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Title: Affect and Critique: Negative Dialectics and Massumi's Politics of Affect

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ABSTRACT

Brian Massumi's concept of affect offers a model of change that relies on sensory-affective modes of resistance to neoliberal power relations. Influenced by Bergson's concepts of time and space, Massumi develops an account of perception as the capacity to entrain with ontological, affective flows of becoming before they are captured and reduced to quantifiable forms. This requires a radical reconfiguration of the body as a zone of indetermination between the virtual field of unformed potentialities and the realm of determined existence. I argue that affect theory cannot fulfill its promise to open new political possibilities without the negativity of critique that Massumi pointedly rejects. The wholly affirmative 'Yes' of affect is not enough to resist the deeply entrenched drive to quantify and commodify life.

Adorno's concept of non-identity offers a way of distinguishing between affective tendencies that deceptively serve the reification and commodification of experience and those that have the potential to resist what Adorno calls the "ontology of the wrong state of things." Negative dialectics expresses the necessity of a wholly critical 'No' within capitalist life. However, this 'No' requires extensive qualification in order to clarify what kind of intellectual and somatic commitments are required to engage in non-idealist dialectics. On the one hand, reading Massumi in the context of Adorno's concept of non-identity provides a critical edge that affect theory needs if it is to live up to its claim to be a force for change. Affect must include dialectical attunement. On the other hand, re-examining Adorno's thought in light of Massumi's concept of the body considers a more substantial and constitutive role of embodied suffering in what is traditionally interpreted as an epistemological form of critique.

There is a radical difference between Adorno's dialectical critique and Massumi's dismissal of it. While the latter maintains that the dialectical tradition is too negative, Adorno insists that it is not negative enough. This fundamental tension between the two thinkers creates an opening to consider new political possibilities unencumbered by the privileging of one approach at the exclusion of the other.