Afterword

The Sensory Revolution Comes of Age

David Howes

Abstract

The sensory turn and the affective turn in contemporary scholarship both crystallised at roughly the same time but then diverged. This special issue reintegrates them. Conjointly, these twin approaches direct attention to the multiplicity, agency, and interactivity of the full spectrum of human faculties (i.e., how the senses and affects intersect with and may also disrupt the rule of reason) in addition to highlighting the extent to which ‘the perceptual is political.’ The resulting paradigm has precipitated a shift from the study of communities as ‘imagined’ to how they are sensed and/or felt, and from a focus on ‘the human condition’ to the intensive investigation of the multiple ‘national post-revolutionary conditions’ that define the current conjuncture. By foregrounding the aesthetics of politics, and tracking the eruption of dis-sensus (laughter, graffiti, dissent) within the con-sensus that states seek to foster in their citizenry, this special issue sounds a much-needed wake-up call.

Keywords: life of the senses, political anthropology, politics of perception, revolution, sensory ethnography

The sensory revolution in the humanities and social sciences, with its roots in the history and anthropology of the senses, has matured over the last three decades. What started out as one turn among others: namely, the ‘sensory turn’—which came after the ‘linguistic turn’ (the idea of culture as ‘structured like a language’ or ‘text’), the pictorial turn (or rise of ‘visual culture studies’), the corporeal turn (with its emphasis on the ‘embodied mind’ and/or ‘mindful body’), and the ‘material turn’ (which foregrounds the agency of objects and infrastructures)—has steadily expanded to encompass all these prior turns and correct for their excesses. Thus, the sensory revolution has been responsible for offsetting the verbocentrism of the linguistic turn, the visualism of the pictorial turn, the psychophysicalism of the corporeal turn, and so forth by redirecting attention to the multiplicity, agency, and interactivity of all the faculties or “powers”¹

One of the consequences of this paradigm shift is that in place of ‘visualizing theory’ (Taylor [1994] 2014), which is an oxymoron since theory derives from the Greek *theoria*, which already means ‘to look at’, anthropologists are now equally or more inclined to treat diverse other-than-visual senses as ‘theoreticians’ (e.g., Michael Taussig’s theory of ‘sensuous mimesis’ ([1993] 2018), Steven Feld’s notion of ‘acoustemology’ (1996), David Sutton (2010) on ‘gustemology’).² Other transformations are also discernible in the anthropological literature. For example, in place of viewing states as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson [1991] 2016), the focus is now on how community or citizenship is *sensed* (Howes and Classen 2014; Trnka et al. 2013). Or, alongside conceptualising politics in terms of ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière [2000] 2004), which is one way of translating *le partage du sensible*, the attention of anthropologists has been increasingly drawn to exploring ‘the sharing of the sensible’ (an equally acceptable translation of *partage*).³ This shift is neatly captured by François Laplantine in *The Life of the Senses: Introduction to a Modal Anthropology* where he writes: ‘The experience of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible [*partage du sensible*]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience’ (2015: 2). The implication of this dictum is that the practice of ethnography has come unhinged from the conventional methodology of ‘participant observation’ and gone over to ‘participant sensation’—the methodology of sensory ethnography. The latter brackets observation and involves sensing—and making sense—along with others (see further Cox et al. 2016; Elliott and Culhane 2017; Howes 2019).

The field of political anthropology has lagged behind the many other fields of anthropology that got swept up in the sensory revolution, such as medical anthropology (Hinton et al. 2008), the anthropology of food (Sutton 2010, Rhys-Taylor 2017), the anthropology of religion (Meyer 2009), archaeology (Hamilakis 2013, Skeates and Day 2020), and the anthropology of art (Howes and Classen 2014: ch. 1), but with the publication of this *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* special issue, that state of affairs has definitively ended. Perhaps part of the reason for the delay is that the aestheticisation (which is to say, the sensualisation) of the political has been viewed with suspicion, ever since Walter Benjamin’s critique of the fascism and glorification of war of the Futurist art movement, led by F. T. Marinetti (see Benjamin 1968: 241–242). However, the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ helpful as it was in deconstructing many of the ‘Grand Narratives’ of modernity, no longer holds the same sway. It has been supplanted by the ‘New Materialism’ that is (perhaps regrettably) more preoccupied with materiality and the alleged ‘vibrancy of matter’ than with exposing and critiquing ideologies.

By contrast, *pace* Benjamin, the aesthetics of politics is at the very core of this special issue, and the new political anthropology it heralds is squarely focussed on the politics of perception. It bears noting that the approach advocated here not only departs from Benjamin’s critical theory, it also takes leave from the phenomenology of perception as exemplified by *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000).

That book, and Ingold's writings in general, were and remain profoundly apolitical, not to mention pre-cultural (Howes 2019), on which more in a moment.

Sensori-social stirrings

Starting with the American Revolution of 1776, and continuing with the French Revolution, the Communist Revolution, and so forth, virtually every state on Earth has undergone some form of revolution.⁴ Thus, in place of addressing ourselves to 'the human condition', it only really makes sense any longer to speak of 'national post-revolutionary condition(s)'. As Myriam Lamrani framed this condition in her initial proposal for this special issue: '*Beyond Revolution* approaches an often-overlooked dimension of national post-revolutionary condition'—namely, 'the sensory and affective traces that revolutions leave in their wake'. The question: '*how do revolutions endure by moving back and forth between people's bodies and the body politic?*' (emphasis in original) is the question of our times. Incidentally, this line of questioning gives the lie to Ingold's 'idea of direct perception', which assumes the givenness of 'affordances' (a concept derived from the work of the psychologist J. J. Gibson), and holds that 'living beings can find meaning in an environment unmediated by signs [or 'culture']....It asserts that we perceive things directly, as they come forward into presence and impinge on our activity, not indirectly through the signs they leave in their wake' (Ingold 2018: 41). *Beyond Revolution* presents a rebuke to Ingold's doctrine of direct perception by insisting on attending to the political life of sensation and arguing that all we ever know are 'traces'. It is a wake-up call.

This awakening does not come entirely out of the blue, of course. There were intimations of this shift as far back as 1994.⁵ One more recent intimation is an article by Gedis Lankauskas that appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Senses and Society*. It is called 'Sensuous (Re)Collections' and presents a sensory ethnography of a socialist theme park located on the outskirts of Gruta, Lithuania. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a Lithuanian mushroom magnate made it his mission to acquire the now demoted Soviet-era statuary and other ideological relics (including a freight-train car used to transport people to Siberia) and assemble them in a park. Grūtas Park, which opened in 2001, represented a kind of 'upside down gulag' (since now it was the former Party leaders—or their effigies anyway—who were imprisoned). Lankauskas analyses how the gustatory medium of food, available in the café near the exit, elicited very different social comportments and emotional reactions from the visitors than the medium of sight: the visitors would stand before and shake their fists in anger at the statues of Stalin and his cronies, but when they came round to the café, where they could eat 'thin beet soup and bland meat patties, drink *kisielius* or vodka', they were overcome by feelings of nostalgia and recollections of the camaraderie of bygone days around the kitchen table or lining up for hours to purchase provisions (Lankauskas 2006: 41). Lankauskas brings out well how different senses mediate different affects—trauma and anger (sight) vs. fellow-feeling (taste)—and how the 'back and forth' (Lamrani) between

microcosm and macrocosm (between people's bodies and the body politic) also oscillates over time.

Another intimation is given in the chapter on 'The Politics of Perception' in *Ways of Sensing* (Howes and Classen 2014: ch. 3). The authors disclose how the phenomenon of nationalism cannot be adequately comprehended by reference to the adherence to certain political ideals, such as democracy, for it always at the same time involves attachment to particular tastes, smells, sounds, and sights (e.g., national dishes, anthems and flags):

Sensory ways, models and metaphors inform our notions of social integration, hierarchy and identity. The senses are directly put to political ends through acts of marking, excluding, punishing or exalting particular individuals and groups (Howes and Classen 2014: 66)

From the struggle to end discrimination based on skin colour to the derogatory trope of the 'smelly immigrant',⁶ or from conceptualising society on the model of a salad bowl or stir-fry versus a melting pot, the ordering of society and the ordering of the senses are intimately intertwined. The authors also invite us to contemplate the political implications of the technologisation of the sensorium. They take their cue (in part) from the work of Marshal McLuhan, who declared: 'We are moving out of the age of the visual into the age of the aural and tactile' (quoted and discussed at Howes and Classen 2014: 89–92). McLuhan theorised the rise of internationalism (the 'global village') and the 'new tribalism' as 'effects' of the transition from typographic to electronic means of communication (in contrast to the way Marx would have theorised this development by reference to transformations in the means and relations of production). The social control of perceptibility is a fascinating locus for political analysis.

The last intimation I would like to flag is a recent article by my colleague Julie Soleil Archambault (2021), which provides an update to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. She might have called her article 'The Workout Ethic and the Spectre of Socialism.' Over the course of her 15 years of fieldwork in Mozambique, focussing first on cell phones (2013) and then on concrete (2020), Archambault, who is an avid runner, noticed that she was no longer the only one out on the track at dawn running alone. So, she followed the middle-class Mozambiquans she befriended into the gyms they had come to frequent in the wake of the fitness boom. One day, she noticed a poster in the foyer of the gym she trained at which read: 'Transformation only happens if we pursue our goals'. Tracing the origin of this slogan, she discovered that it was popularised under the former socialist regime.⁷ What was this 'trace' (Lamrani) doing in a gym—the paragon *neoliberal* site for responsabilising subjects? Ever one to 'follow the ethnography', Archambault goes on to work out the 'back and forth' (Lamrani) implications of this 'transition' that was playing out at the level of the body. In doing so, she complicates the prevailing genealogy of the self-improving subject: whereas armchair theorists snidely view the fitness craze in Africa (and elsewhere) as a product of the

encroachment of neoliberal subjectification, she discloses how the emergent pursuit of fitness and other ‘wellness aspirations’ have their roots in previous ethical and political regimes. Those armchair theorists need to get out and exercise!

Revolution and/of the senses

Let me close by briefly signalling what I take to be the contribution of each of the articles in this special issue to the ongoing sensory revolution in anthropology/anthropology of revolutions by situating the articles in relation to other work in the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies.

Research in the history and anthropology of the senses has challenged the monopoly which the discipline of psychology formerly exercised over the study of the senses and sensation. For example, sensory historians have brought to light the invention of all sorts of novel senses in the eighteenth century, particularly in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. These senses included the aesthetic sense, the moral sense, and the public sense, among others, none of which have any basis in anatomy (Howes 2009). Given all these historical precedents of senses without organs (or SWO), what prevents us from recognising the sense of humour as a sense, and having a good laugh, as Alkisti Efthmiou and Chrisoula Lionis in this issue bid us do in their study of the post-revolutionary aesthetics of the Chilean and Egyptian national pavilions at the 2019 Venice Biennale?⁸ Nothing prevents us, apart from the outmoded psychophysical reductionism of mainstream psychology which continues to view the senses as ‘fixed biological or psychological mechanisms’ rather than the ‘dynamic processes shaped by and through culture’ they are (Bull 2018). The life of the senses is not dictated by physiology, it is shaped by practice—sensory practices, sensuous habitudes, techniques of the body.

What student is not familiar with Bentham’s design for a model prison known as the Panopticon and, thanks to Foucault, with the role that visual surveillance has played in the invention of the modern subject? None, I wager. But that turns out not to have been the whole picture behind the birth of this institution. In point of fact, the prison was designed to enforce sensory isolation, the (Quaker-inspired) idea being that ‘forced withdrawal from the distractions of the senses into silent and solitary confrontation with the self’ would force the inmate to ‘begin to hear the inner voice of conscience and feel the transforming power of God’s love’ (in the words of English prison reformer John Howard quoted and discussed in Walfish 2018). In her article in this issue, Maria Frederika Malmström brings out how in latter day Cairo the prison has been repurposed to serve as a place for ‘disappearing’ people, but it could not quell the whispers that the inmates use to try and communicate their continued existence to loved ones without its walls. Reading her analysis against Foucault, the prison is revealed to be a multimodal space and whether you see it as a scopic regime or a whispering wall depends on the angle (from above or from below) from which you approach it. (Significantly, when the ex-prisoners presented themselves to their relatives in the flesh, they were seen as ‘ghost-bodies’ or spectres.)

Charis Boutieri's article in this issue on the 'democratic grotesque' is a fine example of sensory ethnography, or striving 'to feel along with others what they experience' (Laplantine 2015) in practice. The focus of her article is on intracultural variation—specifically how feeling is distributed across the generational divide between ribald youth and staid elders in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Was the image on the *daklha* banner a depiction of an ISIS fighter or a teenage ninja? It is all a matter of perception, of course, but at a deeper level the uproar over this image goes to show the extent to which perception *matters* to the mobilisation of affects.⁹ (The Tunisian youths just smirked.)

Martin Holbraad describes in this issue how the Cuban state, like most states, positions itself as care-giver in chief for its citizens but does so in an affectless (impartial, neutral) manner, to ensure procedural fairness. This only serves to foment a cynical affective disposition in its subjects, save in the case of Lázaro, whose *espiritismo* (or direct channel to the spirits) affords him hope as he goes about exploiting the procedural mechanisms of the state against the state in an effort to get a roof put back over his head. It is interesting to speculate on what Michel de Certeau would make of Lázaro's spiritist 'tactics' of everyday life. Holbraad's account of Lázaro's enchantment of the Cuban bureaucracy also compels us to rethink Weber's rationalisation thesis of the modern state.

In 'Vandalism as symbolic reparation: Imaginaries of protest in Nicaragua' in this issue, Ileana Selejan presents a sensational analysis of the affective charge of the colour-coded bandanas and clanging pots, or uprooting of trees and scribbled slogans on statues (perceived as acts of vandalism by the authorities), that erupted in 2018–2019 in Nicaragua and neighbouring Latin American states as protesters enacted the 'never more' (*nunca mas*) scenario again and again and again. In "I did not wash my hand for days": The stuplime return of revolutionary speech in the Republic of Guinea' in this issue, Mike McGovern offers a deeply resonant analysis of the shifting affectivity of political speech in pre- and post-coup Guinea, which went from the sublime to the stuplime. It is instructive to read the last two articles in light of the con-sensus/dis-sensus distinction, as discussed by Charis Boutieri. In effect, what Selejan and McGovern present in their respective articles is an inventory of all the sensory and affective depth charges that have rattled the 'con-sensus' that the various states concerned sought to uphold in an effort to stem the tide of popular 'dis-sensus.'

Alas, time constraints prevent me from expatiating further on the multiple other themes that transect this special issue. So, let me end with one last sentence: *Vive la révolution sensorielle!* (Long live the sensory revolution!)

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Notes

1. For a review of the relevant literature concerning all these diverse 'turns' that culminated in the precipitation of 'sensuous scholarship' (Stoller 1997; Uzwiak and Bowles 2021) see 'The Sensory Studies Manifesto' (Howes, forthcoming). It bears noting that the sensory turn and the affective turn crystallised at roughly the same time. What is more, senses and affects are intimately intertwined, as Myriam Lamrani points out in her introduction. One has only to consider the multiple meanings of the English word 'feeling': it sounds in sensory studies (as tactility) just as resonantly as it sounds in affect studies (as affectivity). Uniting the two senses is at the heart of this special issue, and this fusion or interweaving constitutes a major theoretical and methodological advance.
2. The idea of the senses as 'in their practice theoreticians' comes from Marx, of course, as does the oft-quoted slogan: 'The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.' For an in-depth investigation into the sensorium as an historical formation see the six-volume *Cultural History of the Senses* (Classen 2014). See further Dawkins and Loftus (2013) on how the senses are 'relationally produced'. These sources present further testimony to the political naivete of Ingold's doctrine of 'direct perception' (to be discussed later in this article). As Michael Bull et al. (2006: 5) put it in 'Introducing sensory studies,' the kick-off article of *The Senses and Society* journal: 'The perceptual is...*political*'.
3. To what extent does the translation of *partage* as 'distribution', like the mistranslation of *agence-ment* as 'assemblage', inflect the theories that are constructed atop them with un-examined and sometimes questionable assumptions? Should not the translators be held accountable for their betrayal of the sense of these terms of art? By far the most challenging French term to translate into English, however, is *le sensible*. The sensitivity that is suggested by *le sensible* is lost when it is rendered into English as 'the sensible' since the latter term connotes practicality, as in the expression 'sensible shoes'. *Le sensible* is perhaps best translated as 'the sensate' or 'the perceptible' to signal that it is *not* synonymous with common sense.
4. Or if not a revolution, at least a Spring. Here in Quebec a student revolt beginning in February 2012 was fittingly called *le printemps érable* (the Maple Spring). Quebec has also had its revolution, though, *la révolution tranquille* (the Quiet Revolution). All very sensuous.

5. Allen Feldman (1994) floated the idea of a 'political anthropology of the senses' in his seminal contribution to *The Senses Still*, which focussed on picking apart frame by frame the video of the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police (among other spectacles), but this led him on to propose a theory of 'cultural anaesthesia' which undercut the critical potential of his intervention since if there is one thing modernity stands for, it is the state of *hyperaesthesia* (see Howes 2005, 2017)
6. On this issue of sensory discrimination see further: Manalansan IV 2005; Sekimoto and Brown 2020; and Hsu 2020.
7. The rallying cry of the socialist regime was actually '*A luta continua*'. The main point of Archambault's article is that fitness, as an aspirational pursuit, is inspiring new body-conscious subjectivities and an emerging workout ethic that borrows from socialist registers of discipline and struggle.
8. See further Caroline A. Jones' (2016) sensorially savvy analysis of the aestheticisation of politics/politicization of the aesthetic at the 1951 São Paulo Biennale, and for an archaeology of the politics of perception—or 'clash of the senses'—under Futurism, which got the political ball rolling in the first place, see Classen 1998: 127–131, 156–159, 199–201. Benjamin's account of the 'shock' to the senses under Dadaism (Brill 2018) pales in comparison.
9. See further Brian Kane's (2015) critique of affect theory for lacking a theory of perception.

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