular domain. This suggests an affect-based perspective on the dynamic formation and subsequent transformation of individual entities – their ontogenesis and individuation – instead of assuming that entities, whether ordinary objects or human actors, are ready-made, stable, and fixed. For human actors, affects are material and ideational relations that, in the short term, increase or diminish their agentive and existential capacities in relation to their surroundings and all other actors and entities present in a situation. In the longer term, affective relations *constitute* human and non-human actors, insofar as affective relations over time both establish and subsequently modulate – make, unmake, remake – individual capacities and dispositions. In other words, relational affect is a central factor in the process of subject formation. Moreover, relational affect is a driving force in the formation and subsequent consolidation of larger aggregates of bodies, that is, in processes of collectivization.

Delineating affect in such general terms is productive for devising research perspectives in a number of different fields and with different goals and methodological orientations. Methodologically and conceptually, we will approach affective phenomena neither as individual mental states, nor as categorically circumscribed episodes within human practices (→ *emotion, emotion concept*). Rather, they constitute forceful encounters between evolving entities within tangles of formative relations (→ *affective arrangements*). Emphasis is placed on developmental processes, variable power relations, change and transformation, on the formative settings that are the backdrop of ontogenesis and subjectification, and

on the spontaneous, intensive association of entities into larger aggregates (→ *affective communities*). In addition, this perspective helps to bring into view subtle affective dynamics that may otherwise escape the purview of researchers. However, all these phenomena – human actors and their characteristics, mental states, interactive practices, social collectives, established systems of categories and feeling rules – may still be thought of as the transient yet temporarily consolidated results of such affective encounters. This conception of affect – mainly developed from materials found in the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza, read through Gilles Deleuze – is generative of further working concepts apt to illuminate the nexus between affect, power, and subjectivity. The purpose of this chapter and of several subsequent chapters in this volume is to flesh out this cluster of ideas and its conceptual background and highlight some of the implications for the contemporary study of affect.

## **Foundation: Spinoza’s relational approach to affect**

### ***Talking affect with Spinoza***

That a key strand of contemporary affect studies is rooted in Spinoza’s philosophy makes it interesting but also vexing. Spinoza offers an all-encompassing metaphysical system – a dynamic form of substance monism – that opposes central lines of Western philosophical thought running from Descartes via Kant to many individualistic and mentalistic approaches in the 20th century (cf. Andermann, 2016; Balibar, 1997; Gatens & Lloyd, 1999; Saar, 2013; Sharp, 2011). This oft-unacknowledged conflict of metaphysical frameworks lies behind some of the controversies surrounding the turn to affect in the past 30 years, and might explain some of the misunderstandings and confusions that beset its proponents and opponents alike (cf. Massumi, 1995; Leys, 2011; see Gatens, 2014, for clarification). In this section, we therefore revisit Spinoza’s understanding of affect in light of his overall ontological approach, so as to bring the basic perspectives and underlying thought of contemporary Spinoza- and Deleuze-inspired affect studies into view. Our account is geared to present-day concerns, and aims to strike a balance between philosophical reconstruction and a systematic perspective on research. In the second half of this chapter we relate this understanding of affect to current approaches within affect studies.

In Spinoza’s main work, *Ethica* (1677/1985), especially when interpreted in a Deleuzian key (e.g., Deleuze 1981/1988a, 1968/1990), affect can be characterized along the lines of three thematic vectors: (1) a relational ontology; (2) a constitutive interplay of affecting and being affected; (3) a dynamic and polycentric understanding of power.

Before we explicate these three conceptual strands, a note on Spinoza’s – and our own – terminology is in order. Spinoza distinguishes between

*affections* (lat. *affectio*, *affectiones*) and *affects* (lat. *affectus*).<sup>1</sup> Each is closely related to his metaphysical position of substance monism, as they are basic ontological notions that apply at the level of being itself. According to Spinoza, there is only one substance that is truly all-encompassing, constituting a field of immanence to which all being and all reflection on being is inevitably tied. Neither an external observer's position, nor an encompassing representation of reality is conceivable in Spinoza's account, only *involved* articulations from positions within substance. This one substance – not coincidentally also called “nature” or “god” – is dynamically differentiated into an infinite amount of finite *modes*. These modes – literally, the modifications of substance – are the various discernible entities: all that there is. In its most basic sense, “affection,” in the sense of the Latin *affectio*, is just another word for “mode”: “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (Spinoza, 1677/1985, I def. 5).<sup>2</sup> Yet at the same time, and given the nature of modes as ongoing dynamic modifications of substance, affects-as-*affectio* are also the relations between the various modes, the effects and impacts they mutually exert on one another. In other words, then, Spinoza's *affectio* refers to the *being of entities* in a dynamic relational ontology, and also – or thereby – to the impression made, or trace left, on entities by their dynamic encounters with other such modes (cf. Deleuze, 1981/1988a; Andermann, 2016).

While affects-as-*affectio* are all relations between entities (modes) within the one substance, Spinoza uses “affect” (lat. *affectus*) to designate those affections that effectively either increase or diminish the powers – agentive capacities or *potentia* – of the entities in question (Spinoza, 1677/1985, III def. 3). As such significant impacts, affects-as-*affectus* might be conceived of as durational transitions from one state of being into another. As Deleuze (1981/1988a) suggests, from here it is not far-fetched to assume that, in the case of sentient creatures, some of these significant transitions register as a felt *durée*, as feelings, in other words (cf. pp. 39ff., 48f., 62f.). Viewed from this angle, affects-as-*affectus* might be separately individuated and named, thus approaching what in current terminology is referred to as emotion: the categorical types designated as, for example, happiness, sadness, fear, anger, shame, and so on. However, a premature focus on the categorical sorting, individual enactment, and conscious feeling of such consolidated affects can lead us away from acknowledging Spinoza's principal point, namely that affects-as-*affectus* are

- 1 The term “affection” in current English is misleading in this context, as it refers to particularly *affectional* (i.e., loving) relations, not to affective relations of all kinds as Spinoza's term *affectio* was meant to refer to. Thus, we will stick with the Latin term wherever the pronounced understanding of *affectio* is in play, while “affect” captures Spinoza's *affectus* well enough for a start.
- 2 References to Spinoza's *Ethics* follow the common citation scheme using the work's internal segmentation in parts (I–V), propositions (prop.), scholia (schol.), proofs (dem.), definitions (def.), and others.

relational phenomena unfolding dynamically and effectively in-between entities, both human and non-human, and within formative environments. They are not – or not initially – individual human compartments, let alone “mental states.” For this reason, we postpone the discussion of the relationship between affect and emotion to the chapter on emotion (→ *emotion*, *emotion concept*).

As a terminological orientation, we use “affect” (*affectus/affectio*) roughly in the way Spinoza employs these terms, while we use the non-Spinozist term “affectivity” generically to cover the whole extended family of affective phenomena that encompasses, for instance, emotions, feelings, sentiments, moods, atmospheres, and so on. In contexts where it is important to preserve the Spinozan nuances, we write *affect-as-affectio* and *affect-as-affectus* for maximal clarity (or just the Latin *affectio* and *affectus* in short). Our wager throughout is that even short of a theoretically pure adoption of Spinoza’s metaphysical outlook, this approach can help inform – either embellish and dynamize or productively challenge – other theoretical perspectives on affective phenomena.

### **Toward a systematic understanding of affect and affectio**

We will now unpack successively some of what is implicit in the general determination of Spinoza’s understanding of *affectio/affectus*. Contemporary affect theory and related work would benefit from adopting, or at least accounting for, these aspects of Spinoza’s thought.

(1) *Relational ontology*. *Affect/affectio* refers to dynamics of mutual effective impingement in relations, that is, between individual entities. This presents us with a productive approach to the question of the constitution or formation of individual entities, or the process of ontogenesis. To Spinoza, an individual (“finite mode”) is nothing more or less than *how it manifests in relations of affecting and being affected*. Individuation, on this account, is an open process of relational modulation not guided by an anticipated result or blueprint. It thus presents a radically relational and dynamic understanding of individuals and their affective encounters. The individual on this approach is a transiently stabilized node in an encompassing relational dynamic and thus constitutively entangled with other individuals and a shared formative milieu. Gilbert Simondon’s (1989/2005) concept of *transindividuality* is apt for capturing this dynamic-relational understanding of individuals. It emphasizes both the separate and unique character of individuals once constituted, and the essential sharedness of the formative relational domain, or pre-individual milieu, in which individuation takes place (Balibar, 1997; see also Sharp, 2011, pp. 34–42).

Another important takeaway of Spinoza’s ontological approach is the theorem commonly referred to as ontological “parallelism,” in opposition to Cartesian dualism. Human affects in Spinoza are inseparably both a bodily

and a mental dynamic, that is, they are, as *affectiones*, simultaneously relations between bodies and “the ideas of these affections” (Spinoza, 1677/1985, def. 3). Spinoza (1677/1985) states that “the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (prop. 2 schol.). Extension and thinking are just two attributes under which the “order and connection of things” as part of the one substance may be explicated, and “hence the order of actions and passions of our body is, by nature, at one with the order of actions and passions of the mind” (Spinoza, 1677/1985, III, prop. 2 schol.). This parallelism theorem is an important background axiom to an understanding of affect as social micro-dynamics. It gives the reason why the nexus of affective dynamics and concurrent subjectivity must be analyzed in social situations and networks of relations where affect is a register of reciprocity on a bodily *and* a mental level.

(2) *Affecting and being affected*. Another key characteristic of Spinoza’s notion of affect/affection is that it is always referring to a correlative interplay of affecting and being affected. An affective relation is not a one-sided or unilateral impact of one individual on another. Rather, active and receptive involvement are inseparable. This entails that the unfolding of an affective dynamic is not reducible to properties of only one of the involved individuals. The way one individual is affecting and being affected in a situation co-dependes on all the other participating individuals, both human and non-human alike.<sup>3</sup> Rather than asking *who* is affecting *whom* in a given situation, the question *how* a relational dynamic of affecting and being affected evolves in the immanence of a given situation is rendered salient. This informs a basic directive for research, namely, the requirement to situate a putative affective dynamic within its specific micro-relational milieu, and thus investigate affect as part of complex, polycentric, and spatio-temporally extended affective arrangements (→ *affective arrangements*).

Understanding affect as an interplay of affecting and being affected does not boil down to a concept which assumes a cascade of “one-directional affections” (individual A affecting B with subsequent “counter affection” of B on A) that sums up to reciprocity merely on an aggregate level. The interplay of affecting and being affected should be understood in a strong sense, even to the point of transforming the implied understanding of causality. The prototypically modern idea of causality as transitive, with billiard balls as the standard model, shifts into thinking of *immanent causality* between things as parts of a higher context of effectuation, of which the physics of coupled oscillators would be the textbook model (→ *affective resonance*). Thus the elementary structure of our Spinoza-based concept of affect is that of a joined

3 For details on this point see Deleuze (1968/1990, pp. 91–95, 217–224), Kwek (2015) and Mühlhoff (2018). In Spinoza’s *Ethica* (1677/1985), this interpretation refers to the group of propositions in part III, prop. 49–59 and part IV, prop. 33.

movement-with, of a durational coupling of the individuals' movements in reciprocal modulations and resonances, so that it is impossible to say A is affecting B without B affecting A. In a Deleuzian terminology, this is to say that affecting and being affected is always forming an open process, a process of *becoming* (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987, ch. 10). Of course, this perspective does not preclude the singling out of affective and agentive contributions of individuals, nor is it blind to acts of singular and one-sided violence. To the contrary, it allows to explicate how the violence of a perpetrator is often enabled by structural constellations of relative inequalities in affective capacities and by overall situational dynamics as their manifestation.

(3) *Power*. The concept of affect in Spinoza is intimately connected with – even identical to – an understanding of power. Spinoza attributes to each individual a *potentia*, which is a kind of “micro power.” This *potentia* is not something that individuals possess besides their other characteristics. *Potentia* might best be translated as the individual's capacity to enter into relations of affecting and being affected – or *affective capacity* in short (cf. Spinoza, 1677/1985, III, post. 1 and 2; Deleuze, 1981/1988a, pp. 49–50). In Spinoza's ontology this amounts to saying that an affective capacity is the individual entity's ability of being in general: “*Posse existere potentia est*” (“to be able to exist is to have power,” Spinoza, 1677/1985, I, prop. 11 dem.). At the same time, an individual's affective capacity is also a *receptive* capacity as affect is always both active and receptive. *Potentia* is thus the individual's specific susceptibility to affections by others as much as it is its power to affect others through one's acts or one's sheer presence. In combination this makes for the fundamental heteronomy in the constitution of the individual in Spinoza, whose being is both an expression of its own *potentia* and modulated by all the other individuals (and their *potentia*) around.

In this dynamic notion of individuation, a spatial (or “extensive”) and a temporal dimension can be distinguished. The “extensive” dimension figures prominently in the Deleuzian reading of Spinoza and in some contributions to affect studies. It stresses that an individual is nothing but a composition of smaller individuals in specific “relations of motion and rest” (see Spinoza, 1677/1985, II, axioms and lemmata after prop. 13; Deleuze, 1981/1988a, pp. 91–92, 123). When a mode “encounters another mode, it can happen that this other mode is ‘good’ for it,” so that both enter into composition; “or on the contrary decomposes it and is ‘bad’ for it.” In these cases, the mode's “power of acting or force of existing increases or diminishes, since the power of the other mode is added to it, or on the contrary is withdrawn from it, immobilizing and restraining it” (Deleuze, 1981/1988a, pp. 49–50). What an individual *is* at a given point in time is variable, shifting according to the prevalent level of individuation for the explication of a social configuration. Such a configuration may sometimes be comprised of humans, of parts of humans, of couples, teams, families, corporations, or states and so on. This is particularly fruitful for the analysis of structural power phenomena as it

enables understanding the fundamental heteronomy of the individual on different scales of relatedness but without rendering the individual passive or depriving it of an own power.<sup>4</sup>

Along the temporal dimension of individuation, an individual's *potentia* is always also a product of their history of relations of affecting and being affected. The temporal structure of individuation is what makes for a trans-situative coherence of one and the same individual passing through a series of situations and contexts of relatedness over time, counterbalancing to some extent the transience and variability of entities on the process ontological account. How an individual can affect and be affected is a result of a kind of bodily and environmental repository for specific patterns of affectivity in past relations. This repository works by means of the sedimentation of past patterns of affect into the *potentia*, which are thus present *as potentials* in current relations, co-shaping an individual's affects, actions, and embodiment (→ *affective disposition*). This suggests an account of how past patterns of interaction are not identically repeated, but act as tendencies in present affective relations – not entirely unlike what gets expressed by notions such as “habitus” and “performativity” in practice theory (cf. Bourdieu, 1990; Wetherell, 2012) (→ *affective practice*). Along these lines, the genesis of an individual's *potentia* can be extended to an analysis of social structures, such as gendered or racialized modes of interaction inscribed and perpetuated as patterns of affective relatedness, also consolidated within institutions and often blocked from view by being assumed as inevitable givens in the routines of day-to-day practice (cf. Mühlhoff, 2018) (→ *affects of racialization*).

## Contemporary affect: ideas and directions

In this second part of our chapter, we extract central ideas for understanding affect in contemporary affect research, drawing especially on lines of work belonging to what has been termed “cultural affect theory” or the “turn to affect.” While we find it unhelpful to play up the putative contrast between affect and emotion, it is clear that a Spinozan perspective on affect engenders a different analytical gaze, different methodologies, and different research questions than work centered on a predominantly anthropocentric, categorical conception of emotion (→ *emotion, emotion concept*). With this concept of affect, a dynamic-materialist ontology challenges the reflexive individualism

4 By the same token, what is in common sense referred to as an individual's “power” is to be explained as a manifestation of their *potentia* as it is rendered effective in a socially, politically, economically stabilized structural constellation of many individuals. That is, an individual's power to act, or even to command or to repress, is not a property of that individual alone, but the joint product of larger, relational constellations. Some refer to this crystallized form of power as *potestas* in distinction to *potentia* (see Negri, 1991; Hardt & Negri, 2000), while the clear origin of that distinction in Spinoza is under dispute (see Saar, 2013).

long dominant in Western modernity. This classical mode of thought is premised on the separation of intelligibility and materiality – articulated variously as “body” versus “mind,” or “human” versus “non-human” or “reason” versus “nature,” or similar such dichotomies. In light of this, it is unfortunate that post-1990s affect studies were initially pitched by some as a radical break with discourse- and language-based approaches to cultural articulation. While this was understandable as a strategic reaction against a perceived hegemony of poststructuralism (see for example Massumi, 1995, 2002; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995), Spinoza’s *affectio/affectus* both cross-cut and dynamize these modernist orderings. That is, they fulfill rather than counter a key poststructuralist aspiration (cf. Terada, 2001). In light of this it is feasible, for instance, to explore an account of language *as affect* (→ *writing affect*), or focus on the affectivity driving discursive practices, or understand affect – as Deleuze (1985/1989) suggests – as part of the vital core of what was long considered its very opposite: thought itself.

We cannot develop all these ideas here. Instead, we will identify three broader strands of affect-oriented work that have been noteworthy in recent years. This selection is not meant to be exhaustive.<sup>5</sup> What these three orientations have in common is that they all approach affect as a modality of power – force, effectiveness, potential – not (directly) wielded by human actors. As such, these lines of work foreground questions pertaining to the often diffuse, distributed operations and formative workings of power in various societal sectors and domains of practice (→ *political affect*).

### **Bodies-in-relation**

Spinoza’s understanding of *affectio/affectus* features the body in its full worldly complexity and environmental permeability, as that which stands in constant onto-formative relation with the surroundings and registers – in all sorts of sensuous, vital, material, and dynamic ways – what goes on around it. At this point, there is a significant overlap with (post-)phenomenological approaches in affect studies that emphasize the situated embodiment of affect and the affective sensitivity of situated bodies. For instance, Sara Ahmed (2007) powerfully expounds the ways that racist public discourse, discriminatory social practices, and the operations of paramount institutions – for example those of law enforcement, administrative bureaucracy, or the education sector – invent, enforce, and sustain the “norms of whiteness” (Ahmed, 2007). The effects of these discursive and institutional operations always sooner or later

5 A convincing and accurately wide-ranging exposition of the various strands and perspectives of the turn to affect is to be found in the Introduction to the seminal *Affect Theory Reader* (see Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, pp. 6–9). A notable recent account and showcase of the non-human strands of affect studies, including a take on the innovative method of “affect analysis” is Kwek and Seyfert (2018).

land – often violently – on the bodies of those who find themselves subject to these power dynamics, but also – in different registers of affective impingements – on the bodies of privileged subjects who align seamlessly with the norms and routines of institutions created in their own image: “White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158). Ahmed’s work is but the most visible among a growing number of interrogations of affect’s involvements in racialization and other violent forms of othering, discrimination, and structural oppression (see for example Ngai, 2005; Chen, 2012; Berg & Ramos-Zayas, 2015; Palmer, 2017; Schuller, 2018) (→ *affects of racialization*).

These lines of work in part continue an earlier feminist and queer theoretic current in the turn to affect. In the mid-1990s, acclaimed queer theorist Eve Sedgwick had embarked on a quest to turn the study of affects into a key dimension of cultural inquiry, drawing on work by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins. With hindsight, Sedgwick’s engagement with Tomkins appears less as a transfer of psychological theory into the humanities than as a generous reading that pushes beyond the usual demarcations and border policing tendencies in earlier humanities scholarship. Tomkins’ categorical model of nine transculturally universal affect programs did not have much staying power within cultural affect studies. With their queer forays into materialist and scientific domains, Sedgwick, Elizabeth Grosz, and others instead paved the way for productive lines of work in feminist theory – work characterized by a return to questions of materiality and embodiment and by a renewed openness toward cross-disciplinary articulations and remixes de-emphasizing the strictures of poststructuralism and discourse theory. Inspired by Tomkins’ categorical approach, these authors invoked *affects* – writ small and in the plural – more than *Affect* in a grandiose singular, as an analytical angle for studying the plurality and heterogeneity of modes of bodily affection in relation to societal arrangements and power structures.<sup>6</sup>

We recommend emphasizing convergences in various different approaches and lines of work that all focus on the complex interactive relationality of bodies – human as well as non-human – that coalesce locally to form efficacious affective configurations and affective communities (→ *affective communities*). For instance, there is a long legacy of work on complexly situated, technologically enhanced, extended, or biomediated bodies – Donna Haraway’s *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1984; see Haraway, 1991) is an early landmark – that should be conjoined with the more classically phenomenological approaches to affect or affects as *bodies-in-relation*. We think of work by Marie-Luise Angerer, Lisa Blackman, Rosi Braidotti, Theresa Brennan, Rey

6 Authors who prefer to speak of *affects* rather than *affect* also tend to distinguish less sharply between affects and emotions. This pertains, for instance, to the work of Ahmed and also to that of feminist affect theorist Lauren Berlant (2011). An illuminating discussion of different strands of *affect-* versus *affects-*centered approaches is provided by Donovan Schaefer (2015).

Chow, Patricia Clough, Richard Grusin, Mark Hansen, and Luciana Parisi, among many others. These approaches are tentatively united by understanding bodies of all kinds as constitutively relational, and as permeable, extendable, and plastic.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, these scholars share a sense for bodies' capacity to resonate, to swing with ambient forces and processes, or in general of both living and technological bodies' inherent proneness for energetic transmission, auratic radiance, rhythmic attunement, and also, not least, for more immediately physical imbrications and entanglements (→ *affective resonance*). The named authors share the conviction that there is no natural sanctity to the unscathed, unenhanced, non-mediated biological body – be it human or animal – or rather: such allegedly pristine natural bodies do not exist, and likely have never existed. In light of this, a Spinoza-based perspective on affect – together with other lines of work of different origins – encourages studies of the specific imbrications of bodies and designed spaces, technologies, media, and other artifactual arrangements of contemporary societies.

### ***Affective arrangements: individual and milieu***

This brings us to a second segment of affect-centric approaches. A good deal of current work on affect focuses on the effective entanglement of individuals with the arrangements and apparatuses of specific milieus, settings or domains. Lawrence Grossberg (2010), in an interview on the origins and prospects of affect studies, raises this very point: “[W]hat are the machinic apparatuses or regimes of discourse that are constituting the ways in which we live our lives? The possibilities of affect and their articulations to conjunctures and historical ontologies?” (p. 314). Grossberg asks this question in part with critical intent, alleging that some scholars – Brian Massumi among them – directly “leap from a set of ontological concepts to a description of an empirical and affective context” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 314). Grossberg contends that these authors fail to pay enough attention to the various arrangements and set-ups that make affect concretely effective at particular sites of social life.

Over and above the ontological plane, where affect-as-*affectio* is described in an abstract register of intensive force relations, there is in each case a specific organizational, equipmental, spatial or technological set-up of the domains under study. It is these “machinic arrangements” – a certain elaborated format of affect-as-*affectus* – that kindle, channel, and sustain tangible relations of affecting and being affected, and that work as operative registers of time- and place-specific affective dynamics, often manifest as an in each

7 A noteworthy historical study of these lines of thought, with critical emphasis on the problematic biopolitical dimension of notions of impressibility, sentimentality and the body-milieu nexus in the 19th century, is Kyla Schuller's *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018). The appearance of historical scholarship of this type signals a welcome new phase of scholarly rigor and critical awareness in discourses surrounding affect.

case unique concatenation of what Foucault called the sayable and the seeable (Foucault 1977/1980; cf. Deleuze, 1986/1988b, pp. 47–69).

This angle on affect calls for approaches that study the relevant processes *in situ* by way of various empirical methods. This could mean, for example, that researchers chart the material propping of concrete locations, to focus on the orchestrated coordination of individuals present at a given site (for instance in the study of crowd behavior or in audience research); that they check out frequency patterns, intensity contours, and dynamics of communication in, for instance, white-collar workplaces, kindergartens, or school yards; that they investigate the differential affective responsiveness of patients or customers in medical settings, or study the minutiae of how user practices and user affectivity are modulated or subtly nudged by the design features of social media, and much else. Work of this kind is required to make good on a central aspect of the ontological “promise of affect”: namely that affect is locally manifest as a shape-shifting level of material effectiveness, sedimented into historical formations that, in all sorts of ways, contribute to establishing and sustaining a time-bound, initially inchoate yet characteristic and repeatable *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977). What is called for here is the transition from ontology in general to *historical ontology*, a step mediated by concepts on the meso-scale of cultural articulation – concepts such as Deleuze’s and Guattari’s *agencement machinique* or Foucault’s *dispositif*, which have been productively adapted to affect studies, for instance as “affectif” (Seyfert, 2012), as “affective apparatus” (Anderson, 2014) or as what we prefer to call an affective arrangement (Slaby, Mühlhoff, & Wüschner, 2017) (→ *affective arrangement*).

There is much work in affect studies that heeds Grossberg’s directive. For example, take Melissa Gregg’s (2011) chartings of white-collar workplaces, teamwork and telecommuting work arrangements; Robert Seyfert’s (2018) case study of high-frequency trading; Natasha Dow Schüll’s (2014) forays into machine gambling in Las Vegas, or consider Grossberg’s (1992) own pioneering work on the “rock formation” and popular music more broadly, Michael Richardson’s (2016) work on affective witnessing (→ *affective witnessing*), or Ahmed’s (2012) ethnography of the institutional non-performativity of diversity committees.<sup>8</sup>

### **Affect and the “wild beyond”**

And yet – there will be many who won’t be satisfied with this swift turn to the concrete, the material, the organizational. Is there not quite another “promise of

8 Not fully fitting this second rubric is work on the aesthetic forms pertaining to modes of affecting and being affected. Such → *poetics of affect* play an important role in many artistic genres as well as in contemporary practices and formats of media (→ *economy of affect*). Eugenie Brinkema (2014) has provided an excellent study of such “forms of the affects,” intended both as a critical corrective to some strands of work in affect studies and a continuation of earlier approaches especially to cinematic affect.

affect” that springs from the pages of Spinoza, and likewise from the writings of Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, and others? Isn’t it this other spirit of affect that Massumi tries to bring out in his refusal to let affect be captured by hegemonic codes, discourses, or apparatuses? Indeed, this is what goes on when Massumi tries to evoke, express, and hold on to an affective intensity that transpires *before* world, subject, experience, solidify into enduring formations. Preconscious, non-human, rife with vital forces (“the virtual”), intensive, at times wild and ecstatic – it is this image of affect that some of the deacons of intellectual high culture instinctively oppose, because they see it go against fixtures of humanist inquiry: against representation, normativity, the subject, intentionality, critique, disciplinary standards of scholarship, and much else.<sup>9</sup> To conclude our chapter, we cast a glance over to this other, this *wild side* of affect.

Long before the recent turn to affect, Raymond Williams brought forth his seminal notion “structure of feeling” in an attempt to re-invoke the living presences beneath and prior the forms, wholes, and constructs that make up the warp and weft of cultural activity. It was meant as a counterpoint to what he called the “habitual past tense” of social analysis: “reduction of the social to fixed forms remains the basic error” (Williams, 1977, p. 129). This notion anticipated the more radical strands of contemporary affect theory. Williams calls for a theoretical sensibility for the energetic immediacy of affective encounters, to the uncurbed forces of relation. This is not far removed from the impersonal vitality that Deleuze invokes when he discusses affect throughout his *oeuvre*. This more radical end of the affect spectrum remains mostly unacknowledged and unaccounted for within the terms and habits of routine understanding, yet it energizes, it crucially *in-forms* day-to-day existence. To call what transpires in these fleeting moments *pre-subjective*, *preconscious*, *pre-discursive*, or *non-human* does not signal a naive break with established scholarly practice. When bouts of unanticipated intensity well up within routine activity, they provide an occasion for change, potentially inspiring fresh articulations of what seemed self-evident before. Affect in this sense is a generative irruption, potentially kindling transitions from established understandings toward new thoughts and new discursive and practical moves. What is at issue is a dynamic reservoir of possibility, spheres of potential – what is formative but not yet formed.

Williams – in his day less concerned with the non-human than with the infrastructures of social experience as lived – used the somewhat pedestrian notion “practical consciousness,” a term too narrow in scope for many of the purposes of current affect studies. Yet still, this concept points to the important idea of dynamic openness of affect and affect-imbued thought:

9 We think here especially of Ruth Leys’ (2011) sweeping – and rather reductive – critique of the Massumi-inspired turn to affect, and related moves by other acclaimed scholars, such as Emily Martin (2013) in anthropology. Gatens (2014), Hemmings (2005), and Wetherell (2012) offer more balanced yet also predominantly critical assessments of the more radical strands of affect theory.

“a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined” (Williams, 1977, p. 131). Not incidentally, one of the first examples Williams mentions is language. He notes that no generation speaks in quite the same way as the preceding generation – that there will be shifts in style, in tonality, changes to the complexion of existence as enfolded into phrases and idioms and habits of speaking. What Williams hints at is the fluid underground of social and cultural practices, formations, experiences – the virtual sphere that contains the seeds of change, and that is ever only partially and provisionally articulated and conceptualized. It is crucial not to lose sight of this other side of affect, its opening out to a plane of immanence that is at once the “wild beyond” to determinate formations, habits, states, and comportments and their indispensable formative backdrop.<sup>10</sup>

It is this sense for the openness and non-containability of the virtual that lets one appreciate (not necessarily like) the more unconventional and experimental writing styles within affect studies, for instance by Kathleen Stewart, Ann Cvetkovitch, or Erin Manning. And it renders noteworthy the capacious post-Spinozism of Greg Seigworth. Likewise, in this vein, the more meta-physical and more radically posthuman endeavors surrounding a “new materialism” seem sensible (if not always well-executed), for example work by Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti among others (cf. Coole & Frost, 2010), as do non-anthropocentric or “heterological” perspectives on non-human agency, animacy, and on affective configurations that exceed the scope of eurocentric humanism (e.g., Chen, 2012; Kwek & Seyfert, 2018).

This third and last segment of affect-oriented thought might also serve as a note of caution at the outset of a volume on the key concepts of *Affective Societies*. While it is our goal to approach the social and political prevalence of affect with conceptual rigor and terminological clarity, it is evident that no degree of conceptual elaboration will exhaust the phenomena under study. Affect tends to outrun even its most encompassing and nuanced conceptualizations. However – to end with another suggestion from Spinoza and Deleuze – well-made concepts themselves might become affective formations: concise compositions, conveyors of an intellectual intensity, capable of illuminating pockets of reality, even if, at times, more by conjuring a phenomenal poignancy that they cannot quite capture semantically. Thereby – if it goes well – focal concepts may set thought and action on new paths. We hope that some of this will transpire in the affective practice of reading the chapters collected in this volume.

10 “Wild beyond” is a phrase we borrow from Jack Halberstam’s foreword to Stefano Harney’s and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons* (2013). Halberstam does not use it as an affect-related notion but as a broader denomination that signals a break with the structured, organized, politically formatted realm of Euro-modernity. The more radical strands of affect studies share this orientation at least in spirit.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2007). A phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 149–168.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Andermann, K. (2016). Transindividuelle Affizierung. Spinozas relationale Ontologie bewegter Körper. In: U. Eberlein (Ed.), *Zwischenleiblichkeit und bewegtes Verstehen – Intercorporeity, movement and tacit knowledge* (pp. 109–135). Bielefeld: transcript.
- Anderson, B. (2014). *Encountering affect: Capacities, apparatuses, conditions*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Balibar, E. (1997). *Spinoza: From individuality to transindividuality*. Rijnsburg: Eburon.
- Berg, U., & Ramos-Zayas, A. Y. (2015). Racializing affect: A theoretical proposition. *Current Anthropology*, 56(5), 654–677.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity.
- Brinkema, E. (2014). *The forms of the affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Chen, M. Y. (2012). *Animacies: Biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Coole, D., & Frost, S. (2010). *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1988a). *Spinoza: Practical philosophy* (R. Hurley, Trans.). San Francisco: City Lights Books. (Original work published in 1981.)
- Deleuze, G. (1988b). *Foucault* (S. Hand, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1986.)
- Deleuze, G. (1989). *Cinema 2: The time-image* (H. Tomlinson, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1985.)
- Deleuze, G. (1990). *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza* (M. Joughin, Trans.). New York: Zone Books. (Original work published in 1968.)
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published in 1980.)
- Foucault, M. (1980). The confession of the flesh. In: C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 194–228). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gatens, M. (2014). Affective transitions and Spinoza's art of joyful deliberation. In: M.-L. Angerer, B. Bösel, & M. Ott (Eds.), *Timing of affect: Epistemologies, aesthetics, politics* (pp. 17–33). Zurich & Berlin: diaphanes.
- Gatens, M., & Lloyd, G. (1999). *Collective imaginings: Spinoza, past and present*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (Eds.). (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Grossberg, L. (1992). *We gotta get out of this place: Popular conservatism and postmodern culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L. (2010). Affect's future: Rediscovering the virtual in the actual. Interviewed by Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg. In: M. Gregg & G. J. Seigworth (Eds.), *The affect theory reader* (pp. 309–338). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In: D. Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149–183). London: Free Association Books.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Hemmings, C. (2005). Invoking affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn. *Cultural Studies*, 19(5), 548–567.
- Kwek, D. H. B. (2015). Power and the multitude: A Spinozist view. *Political Theory*, 43(2), 155–184.
- Kwek, D. H. B., & Seyfert, R. (2018). Affect matters: Strolling through heterological ecologies. *Public Culture*, 30(1), 35–59.
- Leys, R. (2011). The turn to affect: A critique. *Critical Inquiry*, 37(3), 434–472.
- Martin, E. (2013). The potentiality of ethnography and the limits of affect theory. *Current Anthropology*, 54(S7), 149–158.
- Massumi, B. (1995). The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique*, 31(2), 83–109.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mühlhoff, R. (2018). *Immersive Macht: Affekttheorie nach Foucault und Spinoza*. Frankfurt: Campus.
- Negri, A. (1991). *The savage anomaly: The power of Spinoza's metaphysics and politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ngai, S. (2005). *Ugly feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Palmer, T. (2017). “What feels more than feeling?” Theorizing the unthinkability of black affect. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 3(2), 31–56.
- Richardson, M. (2016). *Gestures of testimony: Torture, trauma and affect in literature*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Saar, M. (2013). *Die Immanenz der Macht. Politische Theorie nach Spinoza*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Schaefer, D. O. (2015). *Religious affects: Animality, evolution, and power*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schüll, N. D. (2014). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schuller, K. (2018). *The biopolitics of feeling: Race, sex, and science in the nineteenth century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K., & Frank, A. (1995). Shame in the cybernetic fold: Rereading Silvan Tomkins. *Critical Inquiry*, 21(2), 496–522.
- Seyfert, R. (2012). Beyond personal feelings and collective emotions: Toward a theory of social affect. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(6), 27–46.
- Seyfert, R. (2018). Automation and affect: A study of algorithmic trading. In: B. Röttger-Rössler & J. Slaby (Eds.), *Affect in relation: Families, places, technologies* (pp. 197–217). New York: Routledge.
- Sharp, H. (2011). *Spinoza and the politics of renaturalization*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Simondon, G. (2005). *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information, potentiel et metastabilité*. Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon. (Original work published in 1989.)
- Slaby, J., Mühlhoff, R., & Wüschner, P. (2017). Affective arrangements. *Emotion Review*, Prepublished October 20, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073917722214>
- Spinoza, B. (1985). Ethics. In: E. Curley (Ed. and Trans.), *The collected works of Spinoza* (Vol. 1). Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published in 1677.)
- Terada, R. (2001). *Feeling in theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject.”* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding*. London: Sage.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.