

SENSUOUS MATERIALISM

Extract from Max Farrar & Kevin McDonnell, *Big Flame: Rethinking Radical Politics*, London, UK: Merlin Press. (forthcoming)

Sensuous materialism

One theme for these two concluding chapters is the tentative offer of a new framework for 21st century radical politics. I suggest that our politics should be guided by a philosophy that combines a Marxist understanding of materialism with a sociology and psychology (inspired by Sigmund Freud) of the affective dimensions of life. Activists would then pay as close attention to the emotional dimensions of life as we do to the material context in which people live and struggle. This philosophy could be called ‘sensuous materialism’, deliberately evoking the early writings of Karl Marx that included the adjective ‘sensuous’. For example, when he explained his view of human action, and his critique of previous forms of materialist thought, the young Marx wrote:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.¹

All humans — including activists and intellectuals — are fleshly, sensuous, subjective (and thus emotional), active makers of their own material lives; the philosophy best equipped to critique the world we have made is, it is argued here, a type of materialism, equally rooted in analysis of the contingencies of physical labour and the vagaries of emotion.² Just as the hard left largely ignored Marx’s early writings, marxists in general lost sight of the sensuousness of human existence, concentrating instead on its economic dimensions.

Sensuous materialism would combine Freud with Marx. The next chapter will have much to say about the narcissism that gorges on and is fed by consumerism; it is Freud’s conceptualisation of human drives and needs, usually operating beyond the realm of reason, promoting love and hate, lust and rage — all the light and dark in human activity — that we need to utilise in order to enlarge our analysis of human existence. Freud and his followers (including marxists such as Herbert Marcuse) provide the tools we need to make sense of the irrational and emotional dimensions of life. In their critique of reactionary cultural and political movements that appear to eschew reason, marxists too often fall back upon the patronising concept of ‘false consciousness’. Our critique would be much improved if we used Freudian analysis of the unconscious and the mechanics of repression. For example, Freudian thought helps us explain the intense fear and loathing of the

¹ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845, in Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, *Selected Works*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973, pp. 28-30. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm> Accessed 20.5.18 Italics as in the original.

² There may be a hint of this type of analysis in William Morris’s advocacy, in 1892, of a socialism that promotes ‘art, research . . . pleasure’, since at least art and pleasure are sensuous and emotional activities. Socialism, for Morris, was not ‘mere amelioration of the condition of certain groups of labour, necessarily at the expense of others . . . not to level down and level up till we are all sharing in a poor life, stripped of energy, without art, research of pleasure’. Cited in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris — Romantic to revolutionary*, London, Merlin Press, 1955, 1977, pp. 599-600.

Other that drives right-wing populist movements.³ In general the left seems to regard psychoanalytical thought as reductionist and individualist. There are signs, however, that this hostility to psychology is diminishing, as it has to face up to the surge in support for populist and often racist right-wing leaders.⁴

Most marxists have been too hostile to idealism; most sociologists too hostile to personal psychology, so many politicians would reject Michael Edwards' claim: 'Love – an antidote to the self-interested, mindless pursuit of growth and power that is the bedrock of our unjust economies – can be a force for social change'.⁵ Big Flame in several respects was at the soft end of marxism (we were feminists; lots of its men sang on demos; some of us joined Men's Groups) but it never put 'love' in its manifestos. Most members would probably have worried about its romanticist connotations, its implication that coupledness was the main goal of life. Now, however, the necessity for a politics that places at its centre meaningful, sensual, emotionally empathic and egalitarian relationships is much clearer. Sensuous materialism is the philosophy that, by placing equal weight on the emotional and the economic dimensions of social life, can provide an underpinning for a viable radical politics for today.

In offering sensuous materialism in the 21st century, we recall the origins of Big Flame in the sexual and political liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly feminism, and those movements' longing for a new world order. This philosophy was well expressed by Sheila Rowbotham in a 1969 editorial for the revolutionary underground newspaper *Black Dwarf*. Appealing directly to the men who dominated the movements, reminding them that they 'have nothing to lose but [their] chains', Sheila Rowbotham wrote that, after gender equality had been achieved:

There will be thousand of millions of women people to discover, touch and become, who will understand you when you say we must make a new world in which we do not meet each other as exploiters and used objects. Where we love one another and into which a new kind of human being can be born.⁶

³ Robert Young, the radical historian of science and Kleinian psychotherapist has explained: 'The psychological characteristics of racism are splitting, violent projective identification, stereotyping and scapegoating'. In societies like ours where the myth of racial hierarchy has been naturalised, individuals split off the unbearable aspects of their unconscious and project these onto others. They coalesce in like-minded groups. 'The unbearable and unacceptable parts of the group and the individual may be wishes, fears, idealisations, denigrations. When they get split off and projected into others, anxiety in the self and the group is diminished. When the others take them up and behave according to the stereotype, the projection is vindicated: in the "lazy nigger", the "cunning yid", the "crazy Indian", the "fanatical Arab".' Robert M Young, *Mental Space*, Chapter 6 'Projective Space: The Racial Other', London, Process Press, 1994, p. 93 and p. 96. Note that this type of analysis can be applied to leftists who are also capable of splitting and projecting (which explains the narcissism of small differences and mutual loathing among leftists).

⁴ Wilhelm Reich's Freudian analysis of the Nazis, and Marcuse's effort to combine Freud with Marx were influential in the 1960s and '70s. A strand of feminism since the 1970s has enthused over Lacan's interpretation of Freud. These currents have had little support in the left, but, in 2018 the columnist Suzanne Moore wrote: 'Freud as a self-help guru killed Freud the revolutionary. But he is a revolutionary, and let's get him back as one. I have changed my mind about him because he changes minds. We live in an age where the repressed has returned. And it's dark, dark stuff'. Susanne Moore, 'If we want a different politics, we need another revolutionary: Freud'. *Guardian Journal*, 26.12.18. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/26/politics-sigmund-freud-revolutionary-marx> Accessed 29.12.18

⁵ Michael Edwards, editor, Transformation, *openDemocracy*. Email to subscribers on Valentine's Day 14.2.19.

⁶ Cited by Tariq Ali *Street Fighting Years: An autobiography of the sixties*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 312.

Evocatively combining the critique of material exploitation and objectification with our vision of a society that nurtures new human beings becoming capable of genuine love, not the mediated, saccharine ‘love’ promoted under capitalism, Rowbotham here exemplifies a sensuous materialist analysis dedicated to utter transformation in economy, society and subjectivity. In her groundbreaking book *Hidden from History* published a few years later, Rowbotham offered an example of the need for this approach to politics. Criticising a 1934 book called *Sex and Revolution*, she said the author ‘reduces the relationship [of caring for children] to a task of mere economic production with emotion and feeling somehow detached from the material needs of the child’.⁷

‘Emotional labour’ is a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, referring to the way that workers are increasingly compelled to conjure up and manifest (preferably positive) emotions in their facial expressions and bodily movements. Scholarship abounds that applies this concept to the routine actions of waiters, flight attendants, nurses, teachers, police officers, administrators and others. Emotional labour takes place in all kinds of domestic settings too. Thus a woman in Sam Bowers’ 2018 novel *Perfidious Albion* took a swipe at the way that men had now claimed this field for themselves: ‘It was, Jess thought, the age of beatified masculine emotion. Everywhere you looked, men were sweeping up awards for feeling things’.⁸

Studies of emotional labour are a relevant source for examining how emotion is played out at work and at home, but sensuous materialism has larger ambitions: to guide a fully humanised analysis of the way that we live today, of the material and psychological structures that influence our lives, and to provoke transformational activity in all dimensions of life. This type of analysis is exemplified by another founder of the women’s liberation movement, once a member of Big Flame, Lynne Segal, who said of her book *Radical Happiness* (2018) that she was always addressing ‘our attachment to life’. What promotes our well-being, she said, is:

having friends and contacts; it’s making life meaningful, together with others. Confronting the ubiquitous neoliberal rationality, endorsing only individual competitiveness — individual or corporate — we need to hold on to alternative ways of connecting with each other.⁹

Life, Segal argued, is made meaningful when humans form bonds with one another that are not polluted by neoliberal rationality. It goes without saying that these bonds are emotionally charged, and these emotions need analysing and working upon. In a similar vein, reminding us that feminist praxis is a major source for sensuous materialist philosophy, Lara Feigel has argued that ‘it’s more necessary than ever to form communities of insight and sensitivity situated determinedly within the realm of feminism’.¹⁰ This way of thinking has been applied to the electoral success of Donald Trump and right wing populism. Coining the term ‘emotional politics’, Edward Sugden wrote:

⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History — 300 years of women’s oppression and the fight against it*, London, Pluto Press, 1977 (Third edition), p. 141.

⁸ Sam Bowers, *Perfidious Albion*, London Faber & Faber. Kindle Locations 140-141.

⁹ Lynne Segal in conversation with Jo Littler, ‘Democracy in the Making’, *Soundings — a journal of politics and culture*, Issue 69, Summer 2018, p. 113. Italics as in original.

¹⁰ Lara Feigel, “‘A different way of living’ — why writers are celebrating middle age”, *Guardian Review*, 11.8.18. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/11/viv-albertine-deborah-levy-rachel-cusk-divorce-menopause-midlife> Accessed 11.8.18

Ideology and demography no longer provide a satisfactory explanation for the results of elections. Something else brings this bloc [the ultra rich and sections of white working class] together — mass emotion which has taken the place of ideological identification. What unites the electoral victories of nationalist populists is their ability to manipulate affect, to induct their voters into a shared mood that usually resonates in the key of anger and hate. So could ‘emotional politics’ of this kind also be used to anchor a progressive revival?

Sugden answered his question affirmatively, advocating that the left create a positive emotional mood in its campaigns, employing ‘optimism over fear, love over hate, care over callousness and tolerance over hatred’.¹¹ Paul Mason agreed. He claimed that both left and right-wing efforts to disrupt neoliberalism in recent years are the result an effort to reinsert ‘emotion, and with it feelings of identity, place, nation and class’ into politics.¹² But this heightening of emotional expression spreads well beyond the political realm: it suffuses everyday life. A sensuous materialist philosophy would inspire radical thoughts, feelings and political actions capable of overturning the type of capitalism (may we call it ‘emotional capitalism’?) that has been constructed in the richest countries over the past thirty years or so.¹³

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¹¹ Edward Sugden, ‘Donald Trump and the politics of emotion’ in *openDemocracy*, 11.11.18, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/edward-sugden/donald-trump-and-politics-of-emotion> This article appeared in the section of this online magazine called ‘Transformation’ with its strap-line ‘Where love meets social justice’.

¹² Paul Mason, ‘A new politics of emotion is needed to beat the far right’, *Guardian Journal*, 26.11.18. Online version available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/26/liberals-politics-emotion-right-wing-populists>. Accessed 20.12.18.

¹³ In her novel *After the Peace* (2018), Fay Weldon wrote that ‘the millennials’ put ‘feelings above facts’ (quoted by Dalya Alberge, ‘Don’t be beastly to millennials: their parents are to blame’, *Guardian* 28.9.18 p. 3.). This spasm of emotionalism has important sociological roots and ramifications. For example, William Davies, previewing his book *Nervous States* (2018), argued that the Enlightenment paradigm of divorcing ‘fact’ from ‘emotion’ has partially broken down, with contemporary nationalist populism swept up in a politics that eschews fact and revels in emotion. He explained how, as anxiety about terrorism in 2017 was ever-present, social media ‘synchronise attention and emotion’. The cover page for the article had this title: ‘High Anxiety: How feelings took over the world’. *Guardian Review*, No. 34, 8.9.18. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/08/high-anxiety-how-feelings-took-over-the-world> Accessed 10.9.18. The proposed philosophy of sensuous materialism provides us with a lens through which we can analyse both the economic and emotional structures that underpin people’s everyday lives.