

Politics, Desire, and the Ordinary: Two Blog Entries

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The following two pieces come from Supervalent Thought (my research blog), which tracks academic and random engagements with two scenes and concepts: ordinary life and attachment/detachment. I want to know why people stay attached to lives that don't work. This is a political and a personal question. Psychoanalysis meets affect theory and Marxist critical theory. The projected book's current title is Detachment Theory: Its aim is to describe non-sovereign subjectivity in a variety of scenes, like Anxiety, Limerence, Passive Aggression, Torture...

Another aspect of the blog's animating project is to learn how to write: to experiment with narrating the ordinary via the usually lost moments of gesture, glance, and tonal intensity; to track aleatory experience; to figure out how concepts and encounters open up consciousness without having themselves to be dramatically memorable events; to understand better what an event is, and can be. This is a question of storytelling, remediating the stuff of paying attention. I want to think about how, in these encounters, people endure what's overwhelming: being in the room with what's structurally unjust, affectively impossible. Like all affective scenes, injustice is both a structural fact and a sense of something. I think that these wants are related.

<www.supervalentthought.wordpress.com>

AGAINST SEXUAL SCANDAL

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If I were an actual public intellectual, here's an op-ed I would write. I don't know actually how to write this kind of thing, it's more pop-ed than op-ed since it popped out of me when I woke up at 5 this morning. Advice, emendation, commentary are very welcome, and I appreciate it especially if you comment here rather than via email, because then it really is world-building.

Shockingly, a slightly altered version of this post is now up at [The Nation](#). Also, a critical read of it has been posted at [Pandagon](#). I left a response [there](#).

Against Sexual Scandal

Whatever happens to Elliot Spitzer as a result of the revelations about prostitution the force of this story is not, once again, why big men do stupid sexual things, or why Type A's get tired of being so *good* and have to become *bad* just to attain some balance. The story is also not about how righteous moralists *always* have a dark secret they're creating noise to distract us from paying attention to. It is not really, either, a good opportunity for dancing in the streets because one more powerful person has come tumbling down—after all, some powerful people are better than others, and when the person falls from the mighty naughty force of their appetites nothing about power is changed at all, quite the contrary. The law, the family, marriage—exit polls suggest that all of these will be the winner here, after being horribly maligned by a bad man who forgot his oaths to honor them.

Instead, what stories like this really do is to damage the reputation of sex. Whenever there's a sex scandal, I feel sorry for sex. I felt sorry for sex during the Larry Craig brouhaha last summer. What if he *liked* being married and procreating *and* giving anonymous head? What if that was his sexual preference? What if he was not really *gay*, as he claims, but had sexual desires that seemed incoherent from a normative perspective? Some of the response to Craig was like the response to moralists like Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, and now Spitzer—moralists deserve to suffer the same force of negative judgment they wielded on others. Shame on us? Shame on you, ha ha! But lots of the response was sheer homophobia. And all of it was sheer erotophobia.

Erotophobia, fear of sex, tinged toward hatred of sex. Public sexual scandals revel in the hatred of sex. Disgust at the appetites. The strangeness of sex, the ordinary out-of-controlness of sex acts and sex drives that we all experience (if we're having it). Actually, usually, sex is not a threat to very much. But it *feels* like a threat to *something*, which is why so many people stop having it.

So when a sexual scandal happens, people indulge in projections of what makes them uncomfortable about sex: its weirdness (I was just standing up and talking and now I'm doing *this?*), its sloppiness, its awkwardness, its seeming disconnection from so many other "appropriate" drives (to eat, for example). Then there's one's fear of becoming a mere instrument of someone else's pleasure, in a way that one doesn't want.

Nonetheless, I'm just saying, I really like sex. We have no idea what sex would be like in a world that saw it basically as a good. A weird good. A good that can tip you over and make you want to do strange things. A good that can reveal your incoherence, your love of a little disorder, your love of a little control (adjust the dial as you like). A good that can make you happy, for a minute, before the cat starts scratching the corner of the bed, or the phone rings, or the kids mew, or you're hungry and sleepy, or you need another drink, or the taxi comes.

In "queer theory," where I live, sex is often associated with shame. It is not only that people shame us because of our association with sex (see "erotophobia," above). Sex itself is said, variously, to reveal our narcissism or regressive tendencies, and our aggressions too. It is not just "pastoral," an expression of goodness or communication between (or among!) hearts. It is not just lovely and loving. It's a drive, and that's shaming. And exciting. It needs "sexual ethics" for taming.

At the same time, it's also playful, if you can remember that part; it's also ridiculous and hilarious, if you can remember to notice that. It can also be very interesting and various, if you want it to be, as lots of people do.

And who knows what else it could be if so many people didn't fear and hate it so much that people with complicated needs have to hide and secret it from their loved ones, to whom they have promised to make more sense than anyone can make. Who knows what sex could be if people were encouraged to enjoy it as play rather than as a drama, a genuine test of recognition, or tool of unwanted control over selves and others.

I feel sorry for everyone in Spitzer's nimbus; but I feel *really* sorry for sex. Once again it has appeared in public, as it usually does, as a bad thing that people do to people. Sometimes, too often, it is. But realism about sexuality, about what it could be, deserves better. It deserves comedy too—not romance, and not, so inevitably, more stories about tragedy and scandal.

LOOKING FOR MR. (W)RIGHT

May 7, 2008, 11:33 am

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This is how love starts: a crush. Your body intensifies, gaining and losing confidence in the presence of a person, an image, an idea, or a thing: in a crush, you have a feeling that you feel compelled to keep having. The pressure disorganizes you, opens you up to reverie, anxiety, defense, risk. You are forced into frenzies of adjustment; you feel tilted forward. Sometimes that's enough: being mentally with your crush is all you want. Sometimes you try to repeat being near the thing that stimulates the intensities. Later, you notice the collateral damage: what you have had to put up with to have that feeling. Sometimes it's too much, sometimes it's not that hard to endure. What's really hard to endure, though, is facing up to ambivalence.

In love plots and politics, popular culture has a terrible track record dealing with ambivalence. This is another thing the Jeremiah Wright story reveals. The media focuses on the negative side: aversion, disappointment. It doesn't focus on the *pull*: this part of the person is great, the other not so much. It's as though it's idealization or nothing. Politics becomes chick flick. Ambivalence, then, is seen as evidence of failure, not as what it is: evidence of *desire*, attachment, longing, not just for a better world but for assurance that it's worth staying attached to the political itself. The simple crush on having that feeling again translates politically into wanting to re-experience the feeling that made you optimistic.

Grant Farred calls this "fidelity to the political"; Antonio Gramsci called it "optimism of the will." To give up caring, after all, is to stop resisting what's clearly outrageous, unjust, not fair, wrong. It's giving in to political depression. To stay close to that desire, though, one might shift to a softer optimism—I think that's the usual thing. Just as people close their eyes when they kiss, so too there's an impulse to close one's eyes during the political season just to protect their optimism for a less bad politics, maybe even a good politics, enabling the chance for change that would be fundamental yet not traumatic. Change without loss; revolution without risk. We know better, because in any desire, political or otherwise, there's always risk and the possibility of loss (of comfort, privilege, or knowing how to live). The fantasy of change that would produce flourishing without loss is a deep logic of the crush that can turn into love.

I'm writing this now for obvious reasons. In this season the cynic and the critic provide choruses of shame against my nervous system's interest in caring about what happens in the political, in wanting something from it. Whenever Hillary Clinton opens her mouth sarcastically to demean political hope I am filled with rage, and my mouth spills out excessively with expletives. Without a desire for the political there is no democracy.

Outrages proliferate around us, and Maureen Dowd writes about the *cojones* it takes to eat frosting, ice cream, orange juice, and drink Budweiser. James Carville crows about Hillary Clinton's mutant testicles. When did balls become a legitimate political metric, by the way? I blame *The Daily Show*. In any case, let me repeat: Without a desire for the political there is no democracy. All that other stuff is noise trying to dilute our focus on the substantive material that props up the intensity of our commitment to that.

You might also want to check out Jacques Ranciere, Jose Muñoz, David Graeber, or Avery Gordon on this subject. Additionally, there's an anthology of interviews called *Hope*, edited by Mary Zournazi. Their politics are not identical to each other's, nor to mine. They alike value the drive to remain attached to the political, to not confuse small victories with no victories, and they respect the havoc of desire as something that a vitalized political sphere incites and requires. To learn things, to be animated and expanded, one does not have to agree with everything in what one hears or reads. One can be ambivalent, and figure out whatever it takes next to push things toward the better good life. Do I *really* have to write this?

I guess this means that I am an elite. An elite, in this season, is not someone with more money than other people: the word for that is *privilege*. When the aspersion "elite" is cast, it means that some incitement to normative political emotion has not produced normative moral clarity. It means that someone wanted to step back and be curious about what Wright meant when he said x, and what he meant when he said y, and to assess the confusions in it all, since no matter what political orientation someone has, *people are politically incoherent*. It means to want realism about how people listen to each other at church or in class: that is, not very well or consistently (sigh). I think that solidarity can be strong while being mixed. It's not that I'm not visceral, but I also have curiosity about what's visceral, since my intuitions are *trained*.

I want to know, who is orchestrating these political emotions, and to what end? But the bigger question is: How can we become *educated* by our political ambivalence, to make stronger and more effective demands on the political to deserve our desire for it?