

# A POLITICS OF THE PRESENT?

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*James Ash*

Chris Ingraham, *Gestures of Concern*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020; 159pp, \$26.95

In *Gestures of Concern*, Chris Ingraham offers an important addition to a growing literature on affect and political and social change. To do this, Ingraham offers an exploration of a range of examples drawn mainly from social and digital media. Ingraham's key claim is that there is a need to attend to 'ordinary actions' on digital and social media that don't seem to have much noticeable effect, but build an 'affective commonwealth' (p2). Ingraham argues that affirming inconsequential gestures is important because it enables new forms of being together that can create change. In his words:

gestures of concern are those "sense of something" actions whose efforts typically yield no perceptible effects, while nevertheless building the affective conditions in which more deliberate modes of engagement might gain some purchase (p26).

To explain how and why gestures of concern become meaningful, Ingraham details a wide range of examples, from Google Earth artwork to TED talk rules and online book review platforms. This is a good book; well written, well-argued and logically put together, which results in a piece of work that should be read and cited within rhetoric, media and cultural studies and a range of associated academic fields. At the same time, the book raises a number of questions around the utility of strongly relational versions of affect theory for enabling ways of thinking political change.

The book's theory of gestures of concern draws upon pre-existing work on affect, including key theorists such as Jodi Dean (2005), Brian Massumi (2002) and Gilles Deleuze (1988).<sup>1</sup> In this vein, *Gestures of Concern* defines affect in a relational sense as 'emergent' phenomena (p73) that both underlies and exceeds particular or individual human and non-human bodies. Like many others working within the remit of this form of affect theory, such an account results in a notion of politics that exceeds representation and works to affirm the openness and possibility of the world to be otherwise (e.g. more equal, less violent). For Ingraham, this is a non-instrumental model of politics, whereby: 'what matters so much about concerned gestures is their open-endedness, the way they produce a horizon of interpret-ability rather than something prefabricated for a particular interpretation' (p184).

Over the last ten years there have been a number of critiques of this kind of non-instrumental affective politics, which suggest it is too vague

1. J. Dean, 'Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics', *Cultural Politics* 1(1), 2005, pp51-74; G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1988; B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 200

2. R. Leys, 'The Turn to Affect: A Critique', *Critical Inquiry* 37(3), 2011, pp434-72.

3. N. Thrift, N. (2004) 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86(1), 2004, pp57-78.

and ephemeral to provide a useful road map to enabling concrete social change.<sup>2</sup> Ingraham is aware of this critique. In the epilogue to the book he acknowledges:

Throughout this book, I have suggested that concern is an active vector that colours experience and motivates action, even when the 'action' takes a more gestural and understated form. Well, so what? Why should you care? (p187).

Answering his own question he responds, in the vein of other affect theorists such as Nigel Thrift,<sup>3</sup> that thinking affectively is important because gestures of concern can 'disclose the possibility of a more affirmative and inclusive manner of relations' (p187).

There is a genuine importance to this approach and it would seem essential for any mode of progressive politics to uphold the possibility and openness of situations. At the same time, Ingraham doesn't push the politics of this approach beyond a general sense of affirmation into something more specific. The remainder of the review thinks through some of the reasons why adopting a strongly relational affective perspective might result in a position that seems to be wary of offering a programmatic account of how progressive affective commonwealths can be built. The discussion of these potential reasons are not critiques of the book, but rather provide some food for thought for interested readers and those concerned with the politics of affect.

First, when affect is theorised in the book, it is considered as 'emergent' (p73). In turn, it becomes difficult to state with any degree of certainty what kind of affect an encounter might produce: 'The affective is hard to identify, let alone trace, because it can neither be affixed to an individual on the basis of being personal, the way feelings can, nor be semanticised socially, in the way of emotions' (p150). Rather, affect 'is always manifesting anew through the relationality itself' (p150). For instance, Ingraham discusses gesture and change in terms of mood. In his words, 'Social moods or tones are always shared, even as they contribute in shaping individual dispositions at the level of an enfolded body. All dispositions are also predispositions, before *and* after they become readable, just as all conditions have already been preconditions, and are always becoming new preconditions in-the-act' (p6). Recognising that conditions become pre-conditions and vice versa is undoubtedly important, but suggesting that the affective outcome of gestures of concern are apprehended primarily within the present moment – 'in-the-act', would seem to make it difficult to claim that a particular gesture of concern might produce a repeatable affirmative or progressive community outside of a given relation.

This issue leads to a second point, which is that focusing on affect as emergent results in a book that is perhaps better at offering post-rationalised

accounts of what affective gestures of concern do after an event of encounter, than it is in providing a road map as to how gestures of concern can be organised and directed in an intentional sense into the future. Ingraham recognises this point when drawing upon the work of Raymond Williams: ‘Williams knew that because the felt experience of any social totality is only accessible retrospectively, at which point the feeling is calcified and gone, structures of feeling can only ever be a “cultural hypothesis” about a “social experience which is still *in process*.”’ (p5, emphasis in original). As the above statement suggests, from an affective perspective, ‘social totality is only accessible retrospectively’. While this may result in fascinating accounts of the processual coming into being of life, feeling and sensation through gestures of concern, the book perhaps offers less for those looking to build cumulative gestures of concern that work to create durable affective commonwealths and communities for the future out of the present moment. That is not to say that such a move would be impossible. For example, in chapter two, Ingraham uses the work of Sara Ahmed<sup>4</sup> to discuss ‘sticky’ affects (p75) and there seems to be some potential here to think about how affects stick and cohere in ways that exceed a retrospective reading of the present moment.

4. S.Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

Despite these questions, this is a thoughtful book that is rich with detail and draws all manner of examples together to argue for the importance of minor acts in producing affective commonwealths and communities. As such, it would be of interest to many readers of *New Formations*.

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