Affective Composition: Toward a Spinozist Critique of Political Economy

The terrain of affects, or the emotions, do not just mark a point where Spinoza and Simondon's concepts of individuation intersect, but are also a privileged point of entry for articulating the ontological and political dimension of transindividuality. By examining the affects, it is possible to map out what is at stake in viewing social relations from the perspective of the transindividual. Or more to the point, one sense of what is at stake with respect to transindividuality, since as Simondon argued in the previous chapter, there are multiple transindividual relations, stemming from productive relations, knowledge production, and affective sensibilities. Neither affects, the imagination, nor knowledge are sufficient causal conditions for a transindividual account of subjectivity, but they are each transindividual. Bringing Simondon and Spinoza together with respect to the affects also makes it possible to draw together two distinct accounts of transindividuality as they converge towards a common object, the critique of the contemporary structure of capitalism, something which will be examined more thorough in the next chapter.

While affects might at first appear to be highly individuated, even personal and idiosyncratic, a more sustained examination clarifies that they are a terrain of individuation. Affects are not only profoundly individual, but individuating, as each individual can be defined by their particular love, hates, and desires. Affects are both causes and effects of individuation, constitutive of and constituted by the process of individuation. As such every affect is simultaneously collective and individual, not just because the general affective comportments – love, hatred, hope, and fear – constitute a shared set of orientations, but that the objects of these affects do not exist as isolated objects but only in and through their constitutive relations. Affects or emotions are also collective not just in that they refer to shared terminology and experience, but also insofar as their objects are collective as well. Objects of love and hate define communities as much as individuals.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the similarity between Simondon and Spinoza in terms of affective individuation is undercut by a terminological difference. In Simondon, emotions are individuations of an affective milieu; they are part of the process of individuation, a process that exists in tension with the individuation of sensations into perceptions. In contrast to this, Spinoza uses
the term affect (affectus) consistently, as affects define both the generic capacities and their specific individuations. Spinoza's consistent use of the term, his lack of a distinction between emotions and affect, is part of a general consistency, an immanent ontology, which makes human relations a part of the immanent relations of nature. For Spinoza, the term ‘affect’ and the understanding of individuals as a capacity to affect and be affected refer not just to human or animal emotional life, but also to the entirety of finite existence, the entire world of modes. As much as affects individuate both collectives and individuals, defining their particular conatus, the general capacity to affect or be affected is common to every finite thing. It is yet another example of Spinoza's critique of the fundamental humanism that sees man as a ‘kingdom within a kingdom’, that is, defined by fundamentally different relations and rules than the rest of nature. Simondon's terminological division between pre-individual affects and individuated emotions has been utilised and developed by writers who have explicitly developed the idea of affect as something that is at once less individuated than emotion, on the order of the pre-individual, and more subject to historical and political organisation, more on the order of the transindividual. This distinction has been given its clearest articulation in Brian Massumi's work. As Massumi writes,

An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience, which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional consensual point of insertion into intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion.¹

Massumi's reading, which has its antecedents in Simondon and Deleuze, has become influential in contemporary theorisations of affect, which take as their starting point the difference between transindividual affect and the individuation of emotion.²

Despite the terminological difference of affect and emotion, Spinoza and Simondon can both be read as positing affect as that which passes between the pre-individual and the transindividual. For Simondon, this is because affects are more metastable and thus are the part of the subject that is not individu-

¹ Massumi 2002, p. 28.
² Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p. 5.