The Struggle of "American Anger": In Defense of Extremism

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Panic about growing anger, political division, partisanship, 'extreme' political ideologies, and a lack of cohesion and dialogue abounds in mainstream political discourse in the US. This panic covers the pages of the corporate media and provides the impetus for a range of academic research and conversations. The various trends animating this panic tend to coalesce around one central concern: the destabilization of the imperial US political machinery. To put it differently, the outrage about outrage, the calls for reason, and the pleas for collaboration arise from a crisis—or a series of crises—in the US, and are united around the need to return to a period of relative normalcy and stability.

It is precisely this response—and not the crisis—that presents the biggest danger to those concerned with advancing causes of justice and peace both globally and domestically. There are several reasons for this, all of which have to do with a general abandonment of genuine political struggle. The outrage about outrage conflates and depoliticizes outrage. In other words, the problem becomes the form that political messaging takes, rather than the political messaging itself. Consider mainstream coverage of the struggle between fascists and anti-fascists. It is not only Donald Trump who says there are "fine people on both sides" (qtd. in Blow). Much of the liberal left is also outraged at the means that anti-fascists must employ to adequately respond to and confront the very real threat of white supremacists and neo-Nazis. Instead of calling for an end to fascism and neo-Nazism, they call for dialogue and debate. This, in turn, conflates radically different political positions, painting the left and the right with the same brush, and therefore leaving nothing but a neoliberal and imperialist middle for one to align with.

At the same time, the liberals cannot contain the anger at the Trump government and the forces it represents. The struggle in this instance becomes one of channeling the anger. The Democratic Party excels at this, and we saw an early example of this at Trump's inauguration in January 2017. As soon as Trump's presidency was secured, the Answer Coalition—a militant anti-racist and anti-imperialist group—began organizing a counter-inauguration protest. The Partnership for Civil Justice Fund (a member of the Answer Coalition) waged important legal struggles against the Trump Inaugural Committee in order to get access to the inaugural route. They ended up as the only people with permits to protest right on the route. Yet as the inauguration approached, another event, The Women's March, started organizing. They wanted to hold the event the day after the inauguration. Their politics were not explicitly anti-racist and anti-imperialist, but of the generic liberal-left sort. At first, the lineup was overwhelmingly white, although that changed in response to grassroots pressures. It was fairly clear that the event was designed to get people away from directly struggling against Trump and his supporters on inauguration day, displacing their anger onto something else, something more amorphous, less confrontational, less about political struggle.

To understand the mechanisms through and manner in which anger at Trump has and is channeled, it may be helpful to turn to affect theory. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan asks how affects circulate, how bodies and spaces disseminate and absorb affect. The book's opening line makes this often abstract line of work concrete: "Is there anyone," she asks, "who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'" (1)? If, for example, you have ever walked into a tense situation, you can relate. Say your roommate and their partner just had an argument. When you enter the room, there may not be any visible indicators that something is off. Everything might *appear* to be as usual, but you nonetheless still *feel* the situation, still know that something is indeed off. In the absence of—or in addition to—visual or auditory markers, we reach the affective register. One clear example of affect are pheromones, faded chemicals the body gives off that are (in contradistinction to hormones) directed toward others. Pheromones are "direction-givers which, as molecules, traverse the physical space between the subject and another, and factor in or determine the direction taken by the subject who inhales or absorbs them" (75). The use of the word "determine" might give the impression that particular pheromones necessarily result in

particular directions, which is decidedly not the case. What Brennan means here is that the pheromone *alone* might determine *a* direction.

There is a key distinction to be made between affects and feelings. The former are physiological sensations, while the latter are "sensations that have found the right match in words" (5). To put it differently, feelings are affects rendered intelligible, or affects interpreted in some way, put into some epistemological order. The same affect can be interpreted in multiple different ways. Brennan closes out her book with what we could interpret as a political injunction: "Of that we cannot speak, thereof we must learn" (164). A political approach to affect would thus entail the struggle to influence affective interpretations, to make affects enter into *some* orders and not others, to have them register in a strictly partisan manner. That feelings and affects are different is exemplified by Lauren Berlant's classic example that "pleasure does not always feel good" (159). To return to the example above, if you enter the post-argument room, at the affective level you can sense a disruption but cannot quite explain it or make it intelligible in any way. To move into a feeling is to interpret the affect, to render it legible, or to place it in a narrative. The liberal response to "American Anger" is thus a certain affective orientation, a way of situating affect in an order of knowledge.

Making this process explicit is an imperative for radical movements today, and it means that we have to correct for our historical overemphasis on consciousness and knowledge. One entry point here is the party line, which is just as much about intellectual positions as it is about bodily positions. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* is helpful here, as it is an exploration of questions about orientation and disorientation. One of Ahmed's primary claims is that "the body gets directed in some ways more than others" (15). One way the body gets directed is through lines. We "get in line" with others, which means that "we face the direction that is already faced by others" (15). Take a political line: A political line provides us with a way of viewing the world, understanding what the world means or should mean, and what our place in the world is or should be.

The formation of a political collective is the congealing of a certain orientation, the successful (but not identical) repetition of worldviews, actions, and capacities. Ahmed gives the example of citizens reading newspapers: "They are not necessarily reading the same thing [...] let alone reading the same thing in the same way. Yet the very act of reading means that citizens are directing their attention toward a shared object" (119). We might imagine people across the United States reading

various national and local papers available in newsstands and at corner stores. The words and papers are different and each person is an irreducible singularity with their own history, but it is nonetheless easy to grasp how a line develops through the papers' concerns (what they write about) and perspectives (how they write about it). In the US, where six corporations own ninety percent of the media, this is especially easy to grasp. This same situation makes it especially difficult to intervene in.

Perhaps this is one reason to celebrate the ascendancy of 'fake news': The news itself is exposed as necessarily entailing a political line. Those most up in arms about fake news are the very mainstream media outlets whose political lines are newly and increasingly made visible. That 'fake news' is now a shared and open signifier indicates an overall disorientation in the political realm. The corporate establishment—liberal and conservative—cannot stand such a disorientation and has been working in different ways to reorient the population, lest the systems that undergird their establishment be undermined. There is no one strategic or tactical consensus within this establishment as to how the reorientation should occur, and indeed there is a sharpening *intra*-class struggle in the summits of US power. Nonetheless, the dominant faction of the US ruling class is opposed to Trump. He is an unsuccessful and unpopular manager of the state apparatus, a poor overseer of the collective interests of capital. Of course, they are not opposed to him when he gives trillions in tax breaks to the banks and corporations. There are no fractures when he puts forward unprecedented funding to the Pentagon. Instead, cracks emerge when he withdraws US troops from Syria and Afghanistan, or when he holds a summit with the leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The bourgeois opposition to Trump, in other words, is based solely around his proclivity to somewhat unpredictably diverge from the imperial agenda.

This bourgeois opposition has emerged as the leadership of the anti-Trump movement, providing the narrative within which the disorienting affects circulating in the current moment are placed. That is, the primary anti-Trump tendency desires to displace our dissatisfaction with, and dislike or hatred of, capitalist exploitation and oppression onto the person of Trump, thereby safeguarding the institutions that Trump by and large represents. It is for this reason that any group or network undermining these institutions is singled out for propagating 'fake news,' that any outrage is delegitimized as swiftly as possible, and that all 'extreme' political ideologies and organizations are conflated and dismissed.

All the same, the dominant affective response to 'extreme' ideologies is one of aversion or ridicule, which allows them to be dismissed out of hand. A primary task for our moment thus requires reframing the affective reception of the extreme. After all, the problems we face are extreme. Racism is extreme. Imperialist wars are extreme. Misogyny is extreme. Any effective response must be extreme in kind. The particulars of any symbolic order are not intrinsically tied to any affective positioning. We tend to think of the sovereign, intentional, and agentic subject. If we understand the subject as positioned within and because of symbolic orders, political economy, and affective regimes, we can wrestle over the determination of affective situations.

Contemporary disorientation provides an opening for radical or 'extreme' politics to assert themselves. The destabilization and broad skepticism of mainstream narratives is an important opportunity. To seize this opening requires, above all else, organization. We need to make new political lines available, extreme political lines, and doing this requires collectivity. Take, for an example, Lenin's distinction between trade-union and revolutionary consciousness. Workers experience exploitation directly: We suffer from being overworked and underpaid, from being deprived of safe and sufficient working conditions and work breaks, from job insecurity, and so on. Yet there is a type of consciousness that does not flow directly from experience, and this consciousness has to do with the relationship of our experience to the relationship of broader social, economic, and political forces at differing scales: within the factory, the city, the state, and the world. This is only generated and spread through organization—and it crosses any binary between the mind and the body, between emotion and intellect.

At the time of Lenin, this knowledge—the type that could produce consciousness—was created and imputed through "factory exposures," leaflets that documented, detailed, and (to varying degrees) contextualized conditions in the factories (94). Lenin argued in "What Is to Be Done?" that these exposures had to be expanded and deepened, because they "merely dealt with the relations between the workers *in a given trade* and their immediate employers," and as a result workers only "learned to sell their 'commodity' on better terms" (95). This is "trade-union consciousness" (74), which is limited to the economic realm and the exchange between the buyers and sellers of labor-power. To contribute to the development of revolutionary consciousness, exposures had to be *political-economic*, that is, they had to be situated at the nexus of work (exploitation) and the political system that

legalizes and legitimates exploitation. And yet Lenin might take the production of trade-union consciousness for granted. Perhaps he was unable to account for the ways in which the nascent revolutionary struggle had already tied affective dispositions to epistemological regimes. For the conditions suffered in the factories could just as easily have been (to use Brennan's term) *learned* as one's lot in life, the result of personal and individual decisions accumulated over the course of life, or one's duty to nation or country. If so, then we can link trade-union consciousness with discordant activity, and revolutionary consciousness with organized collective activity. As liberals attempt to channel righteous rage into electoral arenas, special counsel indictments, and, most dangerously, imperialist aggressions, we would do well to cultivate particular affective-epistemological relations in the course of the daily struggles unfolding against capitalist exploitation and oppression.

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