

# Stephen Tumino



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# The Pedagogy of Affect

Every year the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), which gives (or denies) legitimacy to ideas and practices in the teaching of the humanities in the United States (which is then followed in most other institutions abroad), publishes a book titled *Profession*. *Profession* 2008 is no exception: it is a collection of essays that, in the name of debating various modes of teaching, produces what is in effect a coerced consensus — a consensus that, for example, inhibits critique and contestations of ideas (Rita Felski, Gerald Graff, Peter Brooks), limits experimental modes of knowledge ('Stopping Cultural Studies'), and offers empty talk about humanities and human rights without ever offering a critique that would make it clear that 'human rights' are essentially rights to own and trade in the 'free' market.¹

Instead of offering a survey of Profession 2008, I will focus on the structure which shapes the different discourses and that explains what is behind the consensus — what I will call the pedagogy of affect. The pedagogy of affect represents itself as an open space attuned to difference, positioned as a retreat from which to pragmatically assess what does and does not work in the university so as to manage the contradictions that have arisen therein from the conflict between capital and labor. It represents itself above all, therefore, as a place where these conflicts can be considered 'reasonably', with all its associations of nonpartisan neutrality, and relegates to an 'ideological' past the university as site of commitment to theory for social transformation. Profession 2008 is telling in the way its contributors all replace sharp conceptualization of the issues with an affective rhetoric that turns the university away from critique for social change into a therapeutic retreat in which to display their class privilege. In affective pedagogy the opposition of concepts to feelings I am invoking here is thought to be an oppressive holdover from the past

<sup>1</sup> Profession 2008, Modern Language Association of America, 1 December.

that is inherently unstable and prone to slippage, so I need to explain why feelings are really anticonceptual concepts designed to rewrite theory as therapy and reconcile student-citizens to going along with the status quo.

To clarify, by 'explain' I do not propose to 'define' the affective, as any such definition would simply repeat the common sense that subjective experience is self-evidently meaningful by separating it from the social relations which are the cause of our experience. What is considered meaningful is always made sense of by taking sides in the daily struggles that form over the appropriation of material resources. What I do propose to do in the remainder of this text, however, is to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the intellectual conflicts over the affective so as to explain how affect is used to structure the dominant representation of pedagogy in *Profession 2008* and turn what should be an education in conceptual awareness of social relations into ideological training for what is good for big business.

### The Materialist Unconscious

Currently, the humanities are undergoing what is called an 'affective turn' away from the discourse of theory and what are considered its uncomfortable and alienating languages, and back to the familiar languages of the experiential and emotional as the basis of commonality above and beyond social inequality (class).<sup>2</sup> The dominant understanding of affect now is an immanent one that traces itself through the writings of Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. In this genealogy, the body is made into an opacity that disrupts the dialectic of labor and subverts conceptual abstraction, and it has therefore come under critique as 'matterist' rather than 'materialist'.<sup>3</sup>

In the affective pedagogy dominant today, all concepts are made into modalities of the body, as the arch-conservative Nietzsche taught, and the body is turned into a zone of excess that spontaneously resists all conceptualization. Concepts, in this frame, are elitist constructs imposed

<sup>2</sup> The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social, ed. by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Teresa L. Ebert, Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

from above that aim to produce 'docile bodies'.<sup>4</sup> Although they cannot finally be done away with they can be made into moments of play, which, as Stanley Fish says, is the apolitical zone of getting things done, as a true academic professional must.<sup>5</sup>

Body matterism is opposed by a materialist understanding of the body, the senses, and the affective that is activated in the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Kollontai, to name a few, where the body is understood as a site of ideology and theorized in class terms. For Marx, for example, 'the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'. On these terms, 'the senses have [...] become directly in their practice theoreticians' as they 'relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective human relation'. In other words, for Marx, the affective, although experienced spontaneously, cannot be understood on its own terms as it is always made in the labor relations that shape both the object and the subject of knowing. In materialist theory the critique of the affective produces the class-consciousness that 'enjoyment and labor, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals'.8

In the pedagogy of affect, there are no antagonistic concepts that implicate our thoughts and feelings in the structure of social inequality, but merely more or less affective bodies more or less opportunistically placed for their voices to be heard. What the pedagogy of affect represents is a model of the good society as an empty plurality in which all are entitled to participate, unless they exclude themselves by advancing the struggles for fundamental change. Theory for social change is marked as 'totalitarian' and 'terroristic', and thus made into the other of the compassionate and caring society where differences are accepted and nothing need change. In the pedagogy of affect, it is the intensity of feelings more than providing critique of the system

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Fish, Save the World On Your Own Time (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 3, pp. 229–346 (p. 302).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The German Ideology', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 5, p. 59.

of wage labor and capital that is central to the social. In the affective pedagogy, critique is made to exemplify an uncomfortable and ugly militancy that is relegated to the bad old days of the university that stood for knowing what is to be done to change society (abolish classes).

To make my discussion about the pedagogy of affect more concrete, I will surface its effects in what is a canonical text of the new humanities: *The Political Unconscious* by Frederic Jameson. Jameson's text, of which an issue of the journal *PMLA* has recently been devoted to discussing, provides such an occasion because, while it defends a materialist theory of affect as ideology that normalizes inequality, it proposes using the affective as an ethical response to inequality. The effect of such a move is to underwrite the common sense of consumer culture that makes the affective a therapeutic zone for the subject in which to feel at home within exploitation rather than activate the conceptual against the hegemonic culture industry and its pedagogy of affect.

Central to The Political Unconscious is Marx's concept of 'commodity fetishism', which Jameson understands primarily through Lukács' theory of 'reification', the material process of production whereby social relations are depersonalized and seen as relations between things due to the dominance of exchange value (production for profit). Following Marx, Jameson argues that any conception of the autonomy of culture from the economic is 'a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life' due to the 'universal commodification of labor power'. 10 On these terms, Jameson's materialist theory is in a position to implicate the affective as the commodification of the senses necessitated by private property, in a manner similar to the way he reads Conrad's 'impressionistic' style, for example, which attempts 'to rewrite in terms of [...] sense perception [...] a reality you prefer not to conceptualize'.11 Jameson's use of commodity fetishism as a theory of affect would seem to show that, far from being a site of resistance to capital, affections, sensations, and feelings are an extension of exploitative relations: the site of ideology. This is significant because he

<sup>9</sup> PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 137.3, May (2022).

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

thus establishes the need to read culture and cultural experience (senses, feelings, passion) not in its own terms but in relation to its outside — namely, the class relations that both necessitate such experiences and provide 'ready-made' interpretations that justify social inequality. He shows, in short, that the senses, affects, experience, passion, and so on are not explainable on their own terms (since they are produced under certain circumstances), but require explanation (concepts).

Jameson, however, both in his early and later work, seems to simultaneously undermine this very conclusion in ultimately arguing against the ability to conceptualize economic relations and in suggesting that culture (contrary to what he has already critiqued) should be seen as not only 'semi-autonomous' from class relations but as an (immediate) site of libidinal 'resistance' to class inequality. For instance, he ultimately rejects a materialist theory of ideology which argues that 'superstructural phenomena, are mere reflexes, epiphenomenal projections of infrastructural realities', on the grounds that 'history [...] is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization'. 12 There is, in other words, finally no outside to ideology, according to Jameson, and the concept of ideology becomes synonymous with discourse in his writings. By getting rid of the outside, Jameson duplicates the dominant ideology, which reifies the cultural from the class relations in which it is produced. On the discursivist terms Jameson invokes, it is impossible to give a critique of ideology as a false-consciousness of the economic and produce an awareness of the necessity for social change, which is what Marx's labor theory of value does. Because Jameson abandons the critique of ideology, he speculates that, beyond the historical specification of ideology as global commodification that acts as a 'containment' of the awareness of the exploitation of labor in capitalism, culture also provides the individual with a therapeutic 'compensation' for a thoroughly commodified social life in the form of the 'libidinal transformation' of the senses:

The increasing abstraction of visual art thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 35, 42.

reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

In short, as 'compensation' for the 'loss' (theft) of the surplus labor time of the worker by the capitalist at the point of production, the worker receives emotional plenitude in the consumption of art during the time after work.

The increasing abstraction Jameson locates in visual art, which he maintains may act as an affective compensation for exploitation, is itself of course a modality of labor determined by the labor process as the 'secrets which are only disclosed to the eye of the physicist and chemist' — and, subsequently, the artist — is the product of 'industry and commerce' as 'even this 'pure' natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men'. 14 What this means is that if the development of the senses has reached the point where we perceive a world made up of things as if purely in terms of their natural properties like color and form, as in modern art, this is as much as to say that the senses have become commodified and are therefore only enjoyable at a price. Because the means to enjoyment must first be purchased in order to be consumed, it follows that 'enjoyment and labor, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals' and cannot act as compensation for exploitation.<sup>15</sup> The enjoyment of art, for instance, requires wages not only over and above the means of subsistence to purchase access to art, but also to purchase the education to enjoy it. To hold out a libidinal compensation in consumption and the pleasure of the senses is to conveniently forget that access to consumption and its pleasures is a class matter determined by one's place in production — a 'forgetting', moreover, which is precisely ideological in that it acts to block access to consumption on the part of the exploited (the workers) by normalizing the class privilege of the exploiters (the owners). They, of course, have no need to be compensated as they do not lose anything in the production of commodities, but only gain the surplus labor of others.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-37.

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels, 'German Ideology', p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

## The Hunt for the Red

Under the dominance of the 'affective turn' in the humanities, *Profession* 2008 turns being a professor from being an engaged intellectual committed to the struggle to end social inequality to being someone who just happens to have a job that allows them to profess feelings of what is right and advocate for the good, but that does not mandate them to conceptually establish a basis for achieving it in practice as doing so would assert a mastery of knowledge that violates the sovereignty of differences and marginalizes other voices. It is the dominance of affective pedagogy that explains the rhetorical differences of the contributors to *Profession* 2008 and makes it a model of the university for capital at a time of growing social inequality.

What the affective pedagogy does above all is to commodify the effects of class society as cultural differences the better to do away with those practices that have become a structural liability to the accumulation of profit. Take Peter Brooks' essay, 'The Humanities as an Export Commodity'.16 On the surface it appears to be an argument for the value of the new humanities as a model of democracy and an engaged citizenry, for whom 'reading is a cognitive exercise with real world consequences', that is interested in contesting how the US has entered the ranks of 'rogue nations' by its institutionalized practices of torture in places such as Abu Ghraib, Iraq, which he takes to be 'wholly incompatible with the morality of American democracy'. 17 Actually, however, Brooks' essay is a defense of the pedagogy of affect that has displaced theory with feelings on the grounds that theory went too far and violated the self-evident norms of common sense enshrined in the 'humanistic tradition' and the lessons of 'poetry' which are, pace Shelly, 'the unacknowledged legislators of humankind'.18 Brooks 'has the feeling that the humanities' big day is over', he says, because 'the body rejected the transplant'. 19 Behind these tropes of affect, with their assumption of a healthy organicism, is the cultural common sense which says that theory is 'ideological' and therefore 'dangerous' because

<sup>16</sup> Profession 2008, pp. 33-39.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 35, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

its commitment to 'the instrumental use of language' is 'violent' and 'subversive' of an 'ethical reading' of culture.20 An 'ethical reading', for Brooks, is one that does not hold out the 'facile' and 'mindless' politics of 'salvation' through 'critique', but the more 'responsible' one that gives to its practitioners 'a clear sense of what their work can and cannot do'. 21 In the pedagogy of affect, one is either in the camp of the 'modest' and 'wise', and possess an innate but unacknowledged sense of right and the good, or you are making a fool of yourself and not to be suffered gladly. How else to read Brooks' earnest desire that, without a trace of irony, wants to 'promote and enforce responsible reading' and 'cleanse' the university of 'ideological flotsam', and the way his rhetoric plays with the discourse of 'border crossing' and 'frontiers' as it seeks to put a halt to 'unmarked vans' with all its violence toward the other?<sup>22</sup> My point in marking such rhetoric is not simply to show how Brooks' 'responsible reading' is itself unethical and antidemocratic ('ideological') on its own terms, because of its instrumental use of poetics, for instance, to diagnose critique-al theory as a pathological contagion on the body politic that needs to be purged, but to explain why the affective is necessary to the university in a time of global capital.

To reproduce the conditions for accumulation, capital must violently displace any limit that stands to protect and promote the material needs of the working class as these come into conflict with the requirements and practices that will increase the production of surplus value from unpaid surplus-labor.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, capital is inherently unstable and crisis prone. On the one hand, it must commodify the needs of the workers by giving them a living wage with which to buy back what they have themselves produced, and, on the other, it must cheapen the value of labor power by increasing the amount of time that workers engage in unpaid surplus labor over the necessary labor time normally required to meet their needs on any given workday. Among other things, this accumulation process 'chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe', as *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* says, seeking out pools

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Working Day', Chapt. 10, Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, vol. I, Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 35, pp. 239–43.

of cheap labor to exploit with the most advanced productive techniques available.<sup>24</sup> The workers who resist the forces of commodification and fight back to defend their standards of living are marked as criminals and handed over to the state, which has its own ways of exploiting their labor. It is in this global class context that the institutionalization of torture by the United States needs to be seen, not as a moral abomination that tarnishes an otherwise fundamentally just and good society that enshrines human rights and stands for the best of humanity, as in Brooks' rhetoric.

Brooks' attack on theory as a dangerous ideology that violates common sense has also to be read in terms of its class politics. It represents a revanchist attack on the very reforms the university has undertaken since the institutionalization of theory in the 80s to manage the contradictions of global capital which has more and more come to rely on a high-tech and multicultural workforce.

Brooks' 'responsible reading', whose 'proponents speak with a clear sense of what their work can and cannot do', wants to put a halt to 'the free play of the signifier' by demarcating an 'arbitrary and phony [...] parody of a deconstructive reading' from a properly 'ethical' one that calls things 'by their name'. 25 Despite appearances to the contrary, there is in fact no contradiction in Brooks' speaking in the name of an authentic (nonparodic) deconstruction that violently asserts a clear sense of responsibility against which all else is marginalized as arbitrary and ridiculous because the rigors of theory are no longer needed in the corporate university. Theory is to be done away with because the value of deconstruction to create a flexible and compliant workforce that is sensitive to ambiguity and attached to difference with a mystical sense of belonging has already proved itself to capital and now the only theory left is the one that 'goes too far' by uncovering the relation of theory to class — red critique-al theory. The purging of theory in the pedagogy of affect is more than thinly disguised red-baiting; it represents the task of the boss to make production more efficient by cutting the costs that eat into profits. Brooks' defense of deconstruction as 'responsible

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (p. 487).

<sup>25</sup> Brooks, pp. 35, 37–39.

reading' is self-parodic and laughable. It is his defense of poetics as anti-instrumental reason that returns us to common sense that sells in the corporate university where one can only profess the interests of the ruling class, and because these interests are everywhere in crisis and obviously bankrupt and intellectually indefensible, one can only profess them emotionally in sentimental tones that are designed to reassure the public as to the humanity of the wages system.

*Profession* 2008, by showcasing the affective pedagogy and demonizing the need for sharp conceptual analysis, is saying that the university is not a place of critique for social change, but a feel-good retreat from class conflicts that violently asserts class supremacy.

It is in the space of affect and war on the concept that Graff, for instance, can claim that 'rhetorical proficiency is critical' to those without access to 'money and power' even though 'there's no disputing that money and power often get you access' to the governing institutions that command the social resources. <sup>26</sup> Either this is a feel-good palliative sentiment or it is the height of cynicism. Actually, it is both. On the one hand, Graff shows that he is a realist by acknowledging how the command of wealth distorts democratic institutions by making them into sound chambers for the already rich and powerful while, on the other hand, he represents himself as a caring person who is concerned about this sorry state of affairs and wants to do all that is reasonably possible to help. What is 'reasonable', of course, is to work within the dominant arrangements and not to challenge the ruling consensus, which is why Graff can write that change always comes from within the dominant: 'shared argumentative norms [...] are preconditions of change'.27 It is the function of the affective pedagogy to replicate the Graffs of the world and produce a layer of feeling managers with a hardnosed conscience who are capable of getting things done while being attuned to difference. This is the university whose mission is to produce 'well rounded' individuals whose 'clear and distinct' ideas are perfectly receptive to commands and whose 'heart' is in the right place to relay them seamlessly — the university of and for capital.

Even when someone like Kim Emery says in response to Graff that the university should be a place of 'radically democratic' 'critique'

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Graff, 'Reply', *Profession* 2008, pp. 259–62 (p. 260).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

that 'advances knowledge' beyond the 'current limitations' due to the influence of 'money and power', what is silently assumed is the pedagogy of affect that accommodates difference above and beyond class.<sup>28</sup> She does not need to explain, therefore, why a 'reductive' theory of culture that surfaces how 'culture everywhere and always trumps' the 'different needs, values and purposes' of 'deskilled and deregulated workers' 'support[s] and sustain[s] the status quo', because what is assumed is that class no longer matters.<sup>29</sup> Only cultural differences matter, differences which are, according to her, inherently 'queer' ('neither finite nor fixed') and not to be accommodated or regulated in any way regardless because, after all, isn't 'the secret that our future is unknown' anyway?30 The 'homogenizing' 'narrow-mindedness' of the 'elitist' university, she says, 'does make me feel queer', and the reader is supposed to take solace in that feeling as 'incoherence is a condition of possibility' of an 'open-ended' democratic society.31 The pedagogy of affect is indeed a 'radically democratic' space where there is no limit to imagining that the unmet needs of the producers can be explained away as providing a perfect opportunity to reinvent oneself as a more feeling person with deregulated desires who resists 'reductive' knowledge with its presumption that there is some 'predictability', or worse still, 'transparency', about whose needs are and are not being met and what is to de done about it.32

In the name of having 'radical' feelings that 'resist' coercive power, these theorists are doing some very reactionary things with theory. Brooks' sentiment that 'how to read poetry' is more 'crucially important [...] now' rather than 'political philosophy and economics' is mirrored by Rita Felski, who feels that a narrowly pragmatic focus on 'how we read' rather than 'why' is truly 'transformative', rather than the 'bigger picture' 'revolutionary' claims of 'theory'.<sup>33</sup> They are joined in these feelings by Emery who 'feels queer' will dismantle the 'homogenizing

<sup>28</sup> Kim Emery, 'Outcomes assessment and standardization: A queer critique', *Profession* 2008, pp. 255–59 (pp. 255, 257, 259).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 257–58.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 256, 258-59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>33</sup> Brooks, pp. 33–35; Rita Felski, 'From Literary Theory to Critical Method', *Profession* 2008, 108–16 (pp. 108–10).

standardization' of culture required by 'money and power'.<sup>34</sup> By activating 'feelings' as the zone of effectivity they are opposing theory, which is necessary to reveal the structure of inequality, as 'ideology', which is normatively equated with a 'bad' subjectivity. It seems that joining in the hunt for the red is the only way to have your voice heard in the university now.

<sup>34</sup> Emery, pp. 255, 258.