



# Various joyful encounters with the dystopias of affective capitalism

Tony Sampson

## abstract

This article contends that what appear to be the dystopic conditions of affective capitalism are just as likely to be felt in various joyful encounters as they are in atmospheres of fear associated with post 9/11 securitization. Rather than grasping joyful encounters with capitalism as an ideological trick working directly on cognitive systems of belief, the article approaches them as a repressive affective relation a population establishes between politicized sensory environments and what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call a brain-becoming-subject. This is a radical relationality (Protevi, 2010) understood here as a mostly nonconscious brain-somatic process of subjectification occurring in contagious sensory environments populations become politically situated in. The joyful encounter is not therefore merely an ideological manipulation of belief, but following Gabriel Tarde, belief is always the object of desire. The article discusses various manifestations of affective capitalism and repressive political affects that prompt an initial question concerning what can be done to a brain so that it involuntarily conforms to the joyful encounter. The article also frames a second question concerning what can a brain do, and discusses how affect theory can conceive of a brain-somatic relation to sensory environments that might be freed from its coincidence with capitalism. The second question not only leads to a different kind of illusion to that understood as a product of an ideological trick, but also abnegates a model of the brain, which limits subjectivity in the making to a phenomenological inner self or Being in the world.

## Introduction

To develop a theoretical understanding of the dystopic conditions of affective capitalism we will need to grasp its various manifestations in everyday life. The most recent and conspicuous of these appearances is perhaps Facebook's notorious attempt to engineer the emotions of their users (Kramer et al., 2014).

In 2014, Facebook carried out an experiment involving the manipulation of the emotional content of posts and measuring the effect these manipulations had on the emotions of 689,003 of its users in terms of how contagious they became. The researchers who carried out the experiment found that when they reduced the positive expressions displayed by other users they produced less positive posts and more posts that are negative. Likewise, when negative expressions were reduced, the opposite pattern occurred. The rather paltry findings of the study led the researchers to conclude that the ‘emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale contagion via social networks’ (*ibid.*).

Emotional contagion is not an exceptional concept in science or philosophy. Indeed, aside from much recent neuroscientific work in this area, we can also look back to Hume’s understanding of sympathy as a sort of early philosophy of emotional contagion (Ellis and Tucker, 2015: 63-64). So even if this contentious attempt by Facebook to influence moods produced meagre evidence of contagion, the design and implementation of the experiment itself should perhaps alert us to a potentially Huxleyesque mode of mass manipulation. Nicholas Carr (2014) described it accordingly as a ‘bulletin from a dystopian future’. Moreover, the dubiously titled research paper that followed (‘Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks’) draws attention to how the social media business enterprise’s cultivation of big data flouts ethical considerations. In their endeavour to engineer emotional contagion the Facebook researchers did not ask for consent or refrain from involving minors in the experiment. In effect, they treated their users like lab rats (Carr, 2014: webpage). However, what is more concerning about this study, as Carr contends, ‘lay not in its design or its findings, but in its ordinariness’ (*ibid.*). This kind of research is, it would appear, the social media business norm; part of a ‘visible tip of an enormous and otherwise well-concealed iceberg’ (*ibid.*) in the industry. To be sure, the one thing that both the disparagers and apologists of Facebook seem to agree on is that user manipulation is rife on the internet.

This article begins by expanding on Carr’s dystopic assessment of the Facebook experiment by briefly asking what we can learn about affective capitalism from the aesthetic figures that populate Aldous Huxley’s notion of soft control. In *Brave new world* and *Brave new world revisited* (originally published in 1932 and 1958 respectively) Huxley presents a comparable model of control that taps directly into the affective states of the brain-somatic relations of a population engaged in everyday joyful encounters. In *Brave new world* joy is triggered by the drug Soma which is consumed along with the hypnopaedic rhythms of ‘beating of drums...plangently repeated and repeated’ so that they quell any misguided

thoughts of nonconformity (Huxley, 2007: 69). Huxley's joyful encounter is, it would seem, an affective manipulation that exploits bodily desires in order to influence belief in the political new order. He writes that it was not 'the ear that heard the pulsing rhythm, it was the midriff; the wail and clang of those recurring harmonies haunted, not the mind, but the yearning bowels of compassion' (*ibid.*). Although the widespread proliferation of drugs like Prozac and Ritalin have prompted some authors to draw comparisons between Huxley's dystopia and the present day (Rose, 2005), I will argue here that Huxley's rhythmic entrainment of somatic desire and belief are comparable to more generalized mechanisms of control in times of affective capitalism.

Mechanisms of control are grasped here through the many *interferences* that crop up between current scientific emotion research and Huxley's dystopian novel and help us to address a question concerning *what can be done to a brain* so that beliefs can be manipulated by way of appeals to desire. Moreover, rather than grasping these repressive joyful encounters with capitalism as a mere ideological trick working directly on cognitive systems of belief, they are conceived of as occurring in the affective relations a population establishes between politicized sensory environments and what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call a *brain-becoming-subject*. This is a *radical relationality* (Protevi, 2010), understood in this context as a mostly nonconscious brain-somatic process of subjectification happening in the contagious sensory environments populations become politically situated in. The joyful encounter does not therefore simply function in ideological registers, but following Gabriel Tarde (as developed in Sampson, 2012), belief is always grasped as the object of desire.

Attention is accordingly turned toward other manifestations of affective capitalism; beginning with the so-called *emotional turn* in the neurosciences, which is increasingly influencing how marketers and political strategists, for example, target affective brain-somatic states in an effort to manipulate the mood of a population. So-called neuromarketers are, like this, adopting novel tools, like Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) and electroencephalography (EEG), that can supposedly correlate bodily arousal and the modulating rhythm of a brainwave to salient consumer emotions implicated in, for example, empathy toward brands leading to purchase decisions (Vecchiato et al., 2011). Likewise, researchers in the US are using MRI scans to speculate on the differences between political preferences according to parts of the brain implicated in social connectedness (*Science Daily*, 2012). While clearly acknowledging the speculative nature of the claims of these commercial and political offshoots of the neurosciences, I contend that the emotional turn opens up a second unignorable question concerning *what can a brain do*.

Before even beginning to approach this second question, we need to grasp a historical trajectory of the joyful encounter and in particular its modern origins in fascism. Here I want to draw specific attention to the significance of what we might call a *double event* of affect implicated in the political control of the sensory environments in which brains (and bodies) become subjectified. This is a double capacity to affect and be affected by events (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 257). Beginning with John Protevi's (2010) analysis of passive and active affective registers in the joyful encounters with the far right of the 1930s, the discussion moves on to look at more recent manifestations of a right wing political affect that are once again spreading across Europe. To be sure, grasping the affective capacities of the brain-somatic relation to contemporary sensory environments becomes imperative, I contend, to understanding the various social, cultural and biological triggers for this current wave of right wing populism.

This second question is further approached via Catherine Malabou's (2009) effort to draw on the neurosciences to grasp how to free the brain from its coincidence with capitalism. Indeed, by re-appropriating the emotional turn, Malabou conceives of a plastic brain that is already free, but through a circuitous convergence between capitalism and neuroscience becomes trapped in the model of a flexible brain. In short, flexibility is for Malabou the 'ideological avatar' that hides the potential of neuronal plasticity to be free (*ibid.*: 12). Here I will similarly expand on possible alternatives to a mode of capitalism that increasingly targets noncognitive brain functioning by, firstly, exploring the *radical relationality* established between brains, bodies and sensory environments (Protevi, 2010), and secondly, grasping the rhythmic composition of imitative encounters (Borch, 2005) that position subjectivities. This is an appeal to an affective relationality that crucially does not coincide with the sense of the inner world of subjective experience Malabou seems to refer to, but points instead to a brain-becoming-subject composed of relations. As Protevi describes it, 'we do not "have" relations, but we are relations all the way down' (2010: 174). Indeed, the theoretical potency of concepts like joyful encounters, radical relationality and brain-somatic relations is that they help us to rethink power relations by circumventing a phenomenological worldview determined by subjective personal experience of external reality alone. Again, following Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) appeal to neurology we find an alternative to Malabou's synaptic essence of self; that is to say, a mind that needs to know what is *inside* our brain so as to reveal who 'We' are (Malabou, 2009: 3). Unlike the phenomenologist's person who thinks beyond the brain toward a *Being in the world*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) argue that *there is no brain behind the brain*. It is the brain that thinks, not the mind or the person, as such. This is a theoretical move that is seemingly counter to a tradition in the humanities that has either ignored affect or more recently tried to situate it as something that is guided by human meaning

making, discourse and ideology (Wetherell, 2012). In this tradition the vulnerability to various encounters with capitalism (and microfascism) is, as follows, grasped as nothing short of an ideological illusion that shapes belief, as such. However, via Deleuze and Guattari, and Tarde, the tendency to sleepwalk toward a repressive subjectification is inversely understood as a reconfigured illusion in which beliefs are engendered by desire.

Due to its engagement with neurology certain aspects of this approach will most probably trouble theoretical perspectives that maintain the rigidity of a divide between culture and biology. However, while it is important to retain a sense of criticality when approaching the hyperbole and speculative nature of neuroscientific enquiries into the biological brain, it is equally important to acknowledge the hypothetical nature of both sides of this divide. This article therefore concludes with a brief footnote concerning the potential of a more productive interference established between the opposing models of the brain adopted in representational and nonrepresentational theory. In place of the thick line often drawn between the representational spaces of discourse, meaning and ideology, on one hand, and nonrepresentation and affect, on the other, the discussion concludes by drawing on Henri Bergson's (1911: 52-53) notion of an insensible degree of separation between affect and representational space to help to briefly reconfigure the relation between desire, belief and illusion.

### **Everybody's happy now; in everybody else's way**

'Don't you wish you were free, Lenina?'

'I don't know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody's happy nowadays'.

[Bernard Marx] laughed, 'Yes, "Everybody's happy nowadays"...But wouldn't you like to be free to be happy in some other way, Lenina? In your own way, for example; not in everybody else's way'. (Huxley, 2007: 79)

A dystopian interpretation of social media begins by conceding that most people probably get an enormous amount of pleasure from their time on platforms like Facebook. There might be certain anxieties over how many 'friends' or 'likes' a person has acquired, but social media evidently provides fun and idiocy in equal measure (Goriunova, 2012). So the kind of user manipulation social media companies engage in needs to be grasped as part of a dystopian trajectory that a large percentage of the population are seemingly happy to go along with. Indeed, the exploitation of affective states associated with emotions like happiness is significant here since, on one hand, susceptibility to the suggestions of marketers is not arrived through cognitive processes alone, but coincides, to a great extent,

with noncognitive encounters associated with joy, and on the other hand, joyful encounters do not simply lead to the sharing of more joy, but also become part of an affective contagion eliciting conformity and entrainment. There is, like this, a joyful kind of collective encounter occurring in social media manipulation that is comparable in many ways to the rhythmic refrain central to that which controls Huxley's *Brave new worlders*: that is, *everybody's happy nowadays – in everybody else's way*.

Other emotions are evidently triggered by this rhythmic refrain. But mass fear, anxiety, hatred and jealousy are perhaps merely in the service of the subjectification of Huxley's 'happy, hard-working, goods-consuming citizen' (*ibid.*: 208). It is for this reason too that social media makes for an ideal test bed, or nursery, for cultivating, triggering and potentially steering joyful emotional contagions toward some predefined consumer-driven goals. Certainly, distinct from mass broadcast media, which proved to be an effective means of spreading emotions from the 1930s onward, the users of these networks are more predisposed, it would seem, to share their joyful experiences in exchange for the tools that allow them to freely do so; to post silly cat images, update profiles, to 'like', to 'share', to 'retweet', to 'upvote', and so on. Given the right tools, people become, as William S. Burroughs (1985) wrote in an essay in the mid-1970s, a controlled population who are happy to turn themselves on. Evidently, despite the controversy surrounding the Facebook experiment, many users of Facebook will be blissfully oblivious to (or perhaps not at all troubled by) their participation in their own manipulation, or indeed, the many other attempts to trigger the emotional contagions they become (involuntarily) engaged in.

Current efforts by social media enterprises to steer affective contagion also resonate with Huxley's interest in the potential of brain conditioning beyond the dystopian novel. In an effort to evaluate the extent to which his dystopian universe of control had become a reality in the late 1950s, Huxley revisited the themes that had obsessed him in the early 1930s, including the potential manipulation of social relations through propaganda, brainwashing, hypnosis and chemical persuasion (Huxley, 1962). The eventual realization of a scientific revolution of control, he contended, would be underpinned by widespread Pavlovian conditioning of behaviour. However, beyond the physical stimulation of behaviour in *Brave new world* we find a brain that becomes the sum of *all* the suggestions made to it. This is an affective suggestibility, it would seem, that expands on Pavlov to consider emotional conditioning as a means to influence belief. Indeed, Huxley's hypnotic suggestions are mass-produced by the College of Emotional Engineering (CEE), located in the same building as the Bureau of Propaganda (Huxley, 2007: 56). Helmholtz Watson spends his time in CEE between lectures writing hypnopædic rhymes. Assisted by the intoxicating effects

of Soma, the emotional content of these rhymes becomes the mental stuff by which the intentions of the Brave new worlders are shaped. These rhymes tap into affective states by way of the aesthetic power of repetitive drums, and harmonious chords. It is the gut-brain that hears, not the ears (*ibid.*: 69). The recurring harmonies and repetitive words haunted the passions before they infected the mind (*ibid.*). It is these appeals to affective states that repress the population by quelling any misguided thoughts toward nonconformity.

Ford, we are twelve; oh, make us one,

Like drops within the Social River;

Oh, make us now together run

As swiftly as thy shining Flivver

(*ibid.*: 70)

Ostensibly, there is nothing particularly new in Facebook's recent endeavour to steer intent by exploiting the contagious emotional desires of a population. The history of marketing is strewn with similar attempts to do so. St Elmo Lewis's Attention, Interest, Desire and Action model (AIDA), a prominent template for suggestible advertising developed in the late nineteenth century, made explicit the practical necessity to bring together desire and cognitive beliefs (Heath, 2012: 16-16). Similarly, in the 1920s, Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays (1928), notoriously made the connection between unconscious desires, attention and the selling of products to the masses in his marketing propaganda model. To be sure, the syllabus of any self-respecting emotional engineering degree must surely include a history of response and instrumental conditioning techniques; emphasizing the important role of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner, but also bringing in Bernays's model to illustrate the efficacy of emotional manipulation in marketing. Like this, Bernays well understood the leap from the mere conditioning of habitual responses and reaction psychology (behaviourism) to a propaganda model focused on the creation of 'circumstances which will swing emotional [and psychological] currents so as to make for purchaser demand' (*ibid.*: 52-54). Indeed, these emotional currents also include tapping into a desire for an authority figure of some kind. As Helmholtz might recount in one of his lectures at CEE; the salesman who wanted us to 'eat more bacon' would persuade us not because his bacon was the cheapest, or indeed the best, but because the doctor, who recommends the bacon, becomes a conditioning stimulus that feeds on this desire for authority. There needs to be, in other words, a complete circuit of conditioning of desires and beliefs in place to assure at least some level of certainly that more bacon will be sold.

## The emotional turn

The difference between these old marketing models and the current effort to tap into affective registers is arguably twofold. Firstly, new technologies, like those that allow for massive-scale emotion research carried out on big data samples, as well as biofeedback and brainwave measuring tools intended to detect the visceral stirrings assumed to lead to emotional engagements that inform purchase intent, are now widespread in marketing. Secondly, the focus on Pavlovian brain conditioning has been influenced by a continuously shifting theoretical frame in the brain sciences, beginning with the opening up of the black box of behaviourism to cognitive brain modelling, but now increasingly emphasising the significant role emotions play in decision making processes. To be sure, since the mid-1990s, the neurosciences have gradually moved away from a purely cognitive based approach to the brain-mind problem toward an enquiry into the affective, emotive and feely triggers assumed to be enmeshed in the networks between somatic markers and pure reason (Damasio, 2006). The neuroscientific argument forwarded suggests that the perturbations and disturbances of somatic sensations elicited by certain feelings – predominantly fear – can be subjected to response conditioning. There is an attempt, in the work of Joseph LeDoux (2003), for example, to demonstrate how a lab rat's amygdalae provokes a rapid response based not on cognitive, but emotional information processes (*ibid.*: 120-124). Using Pavlovian conditioning LeDoux points to a pathway that he contends fear travels through, from an input zone (the lateral amygdala) with connections to most other regions in the amygdala, to the central nucleus, which functions as an output zone connected to networks that control fear behaviours, like freezing, and associated changes in body physiology; heart rate, blood pressure etc. (*ibid.*).

Underpinned by similar ideas promoted in neuroeconomics, which correlate changes in brain chemistry to economic decision making, neuromarketing further attempts to go beyond a system of deciding that regards cognitive preferences as a given to explore the hedonic motivations exhibited by neurotransmitters thought to guide choice. It is, for example, supposed that dopamine updates the value an organism assigns to stimuli and actions, determining, some argue, the probability of a choice being made (Caplin and Dean, 2008). Like this, neuroeconomic propositions point toward the potential involvement of dopamine in the formation of expectations, beliefs and preferences (assuming, that is to say, that expectations, beliefs and preferences do not conversely affect dopamine activity).

If these kinds of neuroscientific suppositions concerning the processing of emotion have any credence at all, they will evidently challenge two canonical



postulations at the heart of classical economics and persuasion theory. On one hand, the assumption that economic decisions are somehow guided by purely rational, utilitarian actors, rendered free from irrational emotions, becomes exposed to the uncertainties of a reasoning caught somewhere in between cognition and affect. On the other hand, the emotional brain thesis also challenges the Machiavellian notion that fear is the most powerful means of social influence. A neuroeconomist or neuromarketer might, for example, want to know what makes someone happy before a choice is made, since this state of mind can similarly affect options.

Notwithstanding well-founded accusations of copious fMRI-driven neurospeculation (Satel and Lilienfeld, 2013), the influence of the emotion turn on the marketing industry has, without doubt, been considerable. Whether or not these neuroscientific ideas have any validity is entirely up for grabs, but they have certainly become very well-rehearsed in a circuitous convergence between the neurosciences and the marketing industry. LeDoux and Antonio Damasio are often cited in marketing literature, which, for example, claims to understand what makes a web user want to unconsciously click on certain content by recourse to emotional brain functioning (e.g. Weinschenk, 2009). Neuroscientists have also readily engaged with the burgeoning business of neuromarketing with Damasio, for example, providing the keynote at the 2014 Neuromarketing World Forum in New York. There is an irresistible temptation, it seems, to draw on the emotional turn to grasp how the attention and (purchase) intentions of a consumer in a supermarket or on a website might be automatically guided toward specific goals. So beyond the hype of fMRI speculation, neuromarketing can be understood as a model of persuasion, in the tradition of Bernays, which appropriates emotional desires by way of conditioning reward systems and affective appeals. The aim of social media research like that carried out by Facebook is to similarly make the emotional stuff that motivates people to consume certain products and brands more predictable, and consequently more efficiently reproducible and spreadable.

At its most dystopic, the appropriation of the emotional turn by marketers can be seen as a component of affective capitalism with the potential to manage sensory environments by way of producing a stream of sensory stimuli that conforms the mechanical habits of the consumer to predictable temporal behavioural patterns. This is a mode of affective control quantized by the refrain of habitual social media usage, and assembled in the rhythmic entrainment of brain frequencies, which, at the same time, threaten to transform active populations into a passive, docile consumer-proletariat.

## Strength through joy

The joyful encounter has its modern political origins in the fascisms of the late 1920s and 1930s, and in particular the Nazi propaganda machine which thoroughly grasped the purchase of appeals to pleasure as well as fear. The encounters they produced were carefully assembled experiences that tapped into the desires of the crowd. Both Hitler and Mussolini were apparently well acquainted with the late nineteenth century crowd theories of Gustave Le Bon (2002/1895) and not surprisingly they endeavoured to draw on his notion of hypnotic mass suggestion as a mode of control. To be sure, the many direct appeals to desire fit squarely with Tarde's more exacting microsociology of the crowd, particularly his idea that the object of the desires of the social sleepwalker are always belief (Sampson, 2012: 122). That is to say, to make a population believe in fascism it was necessary to appeal directly to desires for joyful sensations as well maintain atmospheres of absolute terror. Like this, the large scale state run leisure organization, *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through joy) demonstrated how the Nazis placed a heavy emphasis on the happiness of the population and its desire to have a good life so that they would associate these feelings of joy with the new order (Fritzsche, 2009: 61). Again, this was not so much an ideological trick working directly on belief systems as it was an attempt at tapping into the crowd's vulnerability to mass suggestion experienced through joyful encounters.

By way of providing a theoretical insight into the affective politics of Nazis joy, Protevi (2010) draws attention to an affective brain-somatic relation that negotiates the world through 'feeling what [people] can and cannot do in a particular situation' (*ibid.*: 180). This is affective political power that can be comprehended here as a *double event* of the affective encounter: the capacity for a body to affect and be affected by its environment (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 257). On one hand, the passive register (to be affected) is grasped politically as an example of *pouvoir*; a bodily encounter in the world similar in many ways to the kind of imitative encounter established between the social somnambulist and the power dynamic of an *action-at-a-distance* described by Tarde (Sampson, 2012: 30). Indeed, it is the passive encounters of a desiring population with a controlling transcendent fascistic leader that seems to lead to a desire for mass repression. On the other hand, the active register (to affect) is an encounter determined by what Protevi (2010: 182) calls 'mutually empowering connections'. Political power as *puissance* is equal to 'immanent self-organization', 'direct democracy', and 'people working together to generate the structures of their social life' (*ibid.*). Is it, in other words, an active joyous affect, increasing the *puissance* of the bodies that pass through the sensory environment, enabling them to form new and mutually empowering encounters outside the original encounter (*ibid.*).

Thinking through the oppositional tensions of this double event, Protevi raises important questions concerning the multiple processes of subjectification occurring in politically organized affective encounters with the Nazis at the Nuremberg rallies. These large-scale militarized events provided a stimulating sensory environment that can be ethically gauged according to a kind of *pouvoir* that elicits passive joy, while, at the same time, enforcing the rhythmic entrainment and repression of the crowd. As Protevi puts it:

The Nuremberg rallies were filled with joyous affect, but this joy of being swept up into an emergent body politic was passive. The Nazis were stratified; their joy was triggered by the presence of a transcendent figure manipulating symbols – flags and faces – and by the imposition of a rhythm or a forced entrainment – marches and salutes and songs. Upon leaving the rally, they had no autonomous power (*puissance*) to make mutually empowering connections. In fact, they could only feel sad at being isolated, removed from the thrilling presence of the leader. (Protevi, 2010: 180)

The marketers of early fascist joy also understood that conventional party politics, or indeed totalitarianism, was never going to be something that the population desired. Much better to appeal to the desire to oppose the established political order than it is to appear to personify it. In the early years of Italian fascism Mussolini purposefully positioned his fascism as the ‘anti-party’ (Obsolete Capitalism, 2015: v) so as to appeal directly to the disaffected working class desire to disrupt. This is an example of a passive joyful encounter since it seems to offer power to those without access to political resources. However, despite initially appealing to productive desires for change, fascism of this kind does nothing more than exacerbate the repression of the masses.

### Right wing populism: Waking the somnambulist in 2015

*Farage...comes along and people connect to him because he sounds like the guy in the street* – Canvey Island Independent Party member explaining the appeal of the UK Independence Party’s leader in Essex. (BBC Sunday Politics, 19 October, 2014)

The disempowering encounters with Nazi joy are comparable in many ways to a fascistic trajectory persisting in current waves of right wing populist contagion spreading throughout Europe at this point in time; a disparate series of political movements, which similarly position themselves as anti-parties opposed to the established order. Once again these attempts to position far right politics as a radical movement add up to more than a mere ideological trick by a totalitarian military machine. There is a far more complex and subtle relation established between desire and belief: a relation that has many continuities and discontinuities with the past. To begin with, although the entraining rhythms of marching and salutes have, for the most part, faded into the background (for the

time being, that is), the entrainment of the population by way of affective appeals to feelings about nationhood, race, and unity, persists. Moreover, this is a right wing populism stimulated by affective encounters intended not only to destroy difference and celebrate sameness, but also produce repression through joy. Not surprisingly then many theorists have revisited Wilhelm Reich's question concerning why it is that so many people seek their own repression under regimes with political motivations that are palpably counter to their own self-interest (Protevi, 2010: 178). As Reich put it:

What was it in the masses that caused them to follow a party the aims of which were, objectively and subjectively, strictly at variance with their own interests? (Reich, 1946: 34)

Indeed, we need to ask why, again, today, so many people desire *pouvoir* over *puissance*. They seem to be wide awake. They do not appear to be deceived. Nevertheless, it is not freedom that the sleepwalking supporters of right wing populism desire; it is repression. They are, once again, in need; it would seem, of a transcendent authority to protect them from what they are told is the chaos of an economic depression worsened by porous national borders open to floods of virus ridden immigrants stealing jobs, scrounging welfare and intent on acts of terror. That is, as well as having someone to blame for their own disempowerment, they crave an authority figure to relate to; someone who personifies prejudicial beliefs and anxieties stirred into action by a fear of the unfamiliar. So where amid all these appeals to the fear of otherness is the joyful encounter? To answer this question there is a need to, on one hand, rethink the sex-economic sociological framework in which Reich framed his original question; that is to say, to move on from its recourse to the inner world of an unconscious mind rooted in biological drives, and address, instead, the affective relations established between the population and the sensory environments that situated it. What seemed to Reich to be the perverse impulses of the fascist unconscious; a desire for repression of biological impulses that seeps through the layering of the unconscious into conscious rational choices needs to be revisited in terms of a political affect that stirs into action a different kind of mass somnambulism. This is not a hidden unconscious seeping out from the inside. Affect is not a fantasy. The sleepwalker is already *out there*; in the crowd; the guy in the street. The somnambulist is a social relation. This is the kind of microfascism that is not simply personified by a transcendent leader either, but as Michel Foucault notes in his preface to *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1984), it is already in 'everyday behavior'; it is 'the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us' (Foucault, 1984: xiii). On the other hand, there is perhaps a need to revisit certain elements of the critique of Marxism Reich offered in the 1940s. Contrary to how the masses have

been generally observed through the lenses of Marxist theory, the working class supporters of these right wing movements did not appear to, as Reich argued, perceive themselves as a hard done by proletariat in opposition to bourgeois elites. As Reich contends, the working classes of the 1940s did not see themselves as the struggling class anymore. They had, he claims, grasped themselves as having ‘taken over the forms of living and the attitudes of the middle class’ (Reich, 1946: 55).

Today, it would seem that the supporters of right wing populism have become particularly susceptible to differently orientated appeals to the felt experiences of a shifting sense of class identity to those Reich observed. That is, the working classes are now positioned as the disaffected guy in the street. This means they are once again drawn to the appeal of the anti-party since it seems to soak up a desire to disrupt order, but merely produces more repression. Moreover, desires are now shared in the digitally mediated sensory environments of social media; these digital crowds and data assemblages Facebook readily experiments with. Indeed, *Obsolete Capitalism’s* (2015, xx-xxxvii) analysis of the rise of the comedian Beppe Grillo’s popularist anti-party, the Five Star Movement in Italy, points to the emergence of a digital populism that acknowledges the central role of the marketer and net strategist in building the anti-party’s brand, orientating voters, and disrupting dissidents through social media.

In many parts of Europe, there is a distinct reversal of the fortunes of Reich’s imagined upwardly mobile proletariat, which the right wing popularists in the UK are readily exploiting by way of joyful encounters. This is again not simply a trick of ideology played out on the ignorant masses. Like Grillo in Italy – the authoritarian hiding behind the rascally face of a showman (*ibid.*: x-xii) – we find that the bourgeois elites, secreted away behind the facade of these anti-parties, are endeavouring to pass themselves off as the guy in the street, or at least some jovial personality compatible with the contrivance of this imagined worldview. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), for example, were led by a privately educated, former stockbroker who is regularly filmed and photographed by the media sharing of a pint of beer in the local pub, creating an appealing impression that he is *one of us*.<sup>1</sup> The production of these political ersatz experiences of joy cannot simply be attributed to an ideological appeal to a rigid sense of the

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1 Since writing this article the UKIP leader resigned after narrowly failing to win a seat in Parliament in the May 7<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2015. This is despite a significant swell in support for UKIP, which amounts to 13% of the national vote share. By the 11<sup>th</sup> May, he was back; the party having refused to accept the showman’s resignation. In June 2016, Farage’s aim to ‘take his country back’ (to take the UK out of the European Union) was realized with many Brexit supporters saying that immigration was their main concern. Farage has since stood down as leader.

representation of class. The image of Nigel Farage swigging a pint in the local pub works in the insensible degrees between representational illusion and affective states that trigger the desire for mass repression; that is to say, they exist in the *interferences* between the desires and beliefs of a population. To be sure, it is the triggering of the latter affective states that seems to prompt contagious overflows of affect that are as much about joy as they are fear. Although a large percentage of the affective contagion of UKIP can evidently be put down to racist fear mongering over immigration, it is also the case that supporters of the right become vulnerable to joyful encounters with these showman-like leaders, which have been historically satisfied (e.g. in the UK) through right wing inventions like the Royal Family and Saatchi and Saatchi's fabrication of the handbag swinging shopkeeper Margaret Thatcher. The fascist marketer has, like this, continued to perpetuate a sensory environment full of joyful encounters with congenial aesthetic figures: *right wing buffoons*, including the UKIP leader and the current London Mayor, Boris Johnson, whose jester-like performances obscure the inequity of power relations in the UK wherein the many are overwhelmingly dominated by an over privileged and privately educated few. Surely, the point is that the somnambulist needs to wake up! These buffoons are not *one* of us. Following Tarde's microsociology, these global leaders should not be grasped as personifications *collectively born* (Tarde, 2012: 36). They are a monadological accumulation of *facts* (e.g. Farage likes a pint and Boris always says it how it is), which tend to assemble and resonate, not so much by accident, as Tarde contended, but by way of purposefully steered affects that spread through the sensory environments of the mass media and digital populism.

Returning to the earlier focus on neurology, the affective marketing of right wing buffoons can perhaps be seen alongside a more generalized marketing of ersatz experiences in affective capitalism that stimulate a craving for sensory stimulation. Again, this is a regime of control that asks questions of conventional Marxist approaches. As Reich (1946: vii) points out, the ideal of abolishing private property, for example, seems to clash with a mass desire for commodities of all kinds. In the 1940s Reich listed such mundane items as shirts, pants, typewriters, toilet paper, books etc., but today we can add a far more sensorial list of luxury consumer items, including the much ridiculed working class obsession with wide screen TVs and access to social media entertainment systems that connect populations to an array of further joyful encounters. These are more than ideological weapons of mass distraction. Indeed, following Bruce E. Wexler's brain and culture thesis (2008), the desire for joyful sensory stimulations of this kind can be conceived of as an addiction that exceeds the commodity fetish; the satisfying of which reduces the anxieties and depressions caused by sensory deprivation (*ibid.*: 83). Turning Wexler's thesis on its head, it might even be argued that given the overwhelming control of sensory

stimulation by affective capitalism some level of deprivation might actually be a good thing.

### The brain is already free?

We are living at the hour of neuronal liberation, and we do not know it. An agency within us gives sense to the code, and we do not know it. The difference between the brain and psychism is shrinking considerably, and we do not know it (Malabou, 2009: 8).

In order to explore the potential of the joyful encounter as an expression of puissance this discussion now moves on to the second question of *what can a brain do*. To some extent then, we can begin by following Malabou's endeavour to free the brain; that is to say, in this context, liberate the brain-somatic relation from its coincidence with the passive joyful encounters of affective capitalism. Like this, the discussion will now fleetingly follow Malabou's effort to draw on theories from the emotional turn in the neurosciences concerning the emergence of a plastic protosubjectivity, which suggest that although we might not know it, our brain is *already* free; we just need to 'free this freedom' (*ibid.*: 11).

What can we learn from Malabou's appeal to the neurosciences so that we might better understand how to free the masses from this desire for repression? Firstly, Malabou draws attention to the emergence of a neuronal sense of self, which is, according to LeDoux, a unity, but not *unitary* (LeDoux, 2003: 31). Significantly then, the plasticity of the synaptic self is not regarded as a mere personality formed out of a genetic building block. It is rather 'added to and subtracted from'; it is, like this, a plasticity of 'genetic maturation, learning, forgetting, stress, aging, and disease' (*ibid.*: 29). This plasticity is what Malabou importantly draws attention when she asks the question of what we should do with our brains. For this reason, we should not, she contends, be overly concerned about a genetically determined brain because the plastic brain provides a 'possible margin of improvisation' between the synapse and the biological encoding of genetic necessity (*ibid.*: 8). Secondly, the question of what can a brain do will also not be answered, Malabou argues, by yielding to a model of plasticity redefined as flexible; i.e. the flexible *ergo* docile consumers and workers of affective capitalism. Whereas the emotional brain is made from a liberated plasticity that can know and modify itself, flexibility is the avatar that masks and diverts attention away from the affordances of freedom that plasticity might offer. 'This means asking not "to what point are we flexible?" but rather "To what extent are we plastic?"' (*ibid.*: 14). The problem, for Malabou, is that in its coincidence with capitalism the brain is 'entirely ignorant of plasticity but not at all of flexibility' (*ibid.*: 12).

Where this article subtly deviates from Malabou's use of the emotional brain is in her contention that our brain is us; that is, 'We' coincide with 'our brain' (*ibid.*: 8). To be sure, the search for a liberated protosubjectivity does not begin, I contend, with an 'organic personality' (*ibid.*). This is neither a quest for a stable sense of self-identity or individual freedom. Indeed, despite the emotional brain having a diachronic temporality, the improvisation between gene power and plastic variability is disappointingly grasped as a dialectical movement by Malabou; that is to say, it is a 'synthesis of all the plastic processes at work in the brain', allowing the organism to 'hold together and unify the cartography of networks' (*ibid.*: 58). The emergence of stable thoughts, emotions and motivations becomes, like this, necessary for the survival of a coherent and rational neuronal personality; otherwise irrationality would cast these thoughts out into the wilderness, and emotions and motivations would be scattered in all directions like some 'unruly mob' (*ibid.*). This *scattering* is, nonetheless, where we might begin to confront the neoliberal production of flexible individuals; in the animal-like collectivities of what we might call the *crowd-brain*, which as Tarde argued, has a potential for revolution rather than joyful repression.

Furthermore, the aim here is not simply a matter of uncovering particular hidden brain regions or plastic processes so as to establish the sum total of who we are, but rather, primarily, about awakening a collective political consciousness from its somnolent coincidence with the spirit of capitalism. As follows, the crowd-brain never becomes a sum total. Arguably, it is a collective freedom that will not be achieved by looking *inside* the brain to establish the relation the 'I' has to an external world. The crowd-brain is a multiplicity of relational patterns. All too often in phenomenological tendencies in psychology and brain science the outside becomes nothing more than a model represented in the inner world. Boundary lines are produced between self, others and the environments in which they relate. In contrast, the intention here is to open up sense making process to the borderless outside forces of pattern and relationality. Indeed, if we are to progress to 'free this freedom' (Malabou 2009: 11), then it is perhaps better to ask how brains relate to sensory environments in which self and other become indistinguishable instead of looking inside the synapse to find out how a brain.

To even begin to free this freedom, it is important to move on from the tendency to conceptualize subjectivity (or the emergence of self) as a readymade Being in the world. The enlightenment concept of an emergent selfhood – Descartes' essence of human subjectivity – and the theoretical structures that support the model of a synaptic self have a lot in common in this sense (Bennett and Hacker, 2013). Indeed, both seem to be in service of neoliberal subjectification. Rather than stay focused then on the inner world of subjective perception and opinion, I want to grasp subjectification in the multiple processes of becoming. As Deleuze



and Guattari (1994) contend, the *brain-becoming-subject* is to be found in its encounter with infinity, not in a readymade personality, soul or self-identity on the *inside*, but by plunging into the chaos *outside*.

## Radical relationality

Before concluding this paper, I want to bring together two theoretical approaches that tease out the affective politics of this notion of an outside. The first works to erode the border between self, other and sensory environment, allowing for a potential education of the senses alert to the affective appeals to joy that occur in relations to exteriority. The second places the temporal rhythms of Tarde's imitation-repetition as the base of all social relationality; that is to say, it is a desire to imitate, and not the sharing of meaning or ideology, that brings the crowd-brain together.

To begin with, and following Protevi's (2010) reading of Wexler's book *Brain and culture* (2008), we see how the inside/outside relation established in the emotional brain model is substituted for a 'radical relationality' (*ibid.*: 174-76), which helps us to theorize relations to exteriority in a number of significant ways. Firstly, Wexler notes how neuroplasticity becomes open to varying degrees of change, over time, occurring in a neuro-environmental emergentism; that is, the intricate connections and patterns established between neurons are 'determined by sensory stimulation and other aspects of environmentally induced neural activity' (Wexler, 2008: 22). Importantly, this notion of emergence not only differs from the model of the inner world presented in the emotional brain model, but also significantly contrasts with other models of a centred self-identity, conceived of by, for example, the phenomenological neurophilosopher, Thomas Metzinger (2009). Like this, Metzinger argues that evolutionary pressures have introduced a further level of duality between an illusory inner dream state that hallucinates an objective reality far too complex to contemplate.

Secondly, and relatedly, radical relationality subtly reverses the notion of a selfhood trapped in the cranium, making the essence of subjective experience, not objective reality, illusory. In other words, the sense of self (the assumed substantive part of who *we* are) is the *imagined* outcome of the speed of sensory processing being too slow to perceive anything more than the self as an individuated substance embedded in the brain. So, rather than rendering the brain an individuated substance, bequeathed with fixed properties (real or imagined), Protevi (2010: 176) contends that subjectivity is made in the tendency to partake in a pattern of social interaction. It is not, therefore, the virtuality of the individuated self that determines how the social field is perceived, but rather

‘the interaction of intensive individuation processes that forms the contours of the virtual field’ (*ibid.*: 73). Thirdly, Wexler’s radical relationality shifts this substance viewpoint (seeing the outside world from the inside) to a novel perspective in which what is internalized becomes a ‘pattern of interaction’. This is a radical relationality because as Wexler writes:

The relationship between the individual and the environment is so extensive that it almost overstates the distinction between the two to speak of a relation at all (Wexler, 2008: 39).

Brains and bodies are thusly in constant processual exchanges with their sensory environments, which, although appearing to be masked by an individual’s ‘exaggerated sense of independence’ (carried in a fleeting memory that considers our uniqueness to be a property of who we are), nevertheless, makes us little more than an effect of the milieu (*ibid.*: 39-40). Therefore, what Protevi significantly extracts from Wexler’s plastic brain thesis is an emergent subjectivity; not understood as the outcome of complex malleable brain functions, but from a ‘differentiated system in which brain, body, and world are linked in interactive loops’ (Protevi, 2010: 173). Wexler’s entire project is consequently underlined by his intention to

...minimize the boundary between the brain and its sensory environment, and establish a view of human beings as inextricably linked to their worlds by nearly incessant multimodal processing of sensory information. (Protevi, 2010: 173; Wexler, 2008: 9)

Lastly, and in addition to Protevi’s reading, Wexler foregrounds the ubiquity and automaticity of imitative processes as key to understanding subjectivity in the making as an effect of the sensory environment (Wexler, 2008: 113-21). As Wexler puts it, imitation is ‘consistently operative throughout the moment-to-moment unfolding of everyday life’ (*ibid.*: 115). It is, for example, through the close bonds a child makes with a range of caregivers that the imitation of example persists through social relations. The extent to which the imitation of example occupies the interactive loops that compose subjectivity in the making suggests a distinctive Tardean aspect to Wexler’s sensory environment that needs to be unpacked.

### **The imitative rhythms of radical relationality**

The significant imitative quality of radical relationality can be usefully mapped onto Christian Borch’s (2005) observation of how the rhythmic intensity of Tarde’s imitation-suggestibility situates a population. There are indeed two aspects to Borch’s rhythmanalysis that can be taken forward in the context of this

discussion. That is, firstly, what comes together through imitation-repetition is not the unity of the One, but rather rhythm produces the harmony of the many; a harmonious relation between repetition and difference (*ibid.*: 93-94). The rhythm of imitative contagion does not therefore produce the stability of a self-contained spatial identity; a self fixed in a sum total, or systematic emergence of a whole self from which the materiality of the brain emerges on the outside (a soul, mind, a person, a model), but rather, secondly, denotes materiality in rhythmic movement. Importantly, I think, this is not an emergence of subjectivity that climbs a flight of steps leading from a neuronal micro level to a macro level of consciousness, but an unfolding rhythmic movement of relations passing through a sensory environment.

Adding a neurological dimension to Borch's rhythmanalysis we get to see the significant role imitation might play in the political positioning of the brain-becoming-subject. That is to say, the situating of brain-somatic relations in the spatiotemporal flows of the sensory environments they inhabit. As Borch puts it:

[T]he individual does not exist prior to the rhythms but, on the contrary, is produced by them and their momentarily stabilized junctions, and since the subjectification of the individual therefore changes as the rhythms and their junctions change, rhythmanalysis is not merely a perspective on imitations per se, but equally a tool to demonstrate a society's dominant ways of promoting subject positions. (*ibid.*: 94-95)

Like this, Borch also draws specific attention to Tarde's contention that environments, like rural communities and newly industrialized cities, acquire a 'very significant importance in what is actually...imitated' (*ibid.*: 82). In Tarde's era, cities produced new social formations, like the urban crowd, which unlike rural family communities, become powerful vectors for imitative flows of the inventions of fashion, crime, and potentially nonconformity and riotous assembly, for example. Here we find the apparent traces of the conservatism of a nineteenth century crowd theory, which feared the revolutionary contagions of the working classes. But it is also in these disruptive social fields that fascist contagions thrive. Indeed, *Obsolete Capitalism* (2015: xiii) makes a very useful connection here between the spread of the kind of microfascism Deleuze and Guattari linked to the rural, the city, the neighbourhood, the couple, the family, school and office, and Tarde's microsociology. It is, within these Tardean microsociologies that we would, Deleuze and Guattari contend, answer the question of why desire longs for its own repression.

The differences between the joyful encounters of 1930s fascism and today's swing toward right wing populism may also be traced back to Tarde's microsociologies of imitation. In times of rampant capitalist industrialization,

the brain-becoming-subject was transformed into a revolutionary crowd. This was also the kind of molecular sensory environment in which Brownshirts and Blackshirts of the anti-party thrived (Obsolete Capitalism, 2015: viii). Indeed, following Tarde we have to note the intensification of mediated relations in urban environments, beginning with rise of the press and telegraph networks. As follows the crowd, Tarde contends, become increasingly 'disconnected from [the] physical co-presence' of the urban environment (Borch, 2005: 96). Here we encounter the origins of a Tardean media theory in action. He would indeed upgrade the crowd-brain's rhythmic encounter with the city to incorporate the introduction of mediated communications that create new *publics*, anticipating, in many ways, the progressive onset of the sensory environments of the mass media age. Newspapers, cinema, radio and television become component parts in the emergence of subsequent new media publics. To be sure, these newly mediated publics can be extended to contemporary post-industrial sensory environments, which play a significant role in once again rupturing harmony and repositioning subjects in the rhythmic flows of social media, for example. Although seemingly deterritorializing the co-presence of the crowd-brain and its urban environment, the ubiquitous Facebook brings together (reterritorializes) bodies and brains into nascent sensory terrains (data assemblages), which are, it would seem, ripe for the repressions of affective capitalism.

### **The insensible degrees between representational illusion and affective encounter**

To better grasp affective capitalism one has to arguably invest in a theory of affect which, on one hand, leans to a certain extent on the sciences of the brain, and on the other, tries to find answers to the uncanniness of social relationality in concepts like imitation, crowd contagion, desiring assemblages, hypnosis etc. This double commitment does not, evidently, sit well with those in the humanities and social sciences who are, it seems, growing increasingly hostile to the positioning of affective states by nonrepresentational theorists as an alternative to discourse analysis and phenomenologically constructed subjectivities. No longer consigned to an incomprehensible fascination with the uncanny, nonrepresentational theory is accused of 'draw[ing] a thick line between bodily movements or forces and social sense making' (Wetherall, 2012: 19-21). What is essentially driving this altercation with those who are 'rubbishing discourse' is an endeavour to claim back affect theory as something that is 'inextricably linked' to guiding forces of human meaning-making, the semiotic and the discursive (*ibid.*: 20), as well as the embodied essence of self forwarded by phenomenological accounts of affect (e.g. Blackman, 2012).

What would seem to be a more productive course of action in times of rampant affective capitalism and contagions of right wing populism is to rethink the relation established between belief and desire. In other words, get to grips with the tensions that exist between ideological illusions and desiring assemblages. Following Bergson (1911: 52-53), for example, (a nonrepresentational theorist who nevertheless grasped the insensible degrees between the *unextended* affective state of things and the ideas and images that represent and occupy them in space), we can begin to rethink the relation between affect and desire, on one hand, and ideological illusion and belief, on the other. Indeed, the interference between the brain sciences and the seemingly opposing philosophies behind representational and nonrepresentational theory are not as disparate as it might seem. When trying to make the implicit experiences of capitalism become explicit both demonstrate a commitment to neurology albeit with very different brain models and outcomes. On one hand, the interaction between capitalist visual cultures and a false consciousness rooted in representation requires a distinctly cognitive model of the brain. We might call it a locationist's brain with special access to a secret photographic album. The ideology of capitalism is thus exposed by semiotic technologies like the sunglasses Žižek's adopts in his film *The perverts guide to ideology* (2012). The revealing of implicit ideologies has a distinct violence to it. It involves the peeling back of ideological layers of myth making to make explicit the referent. This uncovering process might be achieved by staring directly into the light of the spectacle until it makes our eyes bleed or it requires these special shades that Žižek dons to expose the real by routing around the illusory.

Nonrepresentational theory, on the other hand, is concerned with a different aspect of the brain-body chemistry's response to the same mirage. This is an interaction with the smoke and mirrors that may not necessarily be seen, or indeed thought of, in the cognitive sense (located *inside* a brain that thinks in images). It relates instead to sensations, feelings, affect and imitative processes that do not have a location, as such, and get passed on in the ever-moving externality of affective atmospheres. However, it is important to consider that what is felt in the atmosphere of affect is crucially related to what we think, and in turn, what we believe. This may prove to be an altogether differently oriented kind of thinking that requires a very different brain model: an *antilocationist* brain. Perhaps these various manifestations of affective capitalism we encounter bypass belief altogether, appealing to desires that have a mind of their own.

Finally then, whereas the representational theorist seems to have a clear sense of a relation between hidden symbols and conscious visible forms, as established in discursive language and semiotic regimes, affect theory needs to grasp what is often unimaginable. The nonrepresentational power of affective capitalism

becomes manifest in asignifying and prediscursive forces, like those grasped in the radical, imitative relationality established between brains, bodies and sensory environment, which, like signification and discourse, suggest, persuade and subjectify, but there is an indiscernibility that requires a subtler kind of violent disclosure. Žižek's Sunglasses will not protect us from the imitative radiation of affective capitalism. Conceivably a more effective mode of protection from the joyful encounters that work on desire, infect belief and lead to repression, might be a sun blocker of some kind.

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## **the author**

Tony Sampson is Reader in digital cultures and communication at the University of East London. His publications include *The spam book*, coedited with Jussi Parikka (Hampton Press, 2009), *Virality: contagion theory in the age of networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and *The assemblage brain: Sense making in neuroculture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Tony is a co-founder of Club Critical Theory in Southend, Essex and Director of the EmotionUX Lab at UEL.

Email: [T.D.Sampson@uel.ac.uk](mailto:T.D.Sampson@uel.ac.uk)