Habit, Speculative Pragmatism, and Social Transformation

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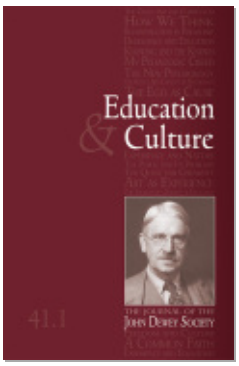

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Abstract The logics of habit are at the heart of a range of complex developments that are reshaping the nature of contemporary social and (im)material life. This article brings together pragmatist and continental philosophies, social and cultural theories, and affect studies to explore the relationship between habit and processes of social transformation. Unfolding a speculative pragmatism of habit fit to navigate the uncertainties of the present, I argue that approaching social change "in a minor key" requires that we understand habits not simply as mindless forms of repetition that reproduce the status quo, but rather as moving assemblages that enable new affective, material, and political capacities and collectives to emerge.

Keywords affect, Dewey, habit, pragmatism, Ravaisson, social change

The guiding question of this year's John Dewey Society annual meeting is "(How) is Deweyan Pragmatism Critical?" I am really pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this question today,[1] as it is one that has been central to my own thinking over the past decade or so concerning the role of everyday habits in collective transformation. This work culminated in my recent book, *Revolutionary Routines: The Habits of Social Transformation*,[2] which brings together pragmatist and continental philosophy with social and cultural theories and affect studies to explore the relationship between habit and social change at the intersection of contemporary transnational politics, new technologies of governance, and networked social movements.

As a growing range of self-help literature — from Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*[3] to James Clear's *Atomic Habits*[4] — underscores, change at

the level of habit is an affectively charged topic of significance to many. With the rise of wearable biosensing technologies that "gather real-time information from [our] bodies and lives," we can now self-track everything from sleep to anxiety to fertility and seek to adjust our habitual practice accordingly.[5] We are perhaps often preoccupied with our habits, patterns, and repetitions because they seem so central to who we are, who we wish we were not, or who we want to become. Indeed, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey goes as far as to argue that there exists no "true self" apart from habitual modes of conduct; rather, "we are the habit."[6]

My work, however, has also been interested in how habit management and modification are processes of much wider social, political, economic, and ecological salience. Governing via habit is a primary tool of neoliberal and neocolonial states,[7] and algorithms premised on pattern recognition increasingly fuel processes of global capitalism, international securitization, and transnational knowledge production.[8] Institutions, in turn, have their own habits: they are animated by tendencies shaped by the bodies that inhabit them; for instance, habits of whiteness.[9] In the midst of the Anthropocene, moreover, collective human habits pertaining to energy, pollution, waste, farming, and food are figured as both the cause of and the solution to the global climate crisis.[10]

The logics of habit are, in other words, at the heart of a range of complex developments that are reshaping the nature of contemporary social and (im)material life. Throughout *Revolutionary Routines*, I trace the narratives of transformation that might be considered dominant (or habitual) within social and cultural theory and the wider realms of philosophy, governance, media, and political activism, and consider what material and ethical possibilities thinking and feeling differently about social change might open up. While it is frequently assumed that meaningful transformation requires dissolving or breaking free from problematic forms of habituation, pragmatist and continental philosophers suggest that habits never really die; rather, they must be creatively repurposed. Habit thus acts as *pharmakon*: it is, as the philosopher Catherine Malabou suggests, drawing on Jacques Derrida, "at once poison and remedy."[11]

Engaging more deeply with this double logic of habit, I suggest, might better attune us to how particular patterns of action become ingrained, but also to how new modes of responsivity might be actualized and sustained across various embodied, ethical, and ecological realms. In what follows, I reflect on some of the personal and political influences that compelled my own "turn to habit"—and to Deweyan pragmatism more broadly—and engage with key themes addressed in the book in light of current sociopolitical challenges, events, and atmospheres. I consider how a "speculative pragmatism"[12] that weaves together insights concerning habit, consciousness, agency, and change from philosophy, social and cultural theory, affect

theory, critical race studies, and feminist theory can offer a generative framework to engage contemporary projects of progressive change—in ways that do not take the meaning of "progress" for granted.

While my project seeks to offer an alternative understanding of transformation fit to navigate the unfolding uncertainties of the present, it also requires a transformed conception of "habit" itself. Approaching social change otherwise, I will argue, requires that we understand habits not simply as mindless forms of repetition that reproduce the status quo, but rather as moving assemblages that enable new affective, material, and political capacities and collectives to emerge.

TURNING TO HABIT: EMPATHY, GLOBAL POLITICS, AND INSOMNIA

I became interested in the role of habit in social change partly through writing a previous book about the politics of empathy.[13] In researching that project, one of the things that struck me about the existing interdisciplinary work on empathy—and affect and emotion studies more generally—is how much we have invested in the transformational promise of a kind of "affective revolution" at the level of the embodied subject or the social collective.

As it emerges across a range of discursive and sociopolitical sites, the promise of empathy is animated, I suggest, by the hope that if people could only be affected powerfully enough by, for example, being exposed to or made to witness the depths of others' suffering (and perhaps their own complicity in the wider structures of power that sustain it), their ways of being and acting in the world could be radically transformed in the interests of greater "social justice"—whatever that is understood to entail in a given context.

This seductive narrative, however, rarely addresses *what happens after empathy* in an explicit or sustained way. It also fails to engage fully with the sedimented (though not necessarily conscious or easily discernible) embodied, affective, and material habits and patterns that keep existing modes of being, seeing, feeling, and acting in place. Moreover, this narrative does not generally attend to how invocations of empathy as "affective solution" are wrapped up with biopolitics and geopolitics in contemporary global relations of power.[14]

Ruminating on this affective-political impasse, I started reading and thinking more about histories and philosophies of habit and habituation. Through my encounters with the classical American pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, as well as the earlier writing of the French philosopher and archaeologist Felix Ravaisson, I soon realized that the concept of habit was vital not only to gaining a better

understanding of why things so often seem to stay the same (despite our best efforts), but also to grappling with how real, progressive, and durable change might take shape at the current sociopolitical conjuncture.

It seems significant to note that I was contemplating these issues and writing some of the early chapters of *Revolutionary Routines* in 2016—the fateful year, of course, that Donald Trump was first elected to the US presidency, and that the historic "Brexit" referendum took place in the UK (where I live and work), resulting in the decision to leave the European Union. In the immediate aftermath of these pivotal political events, frantic and bewildered questions resounded among leftists and social "progressives" on both sides of the Atlantic: "What happened? How did we get here? What do we do now?"

This was a historical moment, not unlike our own, characterized by rising populisms of the right and left, the radical reconfiguration of major geopolitical alliances and communities, a harrowing international refugee crisis, looming global climate catastrophe, the ambivalent promises of new digital technologies, and resurgent misogynistic, homophobic, racist, xenophobic, and antitrans ideologies—all of which made the concept of "progress" appear fragile and ambivalent at best. Today, amid the long tail of a global pandemic, rising political authoritarianism transnationally, and unconscionable humanitarian crises in war zones like Palestine, Syria, and Ukraine (and too many more), progress may seem truly beyond resuscitation.

Nonetheless, many of us remain preoccupied with the urgent need for psychic and social change. Which strategies, techniques, and practices we employ in the hope of transforming ourselves and our worlds, however, depends in part on how we sense, perceive, and conceptualize change itself. Different accounts of the meanings and logics of transformation will produce very different methods of pursuing it. Turning to habit amid these increasingly uncertain political, ecological, and technological conditions offered me a paradigm through which to begin rethinking the very meanings and logics of social change, progress, and progressive politics.

On a more personal note, however, my interest in habits as technologies of transformation also emerged from my experience of chronic insomnia. In 2008, in the months following the completion of my doctorate, the end of a long relationship, and the prospect of beginning a new job in a distant city, I stopped sleeping. As I lay awake in a state of increasing anxiety and exhaustion, I became viscerally aware of the disruption of a habit I had not previously recognised as such: effortlessly falling and staying asleep.

Sleeping through the night is in many contexts and cultures a habitual capacity that babies acquire over time, ideally in a safe and comforting environment. Yet for those untouched by insomnia, the ability to sleep may never reveal itself as habit. As Dewey writes, "the more suavely efficient a habit is, the more unconsciously it

operates."[15] And yet, as his predecessor James notes, the "usually inattentive" sensations of habit will "immediately call our attention if they go wrong."[16]

Over the coming years, I became reliant on various props, routines, and pharmaceutical aids to manage my insomnia, and sought relief in everything from meditation and acupuncture to cognitive behavioral therapy and psychotherapy. Yet nothing really worked; the harder I tried to dislodge my insomniac habit the more powerful and resistant it became. I got by, but this was no way to live. When you are routinely and unwillingly awake in the small hours of the night, the line between sanity and whatever is on the other side becomes terrifyingly permeable.

Eventually, I attended a "sleep school" in London. The instructor had completed a doctorate on cognitive behavioral therapy-based approaches to insomnia but had become convinced that such techniques, in their tendency to focus too much attention on the behavior one sought to transform, were often not particularly effective and could, in fact, be counterproductive—a conclusion I had come to myself over the years. Instead, he offered an approach that combined mindfulness and acceptance-based tools. The gist of his message was that the only way to release yourself from the relentless cycle of insomnia was *to stop trying to sleep*. Our assignment was to gradually give up on the various props we used to manage our sleeplessness and, if we were struggling, to focus on the sensation of being awake.

I had, by this point, become well acquainted with classical philosophies of habit and recognized how this approach resonated with Deweyan pragmatism. As many of you will know, Dewey has this great example in *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* of the futility of repeatedly telling someone with a problem with their posture to "stand up straight." The assumption that verbal instruction is all that is required implies, he suggests, that "the failure to stand erect is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire." Yet a "man who does not stand properly *forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit* . . . conditions have been formed for producing the bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as those conditions exist."[17]

If affirmative transformation is the goal, Dewey argues that compelling people to focus on what is wrong, on what they should *not* be doing, could be the worst possible approach because it maintains attention on "the bad result" rather than on a potentially generative change in the making. He thus advises:

> We must stop even thinking of standing up straight. To think of it is fatal, for it commits us to the operation of an established habit of standing wrong. We must find an act within our power which is disconnected from any thought about standing. We must start to do another thing which on one side inhibits our falling into the

> customary bad position and on the other side is the beginning of a series of acts which may lead to the correct posture.[18]

In Dewey's understanding of transformation, then, meaningful change cannot depend on rigid techniques of prediction or on a linear model of progress. We can only concentrate our energies on the next available step, rather than fixing on a known endpoint in advance.

Relatedly, as the late queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity*[19]—a key text for contemporary affect theories—repeated acts of exposing "the bad" and mimetically tracing its contours often work precisely to reproduce its force. Extending remarks first made in her 1996 essay, "Queerer Than Fiction," Sedgwick is referring here to how we habitually approach "critique" in social and cultural theory with the assumption that we can know in advance which epistemological practices are likely to promote social justice and which are likely to impede it—a "paranoid" form of interpretation, she suggests, that locates the possibility of social transformation in reiteratively exposing what is preemptively deemed normative, problematic, or oppressive.[20]

For both Deweyan pragmatism and the kind of affect scholarship Sedgwick pioneered, then, always already knowing what we will find, what "the problem" is, or what needs to be done to achieve a "better" outcome often stops us from *sensing change as it unfolds*. It closes down more experimental, speculative, and process-oriented approaches to transformation.

Change at the level of habit, from these perspectives, requires reoriented modes of affective attention—to open up exploration of the more expansive modes of (in)attention and (non)consciousness through which political action and solidarities might occur in different contexts. It also, as Dewey underscores, requires attending to the environmental conditions working to sustain unhelpful or harmful patterns and forms of habituation—wherein "environment" is understood in the broadest possible sense.[21]

More than this, bringing Deweyan pragmatism into conversation with contemporary affect theories to address the logics of progressive transformation compels us to (continue to) reflect on what we think social critique *is* and *does*—a prospect that may, I want to suggest, lead us to approach the key question framing this year's John Dewey Society Annual Meeting—"Is Deweyan pragmatism critical?"—anew. What can and does "critical" mean in the context of pragmatist, speculative, and affective theories of change, and what kinds of epistemological and experimental practices are required to attune to, negotiate, and potentially transform everyday life in current environmental and sociopolitical conditions?

Going back to my insomnia, giving up on trying to sleep and focusing on the sensation of being awake eventually worked and, after nearly a decade, something had discernibly shifted: I finally *believed* that I could sleep again. Barring an off night here or there, the insomnia that had plagued me for so many years has not since returned. I foreground this anecdote now, not only because I suspect my experience of habitual sleeplessness might resonate with some of you, but also because it profoundly changed the way that I thought about change. And change—what it is, how it works, and how we might know when it is happening—became the subject of my book.

I frame this shift in my work in terms of an onto-epistemological opening out toward thinking change in a "minor key." *Revolutionary Routines* explores in this vein how, in focusing on the dynamics of habit, we might arrive at a different and potentially more generative understanding of social change—one that moves beyond traditional narratives of personal and collective transformation to discover the potential of "minor" processes percolating beneath the surface of everyday life.

As the philosopher and affect scholar Erin Manning discusses in *The Minor Gesture,*[22] we often understand change in "the major key," as emerging via significant events, turning-point moments, or revolutionary upheaval. Yet as both the visceral experience of insomnia and pragmatist philosophies of habit suggest, it is often the less perceptible, more processual, and minor dynamics of habit that are vital to transformation.

For Manning, and for myself, "the minor" is not simply what is seemingly insignificant or happening at a micro level, nor does it necessarily correspond to the figure of "the marginal," though it may well encompass all of the above. Rather, following the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's articulation, the minor names those continually unfolding yet often unrecognized dynamics that "open up everyday experience to its potential variation."[23] Interpreting social change in a minor key, from this angle, involves examining how everyday habits constitute crucial sites and technologies of transformation, yet ones that may be "cast aside, overlooked, or forgotten in the interplay of major chords."[24]

In reflecting on the scholarly, political, and biographical influences that motivated my own turn to habit, the point I wish to underscore here is not that "personal" or "individual" habits are analogous to "collective" or "social" habits. Indeed, for pragmatist thinkers, habits are neither individual nor collective; rather, they are ongoing transactions between bodies and "the environment, natural and social."[25] Instead, what I want to emphasize—and what is, I think, vital to the possibility of meaningful change at varying levels of significance—is the necessity of cultivating shared capacities to sense the minor currents running through major configurations; modes of affective inhabitation that might attune us to the emergent possibilities for current tendencies to materialize otherwise.

AFFECT AND THE DOUBLE LOGIC OF HABIT

Approaching social change in a minor key has, among other things, involved rethinking the relationship between "the affective" and "the habitual." As suggested in the previous section, some calls for emotion—whether empathy, anger, indignation, or other feelings—as sociopolitical panacea invest in the transformative force of an affective jolt or upheaval that has the capacity to break "bad habits" and reconstitute psychic and social life anew.

Other writing in affect theory, however, focuses on what might be generative about honing our capacity to inhabit affect as it unfolds—to, in the Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams's words, become attuned to that which "hovers at the very edge of semantic availability."[26] In *Ordinary Affects*, for example, the cultural anthropologist and affect scholar Kathleen Stewart explores how inhabiting the sensations of everyday life—from the feeling of being part of the mainstream to the lived textures of racism—interrupts the automatic "jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique."[27] It might also, as Manning suggests, enable us to catch affects, gestures, and habits "in the act" and find ways to reanimate or realign them.[28]

In moving away from a focus on "affective revolutions," I have, along these lines, explored the nature and implications of affective patterns, tendencies, and modes of inhabitation. More precisely, my work has asked: how might bringing together philosophies of habit and theories of affect enable us to rethink the relationship between "the revolutionary" and "the routine"? How, in turn, might we better understand the interplay between the force of affective upheavals and the ongoing dynamics of embodied, material, and political habits in contemporary sociopolitical conditions?

The affective turn has been animated by ongoing debates regarding how best to define, and distinguish between, terms such as "affect," "emotion," and "feeling." My view is that it is sometimes useful to make contingent analytical distinctions between these terms, without suggesting that they are wholly discrete or necessarily "pertain to different orders."[29] Taking a purposefully broad approach, I understand affect as unfolding intensities that animate the flows, tensions, and possibilities of everyday life. Affect, as such, is a form of sensorial relationality productive of different kinds of interaction and becoming.

Habit, of course, has a long history in philosophy. Aristotle first used the concept to "explain the persistence of actions that are sometimes active, sometimes dormant,"[30] whereas for Dewey in the twentieth century, habit is an acquired predisposition to particular modes of responsivity and action.[31] As evolving psychic and somatic relationships between bodies and their environments, habits constitute an "organism's subconscious predisposition to transact with its physical, social, political, and natural worlds in particular ways."[32]

Yet, in the twenty-first century, as the philosopher Catherine Malabou[33] argues in her preface to the first English translation of Ravaisson's *Of Habit*,[34] we have perhaps become habituated to one dominant philosophical trajectory, beginning with Descartes and moving through Kant, which understands habit as automated repetition that keeps things the same, and is thus antithetical to critical thinking, wonder, and change.

Malabou suggests, however, that we might productively return to a second, much older, tradition of habit. This line of thinking—which emerges with Aristotle, is taken up by Hegel, and resonates with the speculative philosophies of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze—conceptualizes habit as the essence of being and becoming. Moreover, and crucially, she invites us to appreciate how the first and second views of habit mutually inform one another. As Ravaisson's philosophical account illustrates, there can never be being and becoming without some degree of automated repetition, for the same force produces habit as "grace" (ease, facility, power) and as "addiction" (machinic repetition).[35] Relatedly, Dewey addresses the role of habituation in the persistence of undesirable patterns and behaviors, yet he underscores, alongside other pragmatist philosophers, that "freedom and power are found in and through the constitution of habits, not through their elimination."[36]

Drawing together Deweyan pragmatism and Ravaisson's philosophy, my work focuses on the contemporary implications of this "double logic of habit." Thinking through habit, I suggest, attunes us simultaneously to, on the one hand, the powerful automated processes and mechanisms underlying the tendency for patterns of oppression and inequality to persist; *and*, on the other, the necessary, yet perhaps counterintuitive, role of habituation in enabling meaningful and enduring forms of sociopolitical transformation.

As I discuss in *Revolutionary Routines*, for instance, while habituated forms of white privilege and supremacy underlie the "reignition" of virulent racisms amid Trumpism (in the US) and Brexit (in the UK), establishing (re)new(ed) everyday habits of what the critical race scholar Paul Gilroy calls "multicultural conviviality"[37] may be vital to the transformational work of antiracism transnationally. Moreover, although technologies of habit furnish potentially pernicious (post-)neoliberal modes of governmentality, like "nudge theory,"[38] which can take a paternalistic approach to behavior change,[39] they also support social movement efforts to connect visions of social justice with the rhythms and routines of everyday life.[40] If we want to better understand the workings of social change, we thus need to appreciate the role of habituation in both enabling and preventing transformation. Or, as William James puts it, we must recognize how "our virtues are habits as much as our vices."[41]

But let us reflect on an example that more explicitly foregrounds the relationship between "the affective" and "the habitual." Contrary to an emphasis on the

transformative potential of affective breaks or revolutions, the well-trodden idea of "compassion fatigue"[42] assumes that prolonged or repeated affective responses inevitably *lose* their affective force and may actually *prevent* meaningful action and change.[43] Ravaisson precipitates this point in *Of Habit*, when he notes the differences between repeated *sensations* and repeated *actions*: "The continuity or the repetition of a passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts or strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation gradually diminishes and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more self-assured."[44]

What is interesting, however, as the philosopher Clare Carlisle notes, is that a closer reading of Ravaisson's analysis reveals a more complex understanding of the always unfolding relations between affect and habit, in which repeated or sustained affect need not necessarily lead to desensitization or disaffection. In particular circumstances, he suggests, feeling or sensing can be "turned into an activity" that can "engender a *heightening of experience* rather than a diminution of feeling."[45]

Ravaisson illustrates this point through a comparison of "the drunkard" and "the connoisseur": While the drunkard "tastes his wine less and less as he continues to drink," the connoisseur develops a refined palate that makes him increasingly discerning"[46]—his taste becomes "more and more delicate and subtle."[47] That is, *through his attentiveness*, the connoisseur transforms the effects of affective repetition so that they intensify, rather than diminish, the sensorial experience.

Putting aside, for a moment, the classed, gendered, and racialized implications of Ravaisson's rather elitist image of the "wine connoisseur," this example elicits a number of pertinent points for understanding the dynamics of transformation: firstly, "feeling" and "action" may not be as opposed as we often think; secondly, habituated affect does not inevitably deaden radical political force; and, thirdly, various forms of transformation may unfold through the interaction (rather than separation) of habit and affect, including the forms of affective (in)attention we bring to everyday experience. In my own work, I have considered how various forms of *affective inhabitation*—a kind of sensorial dwelling in the present—might engender modes of attentiveness, care, and connection that transform sensing "into an activity" with a range of political and ethical implications.

I discuss these dynamics in *Revolutionary Routines*, for example, in relation to experiences of being moved by photographs of suffering or oppression. It is often assumed that repeated exposure of disturbing visual images inevitably diminishes their affective force as compassion fatigue takes hold—or, in Dewey's words, as feeling dissolves into "ineffectual spray."[48] Yet drawing on Ravaisson's analysis, I note how habituated affect may produce effects other than disaffection. In particular circumstances, it is precisely the duration and iteration of sensorial experience that might

enable both vital ethical questioning and embodied capacities for attentive care—or as the cultural theorist Jill Bennett puts it, empathies emerging from "processes of immersion and inhabitation" that are "more complex and considered than a purely emotional or sentimental reaction."[49]

In these and other ways, reading classical philosophies of habit through contemporary affect theories has helped me conceptualize an ontology of social transformation in which both "the revolutionary" and "the routine" and "the affective" and "the habitual" are perpetually intertwined—and minor gestures and tendencies may be just as significant as major events. Rather than abandoning the notion of "social progress," or positioning it at a point far on the horizon, this perspective locates it in the immanent potential for habits to become otherwise through various modes of experimentally inhabiting everyday life.

HABIT, POWER, AND SPECULATIVE PRAGMATISM

Intellectually, we are seeing the emergence of renewed forms of pragmatist thought, which are aligned not (necessarily) with political liberalism but rather with a critical empiricism concerned with possibilities for meaningful intervention in the midst of changing formations of social life, (im)materiality, temporality, and agency. I aim to speak to this contemporary return to pragmatism through examining the possibilities of what I call a "speculative pragmatism of habit," which engages the shifting sociopolitical, ecological, and technological contours of the present.

Although Deweyan pragmatism is, perhaps by definition, speculative and experimental, I use the term "speculative pragmatism" to more explicitly distinguish the approach that I (and others) develop from more instrumentalist and pervasive forms of political pragmatism that adopt a predictive "whatever works" attitude to governance that is largely "market-corrective" in orientation.[50] Whereas "pragmatic" modes of governance informed by behavioral economics such as nudge theory claim that complex social problems can be addressed through harnessing expert knowledge of patterned psychological and economic behavior, Deweyan pragmatists highlight the difficulties and pitfalls of assuming that we can know in advance the nature of progressive social and ethical conduct.[51]

As the philosopher and affect theorist Brian Massumi writes, to think "pragmatically" is to ask, "how does this work?" and to think "speculatively" is to ask, "what does how it works tell us philosophically about the way in which the present-day ecology of power obliges us to rethink fundamental categories?"[52] In a world that is itself becoming increasingly speculative—whether via the production of "affective facts" within the Trumpian political-media "resonance machine,"[53] the role of derivative

trading in financial markets,[54] or the intuitive modes of algorithmic preemption employed within the post 9/11 international security apparatus[55]—critical theory must also, Massumi argues, become speculative.

In this context, habit, as I have suggested, offers a rich onto-epistemological concept and lens through which to explore the immanent nature of politics and social change with "the prudence of the experimenter"[56]—in ways that attend to the imbrication of immateriality, flux, and emergence with materiality, duration, and continuity. In integrating Deweyan pragmatism, continental philosophies of habit, and contemporary affect theories, the account of social transformation I develop favors speculation over prediction and thus moves away from what Sedgwick called "paranoid reading." Focusing on process, possibility, and prefiguration, I engage the dynamics of habit with a "reparative" injunction to inhabit the present in all its complexity, ambivalence, and fluidity.[57]

At the same time, however, reading philosophies of habit through feminist, queer, antiracist, and decolonial theory enables me to pay critical attention (often missing from both classical and contemporary discussions of habit) to the power relations inherent in processes of habit formation and modification. To varying degrees, Dewey, James, and Ravaisson understand habituation as a *neutral* mechanism that can support a range of biological, social, and environmental functions and possibilities. Yet other critical scholars have explored how embodied and discursive habits are (re)produced through dominant modes of social intelligibility that often work in exclusionary and violent ways.

Alongside more recent work in trans theory and Black studies, a key source here is, of course, the philosopher and critical theorist Judith Butler. In her rich discussion of gender performativity, Butler influentially underscores how attending to the generativity of habituation must confront the simultaneous production of *uninhabitability*; in Butler's words, the constitution of "a domain of unthinkable, abject, and unliveable bodies."[58]

While Dewey's liberal vision of participatory democracy—outlined most extensively in *The Public and its Problems*[59]—is one in which all might ideally enter on equal footing on the basis of being human, Butler powerfully illustrates that to pose "the human" as an unmarked category is to elide how expectations of legible gendered embodiment (which are always produced in and through race and other vectors of social differentiation) structure entry to the realm of humanity itself.

Juxtaposing Butler's writing with that of pragmatist and continental thinkers thus highlights the classical philosophers' limitations in addressing embodied particularities and modalities of discipline, regulation, and exclusion, which require careful attention when mobilizing their work for contemporary critical theory and politics. Butler's analysis of the politics of "the human" aligns with long-established

genealogies of radical Black thought—from W. E. B. Du Bois to George Yancy to Claudia Rankine—which have, in different ways, illuminated the entanglement of everyday habits with what Rankine calls "the quotidian operations of antiblackness" in the aftermath of colonialism, slavery, and segregation.[60]

In this vein, it bears emphasizing that the history of empire is in many ways also a history of habit. As the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed argues, the colonial project was imagined "as a form of moral training or habituation."[61] Within the British empire, teaching natives "civilized habits" required that they unlearn "what was custom or customary."[62] Through such processes, the habitual and the affective were intertwined: developing "good habits" required, as the sociologist Norbert Elias puts it, "the civilization of the affects."[63]

If to be judged as "civilized" was, in such conditions, to possess the reflexive capacities necessary to transform sensory impressions into cultivated habits, to be deemed "uncivilized" was to be incapable of "both progress and pain"—assumptions that buttressed settler capital accumulation and its "multiple forms of unfree and free labor, forced reproduction, and/or coerced experimentation."[64] Any endeavor to explore habit's transformative potential must thus, I want to argue, confront its legacies as a colonialist, imperialist, and capitalist technology.

In this context, one of the most significant challenges I seek to address in *Revolutionary Routines* is how to develop a speculative account of the relationship between habit and transformation that pays meaningful attention to social relations of power. As pragmatist philosophy underscores, to work speculatively is to approach the world as composed of unfolding events conceived as, in Dewey's words, "moving, as fraught with possibilities, as not ended, final."[65] There is a risk, however, that in "making everything into an event"[66] and overemphasizing the novel and unexpected, speculative thinking will fail to address the durability of habitual mechanisms and processes, including those linked to racism, sexism, xenophobia, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.

In approaching social change in a minor key, my wager is that the double logic of habit provides a pertinent lens through which to draw together analysis of power with speculative attention to process, emergence, and change as it unfolds. On one hand, thinking through habit enables us to address the mechanisms via which "old" discourses and practices can return in the present with renewed vigor. For example, to return to one key theme of analysis in this article, white domination has clearly been a constant and structuring feature of American social and political life, yet people of varying social locations expressed shock at the public reintensification of crude racist and xenophobic language and behavior in the context of Trump gaining the US presidency in 2016.[67] Making sense of the punctual "reawakening" of explicit and violent forms of white supremacy in the aftermath of the civil rights movement requires, I

suggest, addressing how persistent habits of white privilege act as an incubator for their public resurgence in particular sociopolitical circumstances.[68]

On the other hand, attention to how processes of habituation evolve in conjunction with varied infrastructures and environments[69] underscores how race and racism regularly assumes new guises and dimensions across time and space. For instance, biopolitical modes of governing that involve emerging surveillance techniques tend to translate and dissipate race into multiple molecular instances that can make the practices of racism involved difficult to identify or trace.[70] Contemporary processes of racialization may thus involve formations that are, as Jasbir Puar puts it, "not necessarily or only tied to what has been historically theorized as 'race.'"[71] We therefore require pragmatic *and* speculative modes of praxis to sense how shifting social and technological dynamics necessitate novel modes of apprehension and intervention—without underestimating the resilience and plasticity of existing forms of habituation, both human and nonhuman.

The speculative pragmatism I seek to unfold in *Revolutionary Routines* has important implications for how we understand the nature of social change. Following Dewey, James, and other pragmatist philosophers, I appreciate the significance of unanticipated events and aim to avoid analysis that depends on preset formulas and "old moral truths."[72] Nonetheless, like these thinkers, and like continental philosophers like Ravaisson and Bergson, my focus on habit means that I am most interested in the interplay of continuity and change—in what Manning calls "the becoming of continuity: process punctuated."[73] Such an approach, I suggest, allows us to work speculatively within emergent sociopolitical (infra)structures and ecologies to reorient the habits that comprise them, while confronting the full range of habit's biopolitical implications.

Various forms of social transformation, in this view, arise not primarily from unpredictable forces that disrupt or wash away existing patterns, but rather from reworking ongoing forms of habituation from within—from experimentally inhabiting the potential for current tendencies to become otherwise. This is, however, as Dewey would emphasize, never a process subject to human mastery; singular interventions can have unintended effects throughout wider relations and ecologies, and the prediction of human-environmental interactions therefore offers no guarantees.

HABIT ASSEMBLAGES AND DISTRIBUTED AGENCY

In exploring how habits are formed and reformed through the interaction of bodies, objects, infrastructures, and environments, Dewey, James, and Ravaisson each point to the need for an ontology of change premised on more relational, processual, and

ecological methods of transformation. Within Deweyan pragmatism, habits are, as mentioned earlier, relational transactions *between* organisms and environments that are always in process and unfolding. Habits are, as such, never static and they are always more-than-human.

This vital acknowledgement, I want to suggest, enables us to explore how social change might unfold through intervening in what I and others have called "habit assemblages." The social and cultural theorist Tony Bennett and colleagues note, for example, how a view of "habits as part of mind-body-environmental assemblages" is evident in current conversations of climate emergency and waste management in which "questions of dis- or re-habituation are no longer posed as matters of changing the subject" but as ones of modifying the arrangements of such an assemblage.[74]

Approaches that focus on adjusting habit assemblages are also advocated to address habitual forms of racism in ways that disrupt the stimulation of psychic defense mechanisms linked to white fears of lost privilege and control.[75] Such environmentally oriented techniques might involve the design of architectures and infrastructures to encourage ethical cohabitation[76] or choreographed disruptions of the smooth running of habits designed to produce a "shock to thought"[77] concerning the quotidian dynamics of white domination.

In his own discussion of habituation as constituted by interactions between organisms and environments, Dewey compares habits to psychological functions. Like processes of respiration and digestion (which require oxygen and food to function), he suggests that habits are "not complete within the body"; they necessitate "the cooperation of an organism and an environment."[78] From physiological processes of respiration and digestion, to patterned modes of sensation and perception, to everyday styles of walking and talking, Dewey argues that we are composed as human through "our" habits, which are, in fact, never really "our own" but are instead the immanent outcomes of interactions among bodily processes and our physical and social surroundings.

Homing in on the social/cultural/political level(s), the pragmatist feminist and critical race philosopher Shannon Sullivan argues that habits are not simply comparable to physiological functions; rather, physiological functions *are* particular kinds of habits. Digestion is a transactional habit, she suggests, not merely because it "occurs only when the stomach and intestines have food to process and absorb,"[79] but also because it is continually shaped by, and materially incorporates, wider sociocultural and political relations—including those linked to social privilege and oppression.

For instance, as Sullivan notes, "women who have been sexually abused disproportionally suffer from gastrointestinal maladies, such as IBS and Crohn's disease."[80] Moreover, epigenetic research indicates that "racism can have durable effects on the biological constitution of human beings," including processes of digestion, that can

extend to future generations.[81] Thus, like other habits, digestion is not an unchanging mechanical reflex; it constantly evolves as human psychology and physiology are reshaped by personal and transgenerational experience, as well as wider environmental dynamics from social hierarchies to industrial farming and food-processing practices.

In my reading, the logic of assemblage suggests that change via habit is not likely to materialize from transforming either "the organism" or "the environment" in isolation (indeed the dynamics of habit mean that bodies and environments are always already intertwined rather than rigidly separable). Instead, we need to target the interfaces and circuits of transmission that connect bodies with their multilayered milieus. Given that assemblages are constantly evolving and that the effects of interventions always involve uncertainty and unpredictability, we also require speculative modes of praxis that can affectively inhabit these relations as they unfold across time and space.

Additionally, however, we need to pay closer attention to nonliving entities and processes in the workings of habit; how, in a sense, habits can take on a life of their own that far exceeds biological life, and thus human modes of sensibility, perception, and control. I am thinking here, especially, about current forms of "algorithmic life"—the increasingly "environmental" functioning of pattern recognition via machine learning in everyday life,[82] and the pervasiveness of wider developments in artificial intelligence.[83] Indeed, our present moment is one in which software, AI, and algorithms are increasingly shaping the conditions and possibilities of social existence, as we witness "the enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation."[84]

It is important to recognize, in such conditions, that forms of state and corporate governance, surveillance, and extraction that work via habits often do not address individual subjects, bodies, or organisms holistically. Rather, they seek to capture and/or adjust sensations, movements, gestures, and habits below the level of "the individual" or the dynamics of organic equilibrium. The cultural geographer Ben Anderson points, in this vein, to "a contemporary condition in which power now operates at the sub or just conscious level of bodily *affects*."[85] For the digital and molecular technologies linked to neuroscientific paradigms at play here, what is deemed significant are, for instance, facial expressions, eye movements, blood pressure, and heart-rate fluctuations.

What is at stake in our emerging computational world, then, is not only, as Dewey puts it, the unification of "human nature and the environment, nature and social" that habits entail,[86] but also a much broader range of (im)material dynamics through which human and technical processes interpenetrate one another to the extent that any stark human/nonhuman binary becomes untenable. With the increasing pervasiveness of machine learning architectures across societal domains, there is, as the political geographer Louise Amoore suggests, no human outside the algorithm: "humans are lodged within algorithms, and algorithms within humans."[87]

The nature of twenty-first century digital ecologies thus poses, I believe, considerable challenges for the continuing salience and efficacy of Deweyan pragmatism—as well as my own account of speculative pragmatism—as a theory and praxis of collective change. On the one hand, grasping the significant sociopolitical transformations associated with computational technologies requires precisely the kind of process-oriented, speculative attunement to "a world pulsing with change"[88] that Dewey advocates. On the other hand, the operations undertaken by such technologies are ones to which we have no direct access and that "correlate with no existent human faculty or capacity."[89]

The operations of neural net algorithms, which power everything from internet search engines and automated home assistants like Alexa to industrial robotics and self-driving cars, for instance, happen at scales vastly different from human spatiality and temporality and through "black boxed" processes that even the computer scientists and engineers who design such technologies do not fully understand. What then of the embodied experimenter of pragmatist thought who gains greater access to the processual qualities of our material existence by affectively inhabiting environmental conditions as they unfold across time and space? Do such technosocial conditions portend a future reality in which humans become ever more alienated from the very processes that (re)mediate our everyday habits, affects, and experiences?

In my view, this need not be the outcome, but we do, I suggest, need to confront how the changing contours of our sociotechnical world necessitate approaches to collective transformation that rethink traditional conceptions of will, agency, rationality—and indeed, what it now means to be "human." What thinking social change through the lens of habit assemblages generatively offers, in this vein, is an account of *distributed agency*—a range of capacities for what Dewey calls "intelligent action"[90] made possible not by a disembodied capacity for rational thought, by rather through evolving interactions of mind, body, and environment (in which the meaning of the very categories of "mind," "body," and "environment" is profoundly changing).[91]

From this angle, a minor ontology of habit oriented toward liberation, solidarity, and social justice needs to conceptualize human sensing, activity, and responsivity as working through varying thresholds of attention and awareness—within assemblages in which nonhuman entities exhibit their "own" forms of agency—a challenge that, I want to argue, requires a speculative, pragmatic, and ecologically oriented approach.

COMPOSING SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE MINOR KEY

My argument today has been that approaching collective change via the logics of habit is about more than addressing habituation's powerful role in reproducing existing patterns and injustices, it is also about exploring how new or renewed tendencies are

crucial to durable transformation that *actually makes a difference*. Composing social change in the minor key is concerned, then, with how we can imaginatively reinhabit existing cultural, sociopolitical, economic, ecological, and technological relations to generate novel forms of relationality, cooperation, and life-living.

Although wary of overinvesting in the promise of sweeping revolutionary change, the speculative pragmatist approach I have sought to unfold does not dismiss the importance of radical political praxis or "paranoid critique."[92] Rather, it explores how transformation via habit assemblages can itself be revolutionary and how a minor ontology of change might open up possibilities that exceed, but do not disavow, the dominant tropes of evidence, exposure, and affective revolution.

Genuinely democratic and inclusive forms of transformation are not, from this perspective, likely to be cultivated through overly predictive, instrumentalist, or individualist techniques of habit management and modification. A more speculative and affirmative politics of habit is possible, but it must engage with pernicious histories of governing through habit which persist in the present and needs to find ways to make thinking, sensing, and experimenting with habit an inclusive and collaborative social endeavor.

If we want to pursue affirmative forms of social change that might actually work, moreover, we need an effective understanding of how human action operates within more-than-human ecologies. This requires us to relinquish any lingering belief that what happens within social, political, economic, and cultural life is determined by intentional, volitional subjects. Habit might, rather, be understood as the (im)material hinge that connects "the individual" and "the structural," "the organism" and "the environment," "the human" and "the nonhuman"—while also functioning to dispel any fantasy that such categories are ontologically separable.

Although not without its risks and complexities, the speculative pragmatist approach I have sketched today points to what I see as potentially generative implications for how we understand and practice collaboration and solidarity. While influential accounts of political solidarity define it as a "form of collective responsibility" premised on positive "moral obligations,"[93] thinking social change in a minor key enables us to rethink solidarity as a moving assemblage of affects, gestures, and habits—which could open up previously untenable forms of cooperation across material, social, and political differences as well as traditional human/nonhuman divides.

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NOTES

1. This paper originated as the author's John Dewey Lecture at the John Dewey Society Annual Meeting at Universidade de Évora, Portugal in June 2024. While the original structure, thematic content, and tone of the talk has been preserved, minor revisions have been made to refine or expand particular points in key places. References have also been added throughout.
2. Pedwell, *Revolutionary Routines*.
3. Covey, *Seven Habits*.
4. Clear, *Atomic Habits*.
5. Dow Schüll, "Data for Life," 3.
6. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 14.
7. Bennett et al., "Habit and Habituation"; Bennet et al., *Assembling and Governing Habits*.
8. Amoore, *Politics of Possibility*; Amoore, *Cloud Ethics*; Clough, *User Unconscious*; Pedwell, "Speculative Machines."
9. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*; Stitzlein, *Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender*; Ahmed, "Institutional Habits"; Yancy, *Black Bodies*.
10. Shove, "Beyond the ABC"; Klein, *This Changes Everything*.
11. Malabou, "Addiction and Grace," x.
12. The term "speculative pragmatism" comes from Sandra B. Rosenthal's 1986 book *Speculative Pragmatism*. It has been developed more recently in Brian Massumi's 2015 book *Ontopolitics* and Erin Manning's 2016 book *The Minor Gesture*.
13. Pedwell, *Affective Relations*.
14. Pedwell, *Affective Relations*; Pedwell, "Transforming Habit."
15. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 71.
16. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 43.
17. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 15, italics mine.
18. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 18.
19. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
20. Sedgwick, "Queerer Than Fiction."
21. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*.
22. Manning, *Minor Gesture*.
23. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 1.
24. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 1.
25. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 9.

26. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.
27. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 4.
28. Manning, *Minor Gesture*.
29. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 26.
30. Sparrow and Hutchinson, *A History of Habit*, 3.
31. Dewey, *Human Nature*.
32. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 23.
33. Malabou, "Addiction and Grace."
34. Ravaisson, *Of Habit.*
35. Malabou, "Addiction and Grace," viii.
36. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, 24.
37. Gilroy, *After Empire*.
38. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*; Halpern, *Inside the Nudge Unit.*
39. Pedwell, "Habit and the Politics of Social Change."
40. Pedwell, "Digital Tendencies"; Pedwell, "Re-mediating the Human."
41. James, *Talks to Teachers*, 64.
42. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*.
43. Pedwell, "Mediated Habits."
44. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 49.
45. Carlisle, *On Habit*, 82.
46. Carlisle, *On Habit*, 81.
47. Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 49.
48. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 101.
49. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 65, 24.
50. Jones et al., *Changing Behaviours*.
51. Pedwell, "Habit and the Politics of Social Change."
52. Massumi, *Ontopolitics*, viii.
53. Connolly, "Resonance Machine"; Anderson, "'We Will Win Again.'"
54. Clough, *User Unconscious*.
55. Amoore, *Politics of Possibility*; Amoore, *Cloud Ethics*.
56. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 7.
57. Pedwell, "Cultural Theory as Mood Work."
58. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
59. Dewey, *Public and its Problems*.
60. Rankine, "On Racial Violence."
61. Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 129.
62. Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 128.
63. Elias, as cited in Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 135.
64. Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*, 14.

65. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 122.
66. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 3.
67. Sullivan, "Du Bois, Afro-Pessimism, and The Wages of Whiteness"; see also Southern Poverty Law Center, "10 Days After."
68. Pedwell, *Revolutionary Routines*.
69. Dewey, *Human Nature*.
70. Amoore, *Politics of Possibility*; *Cloud Ethics*; Browne, *Dark Matters*.
71. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxii.
72. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 94.
73. Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 3.
74. Bennett et al., "Habit and Habituation," 12; see also Bennett et al., *Assembling and Governing Habits*.
75. Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*.
76. Amin, "Remainders of Race"; Noble, "Cosmopolitan Habits."
77. Massumi, *A Shock to Thought*.
78. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 10.
79. Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 12.
80. Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 19.
81. Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, 20.
82. Durham Peters, *Marvelous Clouds*.
83. Pedwell, "Speculative Machines."
84. Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," 396.
85. Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 26.
86. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 9.
87. Amoore, *Cloud Ethics*, 58.
88. Clough et al., "Datalogical Turn," 111.
89. Hansen, *Feed Forward*, 4–5.
90. Dewey, *Human Nature*.
91. Pedwell, *Revolutionary Routines*; Pedwell, "Re-mediating the Human"; Pedwell, "Speculative Machines."
92. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
93. Sholz, *Political Solidarity*, 13.

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