



# Affective capitalism: Investments and investigations

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## Introduction

Experience taught me a few things. One is to listen to your gut, no matter how good something sounds on paper. The second is that you're generally better off sticking with what you know. And the third is that sometimes your best investments are the ones you don't make. (Trump, 1987: 58)

This editorial begins with a quote from a figure who hardly needs an introduction: Donald J. Trump, businessperson, television personality, author, politician, and the nominee of the Republican Party for President of the United States in the 2016 election. It is not only this quote, but also Trump's areas of influence that can be used to outline the different fields where we track the emergence and appearance of what, in the context of this special issue, will be defined as *affective capitalism*. Affective capitalism traverses different fields from business to politics, media to decision-making, investment to knowledge production. The citation is also a reminder of Brian Massumi's (2002) analysis of Ronald Reagan in 'Autonomy of affect', one of the core texts on affect theory. In the essay, Massumi argues that affect is a story about the brain and the brainless. It is a story about listening to your gut, no matter how good, bad, rational or irrational something sounds on paper. Listening to the gut, for Massumi (2002: 29), is to understand the force of 'a half-second lapse between the beginning of a bodily event and its completion in an outwardly directed, active expression'. Massumi conceptualises conscious intention and brain activity as different things; before intention or rational elaboration arrives, the body-brain has already formed a thought. Here, sticking to what you know is constantly challenged by the affectivity of the body, which can potentially evoke 'the new'.

If affect has the potential to arouse the body beyond rationality and activate us as subjects, it is no wonder that its powers have been subject of capture and capitalisation. What we call affective capitalism in this special issue, was already formulated by Massumi (2002: 45): ‘The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory’. There are a number of industries that invest in affect production from reality TV shows to social media sites, from celebrity blogs to the credit industry and lending businesses. To capitalise on affect is to capture, structure, and modulate the infrastructures where it moves (see Parikka in *Obsolete Capitalism*, 2013). When a businessman becomes a reality TV host and then a presidential candidate, what binds these different fields together is the ability to build affective infrastructures that appeal to people and activate crowds. We see and feel it happening, and yet what actually happens in the process is difficult to describe.

While the scientific premises of Massumi’s argument may be subject to criticism (e.g. Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012: 55-65), his idea of a body and its capacities to affect and become affected has been influential in what has been defined as the affective turn in cultural studies. In this context, Massumi’s ‘Autonomy of affect’ is only one of several significant branches of affect theory. In fact, in the *Affect theory reader*, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) note that there are a number of different approaches to affect theory ranging from Spinoza to psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and theorisations of materiality. Moreover, theories of affect and its manifestations in capitalism do not follow one particular branch, but emerge from various strands of theorisations. The different strands and their differing notions of affect are adapted and crossbred across disciplines. Methodological takes on affect vary not only according to the theoretical frames, but also according to context, topic, and discipline. Thus, in this special issue we emphasise the multiplicity of approaches that can be used to understand and elaborate on the ways in which different bodies, individual and collective, material and immaterial, technological and cultural, financial and economic come together, affect and become affected in different encounters.

## **Interconnections of affect and capitalism**

Affect theory has already been mapped in several publications (e.g. Clough, 2008; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Wetherell, 2012; Paasonen et al., 2015), and our aim is not to give a detailed overview of the field. However, a few theoretical trends dominate the discussion of affective capitalism, and as such deserve closer

examination. Some of the strands approach affect more pragmatically – and may even offer an explicit definition of it – while others do not try to specify affect, but understand it rather as modes of intensification, movement, and capacities. The latter notion of ‘affect’ is based on the above-mentioned idea – the bodily capacities to affect and become affected. In this view, affect is not so much a property of a subject or a body, confined to subjective human or non-human experiences, but rather an active, moving relation, and a collectively formed and circulated capacity (e.g. Stewart, 2007; Clough et al., 2007; Anderson, 2014).

The conceptualisation draws on a broader philosophical project, particularly on Gilles Deleuze’s idea of reality as a field of quantities of forces. These forces have the capacity to affect and be affected by other forces. The definition draws on Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* (Deleuze, 1988; 1990; 1992), and appears in a series of Deleuze’s (and Felix Guattari’s) works. In the Spinozian-rooted notion of affect as *bodily capacities*, bodies are not seen as entities, but rather as assemblages that extend beyond clearly defined boundaries (e.g. Massumi, 2002; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Blackman, 2012). Moreover, this account ‘moves away from a distinctive focus on the human body to bodies as assemblages of human and non-human processes’ (Blackman, 2012: 1), which further accentuates the dynamic nature of affect. Indeed, affect is irreducible, as Ben Anderson (2014: 17) suggests, and involves different forms and multiple processes of organisation, which are interconnected.

If affect is abstract and escapes exact definitions, capitalism feels almost like its opposite in the ways in which it has been theorised since Marx. In contemporary cultural and political theory, affect has been employed in critical readings of capitalism and post-Marxist revolutionary politics. The need for these theories has been evident especially among the younger generations in Europe struggling in the midst of financial and political crisis. They are facing what has been referred to as the ‘New Normal’, that is, material and affective unpredictability on a scale previously unheard of amongst the educated middle classes. Hence, theories of affect and capitalism often derive from analyses of post-Fordist precarity (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Berardi, 2009; Ross, 2009; Berlant, 2011a; Standing, 2011; Weeks, 2011; Fleming, 2014), academic and digital labour (e.g. Terranova, 2000; Ross, 2004; DeAngelis and Harvie, 2009; Gill, 2009; Hearn, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Scholz, 2013; Huws, 2014), and austerity politics (e.g. Quiggin, 2010; Blyth, 2013; Brown, 2015). Furthermore, theorisations of affect and capitalism often connect with the Italian autonomist movement, especially with the notions of refusal of work (Tronti, 1965/1980), immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996), and affective labour (Hardt, 1999).

Although theories of affect and capitalism have mostly been developed in the context of post-Fordist politics, we are aware that understanding capitalism as two monolithic frameworks, Fordism and post-Fordism, has been criticised. As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) argue, the historical tradition of Fordism is multidimensional and changing, not monolithic. Fordism entails, for instance, phases that Feruccio Gambino (1996) calls ‘pre-trade union Fordism’ during 1903-1941, and ‘regulationist Fordism’, which was connected to centralised union bargaining and Keynesian welfare systems. Therefore, theories of capitalism influenced by the Italian autonomist tradition should rather be seen as a European reaction to the erosion of the welfare state than as a universal theory of affect and capitalism. As Lauren Berlant notes, there have always been workers outside Fordist structures for whom ‘the ongoing prospect of low-waged and uninteresting labor is...nearly utopian’ (2007: 275). The articles in this special issue do not offer a universalising account of affective capitalism, but analyse affective capitalism in particular contexts – in fields such as entrepreneurial coaching, creative work, and brain research, mainly in Europe and North America.

There are tensions between the Italian autonomist tradition and feminist theory, labour history and affect theory due to the classed and gendered limits of the immaterial and affective labour debates (e.g. Dowling, 2007; Fantone, 2007; Morini, 2007; Weeks, 2007; Hearn, 2011; McRobbie, 2011). Nevertheless, autonomist theory has been essential for scholars analysing the affective structures of capitalism and new ways of making profit in post-Fordist capitalism. For autonomist theory, affect is key to understanding and contesting capitalism. The concept of affect is not only used to examine capitalism itself, but also to explain the highly affective relationship between capitalism and the worker. Mario Tronti, for instance, suggests that the path to the rejection of the ideology of self-management and capitalist production is through affect, as only the ‘alienated’ worker is truly revolutionary (Tronti, 1973: 117; see also Bowring, 2004: 108). In this tradition, affects thus have revolutionary potentiality.

Recently, autonomist Marxist theory has moved from considering the potentiality of antagonism to the potentiality of affirmative feelings such as love and desire. For Michael Hardt (2011), for instance, love seems to open up the possibility of a new world and the creation of powerful lasting bonds. In research on cultural work, this kind of analysis on capitalism and affects as transgressive has raised several questions in relation to post-Fordist work cultures where socializing is not only about pleasurable potentiality, but also a compulsory requirement for securing a job in the future (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2011; Hearn, 2011). Feminists, in particular, have argued that affects cannot be freed from capitalism because care work has always been an integral part of capitalist production and

the Fordist sexual contract (McRobbie, 2011; Adkins, 2016). Furthermore, in her discussion with Michael Hardt, Lauren Berlant argues that love is not entirely ethical as in both love and capitalism, ‘greed is good’ (2011b: 685). Taking into account these discussions, we want to highlight the ambivalence and messiness of affects, capitalism, and their interconnections. In other words, affective capitalism is a broad infrastructure in which the emotional culture and its classed and gendered history merge with value production and everyday life.

In addition to Deleuzian rooted conceptualisations of affect and the autonomist tradition, Eva Illouz’s (2007) historicisation of the emotional style of 20<sup>th</sup> century American capitalism has inspired contributors to this theme issue (Graefer, Vänskä, Mikotajewska-Zajac). Illouz does not operate with the concept of affect, but rather, offers a sociological analysis of an emotional culture. Illouz argues that the development of modern capitalism coincided with the development of an emotional culture where ‘emotional and economic discourses and practises mutually shape each other’ (*ibid.*: 5). In Illouz’s analysis, a therapeutic emotional style was central to the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘emotional capitalism’ (*ibid.*) in the USA. The therapeutic ideal of communication enabled a new kind of management of workers and provided a link between individuals’ self-understanding in the private and the public sphere. The contributions to this theme issue offer different approaches to analysing the characteristic formations of affect in contemporary capitalism. While the therapeutic discourse identified by Illouz continues to be influential in early 21<sup>st</sup> century management and self-help literature, the importance of affect for contemporary capitalism in many ways bypasses therapeutic discourse. With the development of big data, algorithmic culture and datafication – tools and technologies that make it possible to turn aspects of our life into computerised data and further into new forms of value – affect does not have to be verbalised as emotions in therapeutic communication in order for companies to be able to mine for profit the ‘archives of affect’ (Gehl, 2011) left by people’s digital media use, networked social relationships, and consumption habits.

Digital media and network culture have been identified as important features of the contemporary capitalist production and consumption of affect (e.g. Paasonen et al., 2015). Political theorist Jodi Dean (2009), for example, describes the merging of capitalism and democracy as ‘communicative capitalism’ where networked communications enable capitalism to profit from the democratic ideal of participation. In the digital media environment, participation is fetishised and formatted as contributions where the content is no longer relevant; only the circulation of messages matters. Thus, communicative capitalism captures political energies, packaging ‘political interventions...as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment’ (*ibid.*: 49). Several contributors to this theme

issue likewise analyse the ways in which social media, blogs and digital ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006) around television provide capitalism with the opportunity to exploit affective labour and the affects of media users (Graeber, Krüger, Nikunen, Sampson). However, by using the concept affective capitalism we want to signal a different focus than Dean’s concept of communicative capitalism, which is primarily concerned with the impact of networked communications on democracy. As Susanna Paasonen et al. (2015: 14) argue, affective values tie in with ‘political economy’, ‘human agency’, and ‘networked technologies’ in multiple ways. Moreover, digital networked communications, while important in contemporary capitalism, are not necessarily a defining feature of affective capitalism, as it is discussed in this special issue.

### **Mapping affective capitalism**

The contributions to the special issue address ways of capturing affect in different contexts, such as debt, media and popular culture, brain research, humanitarianism, and pedagogy. The articles by Greg Seigworth and John Carter McKnight and Adam Fish offer two different approaches to understanding the role of affect in cultures of debt and lending. Seigworth’s article examines body as a ‘debt garment’; how our relationship to credit and debt is evolving in contemporary control societies as a bodily garment, woven into everyday life as wearable ‘expressive infrastructure’ (Thrift, 2012). In a Deleuzian vein, Seigworth studies debt as affective, related to affective capacities of bodies. Turning his attention to ontology, Seigworth suggests that we are becoming the embodiments of affective capitalism through the growing engineering of living-with-debt. Gradually, the weight of debt-carriage on bodies and subjectivities will be distributed less by touch and more by gestures, which are hard to restrain. Offering a series of ‘threats’ to the subject, Seigworth considers the ethological, ecological, existential, ethical, and aesthetic aspects of indebtedness.

Carter McKnight and Fish draw from Deleuze’s idea of the double-movement of liberation and capture to explore how the peer-to-peer lending company Zopa Limited uses TV commercials in order to attract new clients. Here affective capitalism penetrates different media. TV commercials build what the authors call ‘idiotic collectives’ glued together by consumeristic affinities. These collectives are then invited to participate in the processes of lending that take place on an online platform where affect is again circulated in the form of trust. The authors draw a picture of affective capitalism where the rational or sensible (in the context of personal wealth-management, ‘Sensible loans for sensible people’) is mobilised through irrational and even absurd commercials that mobilise affect as emotional triggering.

The affectivity of the brain and triggering of the mind are discussed in several articles of this special issue. Tony Sampson develops a theoretical understanding of the dystopic conditions of affective capitalism through its various manifestations in everyday life. Beginning with Facebook's recent study of manipulating the emotions of the platform's users, Sampson turns attention to the brain as the folding of subjectivity and capitalism. Concepts such as neuroeconomics, neuromarketing, and neurospeculation point towards a turn where the brain is affected in order to manipulate emotions. Sampson's examples of the sensory stimulation of the brain range from marketing to Nazi propaganda and the rise of right-wing populism in 2015. Affect for Sampson operates between the brain and social relationality and is manifested in the moods and movements of the crowd.

Following Eva Illouz's thesis about the emotional style of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, Annamari Vänskä's article probes the role of emotions in pet dog consumerism, in the contemporary phase of emotional capitalism. Vänskä outlines the emotional history of the human-pet dog relationship, and shows how its formation intertwines with the emergence of capitalism and consumer culture. Analysing two contemporary companies as examples, Vänskä demonstrates how emotions are utilised in the language of marketing and how they are materialised through pet dog commodities. Using a posthumanist approach, she argues that the contemporary pet dog business constructs the dog as a privileged co-consumer.

Antti Saari and Esko Harni's article focuses on the ways spiritual experience and Zen Buddhism-inspired mindfulness meditation are used in entrepreneurial adult education and coaching. They argue that learning discourses resonate with certain dynamics of production in which the labour force has become a mental category, perpetuating discourses of self-fulfilment and flexibility. According to Saari and Harni's interpretation, mindfulness meditation highlights the ability to pay attention to the present, which is celebrated in business literature for its effect on concentration, creativity, and work efficiency. Mindfulness techniques can, therefore, be used to enhance well-being and productivity. The article analyses spiritual experience as an indicator of the inherent tensions in the economy and explores how these highest forms of human existence are used to generate profit. Saari and Harni observe that spiritual experience can be used to criticise capitalism and demonstrate the ways in which spirituality is often assimilated into the management of productive work.

Rhiannon Firth's article takes the context of neoliberal state discourse as its starting point. Firth explores how it harnesses affect in the production of compliant subjects and how the individualised and depoliticised discourses of

'well-being', emotional support and self-help undermine collective political struggle. Firth emphasises the role of the body in effective resistance and focuses on critical pedagogies that have the power to resist state affective discourse. The article draws on psychoanalytic and practiced pedagogies that aim to transgress the mind-body dualism and hierarchy. According to critical pedagogies, it is possible to problematise affective states and thereby raise the political consciousness of learners. Firth's treatise extends beyond these approaches by relying on utopian practices that involve learning through movement, play, and physical activity. These incorporate elements of 'somatic' theory that proposes a holistic approach to the relationships between body, mind, and (human and non-human) 'others'.

A number of the contributions to this issue focus on the role of affect in contemporary media economy and participatory culture. In her article, Anne Graefer analyses the humour of celebrity gossip blogs in terms of affective and emotional labour. Drawing on a wide body of literature from cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, and studies of immaterial labour and cultural work, Graefer argues that celebrity gossip blogs offer a window to the complex, messy and multi-layered cycles of contemporary affective capitalism. Graefer's article sets out to investigate the cycles of making profit in affective capitalism from three perspectives. Firstly, Graefer argues that humour valorises and masks the tiresome and precarious working conditions of bloggers. The work of being funny attaches bloggers to the cycles of contemporary affective capitalism, which relies on creative, precarious, and self-exploitative working conditions to create value. Secondly, humour accretes value for capital by creating a buzz or conversation about a celebrity story. Graefer's examples illuminate humour as central to making economic profit in social media, because it has the capacity to stimulate online interactions through affective 'stickiness'. Hence, thirdly, the uses of humour conceal how the ridiculing and shaming of seemingly 'trashy celebrities' functions to weave people deeper into economic circuits.

Moving away from 'trashy' celebrity gossip, Kaarina Nikunen's article analyse instances where popular media offers itself as a platform for 'doing good'. Nikunen explores the trend for charity reality television where hosts help participants solve a range of real life problems or raise funds for charitable organisations. Earlier research on affect and reality television has discussed how reality TV makes women's care work a source of value for media industries, but also a potential source of personal value for female participants and viewers (Skeggs, 2010; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Nikunen shows how care work gains new value when it is performed by male reality television hosts, who use their performances of affect and care to build their own brand as good citizens. For humanitarian organisations struggling with reaching audiences in a fragmented

digital media environment, the affective technologies of reality television offer the promise of turning emotional audience reactions into participation and donations.

The question of the affectivity of participation is also central to Steffen Krüger's analysis of the *min 22. juli (my 22nd of July)* internet page hosted by VG Nett, an online platform of the biggest Norwegian tabloid daily, *Verdens Gang*. The website was set up a year after Anders Behring Breivik mass-murdered 77 people in Norway. It was conceived as part of the public commemorations of the tragic events and was designed to give Norwegians a platform for individually articulating the ways in which they had been affected by the events. Krüger focuses on the emerging forms of interaction between users and the platform. By analysing both published and censored posts, Krüger notes that affect itself became a constitutive, a priori requirement for participating in the platform.

In her note, Karolina Mikołajewska-Zajac highlights some of the difficulties in the changing nature of work done in the so-called sharing economy. Mikołajewska raises key theoretical questions concerning distinctions between production and consumption on the one hand, and between work and labour on the other. The note concentrates on an empirical case, Couchsurfing, which has been discussed in sociological and ethnographic studies focusing on affects and affective labour. However, as Mikołajewska-Zajac points out, these studies need updating, because Couchsurfing changed its legal status from a non-profit organisation to a for-profit organisation in 2011. Through analysing the case of Couchsurfing, the note makes a critical intervention in discussions on notions of affective labour, immaterial labour, free labour and social factory.

### **An appealing mode of capture**

The contributions in this special issue provide answers to the question of what affective capitalism is, not by giving essential definitions of the concept, but rather by mapping different places, conditions and apparatuses where we observe affective capitalism at work. We use the notion of affective capitalism to describe a particular mode of capture where resonances between bodies – both human and non-human alike – enter systems of value and value production. Affective capitalism appeals to our desires, it needs social relationships, and organises and establishes them. Our capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies.

The approach in this issue highlights the processuality, relationality and materiality of affective capitalism, as well as the need to recognise, identify and

trace its 'modalities and apparatuses' (Grossberg, 2010) in late capitalism in particular. These modalities and apparatuses, which operate on cognitive, non-cognitive, and even pre-cognitive regimes have different names. In the context of this special issue, we identify only some of them. In other instances, affective capitalism merges with established therapeutic discourses and blurs the limits of intimacy and labour (Illouz, 2007; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Berlant, 2011a). Discussions of neuro-marketing (Sampson, 2012), analysis of how financial markets are affected by non-human actors such as trading algorithms (Borch et al., 2015), and analysis of how our relationships to credit/debit change (Deville, 2015), show how affective encounters challenge and supplement economic rationalism (Massumi, 2015). These instances, for us, are different faces of affective capitalism, which are constantly transforming.

The holistically understood concept of affect draws together bodies and their environment and relations with other bodies through 'forces of encounter' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 3). To rephrase, then, affective capitalism is a mode of production where systems of organising production and distribution rely on the capacities of *different* bodies, human and non-human, to encounter each other. These encounters and the relations that emerge are surrounded by a vast array of technologies that produce, capture, valorise, commodify and eventually attempt to transform them into different modes of capital.

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