
**Book Review Essay:**

**Theory as Political Technology**

**How to Win Friends and Influence People**

In a book outlining how best to give shape and momentum to a re-invigorated Left, in *Arts of the Political* Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift present a vision that on the face of it has much to commend it, one which emphasizes not just potential, passion and possibility but also pluralism, principle and practicality. But it’s a vision that they have chosen to tie so closely to a very specific, almost wilfully obtuse interpretation of a rather narrow range of academic theory that, by the end, they feel obliged to reassure their readers that they are not recommending “a politics of bio-cultural engineering” (p.199). If you have to say this sort of thing out loud, at the end of your book, it does suggest that somewhere along the line in what has come before you might well have given the impression that this is exactly what you are suggesting. The sense that the authors have not taken quite enough time to reflect on the coherence, consistency or full implications of what they are arguing is pervasive as one reads through this book.

The book comes surrounded by a certain kind of atmosphere. In the mid-2000s, Amin and Thrift provoked a debate of sorts about the future of the Left in geography (see Amin and Thrift 2005; 2007). For their trouble, they were publicly castigated for providing apologetics for neoliberalism and were also darkly accused of wielding undue and unaccountable influence in shaping the agendas of academic Geography in the UK (judging by the paucity of references to Geographers in the
book under review, this presumption of influence is not necessarily shared by the authors). No doubt, the arguments in this book will resonate differently in Geography compared to other fields. Amin and Thrift’s argument now is not at all about the Left in Geography, but about the Left in general (or at least, and in a wholly untenable self-restriction, to the Left in ‘the West’). Because *Arts of the Political* has this ambition to redefine the tasks of the Left, there is an inevitable temptation to get caught up in questions of whether or not Amin and Thrift’s vision is Left enough, or genuinely Left. Others will be both better qualified and more motivated than I to judge the book in these terms. As far as is possible, I want to try to maintain a focus on the mode of argumentation deployed in this book. This may appear to be an act of folly. But the question of whether or not one should align oneself with the specific vision of Left politics that Amin and Thrift present is strictly dependent on the question of how much credence you are willing to extend to their account of the dynamics of contemporary political practice.

The book consists of seven chapters, top and tailed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. It starts with a claim that the Left needs to rethink what politics is and what it can be; in short, it needs “to repopulate the political with new visions, new desires and new modes of organization” (p.ix). The Left, we are told, has lost touch with the idea of politics as a process of *world-making*. The working definition of the Left used here is a little vague, although it gets fleshed out somewhat as things develop. To rediscover its world-making capacity, the Left needs to better understand and cultivate three distinct political arts: of imagination, persuasion and fulfilment. These three political arts of world-making - *invention*, *affect* and *organisation* - form the core structure of the book as its argument is unfolded. The threefold formula has certain degree of analytical lucidity that captures something important about the different dimensions along which politics, in general, is practiced. The three arts are further refined as “the ability to project new habitable environments out of latent injuries and
concerns, the ability to alter the means and terms of political conduct so that the latent can emerge with effective and affective energy, and the ability to develop the means of organization to sustain momentum and cement gains” (pp.xii-xiii).

Strictly speaking, this threefold formula does not specify these as distinctively Left political arts. In large part, in fact, their argument is that ‘the Right’ has been rather better at deploying these political arts in recent times. It should also be said that these three political arts are not accorded equal status. Affect, it will turn out, is the really important political art to appreciate and develop. Amin and Thrift provide a clue to how they will construe this particular political art when they suggest that political judgements “are not made in rational or deliberative ways; they follow key lines of emotion”. For them, it follows that “[m]any political impulses are contagious and require only momentary thought”, and, in turn, that the Left need to acknowledge that the science of influencing “these momentary decisions has become more and more exact” (p.14). Around this chain of assertion and implication, Amin and Thrift will weave a whole theory of contemporary political action and of the tasks of Left politics. The analysis in the book is shaped by a two-track argument, in which a general account of how the political field works is run alongside attempts to fill this account in with specifically Left impetus.

Little Known Facts About Well Known People

Having set out their stall quite clearly, Chapter 1, ‘The Grounds of Politics’, delves a little more deeply into the understanding of politics and the political at work in the book. The distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ has taken on a certain intellectual weight in some fields of Left theory. In what has become the predominant reading of the distinction in discussions of the ‘post-political’, ‘the political’ is reserved for a precious few acts or events of fundamental transformation and upheaval. This is a dull and uninteresting construal of what is an intuitively interesting
conceptual distinction when freed up from overly prescriptive interpretation. Happily, Amin and Thrift don’t fall into this trap. There is, they say, no need to presume that the political is restricted to either particular actors or particular forms of activity. They recommend the task of exploring instead “the continual reinvention of the political that occurs as a result of political action” (p.6), a view that presumes that the political is understood “not as a stable field but as a field whose form and content are continually redefined” (ibid.). This affirmation of the political as a variable effect of political action, rather than an a priori category or an ontological foundation offset against mere politics, shouldn’t be quite as notable as it is. But as I say, in the context of current usages, it is certainly welcome. In fact, the precise sense of the political used in the book is actually quite variable. Sometimes it is used to refer to fields of common or shared concern (and in this use, too easily conflated with the concept of public, with unfortunate implications); sometimes it is used to refer to a field of dispute and contestation, but without excluding compromise and negotiation; and sometimes it is used to refer to a field of intervention and concerted action.

Having posited that the content and form of politics is open to change, Amin and Thrift proceed to outline their case that the task facing the Left is to open up new understandings of the political. This is the task they refer to as world-making: “To be clear, what we mean by world-making capacity is the ability to produce what Peter Sloterdijk has called ‘atmospheres’, that is, spaces of resonance in which the oxygen of certain kinds of thought and practice seems natural and desirable” (p.5). Let it be said that this is not any sort of clarification at all. Suffice to say that world-making is meant to capture the sense of politics as a practice of re-defining issues, actors, stakes and interests that populate the political field.

Amin and Thrift close this first chapter by defining their book as “akin to a political primer” (p.9). If the description of the book as a primer suggests that the book will introduce readers to a new area in an accessible fashion, then think again.
Clarifying what they mean by ‘primer’, the authors say that hope will “prime new kinds of political thinking and practice” (p.16). The book’s frame of intellectual reference is actually remarkably narrow, defined by proper names such as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Graham Harman, William James, Gilles Deleuze and Peter Sloterdijk, as well as by selective reference to the long tail of modern French thought that now includes Gabriel Tarde and Gilbert Simondon. Often cited, briefly quoted, none of these thinkers is given any kind of adequate ‘explication’. The favoured genre of theoretical exegesis adopted in this book is that of the bibliographic essay: rather than a detailed analysis or even outline of ideas, there are a succession of allusions, sometimes accompanied by attempts at clarification which, as already indicated, tend only to muddy the waters further. If this book is a primer, then it is a primer meant only for those who are already attuned to this particular intellectual habitus.

Chapter 2, ‘Leftist Beginnings’, sets out to establish the historical reference points against which the Left today will be for the most part unfavourably compared. It identifies four examples of Left movements that succeeded in the task of ‘world-making’ laid out in the opening chapter. The four examples are all drawn from the period from the 1880s through to 1914: the rise of the German Socialist Party; Swedish social democracy; the growth of the British women’s movement; and the Progressive movement in the United States. None of these, of course, is a classically revolutionary movement. Far from it, they are exemplary examples of reformist politics. Each is marked by a concern with elections, party formation, coalition building. For Amin and Thrift, they exemplify ‘pragmatic utopianism’, and each one if also credited with having successfully “intuited the arts of invention, affect and organization needed to fashion and deliver a program of radical reform by working on the very nature of what it meant to be political” (p.19).
In the overall argument of the book, these four examples stand as the models which succeeded in ushering onto the political scene “new historical subjects, new technologies of organisation and resistance, new visions of the good life and social possibility, new definitions of human subjectivity and fulfilment, and new spaces of the political” (p.35). This is, then, a motivated deployment of Left nostalgia in the cause of advancing a particular vision of contemporary Left politics. One might well quibble with the selections, as well as with their precise interpretation in this chapter. Could the authors really not think of equally compelling examples of ‘pragmatic utopianism’ from sometime in the last 100 years? Or from outside of ‘the West’? One notes, too, that each of these movements succeeded primarily by pursuing politics within a national frame. I suspect that if one is only looking for analogies of this type of political practice, then you might well miss quite a lot of the effective world-making activity of the contemporary Left.

The examples presented in this chapter become the benchmark against which the inadequacies of ‘today’s Left’ are compared as the book proceeds. ‘The Left today’ has lost the capacity to re-shape political imaginations and institutionalise programmes of reform, a capacity which these four movements exemplify. Here, as throughout, the argument of the book has to tread the thin line between affirming the vibrancy of contemporary Left politics while also calling it to task for lacking the will as well as the skill of making its concerns ‘resonate’ and ‘amplify’. In its historical focus, this chapter does remain true to the principle outlined at the start of discerning reconfigurations of the political by attending closely to the dynamics of political action. As the argument proceeds on from this chapter, this principle is rapidly abandoned. For the rest of the book, redefinitions of the political will be deduced from a range of very academic social theory and philosophy; and this theoretical sourcing of redefinitions of the political will be supplemented by derivations that privilege the
causal rationalities of particular fields of business and commercial practice as best disclosing the emergent lineaments of the political.

Chapter 3, ‘Reinventing the Political’, lays out the distinctive ontology of the pre-personal and the non-human that Amin and Thrift present as disclosing the new configurations of the political to which the Left needs to orient itself. This chapter abandons the sense that reinventions of the political are best disclosed by attending closely to political action. It presents, instead, a resolutely scholastic, monological deduction of new understandings of what counts as political from selected strands of social theory and philosophy.

The starting point for this foundational chapter is the argument that we need to move beyond the focus on the subject of politics as “human being unfolding in time”. We are told that what is needed is to rethink “the being in human being as a constant process of becoming”, in ‘the style of’ Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, James and Whitehead. I’m not quite sure what this ‘style’ exactly is, or what distinguishes the recommended ‘style’ of thinking of human being as a process of becoming from the style of thinking about processes of becoming one finds in Hegel, say, or in Marx, or, closer to home, in David Harvey? Personally, I think arguments that stake so much on the novelty of thinking in terms of becoming should be treated with deep suspicion - somewhere lurking therein will be a straw-figure waiting to be easily knocked over. The more resonant point Amin and Thrift want to develop is that all sorts of non-humans have been shown to play quite active roles in the performance of social life - animals, plants, bacteria, the climate. As this brief list suggests, there is a degree of incoherence about just what makes up the non-human, but let’s leave that aside.

Amin and Thrift ask us to ponder the political relevance of this extension of the scope of the social: “What if we were to admit actors who traditionally have been regarded as objects of political attention but rarely as subjects?” (p. 40). It’s a good
question, if you slow down long enough to think seriously about how to go about
answering it. It is, amongst other things, a question that should help us see that ‘the
human’ is a political concept of remarkably recent purchase: ‘the human’ emerges as
an ethical and political figure in the process whereby working people, colonised
peoples, women, sexual minorities, and other exploited and marginalised
constituencies lay claim to a degree of symmetry, shall we say. In large part, ethical
and political concern with non-humans coincides historically with the emergence of
this reconstitution of the political around the figure of the human. I make the point to
suggest that the self-legitimising narrative of political ontologies of the non-human,
indebted to the somewhat partial genealogies of our non-modernity presented by
Bruno Latour, might be interpreted somewhat differently. There is, after all, nothing
more humanist than worrying about the well-being of animals, or the future of the
planet. And I also make this point because the challenge of thinking about the ‘non-
human’ dimensions of political life might well require a rather more careful, more
sensitive elaboration of what it means to be human, as distinct from an account of
human being, than is found anywhere in this book.

In raising the question of what political difference it makes to think of the
material constitution of social life in the extended way developed by actor-network
theory, science and technology studies, and assemblage theory, Amin and Thrift do
not pause to consider whether one should even suppose that one can derive a view of
either politics or the political from ontologies of materiality, actants, and assemblages;
much less from philosophical speculations about ‘reality’. The idea that a view of
assembled, heterogeneous qualities of ‘the social’ has a straightforward political pay-
off turns on a familiar conceit of social science. Amin and Thrift tell us that “liberal
political theory” tends to privilege rational decision making by free-thinking and
sovereign individuals. Then we are told that this view is challenged by recalling “the
simple biological facts that dictate that human beings are always interdependent,
reliant on the other for sustenance and survival” (pp.41-42). It is not at all clear that political theories, liberal or otherwise, that work through issues of individual sovereignty, autonomy, or rational decision-making are straightforwardly invalidated by simply invoking either natural or social facts about interdependence and relationality. As political theories, they are probably better thought of as starting off from an acknowledgement of relational dependence, vulnerability, and unintended consequences. Which direction they move off in from there, in thinking through how to live with these facts, is a more complicated question no doubt. But the type of superiority presumed by social theoretical arguments is prone to misrepresent irreducibly normative questions as questions open to easy resolution by ontological trumping of the sort that Amin and Thrift indulge in here.

Having set up their liberal straw figure in this familiar way, Amin and Thrift move quickly on to suggest that we need to think of rationality in different ways. We are told that there is “an enormous debate” (p.42) about higher order thinking, and then they reel off a four-line list of what is included. We are told the names of thinkers who have challenged ‘Western’ notions of personhood too. But Amin and Thrift don’t slow down to ‘explicate’ the details of these debates or these thinkers work. This discussion, as with much else, reads more like the first draft of a discussion, with hanging, unglossed quotations and rushed allusions to this debate or that. In parts, the style reads like notes-to-self. Often enough, the authors acknowledge that there are lots of precedents for the arguments they are nevertheless presenting as novel and challenging in new ways. For example, Amin and Thrift recognise that what they insist on calling ‘affect’ has been a concern of political thought since at least the time of Hobbes (pretty much from the start of ‘liberal political theory’ then). They then evidence this point by mentioning work in philosophical aesthetics: “Think only of the work of Immanuel Kant on the sublime” (p.46). We are offered no more details on Kant, or the sublime. This is a recurrent rhetorical tic in this book - ‘Think of X on
Y…’. It illustrates the more general tone of knowingness that characterises the elaboration of the argument. For example, the writer whose work is, by my count, most frequently cited and quoted in this book is Isabelle Stengers. Nowhere does one learn who Stengers is or what her work is about. My point is not, necessarily, to doubt that Stengers’ work can inform interesting discussions of politics. It’s just that one would have thought that one might learn a little more about how, in this case, work in the philosophy of science should be and has been translated into interpretations of political practice.

The lesson from this run through of the inadequacies of ‘a large part of political theory’ is that we need to abandon the idea that people simply pick-up political ideas and behaviour, reflect on them and then act (pp.44-45). It will become clear, as the book proceeds, that the primary objection to this view is to the idea that political action depends on ideas and beliefs, not to the sense that politics is a succession of punctual points of action. The input-output view of action is actually retained; it is just going to be filled with affective content. In introducing the idea of affect (pp.46-47), Amin and Thrift give the very strong impression of endorsing the strong interpretation of a sharp, categorical divide between affect and emotion (and, by extension, between affect on the one side and reasoning and rationality on the other). They certainly make no acknowledgment of the ‘enormous debate’ on the adequacy of this relentlessly dualistic interpretation of the significance of ‘affect’.

The chapter now moves onto two related sections, ‘Welcome to the World of the Pre-Personal’ and ‘Welcome to the World of the Non-Human’. Taken together, these two sections provide the basis for a “psychotopical” perspective on the ways in which space matters in processes of world-making. The first of these sections elaborates a view of there being “planes of existence” and “layers of thinking” that are not open to conscious inspection or cognitive articulation. By reference to a hotchpotch of ideas including Drew Western’s account of ‘the political brain’,
Maurizio Lazzarato’s account of immaterial labour and subjection, and Benjamin Lisbet’s psychological experiments, this section develops an account of what it calls, interchangeably, the “pre-individual”, the “pre-cognitive”, and the “pre-verbal” components of subjectivity. At one level, this is all about acknowledging the degree to which a great deal of human life is practice-oriented, and in turn, not presuming that non-cognitive dimensions of human life are ‘irrational’. This is all to be commended, no doubt. It is not clear, however, that what all this work amounts to is the conclusion that “very large amounts of human activity lie outside of what we consider ‘our’ control”, but that they lie instead “in a layer of thinking that is not open to conscious introspection” (p.51). We need to slow down here. It is one thing to say that, in the flow of action, one might not be aware of or in control of all influences at work. That much might actually be rather obvious. But this feature of action is, of course, open to conscious reflection, and that much is evidenced by Amin and Thrift’s discussion of it, and by all the work they cite in the course of that discussion. The question of how one posits the relationship between what, for the sake of argument, we can call the unreflective qualities of action and the knowing, reasoned dimensions of action is the subject of ‘enormous debate’. One would not have thought so judging from the discussion in *Arts of the Political*.

Collapsing debates from very different fields of inquiry together, and subjecting them to a political interpretation, leads somewhat inevitably to a straightforward claim that things going on in a zone of ‘pre-personal’ antecedents modulate political action. The lesson to be taken away is that human being “comes jam packed with uncertainty” and that the “rational, political citizen only ever fitfully reaches the surface of action” (p.53), since political agency is ‘offset’ by “all manner of pre-personal currents”. There are various things one could say about this account of the pre-personal. One might be tempted, given its dependence on an influential interpretation of Deleuzian-inflected theories of affect, to refer to critiques of this
approach that question the authoritative reference to science that often characterises this work (e.g. Leys 2011). But strictly speaking, these criticisms do not apply here, since apart from the passing reference to Lisbet’s ‘half-second delay’ experiments, the authority that Amin and Thrift invoke is wholly drawn from specific fields of philosophy and cultural theory. One might notice too that there is a conflation involved in moving so rapidly from accounts of embodied action drawn from fields such as psychology and phenomenology to an argument about the nature of political action. This conflation only works if one is willing to believe that political action is best modelled on the types of circumscribed performance from which understandings of action in such fields are derived.

The interpretation of affect that underwrites the strong claim about just how much political action is configured by pre-personal currents is dependent on a very particular temporal framing of the issues at hand. Despite the fact that this section refers also to the idea of human action as being “fundamentally prosthetic”, and that human beings are not necessarily best thought of as bounded by their skins, the overwhelming emphasis is on a straightforward ordering of temporal priority: before actions that show up as conscious or willed, comes all this activity in a prior, antecedent realm (where the precise sense of priority involved is itself rather variable). The temporal framing of affect is quite fundamental to the account of contemporary formations of political life that this book outlines in its later stages, and, no less important, for the view of Left politics that the authors recommend on the basis of that account.

The dualistic, temporal framing of affect as an order of not just analytical but causal priority in ‘Welcome to the World of the Pre-Personal’ is followed by the second of the two key sections of this chapter. In ‘Welcome to the World of the Non-Human’, we are introduced to a range of work that has sought to articulate the politics of various non-humans, from animals to plants to objects in general. Once again, it’s a
rapid ride through some wild terrain, taking in issues such as the role of animal labour in Marxist theories of primitive accumulation, of chemical alterations of states of mind, and the political history of barbed wire. As long as one is willing to restrict the term ‘agency’ to the preferred sense used in much of this type of work (a sense of having effects, doing things, making a difference; or more interestingly, bearing some type of responsibility), then the account of non-human agency is challenging without stretching one’s credulity too far. The key point of this range of work, and of this section of *Arts of the Political*, is the distribution of agency across whole networks or systems of people, machines, animals, circulations, things, and circuits. “Actant” is the preferred term for the participants in accounts of distributed agency. It’s really just a technical term for *character*, that is, for any personified subject in an extended moral narrative in which ascriptions of responsibility, liability and accountability are at stake. It’s a concept that might well require one to assume that the best way to think of distributed agency is on analogy with fairy tales and mythological narratives. It might, in short, smuggle in a distinctively humanist imaginary behind the scenes when used to describe configurations of social life that include non-humans.

Amin and Thrift locate their synthesis of various streams of thought on the non-human by telling us that “mainstream thought” worries about whether or not things exist independently or are constructed by the mind, as if most of us are all trapped inside Descartes’ thought experiments. They prefer, they tell us, “the non-correlationist view” according to which all that exists “is a legion of actants, which have no interior kernel or essence but are defined by and through their often ramshackle and quarrelsome alliances with others that need work to achieve” (pp.56-57). If you are in the know, you will get the allusion to ‘correlationism’; if not, never mind. If you are in the know, you might also recognise in this passage the rhetoric of friend making and negotiation that characterises work inflected by actor-network theory especially. You might pause, perhaps, and notice that a social theory that seeks
to affirm the place of non-human actants in an extended view of social practices does so through a recurrent rhetoric that is already a drawn-out political analogy: what shows up as agency in this view of non-human dynamics is whatever contributes to successful coalition-formation and whatever can be shown to be capable of mediating diplomatic relations. There is, in short, more than a little humanistic priming in this sort of account of the non-human, which allows it in turn to be given such clear political inflections. In their elaboration of actor-network theory, assemblage theory, science and technology studies, and ideas from object-oriented ontologies, the authors do little to either address or allay some of the worries one might have about the strong claims for the political salience of such work. Should one, for example, really seek to re-model political life on rosy views of science as a benevolent process of experimentation and modification? Or, to take another worry, what is one to make of the frequency with which arguments about the need to recognise the autonomous status of non-humans as political subjects rapidly devolve into arguments that aggrandise the role of experts as representatives of those subjects?

In these two pivotal sections of this quite pivotal chapter, two quite distinct logical geographies of action are on display. The discussion of non-human agency is shaped by a focus on the spreading, dispersal, and distribution of action across a range of actants. The modularity of action that is supposed here, as well as in discussions of the prosthetics of human life, is a horizontal one. It is an emphasis Amin and Thrift themselves underscore by talking about politics in terms of making connections and linkages. It is a view that emphasises the way in which we are surrounded, accompanied, linked up with all sorts of other stuff, with whom we act in concert. It is a view of action shared across a range of debates around notions of, for example, the extended mind, distributed cognition, cognitive ecologies, and cognition in practice, to name just a few of a whole family of related concepts. One of the fundamental points to arise from this literature is the view that there is no reason to assign either
causal or analytical priority in advance to any specific dimension of action - to rational thought, learned skills, emotional registers, material artefacts, genre conventions and so on. In contrast to this horizontal imagination, the account of the pre-personal dimensions of action that Amin and Thrift provide is framed by a quite different logical geography, in which a vertical modularity of action is privileged: there are layers and planes of experience, and some of these kick-in prior to others, priming them before cognition or reflection. Despite its popularity, there is no good reason to take this vertical framing of the temporal priority of affect all that seriously. Why not think of the any required de-centring of highly rationalist-cognitivist accounts of mind, perception, and consciousness in horizontal terms as well?

The point of drawing attention to the two different logical geographies of action at play in this chapter, and to suggest that they are somewhat at odds with each other, is that it is the vertical interpretation of orders of priority which has the upper hand in the account of the political that follows. Specifically, as the book develops, it is the attribution of temporal priority to an autonomous zone of affect that overdetermines the view presented of the ways in which the horizontal distribution of agency across mediated, built and designed spaces of interaction is managed for political ends.

The introduction to the pre-personal and the non-human leads on to an elaboration of the relevance of space for the political. Here, the understanding is one of “space as the flow of being itself” (p.65), associated with a definition of “terrain” as a sensory and knowing field which serves not just as a background or resource for action but is itself an actor too. Terrain, as a term of political analysis, is meant to be different from ‘environment’. To understand the difference, we are told we need to “move on from Heidegger to Peter Sloterdijk. This may seem to be a trivial move. It is not” (ibid.). I’m willing to believe it isn’t a trivial move, but wait, who is this Heidegger guy? He has been mentioned by name once before this point in the book,
and neither then nor here or subsequently do we get told what it is in his work that we need to move on from. Which means that, though we do get told what Sloterdijk thinks, we are told nothing to allow us to appreciate the non-triviality or otherwise of his thought. Sloterdijk provides us, it turns out, with a series of spatial figures of being-together, or ‘spheres’. They are, as Amin and Thrift quote him saying, the dynamic spaces of coexistence which attest to the fact that human existence “is anchored in an insurmountable spatiality” (p.65). What seems to be at stake here is an attempt to disclose, one might say, the contexts or situations of living and action into which we find ourselves always already thrown. By glossing it like that, I suspect I might well be contravening some secret understanding of the difference that Sloterdijk’s account of spheres makes to a more run-of-the-mill Heideggerian vocabulary, but as I have pointed out, this is not my fault - Amin and Thrift have not ‘explicated’ the difference for the reader.

What is really significant, apparently, about Sloterdijk is the idea of there being a “politics of psychotopical tuning”. This idea provides the answer to the question of the relevance of the preceding discussion in this chapter for “…broadening our sense of what is political and thus…instituting new kinds of Leftist politics” (p.67). (Notice, again, that we have now departed quite clearly from any sense that it is politics that reveals new dimensions of the political; we have reversed things, so that it is Theory that discloses the understandings of the political.) This politics of the psychototopical refers to the means by which new political spaces can be identified, new “immunities” can be formed and new “atmospheres” can be cultivated. Or, to put it another way, the place where ‘priming’ goes on. To summarise, what this notion of psychototopical tuning comes down to is the idea that politics needs to be understood as “the art of generating affective fields”. It is a view that sees various designed spaces as configuring perceptions, smuggling in values and orientations, and full of potential for creative imitation and viral communication. This is all presented in rather
breathless style, it should be said, and it is not clear that the directions for further exploration that are identified at the close of this chapter are, as promised, followed up in the rest of the book. The apparent political potential of this range of spatial practices is dependent in large part on the authors’ accepting at face-value the causal rationalities that shape professional self-understandings in various fields of art, media, design, and other arenas in which space is conceptualised first and foremost not just as a medium of communication but of communicability. We have now reached the point where the dimensions of political life awaiting to be worlded by the Left are best disclosed through the unlikely alliance of high Theory and various cutting-edge forms of high-tech, soft capitalist business practice. We will have to await chapter 7 of this book to see exactly how this combination will help us imagine a “post-human and postrational” politics.

Chapter 4 of *Arts of the Political* shifts register somewhat, moving attention from the authors’ favoured theoretical traditions to a review of five streams of ‘Contemporary Leftist Thought’: anti-capitalist neo-Marxisms; what they call reformist Left positions; post-capitalist positions associated with various types of post-structuralist ideas; what the authors characterise as work concerned primarily with human ethics; and work on public making. Amin and Thrift take their distance most clearly from the first of these, and find things to like in the others - a commitment to the continuing relevance of the social state, or to institutional experimentation, or to alternative ethical practices, or to making new issues public (see also Amin 2012). Nevertheless, the presumption of the chapter, and where it fits in with the overall narrative of the book, is that while these different streams of thought illustrate that the Left has lots to say about the current state of the world, it has lost the world-making capacity discussed in chapter 2 to reformulate political space and generate new ambitions for the future. This judgement might well depend on presenting these streams of thought
as merely that - just streams of thought. Not much effort is made to connect them to any actually existing Left politics with which they might well be in dialogue. Amin and Thrift suggest the first three strands of contemporary Left thought lack practicality, and that the last two lack substantive Left content. The problem really seems to be that none of them seems to have managed to scale-up their practical achievements to the level posited as a model in chapter 2. So the conclusion of the chapter, namely that this review of Left thought further illustrates that the Left has lost “its ability to imbue the new with power and conviction” (p.108), is not really a diagnosis so much as an assertion. In a sense, the authors could hardly be expected to say anything else, since the momentum of their book is precisely to provide a strategy meant to make up for this absence, one based on the theoretical analysis developed in chapter 3. Of these five streams, it is only the final one - exemplified by William Connolly’s vitalistic reconstruction of pluralism, and Latour’s ‘object-oriented’ model of democracy - that will have any further resonance as the book proceeds (and Connolly, it turns out, is still a little too “humanist”, never a good thing in this intellectual universe).

Amin and Thrift seem to acknowledge throughout this chapter that there are resources of value to their project in these other traditions. But having negotiated the tension between lots of Left ideas and supposed a lack of world-making force, they end by announcing that in fact “the Left has to start again from scratch, substantively and procedurally, gathering issues yet to be named; inventing new political technologies; speaking for publics gathered around new disputations of truth, fact and opinion; and making just cause that many can see and many can support” (p.108). There is, as you can see, a degree of hubristic ambition animating Arts of the Political.

How to Stop Worrying and Start Living
Chapters 2, 3 and 4 make the case for the importance of the three political arts, and most especially, for the inventive potential of world-making. The historical illustrations are the most convincing element of this overall case. The diagnosis of the lack or loss of world-making capacity by the Left, in chapter 4, is largely made at the level of assertion rather than demonstration. And as I have suggested, chapter 3 locates the sources of re-invented ideas of what counts as political primarily in social theory and philosophy. Chapters 5 and 6 of the book shift to a focus on the art of organisation. They are provocative in so far as some significant part of contemporary Left thought is indeed rather averse to thinking through questions of organisation and institutionalisation as anything other than unfortunate impositions on the purity of spontaneous action, and they do not shy away from thinking of the state as retaining considerable potential for the realisation of Left politics.

Chapter 5, ‘Organising Politics’, seeks to recuperate the state as a space of Left political possibility. That such a task is even necessary might require a little explanation. The inability to think of organisation, institutionalisation, and state-practices as having such potential is really an index of a failure to think through the meaning of democracy as a practice of rule rather than a pure mode of being; but that’s for another day. Amin and Thrift focus on literatures on spatial practices and on bureaucracy to develop an account of what they call *statecraft* as an open, contingent array of performances that contain all sorts of opportunities for Left politics to take root. What’s most effective about this discussion is the explicitly political interpretation of what one might call various forms of organisational materialism, to borrow a phrase from Michael Mann, found in theoretical literatures on governmentality, state formation, and anthropologies of the state. Emphasising the contingencies of state practice implies that there is much more scope for progressive politics in and through statecraft than is supposed. This discussion bought to my mind various related ideas, for example, James Ferguson’s recent account of ‘Left
governmentality’ (Ferguson 2010), Partha Chatterjee’s (2011) account of ‘political society’, work on the ‘prosaic state’ (Painter 2006) and work on how citizens ‘see the state’ (Corbridge et al. 2005). Such work also underscores the idea of the state as a disparate field of open political struggle rather than a monolith either to be resisted or captured. Amin and Thrift invoke John Keane’s (2009) analysis of ‘monitory democracy’ to illustrate how the contingency of state practices opens spaces in which new forms of accountability and scrutiny can be enforced through civil society actors. The relevance of work like Keane’s, or that of those other writers just mentioned, lies of course in the emphasis it places not just on the contingency of state forms per se, but on how contingent patterns of interaction between states and non-state actors are the key determinant of the politics of state practices.

Chapter 5 proceeds on to a cautious defence of the political potential of bureaucracy, via a discussion of not just Max Weber but also of Pierre Bourdieu as well as Paul du Gay. Taken together with the argument about state practices, this adds up to an argument in favour of thinking of states as “living, breathing things, miscellanies of institutions whose concrete direction is never set by that fact that they are the focus of a host of bureaucratic practices” (p.127). This affirmation underwrites the quite clear demarcation by the authors’ of their position from one that would disavow not just the state but organisation more generally as a requirement for effective political action. The point is well enough made, but it turns out that the affirmation of organisation is quickly reduced to a story about the modulation of affective milieu and the creation of new collectivities through “resonance chambers”. The point noted above, about how the political potential of states and bureaucracies depends on the interactive relationships with non-governmental actors and movements (never openly acknowledged as an implication of their own analysis), is completely elided under this eager embrace of the organisational tools and tactics to instrumentally create new ecologies of practice.
In order to put further flesh on this argument about the importance of thinking organisationally about the limits and possibilities of Left politics, Chapter 6, provides a case study, focussing on ‘Eurocracy and its Publics’. This turns out to be an analysis of the ways in which policy initiatives in the European Union (EU) generate publics around complex technical issues - issues like water governance, biodiversity, and the information society. Of all the examples of contemporary organisational innovation one might choose to look at, the EU does not stand out as the most promising model for future Left politics. The EU certainly fits uneasily with a story about politics with focuses so heavily on questions of passion and emotion. The EU, rather famously, generates very little positive affective identification amongst its citizens. Taken in isolation, this chapter provides an interesting analysis of the way in which EU initiatives work. But in the context of this book’s argument, the choice takes on a more symptomatic resonance, shall we say, whose full significance is only really revealed as the argument reaches its full denouement in chapter 7. Rather than attending to the emergent formations and experimental practices one might find in various modes of contemporary Left practice associated with the ideas discussed in chapter 4, what the EU is a very good example of is a functioning political association in which bureaucracy is the dominant organising principle. It is presented here as a model for a form of “diplomatic” politics in which issues are raised and debated and then programmes implemented by expert-publics. The chapter is concerned with demonstrating the possibility of enlightened bureaucracy working for democratic ends and its role in conjuring into existence whole new fields of political action.

It should come as no surprise that an argument so heavily inflected by theories of ‘object-oriented’ democracy, non-human political subjects, and vitalistic materialisms should find itself making such an explicit case for politics as a bureaucratic, expert-led practice. It’s actually quite refreshing to have the link made
so explicitly. I don’t think this sort of argument is indefensible, far from it. I do think, however, that if one is to reach this point, depending as it does on a claim that “there is no democracy without representation (p.156), then one probably needs a much better understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of political representation than can be gleaned from Latour’s rather obvious declaration that ‘speaking’ always takes place through intermediaries of one sort or another. If one just settles for the sense that representation is a process of unavoidable mediation and translation that simply legitimises the role of ‘spokesperson’, then one has stopped the discussion precisely at the point at which all the really difficult issues arise (see Saward 2010).

Despite these reservations, chapters 5 and 6 are the strongest of the book, because they go against the grain of quite a lot of contemporary Left romanticism of direct action and pure activism, and also because they draw out some political distinctions that follow from certain strands of contemporary social theory of states, state-making, and the arts of government. But as I have said, the analysis presented in these two chapters is really just a preliminary to the argument of the final chapter of the book, chapter 7, ‘Affective Politics’. This chapter draws, the authors acknowledge, from Thrift’s (2007) single authored book Non-Representational Theory, and it synthesizes the component parts outlined in other chapters - psychotopical tunings, affective palettes, bureaucratic potentials - into an overarching vision of the tasks and mediums for effective Left politics.

The Little Recognized Secret of Success
The final chapter of Arts of the Political has a two-part structure which follows from the task that authors have set themselves, and the ways in which they have navigated through contemporary Left thought and practice to this point. The acknowledgement of creativity on the Left is a marginal theme throughout the book, but in order to sell the strong argument about what the Left most lacks and most needs, this emphasis
now disappears almost entirely. We are now presented with a truly dismal view of contemporary political life, one that depends on the folding together of the vertical construal of affect as a field of pre-personal priming with the horizontal imagination of material fields of action through which people constantly circulate. The bleak view that the authors present of a political field completely managed to realise “determinate” political outcomes is the prelude to an argument that what the Left needs to do is out-do the Right in deploying the machinery of affective politics. The chapter, in short, presumes that “affect precedes decision, rather than the other way round, and that in modern democracies, mastery of the means of affective capture is essential for making political gain” (p.158). What the Left therefore needs is to make better use than the Right of “the psycho-technologies that engineer collective feelings, but in a non-cynical way” (p.158). Somewhere along the way, what started out as an analysis of arts of the political has transmuted into an exploration of the instrumental deployment of various political technologies. I realise that the distinction between art and technique is never exact, but the drift is clear: political life, understood as a field of affective attunements, is something that needs to be subjected to better instrumental modulation.

The first part of this chapter outlines a vision of how the “affective machinery” of contemporary politics works to construct manipulated and stupefied publics. It reads in large part like a parody of Frankfurt School-style denunciations of the culture industry, just without the nuance or subtlety. However, the second part of the chapter turns on the contention that the Left does not need to hold out the hope of a more rational alternative, nor even of a critique of affective befuddlement of whole populations. Instead, it recommends that what it needs to do is “take a greater grip on the machinery of affective politics”: “What is needed is active cultivation of alternative feelings so that new affective connections can be forged and a general desire for other ways of being in the world can emerge, and can be built into new
In order for this positive account of the tasks of Left politics to make any sense, Amin and Thrift have to paint a picture of the contemporary political field that is peopled by susceptible subjects completely open to “affective capture”. Forgetting an earlier point that affect needs to be understood as “determinedly indeterminate”, we are told that there is now a whole new level of political organisation that is “increasingly able to obtain determinate electoral results through the manipulation of affect” (p. 159). Notice how the discussion has become centred on a story about elections and voting. The idea that voting is the archetypal model of political action follows because it seems, on the face of it anyway, to lend itself to a discussion of momentary, punctual decisions. Voting therefore seems to fit the requirements of an account of how momentary decisions are preceded by various antecedent pre-personal, pre-cognitive, pre-verbal “vortices of influence”. (There are only two problems with this, of course: first, voting is hardly the only model of political action one might consider relevant; and second, voting is probably not best thought of as a momentary decision anyway.)

Amin and Thrift present a picture of contemporary public life as a product of the wilful “construction of commonplaces”. This view is premised on the argument that since human thought is never free from emotion, public thinking is basically imitative and shaped by semiconscious registers. The authoritative reference for this view is the work of Gabriel Tarde, whose great contribution we are told, was that “we only rarely control our own neural systems” (p.160). Has anyone ever thought otherwise? What Tarde apparently prepares us for is the need to face up to the issue of “automatism”. Hardly stopping to think, Amin and Thrift now present affect as a “semiconscious phenomenon, consisting of a series of automatisms, many of them developed in childhood, that dictate bodily movement” (p.161). Behaviour (we have long since slipped past the point where what is being described can be meaningfully called action) is shaped by a dynamic of suggestion and imitation that is largely
immune to the powers of reflection: “These automatisms may often feel like wilful action, but they are not, and they have powerful political consequences, not least because they form a kind of psychic immune system that means that certain issues can be avoided or perversely interpreted as a matter of course” (p.161). Politics is nothing other than the marshalling of susceptible publics this way and that: “it is relatively easy to promote in populations feelings of responsibility for events over which they could not possibly have had any purchase and, as a corollary, feelings of denial of their influence over events for which they quite clearly did have some influence” (p.161).

It’s difficult to know quite what to say in response to this type of claim, supported as it is by no examples or illustrations to indicate exactly what it is that the authors are talking about. We have by now slipped into an intellectual world where it seems any claim at all, however overblown or preposterous, can be justified by the preceding account of affective modulations and psychotopical tuning. Somewhere along the line, Amin and Thrift seem to have mislaid a distinction that Tarde, amongst others, was careful to maintain, which leads them to mistake publics for really big, extended crowds. They also seem to have mislaid their sense of proportion: “people have little or no agency over their bodies or environments but are under the control of affective forces. That is, they are powered by automatisms: the body is the medium for the transmission of force but usually without any conscious volition. Unconscious - or, rather, semiconscious - ‘thoughts’ cause the bulk of actions, including those associated with the political sphere” (p.161).

Amin and Thrift race on, calmly asserting that people are “powered by automatisms”, their actions “entranced” and “somnambulist”. The specific contexts in which these terms might maintain some semblance of coherence has been abandoned for an account of the generic object, affect, which underwrites a theory of public making as the instrumental manipulation of people’s commitments and attachments,
beliefs and desires. The term ‘automatism’ in this account draws on a simple, medical-legalistic sense of actions undertaken unconsciously. There is, it should be said, an alternative sense of ‘automatism’ associated with modernist art, the surrealists most obviously, as well as in the cultural theories of Roland Barthes and Stanley Cavell. Here, automatism is a figure not for an opposition between the intentional and the automatic but for a redistribution of agency across mediums, genres, and skilful action (e.g. Armstrong 2012). It is, in short, a concept most creatively used in the humanities according to the kind of horizontal modularity of action that, I have suggested, is disavowed by Amin and Thrift’s relentless prioritization of an autonomous zone of affect. I make the point simply to indicate that there are alternative interpretations available of many of the ideas subjected to such singular construal in this book.

The emphatic argument about the priority of the passions over reason, emotion over intellect is linked to a melodramatic diagnosis of the current erosion of democracy. In support of this diagnosis, Amin and Thrift appeal in support to the argument of Walter Lippmann, who in the 1920s worried that the lack of epistemological competency amongst citizens threatened to undermine responsible democratic government. Lippmann’s scepticism about the wisdom of ordinary citizens and his defence of expert-led democratic elitism has certainly proved attractive to theorists of non-human, object-oriented political ontologies. To underscore the sense of impending threat faced by contemporary democracies, Amin and Thrift link Lippmann’s argument to Sheldon Wolin’s post-9/11 diagnosis of ‘totalitarian democracy’ in the United States. Wolin’s view of the purity of radical democracy is almost totally at odds with the position defended by Lippmann. The “threat to democracy” discerned by the two thinkers was hardly the same: for Lippmann, the people were the problem; Wolin is no populist romantic, but he locates the threat at the level of what we might want to call statecraft and bureaucracy gone awry. Splicing the two together makes for a rather incoherent narrative in which proper deliberation
is reduced to so many simulations by power of ‘the meeja’, without quite noticing that Lippmann didn’t seem to put great store in the potential of deliberation in the first place (or that nor have they either in the preceding discussion). Amin and Thrift suggest that Lippmann’s view about the threat to democracy is quite ‘prescient’ “whatever the exact pros and cons” of his argument. They don’t let us in on what those pros and cons might be. But surely one’s judgement of the exact pros and cons of the argument might well shape whether we find Lippmann’s view even faintly prescient, or whether we prefer to think of it as an artefact from the history of democratic elitism. Perhaps, for example, if we were to read John Dewey’s work on the public and its problems, cited elsewhere in this book but not mentioned as part of this discussion, we would notice its effective dismantling of Lippman’s premises, and be led away from thinking that public life is best thought of by reference to mid-twentieth century laments about mass society.

If the “mass media” are the vehicle for circulating simulations of real democracy and hiding authoritarianism, then it also turns out that states and corporations are getting better and better at modulating what the authors refer to as “political moods”. The role of mood in politics has not been given enough attention, the authors claim, then say everyone from Max Weber to Paul Lazarsfeld to Lauren Berlant have given it plenty of attention. Then we are told that the classical field of Rhetoric is also best thought of as a resource for understanding the role of mood in politics. Moods, passions, rhetoric, emotions and feelings: these are not straightforwardly synonyms for each other, or for affect. While trying to corral them all into a singular account of the autonomy of affect, Amin and Thrift provide enough clues to suggest that the issues they are trying to cohere into a singular political ontology might always be given a very different gloss.

The important analytical claim arising from Amin and Thrift’s account of affective modulations, psychotopical tunings and automatisms is that people’s
predispositions are “increasingly available to be worked on and cultivated through a kind of performance management” (p.166). Exactly why this possibility is ‘increasing’ is never quite explained. At points like this, the self-imposed, unjustified restriction of reference in this book to ‘the West’ seems to be important in sustaining this type of claim about the increasing resonance of technologically configured, media-saturated, designed environments identified by the authors. In fact, I suspect that the account of affect provided in *Arts of the Political* depends on an unacknowledged tradition of thinking about ‘the technological’ that might well be deeply ethnocentric, not least in its allusions to the difference of non-Western contexts (cf. Thrift 2009). What we do get told is that the growth of the “mass media” makes it much easier to work on the semiconscious realm. As if the reader has slipped through a portal back to the 1930s, it turns out that social theory is now once again concerned with defining the qualities of “mass experience”. To prove their point about the determinate efficacy of affective modulations, Amin and Thrift invoke as evidence the simple fact of political advertising. In three lines, they refer to Ronald Reagan’s upbeat campaign for re-election in 1984 and the Daisy advert used by the Johnson Presidential campaign against Barry Goldwater in 1964. The naming of these examples is meant to prove the point, without further elaboration. If you don’t know what they are referring too, bad luck. This would be weak journalism. It’s nonsense as academic argument. In a wonderful footnote, it is acknowledged that the Daisy advert, which overlaid a little girl picking flowers with a nuclear countdown and an H-Bomb mushroom cloud (i.e. it was hardly working on very deep levels of subtle suggestion), was actually only broadcast once. Nevertheless, we are assured, without any further evidence, that it was “still decisive”. It wasn’t.

I pick on this small example to give a flavour of the quality of argumentation that is used in this chapter, in which a remarkably dark and sinister image of contemporary politics is presented in order to justify a somewhat counter-intuitive
account of the tasks of Left politics. In a cascade of clichés, we are told that mass media, now understood as technologies of political mood, encourage the substitution of the consumption of democracy for the practice of democracy, of style for substance, personality and substance and perception for genuine debate. Politics has been “mass-mediatized”, and is now at the whim of political advertising, consultants, and the superficialities of retail politics. All of which, it is presumed, are highly effective in modulating affect via “mass media” to their own ends. Affect has now taken on the qualities of a noxious miasma, a causal vector that can be bent to the will of those ‘in the know’ - corporations, the Right, the state. And, if we are lucky, the benevolent Left as well. Because it turns out that the histrionic account of impending totalitarian democracy that is laid out at the start of chapter 7 is just a set-up for the suggestion that these political technologies of mood are also available to the Left: “If mediatisation is built into the political process the Left has to recognise that without it, there is no public or commonplace” (p.173). I daresay that the Left has known this for quite a while, without anyone ever conceptualising mediatization in a way that quite so overestimates the efficacy of affective modulations to bring off determinate effects.

The account of the desultory state of contemporary political life ends rather perfunctorily, and after the embrace of technologies of political mood is recommended, Amin and Thrift move without pause to the task of elaborating five “Leftist structures of feeling”, the values which should guide the deployment of affective technologies for non-cynical ends. In Raymond Williams’ original usage, a structure of feeling was something one identified through a kind of acquired discernment or analytical sympathy with what connected a body of works. The five structures of feeling Amin and Thrift outline are not identified through any such procedure as ‘emergent’ from any existing context of Left politics, to use another of William’s resonant keywords. It is difficult to object strongly to any of the five:
labour, which has a nice old fashioned ring to it; fairness, which is a little more abstract but also has a good solid Left pedigree; heterogeneity, which is just not going to catch on in the popular imagination, but tries to capture what might otherwise be called difference or diversity with a obligatory non-human twist; likewise accomplishment, which might just be better thought of by reference to a notion such as dignity; and steadfastness, which is has a rather moralistic ring to it. The listing of Leftist values comes couched in a vocabulary of “engineering” ethical dispositions and putting in place “machineries” of responsibility which has the effect of rather deflating the motivating force of this attempt to refine the content of Left politics. My feeling of scepticism was confirmed by the frankly weird end to this chapter, which declares that what has been demonstrated by the book as a whole is that “a new door has now been opened on motivation - one that the general population must be primed to go through” (p.186). This is a terrible mixed metaphor (do you prime people to go through doors?). That aside, it confirms the horribly restricted corner that Amin and Thrift seem to have talked themselves into - a place where the role of the Left is reduced to “working directly on affect” with the hope of reshaping the dispositions of “the general population” in favour of four or five rather randomly selected values.

Live Enthusiastically
Only the book does not quite end here. It has an Epilogue, which actually introduces a whole new layer of analysis. It lists a series of “major developments” of the past few decades that are the material upon which the Left might work. These include the global spread of the market economy, the financialization of everything, rising global inequality, global climate change, and technological reconfiguration of human life. It is not clear why these have had to wait to be discussed until the very end of the book, after the construction of a complex theoretical architecture. The Epilogue identifies a series of political responses and experiments that are associated with each of these
major developments. But these are simply listed in the columns of two tables. There is no supporting narrative gloss at all. This seems somehow exemplary of the book as a whole. The world of actual Left politics, of contestation, experimentation, mobilisation and even governance, is a kind of running marginal note never allowed to intrude too far into the theoretical construct being elaborated in the main narrative. None of the varied political movements or practical experiments listed in the Tables is allowed a theoretical voice: that is, they are never allowed to disclose the version of politics and the political that they enact in practice. The task of redefining the political has long since been reserved for selected philosophical traditions and favoured fields of contemporary business, consultancy and design practice.

And so it is that Amin and Thrift arrive at the end of their narrative, arguing that the main challenge of Left politics lies with “reworking human being”:

“What we know is that human beings are malleable and can be culturally and biologically produced. Let us say straight off that we are not heading towards a politics of bio-cultural engineering. But it cannot be denied that all human institutions form human conduct; therefore, there seems to be no reason not to intervene to cultivate different dispositions and personas. After all, education does this all the time. We could see a form of politics arising in which the disclosure of the multiple ways of human being is made more explicit and therefore open to self-fashioning in ways that are often denied currently. This would involve a combination of different arts and sciences that could refashion both body and environment to make ethical living and regard for others on the planet a strongly felt motivation” (p.199).

I quote this passage at length because it captures some of the muddle that characterises this book. Are we really still required to stake the possibility of political progress on theoretical deductions of the “malleability” of human subjects, for
example? And anyway, is malleability actually the correct lesson to learn from all the work about affect, the passions, and emotions referred to and alluded to in this book? The idea that the world is just there awaiting to be re-made in the favoured image of any political movement seems peculiarly at odds with the temper of our times, in which flows of power tend to work in the opposite direction: it is the concerns and grievances and worries of ordinary people that buffet concentrations of power this way and that, and which seem ever less amenable to straightforward modes of political modulation. And, isn’t the invocation of “education” here rather disingenuous? Education may, no doubt, be a transformative experience, but that tends to depend rather heavily on the presumed capacity for rational reflection and reasoned learning amongst the subjects of the process. Education is not, however one thinks of it, and however much one admits that passion and emotion might lie at its heart, a process that could be legitimately described, much less practiced, as one of affective modulation of pre-personal currents of influence or psychotopical tuning of spheres of suggestibility. The incongruity of the appeal to education here underscores the incoherence of the vision of Left politics presented in *Arts of the Political*, a vision which oscillates between a theoretical account in which people’s beliefs and desires needs to be modulated by an avant-garde of well-meaning Leftist artists, designers, and bureaucrats; and one in which the arbitrary hope is to carve out zones of reflection in which people will have time to slow down and consider matters properly.

*Arts of the Political* is a peculiarly disheartening book. It outlines what the authors refer to as a “mid-range” view of politics while leaving well behind the tenets of “middle-range” social theory - there is little scope left here for “the specification of ignorance” about issues which might well require further exploration or analysis (see Merton 1968: 68). What this book provides instead is a political vision premised on a systematic account of how whole fields of action, practice, technology, institutionalisation, accumulation, control, and programming hang perfectly together.
The book might have some influence in academic debates about the politics of affect or the non-human, but even here, I suspect there are rather more serious, nuanced interpretations of these themes to be found out there. One certainly wonders about the salience of its vision of Left politics, depending as it does so strongly on a theoretical narrative in which rational knowing has been completely evacuated from the field of everyday life, and reserved instead solely for a range of professional fields that think of themselves, at least, as better and better able to know what makes people really tick. This theoretical narrative sharply divides and then neatly redistributes knowing and feeling very clearly between different actors, and in so doing posits a specific kind of implied reader with whom some of the books’ arguments might well find some resonance. It is a view of life in which people’s actions are accounted for mainly in terms of things that get done to them without them knowing, and it leaves you with a vision of politics reduced at best to so many expert interventions and artistic experiments.

*Arts of the Political* has very little of substance to say about the state of contemporary Left politics. It presumes that the Left has much to learn from a rather narrow range of philosophy and social theory, and much to learn also from the causal rationalities of selected fields of business, commerce, consultancy, and design. It gives no impression that there is much to learn about the disclosure of new political futures from contemporary Left political practice. Call me old fashioned, but I think this might get things the wrong way around.

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