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Transforming Habit: Revolution, Routine and Social Change

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Abstract

In the wake of the 'turn to affect', compelling scholarly work has explored the vital role affect, emotion and feeling might play in catalyzing radical social and political change. I argue, however, that some narratives of 'affective revolution' may actually do more to obscure than to enrich our understanding of the material relations and routines through which 'progressive' change might occur and endure in a given context - while side-stepping the challenge of how to evaluate progress itself in the current socio-political and economic landscape. Drawing on the work of Eve Sedgwick (1996, 2003, 2011), John Dewey ([1922]2012), Felix Ravaisson ([1838]2008) and others, this article asks whether critical work on habit can provide different, and potentially fruitful, conceptual terrain for understanding the contemporary ethical and material complexities of social stasis and transformation. I suggest that it is precisely habit's double nature - its enabling of both 'addiction' and 'grace' (Malabou, 2008: viii) - that makes it a rich concept for addressing the propensity of harmful socio-political patterns to persist in the face of efforts to generate greater awareness of their damaging effects, as well as the material forms of automation and coordination on which meaningful societal transformation may depend. I also explore how bringing affect and habit together might productively refigure our understandings of 'the present' and 'social progress', as well as the available modes of sensing, instigating and responding to change. In turning to habit, then, the primary aim of this article is to examine how social and cultural theory might critically re-approach social change and progressive politics today.

Keywords

Affect, empathy, habit, social change, John Dewey, Eve Sedgwick

In the wake of the 'turn to affect', stimulating scholarly work has explored the vital role affect, emotion and feeling might play in catalyzing radical social and political change. Such narratives of 'affective revolution' are often rich and inspiring. My sense, however, is that some of these analyses may actually do more to obscure than to enrich our understanding of how 'progressive' change might occur and endure in a given context - while side-stepping the challenge of how to evaluate progress itself in the current socio-political landscape. As such, this article asks whether critical work on habit can provide different, and potentially fruitful, conceptual terrain for understanding the ethical and material complexities of social stasis and transformation. It also explores how bringing affect and habit together might productively refigure our understandings of 'the present' and 'social progress', as well as the available modes of sensing, instigating and responding to change. In turning to habit, then, my primary aim in this article is to examine how social and cultural theory might critically re-approach both social change and progressive politics today.

In the first section, I consider how recent scholarly engagements with affect and emotion, and particularly writing on the politics of empathy, has offered a compelling conceptual vocabulary for addressing the embodied dynamics of social transformation. I argue, however, that although these narratives offer seductive explanations of how affect can spark mind-body change, they tend to provide less convincing accounts of the material processes and infrastructures through which such change might endure. Narratives of empathy's power to ignite personal and collective transformation could also be seen to offer a 'paranoid' understanding of social change (Sedgwick, 1996, 2003). That is, they assume that progressive transformation is precipitated (and perhaps even guaranteed) through acts of exposure that produce greater cognitive and affective knowledge. Yet as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have incisively arguedⁱ, there is no necessary or inevitable correlation between the creation of more (or better) knowledge and progressive social change.

The remainder of the paper thus explores how we might differently encounter contemporary socio-political dynamics through analysis of habit. Bringing the work of John Dewey, Felix Ravaisson and William James together with that of contemporary scholars, the second section introduces the concept of 'habit' and traces some of its intellectual and political genealogies. Because habituation tends to be associated most strongly with mindless repetition, and hence the reproduction of the status quo, I suggest, scholars and activists engaged in projects of social justice have stressed the need to expose and disrupt pernicious habits. They have thus paid less attention to how habit formation may be integral to substantive personal and socio-political change.ⁱⁱ Yet, it is precisely habit's double nature – its enabling of both 'addiction' and 'grace' (Malabou, 2008: viii) - that makes it a rich concept for addressing the propensity of harmful socio-political patterns to persist in the face of widespread awareness of their damaging effects, as well as the material forms of automation and coordination on which meaningful transformation may depend.

I develop these arguments further in the third section through a more detailed engagement with Dewey's analysis of the links between habit, feeling and progressive social reform. Like Sedgwick, I suggest, Dewey is suspicious of approaches to personal or social transformation that depend exclusively on the acquisition of greater cognitive or affective knowledge, not least because they have difficulty engaging effectively with the (often unconscious) psychical, physiological and environmental processes central to embodied regression and change. Instead, he advocates a speculative mode of social intervention oriented towards habit and the workings of 'mind-body-environmental assemblages' (Bennett et al, 2013). Given the impossibility of calculating precisely how the future will unfold, Dewey contends, we cannot preemptively dictate either the nature of ethical conduct or the necessary path towards greater social justice. Our focus, rather, needs to be on approaching 'progress' through efforts to engender an 'increase in present meaning' ([1922]2012: 110), while remaining open to the unexpected, and hence to change. In these ways, Dewey's analysis of the possibilities of habit resonates with Sedgwick's (2003) description of

‘reparation’ as a mode of social engagement attuned to *inhabiting the present* in all its ambivalence and complexity.

The fourth and final section examines some of the risks and possibilities of a ‘politics of habit’, focusing on the links between habit modification and pernicious modes of subjectification and governmentality. I argue that, while habit is not easily disentangled from its colonialist, fascist and neoliberal legacies (and indeed we must remain attuned to their continuing effects), they do nonetheless not determine its potential. Affirmative possibilities exist for engagement with habit to furnish a renewed pragmatist politics, informed by feminist, queer and decolonial analysis, that approaches social change through experimental action addressing the environments and infrastructures that ‘feed’ habits as well as the cognitive, psychosocial and physiological processes of which habit is comprised (Sullivan, 2005, 2015; Connolly, 2013). While this approach is wary of *over-investing* in the promise of sweeping revolutionary change, it does not dismiss the importance of radical imagination and praxis, or the utility of certain aspects of ‘paranoid’ critique. Its emphasis, rather, is on approaching progressive social change through an understanding of the *imbrication* of the revolutionary and the routine - engaging the relationship between the force of affective sparks and the ongoing coordination and adaptation of habits.

Affect, emotion and social change

As Sedgwick discussed in her powerful discussion of what Paul Ricoeur called ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Sedgwick, 1996, 2003, 2011), we have, within ‘critical’ social and cultural analysis, become very skilled at tracing the workings of power and domination - at providing sophisticated analysis of how essentialism, stereotyping, silencing, appropriation and discipline operate, and showing how what might look progressive or transgressive at first glance is in fact simply another reproduction of normative relations of power.ⁱⁱⁱ In turn, we routinely point to various socio-political interventions that might lead to desired changes – from education and consciousness raising, to political protest and social movement building, to policy change and legal intervention, to alternative

economic planning and others forms of structural overhaul. And yet, we have remained comparatively limited in our capacity to explain how – *through what specific material processes and mechanisms* - social transformation might actually happen. More specifically, we find it difficult to account for what it is that enables people (students, policy-makers, journalists, capitalists, teachers, university administrators, activists, bloggers, voters, the middle classes, conservatives, white liberals, men etc.) to change their everyday behavior and act more consistently in ways that might be more conducive to particular ‘progressive’ aims - without assuming that human subjects are wholly self-determining or indeed separate from non-human actors, structures and dynamics. In this context, across a range of fields - and particularly those concerned with ‘projects of social justice’ - diverse engagements with emotion, affect and feeling have offered compelling ways to explain the possibilities of progressive social change.

Of all the emotions, empathy – which may be understood as the act of ‘imaginatively experiencing the feelings, thoughts and situations of another’ (Chabot Davis, 2004: 403) or as a more embodied and sensorial practice of affective attunement – is the one most commonly linked to the promise of self and social transformation. Indeed, across both mainstream and critical literatures, there has been a widespread investment in the power of empathy to spur a kind of affective revolution at the level of the subject or the collective. The idea here is that, in being made to feel deep empathy - whether this is by government officials being exposed to the visceral reality of poverty in the Global South through *Immersion*s programs in international development, or by privileged white university students reading African American slave narratives^{iv} - subjects or groups will be so profoundly affected that they will never be the same again: their views of the world will be radically transformed, as will their behavior and actions, in the interests of greater social justice (whatever ‘social justice’ might mean in a given context). A key point in these accounts, then, is that, while we might theorise social inequalities and commit ourselves to social obligations in the abstract, a transformation at the affective level is required to make us actually feel, realise and act on such responsibilities.

Clearly, this is a narrative of progressive social transformation that depends on a radical affective break, a rupture of consciousness that acts as a catalyst for creating personal and collective change. It is a model of change premised on a powerful spark of emotional recognition that catapults forth new forms 'knowing that transform the self who knows' (Bartky, 1996: 179). Yet is this how 'progressive' change - or indeed any enduring social change - actually works? Does a radical break or a revolution of the subject at the cognitive, psychic, and/or affective level provide the basis for *sustained* behavioral, institutional or environmental transformation at a deep embodied, material and structural level? Or is such affective change often more likely to be fleeting, disorienting or merely productive of an individualist mode of affective politics divorced from wider structural relations of power? With respect to questions of temporality, these seductive narratives of empathic social transformation are often teleological: they imagine a *telos* or end point at which social and political tensions will be eased and antagonisms rectified. As such, the focus in these affective accounts is never really on life in the present, but rather always on a better future on the horizon. Such perspectives, then, tend to not to be attuned to, on the one hand, the material workings of change active *in the present*, or, on the other hand, the ways in which established expectations of 'progress' have been compromised in the wake of post-Fordist economic, social and political configurations (Freeman, 2010; Berlant, 2011) - points which I address in further detail later on.

The underlying assumption of many calls for empathy - or indeed other emotions, whether compassion, hope, shame or anger - as affective panacea seems to be that, deep down, people are capable of acting 'ethically', but are routinely prevented from doing so because they are too busy, too ignorant, or too isolated from the 'reality' of the injustice that others endure. If people (especially those in positions of social privilege and power) could only be affected powerfully enough, through being exposed to the visceral truth of others' suffering - and their own complicity in it - such narratives suggest, they would be compelled to fundamentally alter their ways of seeing and being in the world. Yet it is this cluster of assumptions that I have now come to find most

troubling – the belief not only that we can know in advance what it means to act ‘ethically’ or ‘progressively’ across a range of different contexts and situations, but also that the shock of greater affective knowledge is capable of transforming human behavior in line with such ethical imperatives. How to make sense of the relationship between individual action, environmental conditions and structural relations of power is, of course, another longstanding question that many who over-invest in empathy’s transformative political promise have difficulty engaging with critically in any sustained way.

Beyond the writing on empathy, an implicit model of social change premised on the force of exposure and revelation appears in more or less sophisticated forms across a wide range of progressive scholarly analysis, including strands of my own previous work. Invoking Sedgwick’s legacy, we might say that it is representative of much wider affective habits in critical theory. In her discussion of the dynamics of feeling at stake in what she, drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, called ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ reading, Sedgwick was interested in how we have come to understand politically-engaged, left-leaning, social and cultural analysis as requiring a mode of critique premised on suspicion and paranoia. Paranoia is a style of interpretation characterised by an implicit assumption that we already know what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for us – and social and political life more generally – and that we therefore can split knowledges and practices into those likely to work in the interests of ‘social justice’ and those likely to work against it. Paranoid reading is thus fuelled by a state of constant anxiety and alertness focused on detecting and exposing ‘the bad’ (essentialism, binary-thinking, liberal adherence to the status quo) in the belief that making what is bad *visible* is what is most required to eradicate or change it. As such, ‘paranoia requires that bad news be already known’, and this means that the analysis it generates is often circular and foreclosing of discovery (2003:130). From Sedgwick’s perspective, paranoid modes of interpretation therefore tend to be limited in their capacity to either recognise or produce change, and remain particularly naïve about the complexities of social transformation. Generating more - or more accurate - knowledge about a

particular phenomenon does not necessarily do anything, or at least does not necessarily do what we think or hope it will.

Clearly, not all writing about the links between affect and social change bears the features of the narratives of empathy described above. Visions of affective transformation informed by the continental philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze, for instance, do not subscribe to linear notions of time and social progress, nor do they invest in emotional identification as a driver of change. Yet, in some important respects, I want to argue, they resonate with the earlier accounts of empathy. Indeed, many Deleuzian-inspired narratives focus on encounters that produce 'a shock to thought', an affective jolt that can catapult us involuntarily into critical inquiry (Massumi, 2002; see also Bennett, 2005; Amin and Thrift, 2013). Such experiences, it is suggested, have the potential to move us beyond pre-set narratives, opening up a more radical space for political and ethical engagement. While these accounts do not offer a teleological vision of social progress, they nonetheless invest in the power of an affective break or upheaval to enable critical change. Granted, most theorists of affect working in the Spinoza-Deleuze tradition would not attribute straightforward causality to affect (i.e. affect *causes* change); rather, affect, from this perspective, is understood as a *potential* or *capacity* - 'a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected' (original italics, Gregg and Siegworth, 2010: 3). Nonetheless, causality is complex, rather than absent, here, given that affect is also frequently figured as a catalyzing force, as that which 'can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension' (2010: 1). So, while affect might not be conceived as that which causes change, it is frequently described as that which enables or drives transformation - a subtle distinction. Indeed, what is valued in such narratives is the promise of those fugitive affective moments in which thought might escape the discursive relations of power that normally constrain it, allowing something genuinely different to emerge. Whether or not we are convinced by the claim that affect can move fully outside of discursive forms of mediation (I have my doubts), my point here is that, across varied accounts of affective social transformation, we are offered enticing accounts of how affect might spark

embodied change, but less compelling explanations of the processes through which that change might produce effects that endure.

These observations concerning the limits of contemporary engagements with affect, emotion and social change have led me to ask: Might focusing on habit help reorient theories of affective transformation, enabling us to grapple not only with how patterns of action (personal, institutional, environmental) become deeply ingrained, but also how new modes of socio-political engagement and responsivity might be actualized and sustained? And might it do so in ways that refigure dominant binaries of cognition and embodiment, individual and environment, and human and non-human, while troubling linear notions of time and progress? In posing these questions, it is important to underscore that I do not see 'affect', 'emotion' and 'habit' as radically different and discrete concepts, but rather as related and overlapping ones. We can consider, for instance, how certain emotional responses become habitual over time, and thus how we routinely engage in practices of 'affective citation' (Wetherall, 2013). Indeed, while fuelling explanations of social change, theories of affect have also underscored powerful interpretations of political stasis and 'stuckness' - from Sara Ahmed's analysis of how 'emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination' (2004: 12), to Lauren Berlant's (2011) account of how 'cruel optimism' keeps us locked into self-defeating efforts to pursue 'the good life' in deteriorating conditions of social and economic opportunity. Yet key accounts of habit also pay attention to the role of affect in the formation of *new* embodied capacities and routines, as well as to the vital function of feeling in signaling when our unconscious habits have been disrupted. We might go as far to say then that there is no habit without affect - though the affective components of some habits may be non-conscious or unconscious (Sullivan, 2015). My aim here is thus not to laud the possibilities afforded by the substitution of one critical paradigm (affect) by another (habit); rather, I want to examine how our understandings of contemporary affective forms of embodied and socio-political stasis, regression and change might be enriched though engaging more substantively with the workings of habit.

Genealogies of habit

Intellectual concern with habit has been prominent (if not widespread) in contemporary social and cultural theory – from Michel Foucault’s work on the embodied micro-politics of discipline, to Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of socio-economic class and habitus, to Judith Butler’s examination of the performative and iterative constitution of gender. The concept of habit was also important to classical sociological theorists, such as Gabriel Tarde, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, with the latter viewing it as ‘a chief determinant of human action’ and one of the ‘principle supports for the moral fabric of modern societies’ (Camic, 1986: 1039). In the realm of philosophy, reflection on the links between habit and human activity (which can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle) developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the work of the American pragmatist philosophers William James and John Dewey. Contending that we are all merely ‘bundles of habits’, James, who was trained as a medical doctor and psychologist, took particular interest in the psychic, neural and physiological working of habituation ([1914]2004: 1). Similarly, Dewey, who drew on philosophy and social psychology to approach educational reform, suggested that, while we tend to think of ‘bad habits’ as exerting a foreign power over us, in actuality, habit ‘has this power because it is so intimately part of ourselves.... we are the habit’ ([1922]2012: 14). For these thinkers, habit was central to our everyday conduct as well as to wider socio-political processes of reproduction and transformation. More recently, there has been renewed interest in the legacy of habit in continental philosophy, namely the work of the French philosopher Felix Ravaisson ([1838]2008).^v Here, the focus is on role of habit in processes of being and becoming - in the transformation of ‘a *power* of moving or of acting into a *tendency* to move or act in a particular way’ (Carlisle and Sinclair, 2008: 13, original italics). Together, this work compels us to contemplate habit’s potential - beyond its association with mindless repetition - as an embodied technology of freedom and change.

However, extending Foucault’s legacy, contemporary engagements with habit also reflect on its role in pernicious modes of discipline and governmentality. As

Tony Bennett et al argue, in positioning particular (racialised, classed, gendered and colonised) populations as lacking in the capacity for will 'due to the excessive sway of habit', political, medical and scientific authorities did much in the late 19th century to ensure that the capacity for freedom and self-governance was differentially distributed (2013: 6).^{vi} And yet, for those positioned as 'slaves to habit', such authorities nonetheless prescribed 'a reinforcement of the disciplinary rigors of habit as the only effective means of guiding conduct' (6). This assumed divide between 'will' and 'habit' informed many scholarly mediations of habit at the time, including Durkheim's 'hierarchical conception of the relations between primitive and civilized races' (11; see also Blackman, 2013). Its logic also permeates contemporary state practices of governing marginalised groups, from the Australian Aborigines to the British 'underclass' (15). Indeed, habit modification remains of primary political tactic of managing populations – as is evident in the embracing of 'nudge theory'^{vii} by both the Obama administration and the UK's Conservative-led coalition government as means of 'nudging' individuals into developing healthier habits with respect to diet, exercise, smoking and social behavior through 'manipulating their environments' (Burgess, 2012: 3). Eschewing increased regulation for intervention at the level of habit, this melding of behavioral economics and social psychology is the latest development in neoliberal forms of governance concerned to promote 'greater individual responsibility' (3).^{viii} In this age of digital technology, we might also consider how our social media practices are tracked by corporations that use them to shape our consumer habits (Duhigg, 2012), as well as the range of digital applications available for self-tracking embodied processes, from calorie-consumption, to sleep patterns, to fertility (Coleman, 2014; Lupton, 2014; Dow Schüll, 2016). Habit-tracking technologies and algorithms are also, of course, central to contemporary practices of securitization and the particular geo-political disciplining of bodies and borders they produce (Amoore, 2013).

Developing Bourdieu's work, as well as the insights of phenomenology, psychoanalysis and pragmatism, feminist, anti-racist and other critical social theorists have also long focused on the habitual ways in which social privilege is

perpetuated. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon and Julia Kristeva, Iris Marion Young influentially argued that cultural imperialism and racism are often sustained through habitual ‘aversive or anxious reactions to the bodily presence of others’, which are frequently ‘exhibited by liberal-minded people who intend to treat everyone with equal respect’ (1990: 11). Importantly, for Young – as well as for scholars writing more recently, such as Shannon Sullivan (2005, 2015) in her analysis of the habits of white privilege and racist oppression – repeated affective reactions at the micro level are central to the reproduction of structural relations of power at the macro level. From Young’s perspective, the only way to address pernicious embodied habits is to ‘politicize’ them, a process requiring ‘a kind of social therapy’ which could be mobilised through ‘the processes of politicized personal discussion that social movements have come to call “consciousness raising”’ (1990: 153). Yet, as Sullivan (2005) argues, bringing problematic habits to conscious awareness is not easy or straightforward, not least because of the psychic workings of unconscious repression and resistance. It is also interesting to note that, while many critical scholars underscore the importance of becoming more aware of problematic individual and institutional habits in order to disrupt them, there is much less focus in these literatures on the productive role that habit formation might play in engendering more equitable, inclusive or affirming social relations and spaces (Noble, 2012). What, we might ask, happens *after* our oppressive or status-quo-enabling habits are unsettled or disrupted?

These observations point to the paradox at the root of the concept of habit: On the one hand, ‘habit’ conjures unthinking reflex, mindless repetition, and hence *stasis*. Yet, on the other hand, without the formation of enduring habits, no substantive embodied, social or political *change* can take shape, and become rooted enough to sustain. Catherine Malabou (2008) animates this tension in her introduction to the English translation of Felix Ravaisson’s book, *Of Habit*, first published in 1838. Here, she identifies two key European philosophical genealogies of habit: Firstly, a line of analysis beginning with Descartes and moving through Kant, which understands habit as automated repetition that is antithetical to critical thinking, wonder and change; and secondly, an older

tradition emerging with Aristotle, taken up by Hegel and resonant with more recent philosophers as Henri Bergson and Deleuze, which conceptualises habit as the essence of being and becoming. From this latter perspective, pioneered in Ravaisson's work, habit involves a repetition, but it is a repetition that produces a difference; that is, 'an aptitude for change' (Malabou, 2008: ix; see also Deleuze, [1968]2011).^{ix} In transforming a potentiality into a tendency through the work of repetition, habit illustrates powerfully that 'if being was able to change once, in the manner of contracting a habit, it can change again. It is available for a change to come' (2008: viii). In temporal terms then, habit is 'a past (as result), but this past makes possible a future' (viii).

From Malabou's perspective, we have perhaps become habituated to the first understanding (habit as automated repetition). Yet we might productively return to the second, older, conceptualisation (habit as being and becoming), and indeed, develop a critical appreciation of how the first and second views of habit are always mutually informing one another. This is precisely how Malabou interprets Ravaisson's analysis: he demonstrates that there can never be being and becoming without some degree of automated repetition, for it is one and the same force that produces habit as 'grace' (ease, facility, power) and as 'addiction' (machinic repetition) (Malabou, 2008: viii). However, while Malabou invokes Ravaisson's work to invigorate contemporary critical theory, it is important to remember that the origins of his analysis of habit were, in essence, theological.^x Thus, when Ravaisson associates habit with 'grace', this refers not only to how, via repetition, particular behaviors become more precise and effortless, but also to how, through habit, 'divine grace is appropriated by human beings', who nonetheless remain subject to God's power (Carlisle, 2014: 115).^{xi} Significantly, integrating habit into Christian Salvationist frameworks in this way 'provided the basis for the organization and exercise of pastoral power', which, as Bennett notes, citing Foucault, 'consisted in its "claim to the daily government of men in their real life on the ground of their salvation and on the scale of humanity' (Foucault, 2007: 148 cited in Bennett, 2015: 17). Given these genealogies, it should be emphasized that care (and a degree of caution) is required in

mobilizing historical figures such as Ravaisson for the work of contemporary critical theory and politics - a point which I return to later on.

Nonetheless, various contemporary critical theorists have addressed habit's double-nature, as articulated by Ravaisson, in relation to the workings of social change. Sullivan argues, for example, that habits are both limiting and enabling: Habit 'circumscribes the possibilities for one's action such that not all modes of engagement are available, but it also is an important means by which a person can act effectively in the world.' As such, 'freedom and power are found in and through the constitution of habits, not through their elimination (2005: 24).^{xii} Relatedly, Elizabeth Grosz suggests that habit can be understood as 'a fundamentally creative capacity that produces the possibility of stability in a universe in which change is fundamental' (2013: 219). Indeed, in the midst of life's ongoing transformation, habit acts as 'an anchor, the rock to which possibilities of personal identity are tethered, a condition under which learning is possible, the creation of a direction, a "second nature", an identity' (219). From these perspectives, it is precisely the consolidation and automation of habit that might enable both creativity and transformation.

But what exactly is a 'habit'? Before exploring the links between habit, stasis and change in further depth, it is useful to consider a couple of the most suggestive descriptions of the embodied mechanisms of habit and habituation: For William James, habit is defined by two key criteria: firstly, a habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, while also making them more accurate and diminishing fatigue ([1914]2004: 26). For example, 'a lock works better after being used for some time; at the outset more force was required to overcome a certain roughness in its mechanism. The overcoming of their resistance is a phenomenon of habituation' (7). Secondly, a habit diminishes the conscious attention with which acts are performed (31). Indeed, from James' perspective, habits (even complex ones) are 'nothing but the concatenated discharges of the nerve-centres, due to the presence there of systems of reflex paths, organized as to wake each other up successfully' (13). This means that, in order for any new habit to emerge, repetition is vital: A tendency towards a

particular mode of action ‘only becomes effectively ingrained in us in proportion to the uninterrupted frequency with which the actions actually occurs and the brain “grows” of their use’ (61). Nonetheless, James does not see habit as disconnected from will and consciousness, a point underscored by the fact that the ‘usually inattentive’ sensations of habit will ‘immediately call our attention if they go wrong’ (43).

Like James, John Dewey understands habits as involving forms of embodied automation enabled by specific material processes: ‘habit is impossible without setting up a mechanism of action, physiologically engrained, which operates “spontaneously”, automatically, whenever the cue is given’ ([1922]2012: 26). He also similarly claims that that ‘the more suavely efficient a habit the more unconsciously it operates’ (71). Nonetheless, in contrast to James (as well as Ravaissou, Deleuze and contemporary theorists such as Grosz), Dewey does not see *repetition* as the essence of habit: A ‘tendency to repeat acts is an incident of many habits, but not all’ (19). Rather, habit takes shape as ‘an acquired predisposition to ways and modes of response’ (19). It is:

[H]uman activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued form even when not obviously dominating activity (19).

While James sometimes relies on an individualist language of habit formation, Dewey pays much more attention to the ways in which habits are produced through the ‘cooperation of an organism and an environment’ (10), and hence how they constitutively *imbricate* individual bodies and structural and environmental conditions. Also, in comparison to Ravaissou, and other theorists interested in how intervention at the level of habit makes possible particular *futures*, Dewey is more interested in the role of habit in *the present*, a point I will return to later on. Finally, of all the theorists addressed above, Dewey is perhaps most explicitly concerned with the relationship between habit and projects of

social justice. In the next section, I will flesh out aspects of this line of Dewey's thought and its implications for contemporary theories of social change premised on exposure, knowledge and the force of affect.

Dewey: Inhabiting the present

The most powerful aspect of Dewey's work for the discussion at hand is his claim that questions of moral or ethical conduct cannot be divided from human psychology and physiology, or from wider environmental and structural conditions and relations. Indeed, from his perspective, morals and ethics must be thought of as materialist and fundamentally linked to embodied processes of habituation. Throughout his book *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* ([1922]2012), Dewey is critical of modes of social reform that depend predominantly on thought (i.e. through verbal instruction of particular moral imperatives) *or* the production of certain feelings (i.e. through the generation of empathy, compassion, or moral indignation). The problem with both strategies, he argues, is that they remove thought from embodied action and the individual from the environment. That is, they assume that exposure to new knowledge is enough to instigate and implement 'ethical' or 'progressive' personal and institutional change, without attending to the imbricated embodied and environmental factors that work powerfully to support and perpetuate existing patterns and behavior.

With respect to moral instruction in particular, Dewey suggests, it simply does not follow that if you instruct or show someone what 'the right' thing to do is, that it will actually happen. Here, he employs the example of the ineffectiveness of repeatedly telling someone with a problem with his posture to 'stand up straight'. The assumption that verbal instruction or visual demonstration is all that is required here implies that 'the failure to stand erect is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire' ([1922]2012: 15). Yet, as Dewey stresses, 'A man who does not stand properly forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit [...] conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist' (15). Moreover,

compelling subjects to focus on what is *wrong*, on what they *should not be doing*, could be the worst possible approach because it maintains attention on 'the bad result' rather than on a potentially generative change in the making. In this way, Dewey's analysis resonates with Sedgwick's (1996, 2003) account of 'paranoid' modes of critical interpretation. Not only is exposing 'the bad', or producing greater knowledge about it, insufficient to produce meaningful change, Sedgwick argues, but, actually, repeated acts of highlighting 'the bad', and mimetically tracing its contours, often work precisely to *reproduce* its force. Additionally, because many of the mechanisms that enable and perpetuate behavior operate below the level of consciousness - and indeed, most habitual gestures are powerful precisely because they have become automatic at an unconscious level - methods of transformative intervention that appeal exclusively to cognitive reason or critical reflexivity often miss the mark.

While Dewey acknowledges the potential of affect to spark cognitive and embodied transformation, he is suspicious of the capacity for such change to be anything other than transitory. As he argues, 'impulse burns itself up. Emotion cannot be kept at its full tide' ([1922]2012: 101). Ravaillon similarly addresses this tendency for affect to weaken over time in his discussion of the 'double law' of habit: 'Prolonged or repeated *sensation* diminishes gradually and eventually fades away', whereas 'prolonged or repeated *movement* becomes easier, quicker and more assumed' (Carlisle and Sinclair, 2008: 849, italics mine). Although we might question the divide between 'feeling' and 'action' on which these thinkers rely^{xiii}, their observations nonetheless highlight the limits of models of 'progressive' social change premised exclusively on affective rupture or revolution. As Dewey argues,

Anyone with knowledge of the stability and force of habit will hesitate to propose or prophesy rapid and sweeping social changes. A social revolution may effect abrupt and deep alternations in external customs in legal and political institutions. But the habits that are behind these institutions and that have, willy-nilly, been shaped by objective

conditions, the habits of thought and feeling are not so easily modified ([1922]2012: 44).

Thus, similar to strategies of social reform premised on moral instruction, those which over-invest in the force of affect often do not pay enough attention to the embodied and environmental conditions necessary for change to be incorporated as a productive capacity that might drive *more enduring* forms of transformation.

How, then, can and does 'progressive' social change actually happen? What is required, Dewey argues, is a mode of critical intervention that addresses thought *and* embodied action, the conscious *and* the non-or-less than conscious, the individual *and* environmental conditions at once – that is, transformation at the level of habit. Importantly, however, such modes of intervention cannot rely on the possibility of precise calculation; that is, on predictive modes of behavior modification that fixate on already known end-points. So, concerning the example of posture, Dewey contends,

We must stop even thinking of standing up straight. To think of it is fatal, for it commits us to the operation of an established habit of standing wrong. We must find an act within our power which is disconnected from any thought about standing. We must start to do another thing which on one side inhibits our falling into the customary bad position and on the other side is the beginning of a series of acts which may lead to the correct posture ([1922]2012: 18).

Thus, linking back to Sedgwick, we could say that in Dewey's understanding of social transformation premised on habit modification, meaningful change cannot depend on 'paranoid' modes of knowing and prediction or on a linear model of progress. Indeed, for Dewey, you can only concentrate on the next possible step ahead, rather than fixing on a known end point in advance.

But might Dewey's approach nonetheless be interpreted as teleological given that it requires some guiding idea of a desired result (i.e. 'standing up straight')? What seems important here is that, for Dewey, the 'desired result' can only ever be barely glimpsed; it never emerges in clear relief and cannot remain constant. An imagined progressive result or outcome may energise or re-direct a process (or set of processes) of material transformation, but with each new embodied intervention or modification at the level of habit this imagined outcome itself is re-configured. In Dewey's words, 'A mariner does not sail towards the stars, but by noting the stars he is aided in conducting his present activity of sailing ... activity will not cease when the port is attained, but merely the *present direction* of activity' ([1922]2012: 89, italics mine). From this perspective, *ends* must not be understood as *endpoints* at all; rather an end is a 'series of acts viewed at a remote stage' (17). If we wish to approach social reform at the level of habit, Dewey argues, we require 'intelligent inquiry to discover the means which will produce a desired result, and an intelligent invention to procure the means' (15). Importantly, however, 'intelligence', can only ever be *speculative* of tendencies, rather than *predictive* of future outcomes, because 'the present, not the future, is ours' (82).

Therefore, in Dewey's understanding of the links between habit and social transformation, the present is not repeatedly deferred to a better imagined future; rather, the present is active, brimming with change - and yet impossible to fix or isolate from other temporalities. As he puts it:

'Present' activity is not a sharp narrow knife-blade in time. The present is complex, containing within itself a multitude of habits and impulses. It is enduring, a course of action, a process including memory, observation and foresight, a pressure forward, a glance backward and a look outward. (110)

Thus, unlike the narratives of affective revolution via empathy, change is not imagined as ignited by (or contained within) one powerful spark of recognition; rather, it is conceived as immanent and ongoing. Moreover, critical work on

habit disrupts any recourse to linear narratives of time because habit itself, as an embodied technology, folds together past, present and future. As such, socio-political engagement with habit does not seek a definitive break with the past (if such a feat were possible); rather, it draws on and reanimates the past 'so that its latent possibilities can be realized and acted upon' in the present (Weiss, 2008: 6).^{xiv} In these ways, Dewey's approach resonates with analyses of affect influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze, as well as particular approaches to affect in postcolonial, queer and feminist theory, which conceptualize change as happening from moment to moment, as the past is re-animated in the present; thus similarly disrupting linear accounts of time and progress. The difference, perhaps, is that when greater attention is paid to habit alongside affect (or to their imbrication), we can gain greater purchase on the material processes and mechanisms through which affective potentials are transformed into embodied and infrastructural tendencies (or not). Affect, arguably, cannot participate in enduring processes of materialisation without some degree of habituation or automation that emerges through the co-constitution of bodies and environments.

In this vein, if change is conceived as immanent in Dewey's framework, this is the case not only because human bodies and subjectivities are continually transforming as their habits modify and multiply, but also because habits themselves are formed through the ongoing constitutive interaction of subjects, objects, infrastructures and environments. While habits work by *adapting to a given environment* (and taking aspects of it in), Dewey suggests, they also function to *affect and reconfigure* environments – and because 'environment' is always multiple, embodied habitus too 'is plural' ([1922]2012:24).^{xv} From this perspective, individual habits are not discrete or fully separable from social, institutional or environmental habits; rather, they are always intimately intertwined. As Rebecca Coleman puts it, habit 'involves *matter*'; that is, 'a constitutive set of relations between bodies and environments' (2014: 87, original italics). As such, social change cannot be thought of as a project of changing the subject; instead, it needs to be approached as a process of adjusting 'mind-body-environmental assemblages' (Bennett et al 2013: 12). Moreover,

‘the subject’, while implicated in and constituted through such assemblages, can never be understood as a self-possessed, individual agent because, as Dewey puts it, ‘there is no ready-made self behind activities’ ([1922]2012: 16).^{xvi} While these points certainly make grappling with the possibilities of socio-political transformation via habit a complex endeavor, they also indicate how Dewey’s approach differs from dominant neoliberal governmentalities of habit, which depend on instituting self-discipline and responsibility at the level of the individual without attention to (or indeed precisely as a means to avoid addressing) structural conditions and frameworks. Furthermore, it is clear that, while affect might spark psychic or embodied disruption that plants the seeds for embodied and psychic change, the larger focus of transformative projects needs be on adjusting more expansive material assemblages - assemblages that we are imbricated in but can never master.

These mediations on habit, stasis and change lead Dewey to formulate a suggestive understanding of social progress. Progress, he argues, ‘means increase of present meaning, which involves multiplication of sensed distinctions as well as harmony, unification’ (110). Indeed, if history shows progress at all, Dewey suggests, it is to be identified in ‘this complication and extension of significance found within experience’ - and this enhancement of experience comes with our ability (in conjunction with existing infrastructures and environmental conditions) to generate ‘intelligent’ habits that coordinate and expand our productive capacities in the world (110). Clearly, this is quite a different understanding of progress than that which animates many contemporary projects of social justice. Unlike liberal narratives of empathy, which often implicitly pose an endpoint at which socio-political conflicts have been resolved and grievances adjudicated, Dewey’s vision of progress is one that ‘brings no surcease, no immunity from perplexity and trouble’ (110-11). It does not, then, imagine progress as tethered to an ideal (faraway) future, nor does it assume conflict can (or should) be banished from the workings of embodied subjectivity or socio-political life. Moreover, for Dewey, ethical imperatives or political goods cannot be known *in advance of* social relations in any clear or calculated way. In other words, while engaged in speculative modes of

‘foreseeing’ the near future, Dewey’s approach is nonetheless fundamentally open to the *unanticipated*, and hence, to change.^{xvii} It appreciates how habits, as Grosz puts it, ‘provide the ability to change one’s tendencies, to reorient one’s actions and to address the new, to be able to experience the unexpected’ (2008: 221). As such, this understanding of progress is less future-oriented than it is attuned to *inhabiting the present* in all its ambivalence and complexity.

In these ways, we might say that Dewey’s approach resounds with what Sedgwick called ‘reparative’ modes of interpretation. While Sedgwick was certainly critical of paranoia in social and cultural analysis, it is important to point out that her argument was *not* that we should (or could) do away with paranoid modes of interpretation. Rather, she was concerned to highlight how, when ‘understood to be a mandatory injunction’, this particular style of critical analysis *habitually* marginalises other ways of doing critical theory – especially recourse to reparative analysis (2003: 130). Scholars have interpreted Sedgwick’s call for reparative reading practices in a variety of different ways – most commonly perhaps as an imperative to approach our research objects with an affective orientation of nurturance, love and a desire to provide sustenance, rather than paranoia and suspicion. Yet I find most compelling and productive those readings that figure reparation as an interpretive practice concerned with *inhabiting* ambivalence (Wiegman, 2014; Stacey, 2014) - or, in Sedgwick’s words, with accepting ‘the simple, foundational, authentically very difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level’ (2011: 136). As an affective and analytical practice, *inhabiting* ambivalence requires relinquishing certainty and the possibility of calculated predication, and thus being open to the possibility of surprise and change.^{xviii} Importantly, from Sedgwick’s perspective, it is precisely in learning how to *inhabit* (rather than transcend) ambivalence, conflict and complexity that we might move from simply diagnosing ‘bad habits’ to the difficult and productive work of creating new tendencies – ones that might take us to a different (and more affirmative) intellectual and socio-political place.

The politics of habit

Of course, my discussion of Dewey, Ravaisson and Sedgwick - and the opening out to habit their work suggests - leaves many important questions unanswered: If the socio-political imperative is to develop *new* habits, what should these habits be? Who should decide? How can they be implemented? What would a mass project of habit modification look like? Would it even be desirable? How could such efforts both involve and exceed 'the subject'? And how might complex mind-body-environmental assemblages be identified and adjusted?

In many senses, these are difficult and potentially dangerous questions with which to engage. As acknowledged earlier, governing through habit has long been tethered to oppressive aims.^{xix} If we are looking for examples of mass projects of habit modification, Lisa Blackman suggests, Nazi Germany provides a chilling example. Popular susceptibility to, and investment in, the fascism of the National Socialist party, she argues, was produced in part through the orchestration of rhythm, habit and the 'hypnotizing use of repetition' calculated 'to facilitate processes of suggestion and imitation' (2013: 202). Moving to the contemporary realm, we might also consider how states and corporations work to adjust our rhythms and habits in the interests of global capitalism - speeding up or slowing down the pace of work and leisure (Freeman, 2010), and 'privileging good habits (saving, wise investment, healthy lifestyles) and punishing bad ones (the criminalization of drug addiction, the medicalization of many other types of addiction)' to suit the varying needs of the economy (Grosz, 2013:233-4). The productive capacities of habit to contribute to 'progressive' social transformation are not easily severed from these troubling practices of discipline, control and violence.

My argument, however, is that, while habit's troubling legacies should be foregrounded - not least because of their workings in the present - they are not deterministic or foreclosing of habit's potential. As Sara Ahmed argues, embodied and affective capacities that 'depend upon a preexisting openness to others; a capacity to be affected and directed by an encounter' are always

amenable to instrumentalisation for oppressive or exclusionary aims. However, 'we need not let the reduction of capacity be our reduction. Capacities might exceed the ends to which they have been directed' (2014: 48-49). Indeed, the most powerful bodily and sensorial techniques and practices are equally available to different political ideologies. The fact that technologies of habit have been employed in the interests of oppressive ideologies does mean that they can only be; in fact, the political Left might rather see this as evidence for the political urgency of re-appropriating the material force of habit and habituation.

Yet even if habit need not be associated exclusively with projects of colonialism, fascism or global capitalism, the question remains of what kind of *distinctions* between people or groups a focus on habit may (re)produce. While Dewey suggests that social transformation requires the work of adjusting mind-body-environment assemblages (rather than targeting individual subjects), he also argues that habit modification requires 'order, discipline and manifest technique' ([1922]2012: 10). The challenge of moral judgment, he contends, is 'one of discriminating the complex of acts and habits into tendencies which are to be specifically cultivated and condemned' (23) – a task best guided by 'intelligent' observation and speculation. From Bennett's perspective, Dewey's work thus risks shoring up 'a distinction within the body politic between those who combine thought and habit and are therefore able to reflexively monitor their own conduct and those who, subject entirely to the regimes of habit, are to be governed through mechanisms which reinforce its rigors of unreflexive repetition' (2013: 108). How, we must ask, is the capacity for embodied 'intelligence' likely to be judged as unevenly distributed and what social and geo-political hierarchies and exclusions might follow?

Much of what Dewey has to say in *Human Nature and Conduct*, however, suggests that a key objective of democratic governance should be to cultivate conditions whereby 'intelligence' (an embodied appreciation of the significance of one's present actions and an openness to change) might become a capacity available to all. 'In theory', he argues, 'democracy should be a means of stimulating *original thought*, and of evoking action deliberately adjusted in advance to cope with new

forces' (*italics mine*, [1922]2012: 29). Furthermore, in its attention to how 'conduct is always shared', Dewey's analysis opens up consideration of how habits link embodied subjects together in ways that might support the development of progressive movements and solidarities (11). Such connections are not necessarily (or only) about synchronicity or being together in rhythm – which can function to exclude those who are deemed 'out of time' (Ahmed, 2014); they are more about the imbrication and 'cooperation' of bodies with other bodies, as well as objects, infrastructures and environments (Dewey, [1922]2012). From this perspective, the potential exists for 'intelligent' engagement with habit to furnish more affirmative individual and collective practices, wherein 'progress' is defined not as neoliberal disciplining of self-conduct in line with normative politico-economic imperatives, but rather, as an ongoing process of adding 'fullness and distinctness' of 'meaning' to embodied experience (110). How this potential might be actualised in current socio-political and economic conditions, however, is precisely the challenge with which we must grapple.

Questions may also be asked regarding the kind of 'progress' a focus on habit affirms and enables. As discussed, Dewey (similar to Ravaison, Deleuze, Grosz and others) offers a non-teleological vision of progress focused on the ongoing enhancement of embodied significance and cooperative bodily-environmental functioning, rather than achievement of already known endpoints. The nature of progressive ethical or political conduct cannot, from this perspective, be fully known in advance. Yet, with respect to the workings of social injustice, are there not, by now, some things we can quite clearly know in advance? Can we not say confidently, for instance, that fewer men subjecting their female partners to domestic violence in the UK, or that fewer African Americans being killed by the police in the US, or that fewer people subjecting to grinding poverty and infectious diseases transnationally would constitute 'progress'? Indeed, in its rejection of 'known' political truths or ethical principles, does this critical work on the transformative potential of habit risk an erasure of history, a forgetting of destructive cultural, socio-political and economic patterns we have seen repeat again and again? Does not the relentless reproduction of gendered abuse,

institutional racism and global economic inequality make a so-called ‘paranoid’ approach to social and cultural theory and praxis all the more vital? And is it not crucial that we keep exposing - and militantly fighting against - these kinds of injustices in a context in which those in positions of power (states, corporations, right-wing media etc.) mobilise immense influence and resources precisely to (re)produce, hide or misrepresent them?

In response to these kinds of concerns, it is essential to underscore that any potentially affirmative use of habit in approaching the contemporary possibilities of social transformation cannot participate in a politics of historical erasure. A critical politics of habit must also be able to grapple meaningfully with the embodied and socio-political specificities of gendered, sexualised, racialised, classed and geopolitical inequality and exclusion - points which highlight the necessity of reading Dewey, Ravaisson and other scholars of habit alongside (and through) critical feminist, queer and decolonial analysis. In principle, however, given that the ‘nature of habit is to be assertive, insistent and self-perpetuating’ (Dewey, [1922]2012: 26), attending to the logics of habit should make us *more*, rather than less, attentive to the workings of systemic and endemic abuses of power.^{xx} Importantly, Dewey’s critique of calculative prediction as a method of charting social change is not a disavowal of the salience of knowledge gleaned from past observation and experience – indeed, his advocacy of intelligent ‘forseeing’ in the adjustment of habits is premised precisely on careful analysis of the outcomes and implications of previous (re)actions. What is vital, however, is that efforts to ‘forsee’ are flexible and speculative, rather than rigid and calculative, so that they can account for ‘the role of accident’ and remain open to the unexpected (23). As Sedgwick (1996, 2003) argues, when we are too confident about what we already know, and therefore about what is necessary to ameliorate suffering and produce ‘positive’ transformation, we risk becoming blind to *change itself* when it is actually happening. We *do* need paranoia, Sedgwick suggests, but it should not be our only analytical mode-mood, and when we mobilise ‘paranoid’ forms of interpretation, we might gain from making them more adaptable and intuitive.

As a means to negotiate the possibilities of affirmative social change, a politics of habit resonates in important ways with a critical pragmatist approach that addresses mind-body-environmental assemblages through provisional socio-political goals pursued on multiple interconnected fronts. That is, a politics committed to, as William Connolly puts it, 'the need for multiform activism' that 'folds an ethos of cultivation into political practices set on several interceded scales: local, familiar, workplace, state, theological, corporate, global and planetary' (2013: 6). Given the unconscious nature of most forms of individual-collective habituation, emphasis may be best placed on 'indirect' techniques that address the 'political, social, physical, economic, psychological, aesthetic and other' environments that 'feed' habits (Sullivan, 2005: 9; see also Dewey, [1922]2012: 13). Yet, as environments and embodied subjects are co-constituted through habit, there is also need for experimental 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) that, through collective elaboration, might play a role in cultivating different politico-ethical habits, sensibilities and forms of attunement (Connolly, 2002, 2013; Spivak, 2012). Engaging politically with the repression and ambivalence central to our most pervasive (and often invisible) embodied habits requires a pragmatism informed by critical psychosocial theories and practices (Young, 1990; Sedgwick, 2003; Sullivan, 2005). At the same time, approaching human subjects as contingent components of mind-body-environmental assemblages calls for material techniques that appreciate the imbrication of embodied beings with diverse geographies, architectures and infrastructures, including economic and digital ones (Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2013, 2015; Amoore, 2013). In other words, engaging politically through habit demands an open-ended, interdisciplinary, materialist approach.

As a politics oriented towards the present, pragmatism is wary of over-investment in models of revolutionary change that promise to overthrow the entire system, not least because, in a complex and shifting transnational world, there is no arguably no singular or self-sustaining 'system' to overthrow. As Connolly argues, contemporary economic and socio-political structures and relations are 'replete with too many loose ends, uneven edges, dicey intersections with nonhuman forces, and uncertain trajectories to make such a

wholesale project plausible' (2013: 42). Instead, the focus is on a 'set of interim possibilities', pursued simultaneously in several interconnected arenas, which 'combine an experimental temper with the appreciation that living and acting into the future inevitably contain a shifting quotient of certainty' (42, 37). A politics of habit, then, seeks transformation on the urgent issues of the day, but also aims to sense and adapt to change as it happens. Moving beyond the exposure or disruption of damaging or stultifying individual and collective habits, it focuses on cultivating the productive capacity of habituation to support processes of becoming 'otherwise'.

Yet if the pragmatist thrust of a politics of habit reorients our investment in the promise of revolutionary change, where does this leave radical and utopian thinking? Do we not require radical praxis to move *beyond* the status quo and towards genuine socio-political democracy, freedom and affirmation of difference? These are crucial questions, especially given longstanding critiques of Dewey's approach – and pragmatism more generally – which accuse him of prescribing 'liberal reform' (rather than radical change) that deliberately avoids direct critique of ideological assumptions and structural relations of power (Paringer, 1990; Sullivan, 2005). Similar to Ravaisson, Dewey's work is not available for contemporary critical use without political 'baggage' and risk. However, as this paper has begun to illustrate, we are now seeing a radical re-interpretation of pragmatist thought – one that's affinities lie not with political liberalism but rather with a renewed critical empiricism that grapples with the possibilities of meaningful political and ethical intervention in a world composed of new and changing configurations of social life, materiality, temporality and agency.^{xxi} In the aftermath of post-structuralism, varied re-engagements with pragmatism are mining the work of Dewey, James and others for the tools they offer for developing modes of socio-political analysis and ethical-material practice that work beyond the tropes of evidence and exposure. While a politics of habit must not (and cannot) disengage from the ideological and the structural, the fact that Dewey's work is not *reducible* to 'ideology critique' is part of what makes it amenable to reinterpretation that approaches social thought and political praxis otherwise to (or in excess of) the hermeneutics of suspicion. This

does not mean, of course, that we should endorse Dewey or his style of pragmatism wholesale; rather, the emphasis here is on critical (pragmatic?) reinterpretation appropriate for the contemporary socio-political, cultural and economic conjuncture.

From my perspective, a critical focus on habit need not invalidate the importance of radical thought or revolutionary politics. As Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) argues, it is the unbounded imagination and audacious hope of radical thought that enables those who are marginalised to envision a life far beyond their present conditions, to recognise powerfully that things could be otherwise. What a politics of habit can usefully do, however, is compel us to ‘suture to eventual and the endemic’ (Dewsbury and Bissell, 2015: 23) – to appreciate how affective and political breaks or surges are (sometimes fleeting and sometimes much more significant) *moments* in ongoing and uneven processes of material collaboration, struggle and experimentation. As Dewey’s work suggests, revolutionary action is necessary and vital in particular circumstances, and can lead to lasting change. The point, however, is that when revolutions are ‘successful’, it is because ‘appropriate habits of thought have previously been insensibly matured’ ([1922]2012: 44). In these circumstances, ‘the external change merely registers the removal of an external superficial barrier to the operation of existing intellectual tendencies’ (42). This is why the most significant and influential modern social movements – from the American civil rights movement to transnational feminism - have engaged in hybrid forms of political engagement, combining the ‘shock to thought’ of revolutionary action with the longer term cultivation of new habits, rhythms and forms of embodied coordination.^{xxii}

Imagination, affect and habit can thus be vital collaborators in the workings of social transformation. For Dewey, like James and Ravaisson, affect plays a vital role in alerting us to the disruption of usually smooth-running habits, and hence, to the workings of change. It signals the emergence of ‘gaps, intervals and blips’ in habitual practice, which function as ‘actionable spaces’; that is, junctures ‘affording the opportunity for new forms of practice to be improvised’ (Bennett, 2013: 126, 125; see also Bennett, 2015; Shilling, 2008). While the force of affect

alone may not be sufficient to engender enduring forms of social transformation, it can help establish new embodied capacities and material assemblages, including those premised on empathic imagination and attunement between bodies (Bennett, 2006; Author, 2014a). Moreover, theories of affect influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze overlap with Dewey's speculative approach to habit modification: In different ways, they explore the productive potential of suspending established 'solutions' and ways of knowing to develop alternative modes of approaching social and ethical problems – perhaps reconfiguring 'the problem' in the process. We might also consider the salient affective qualities of habits deemed potentially conducive to affirmative forms of socio-political relationality and cohabitation – from Dewey's habits of 'amicable cooperation' ([1939]1976), to Paul Gilroy's dynamics of multicultural 'conviviality' (2004), to Judith Butler's ethics of 'unwilled cohabitation' (2012).^{xxiii} What all of this suggests is that, in making sense of the complex dynamics and possibilities of social stasis and transformation today, we need to think mind and body; affect and habit; paranoia and reparation; the revolutionary and the pragmatic; the eventual and the endemic together. We need to do so, moreover, in ways which understand the imbrication of cognitive, affective and physiological processes with political and environmental conditions and infrastructures in temporalities that scramble past, present and future

Conclusions

This article has explored how bringing critical analysis of habit together with contemporary writing on affect and emotion might offer a richer framework for grappling with the material logics, challenges and potentials of social and political change today. Turning to habit is productive because it attunes us simultaneously to the powerful automated processes and mechanisms underlying the tendency for patterns of oppression and inequality to persist *and* the necessary, yet counterintuitive, role of automation and habituation in enabling more enduring forms of socio-political transformation. Thinking habit, affect, embodiment, environment and infrastructure *relationally* through the work of Dewey, Ravaisson, Sedgwick and others, my analysis has suggested,

opens out to forms of social and cultural theory and praxis that see change as working through mind-body-environmental assemblages and understand 'progress' as an experiential possibility in the present (rather than an ideal of the faraway future). This focus on inhabiting the present is important, I have argued, because of the ways in which it can enhance our attunement to socio-political complexity and ambivalence and the experiential qualities of 'progress' and 'regress', while better enabling us to sense change as it happens. Embodied attentiveness to the activity of the present, moreover, is what orients us towards the collective, reparative work of creating new, potentially affirmative, tendencies, rather than merely diagnosing 'bad habits'. As a project of social justice, this involves political work and material practice that sutures the revolutionary and the routine and appreciates the co-constitution of imagination, affect and habit.

Endnotes

ⁱ See Sedgwick, 1996, 2003; 2011; Latour, 2002; Felski, 2015.

ⁱⁱ See Sullivan, 2006; Malabou, 2008; Shilling, 2008; Weiss, 2008; Bennett et al, 2013, Grosz, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Wiegman, 2014; Stacey, 2014; Author, 2014b; Felski, 2015.

^{iv} See Author, 2012a, 2013, 2014a.

^v See Bennett et al., eds. 2013; Sparrow and Hutchinson eds. 2013; Carlisle, 2014; Dewsbury and Bissell, eds. 2015.

^{vi} See also Bennett, 2013, 2015.

^{vii} See Thaler and Sunstein, 2008.

^{viii} Although, as Natasha Dow Schüll, notes, the 'nudge' approach does not quite fit the standard neoliberal model of individual responsabilization: it 'assumes a choosing subject, but one who is constitutionally ill equipped to make rational, healthy choices'. As such, nudge 'both presupposed and pushes against freedom' and 'falls somewhere between enterprise and submission, responsibility and discipline' (2016: 12).

^{ix} For Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition* ([1968]2011) - a key text for the renewed interest in habit in critical theory and continental philosophy - the fundamental intertwining of repetition with singularity and the production of difference means that 'habit never gives rise to true repetition: sometimes the action changes and is perfected while the intention remains constant; sometimes the action remains the same in different contexts and with different intentions' (5).

^x Ravaisson was writing at a time when late nineteenth century physical psychology and neuropsychology began to interpret habits 'as a purely physio-anatomical set of instinctual reflexes' in ways that 'trespassed on questions of the will, consciousness and freedom that had earlier been the exclusive terrains of theology and philosophy'. In this context, he offered a reading of habit that enabled earlier theological and philosophical notions to align with, without fully capitulating to, the emerging physical sciences (Bennett, 2015: 6).

^{xi} As Clare Carlisle argues, this interpretation of habit 'accommodates the idea that human beings can possess a divine gift when it is given to them, and are even able to cultivate it through their

own actions.’ However, understanding habit in this way also ‘avoids the implication that it is entirely up to individuals to actualize the divinely infused *habitus*, since this has its own momentum. This means that someone who receives grace can consider it her own, while remaining aware that it is God’s power that moves through her when she is inclined to do good’ (2014: 120-1, original italics).

^{xii} See also Shilling, 2008; Weiss, 2008; Coleman, 2014.

^{xiii} As theorised by Spinoza and Deleuze, in particular, affect is inextricably linked to movement. Yet, as Carlisle discusses, this point was actually partially addressed in much earlier philosophical discussions of habit. Writing before Ravaisson, in his 1736 book, *The Analogy of Religion*, Joseph Butler was the first to note that ‘repetition has contrasting effects on actions and movements on the one hand, and sensations and feeling on the other’. Yet, he acknowledges that ‘since actions are often prompted or motivated by feelings and sensations the active and the passive aspects of habit combine to produce a more complicated effect’ (Carlisle, 2014: 27). Moreover, in particular circumstances, feeling or sensing can be ‘turned into an activity’, which can ‘engender a heightening of experience rather than a diminution of feeling’ (82). As such, the ‘law of habit’ is more complex than it appears at first glance.

^{xiv} See also Grosz, 2013; Carlisle, 2014.

^{xv} See also Shilling, 2008; Grosz, 2013; Coleman, 2014.

^{xvi} In these ways, Dewey’s framework resonates with other prominent strands of contemporary social and cultural theory, such as Judith Butler’s analysis of gender and sexuality, that conceptualise embodiment and subjectivity as performatively constituted, as well as those that understand social relations and phenomena as working through pulsating networks or assemblages, from Henri Lefevre’s analysis of everyday life and the social production of the city, to Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, to various ‘new’ materialisms.

^{xvii} Dewey’s approach here again overlaps with theories of affect influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze.

^{xviii} See Author, 2014b.

^{xix} See Bennett, 2013, 2015; Bennett et al, 2013; Blackman, 2013.

^{xx} See Sullivan 2005, 2015; Weiss, 2008.

^{xxi} See, for example, Connolly, 2002, 2013; Sullivan, 2005; 2015; Shilling, 2008; Bennett, 2013; Bennett et al, 2013; Noble, 2013.

^{xxii} See Young, 1990; Kelley, 2002; Freeman, 2010; Duhigg, 2012.

^{xxiii} See Noble, 2013.

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