Affect and Activism: An Interview with Deborah Gould

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Deborah Gould is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz (and Affiliated Faculty in Feminist Studies, History of Consciousness, and Politics). Her book *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) won the Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Best Book Award from the American Sociological Association’s Political Sociology Section (2010) and the Ruth Benedict Book Prize from the American Anthropological Association (2010). She is currently working on another book about political emotion, *Composing Collectivities: Appetite, Encounters, and the Not-Yet of Politics*. She was involved in ACT UP/Chicago for many years, and later in Queer to the Left, and was a founding member of the research/art/activism collaborative group, Feel Tank Chicago, most famous for its International Parades of the Politically Depressed.
Brittany Frodge (BF): In the introduction to *Moving Politics*, you define affect as an unnamed force “bursting with potential” which suffers a reduction once it is labeled as an emotion. How can we harness the raw power of affect without subjecting it to potentially reductive linguistic labels?

Deborah Gould (Gould): Your question touches on many things, it might be best to begin by saying something about how I understand the difference between affect and emotions, and the relationship between them. I’m drawing from Brian Massumi here who himself is drawing from Spinoza and Deleuze. They define affect as the capacity to affect and to be affected, so it has to do with a body’s movement through a world of other bodies, all of which have the capacity to affect and to be affected. Following Spinoza, when a body is affected, its capacities are either augmented or diminished, and that change in capacity, however slight it may be, is felt, that is to say, it registers, not consciously but rather as a sensory experience of having been affected and thereby changed. An affected body prepares to respond – to affect in turn – and that response might go in any number of different directions, which is to say, the response is not predetermined. There is a lot going on in that relational experience of affecting and being affected and preparing to affect in turn. An emotion, according to Massumi, is a personalized expression or account of that experience, an approximation – using, for example, language, conventionalized meanings, gestures – of what the body has experienced in terms of that change in capacity, that transition which results from affecting and being affected and preparing to respond.

To understand the relationship between affect and an emotion, it’s helpful to think about how we try to make sense of a vague or barely perceptible bodily sensation or feeling. We pull from our storehouse of knowledge, from the prevailing ways of making sense of a feeling, from culturally available names and conventional labels for feeling states, from habits and norms about feelings and their expression, and so on. That’s what an emotion is, it’s within a system of meaning and helps us make sense of what we’re experiencing as we move through the world affecting and being affected by what we encounter. The less-than-fully conscious experience of being affected and sensing the accompanying change in bodily capacity, that is what is bursting with potential in the sense that there is nothing predetermined about what then will follow; given the bodily change in capacity, things could unfold in any number of different ways, even if things might tend to flow in a particular direction. An emotion – the personalized expression, through language and gesture, of that changed bodily state and all of the potential therein – is in that sense a reduction of an experience that really is more relational, multiple, and open-ended.

The idea of affect bursting with potential is precisely what’s interesting to me about affect as a concept. The notion of potentiality is a way to carve out conceptual space for the idea that any moment contains within it multiple possible unfurlings, meaning any moment holds within it multiple possibilities for something different to emerge, for the present and future to unfold differently than the past. The notion of potentiality points to the something else of each moment, to the fact that what gets actualized in social life is not all there is. And that’s why it’s important, conceptually and politically, to pay attention to affect. What doesn’t get actualized is still there in potential, and in that sense is in the mix, exerting force, shaping social life. And because things always could have unfolded differently, and because things might unfold in any number of different ways in a situation we now might be facing, we need to tune into that moreness, that potentiality, if we care about how we might play a role in bringing about social change.
To turn to the part of your question about harnessing what you call the raw power of affect without subjecting it to potentially reductive linguistic labels, I get why you say "the raw power" of affect, because it is a direct, and in that sense unmediated, experience of being affected and a body’s capacity being changed, and so we might call that raw. But I’m a bit wary of that word because it seems to align affect with nature and the presocial. The way I see it, affect presupposes sociality. Affect is the capacity to affect and be affected, and thus has to do with contact, encounter, relation with other bodies. In that sense, affect is all about sociality, it’s a body’s way of processing the conditions it encounters, that it affects and that affect it.

To address the part of your question about harnessing the power of affect before it is reduced through language, I would say that power, in general, operates in part by producing regularities, normativities, tendencies. In that light, cultivating an awareness of the potential of any moment, of any situation, developing an awareness of what else might be possible, of what might occur if we break out of those perhaps deeply grooved patterns of thought and action, in short, cultivating a sensibility that tunes in to the potentialities of any given moment, seems important for harnessing, as you say, the power of affect.

BF: You also imply in the introduction that, while you were participating in ACT UP, you weren’t aware how angry you and your fellow organizers were. Do you feel that, in revisiting this period of your life from an academic perspective and labeling the affects that structured your movement, something is lost? Is affect, in its extra-linguistic nature, impossible to truly capture in academic writing?

Gould: I would probably need to look at how I wrote that. I don’t remember saying we weren’t aware of how angry we were. Maybe what I was saying is that being angry about the AIDS crisis was the “common sense” of the movement, it was hegemonic. In many ways, anger was the dominant emotion within what I would call our emotional habitus. And that meant that we were familiar with that anger toward state and society, we knew how to enact it and perform it, and in some ways, we thus knew how to feel it. Other affective states kind of fell by the wayside, or couldn’t be acknowledged, and certainly did not have the same collectivized form. Anger, in contrast, was collectivized within ACT UP.
So, I would say that something happened when I took the movement as my object of research. I had to defamiliarize and make strange what was my own common sense. To me, initially, it went without saying that lesbians, gay men, and eventually queers were furious about what was happening. But I began to see that that perspective was naturalizing anger. I needed to think more about the sources of anger, what prompted it, how did it come to be a given, something axiomatic, within lesbian and gay communities and even more so within ACT UP. That required me to defamiliarize the movement's and my own common sense, to take a step back. That's what turning something you participated in into your object of research allows you to do, you get to take some distance from it, and it becomes curious to you. Or at least, that's one way to approach it, as something to be curious about, to ask questions about: "Why were we so angry about a virus? About a medical issue?"

I needed to historicize lesbians' and gay men's anger, to recognize that that feeling state came into being in a particular moment, it hadn't been there at the start of the epidemic but rather came into being under specific circumstances and took particular form and shape, and eventually spread widely throughout lesbian and gay communities, and became the common sense of ACT UP. To understand those processes and shifts over time required investigation and analysis; anger within lesbian and gay communities and within ACT UP was neither natural nor inevitable, so I needed to treat its existence and prominence as questions rather than as givens.

Regarding the question about labeling affects, and coming to understand the affects that were in play after taking ACT UP as my object – is something lost, thereby? Is it possible to truly capture the extra-linguistic nature of affect in academic writing? These are great questions. We might say that a lot gets lost whenever we try to capture an historical event or moment in writing. You're pointing to certain things, you're emphasizing certain things, you're ignoring other aspects, so it's an editing process, or better, an interpretive process. In illuminating something, something else gets obscured. And someone might say, "what about this aspect that you barely mention?" Suddenly a world opens, and you see things slightly differently; you might then need to revise your previous interpretation. What historical and social science writing ends up doing is giving us a particular take on something. It brings something perhaps inchoate and barely perceptible – like affect – into language, and it provides an interpretation, offering one way to understand something. The task in any kind of work like this is to try to make your interpretation compelling and persuasive to people, to substantiate your own interpretation in some way. But it will necessarily be a partial account with its specific analysis, of course.

I think your question is also getting at something else, which is about how to convey affect, specifically, in academic work. To get at affect requires sensing, tuning in to, attuning to the transitions in bodily capacity and to the potentialities thereby generated, so one question is about that sort of attunement as a method, and a second question is the one you raise: can that be conveyed in academic work? I think it depends. I don't know that the standard ways of writing in the social sciences are great for conveying affect – and I come out of the social sciences, right? I have to say, the social sciences are not oriented towards great writing; in the humanities and in the arts, there is more freedom to try to be more performative or experimental in your writing, and that might allow for richer conveyances of affect.
Gould: Yeah, there’s a need to experiment with different ways of trying to convey affect. In *Moving Politics*, I begin with a “scene” and a long quote from David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS-related complications; he was an artist, a lot of his work came out of the AIDS epidemic, and he was an AIDS activist. I felt like there was something about the way he put words together that had a speed, an intensity, a motion to it, and it seemed to convey some of the affects circulating in queer worlds, and within ACT UP, in that moment. Even if I’m not able to write like that myself, I wanted to signal the ways in which a written work derives from affective states and can generate affective states as well.

Robby Hardesty (RH): Do you think we can see a more performative paradigm in social scientific writing? Do you think things would be lost if we sort of “swerved” into the more performative?

Gould: I think it’d be great, it would be liberating in many ways. And I really like a good argument, but that can be done in a way that is more creative. Experimenting more to try to enliven our writing more would be great. Would something be lost thereby, by bringing more affect into our work? I don’t think so. Or I’m not too worried about that. So long as we recognize that academic work isn’t the only site for interpretations of the past and interventions in the present.

BF: It’s been really tricky in this course to try to “catch” affect and write about it, like we’re so tempted by the thesis statement – point one, point two, point three.

Rory Baron (RB): I talk about this with a lot of my friends who are creative writing majors, and I’m not – I’m a thoroughly social science person – we talk a lot about the difficulties of trying to harness that affective writing within English or Creative Writing rather than a more argument-style type of writing. The structure’s already there for you within a thesis-style writing, but within creative writing, you have to come up with that structure on your own.

BF: Yeah, writing is so colonized by Western rationality. Alright, question three: In laying out your usage of the emotional habitus, you describe it as a set of emotional labels, or an emotional pedagogy for group members to use, as well as a force which operates beneath conscious awareness. Can you talk more about how the emotional habitus provides labeling and pedagogy, but on an unconscious level?
Gould: With the term *emotional habitus* (drawing from Bourdieu), I am pointing toward a social grouping’s collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions, that is, members’ embodied, axiomatic inclinations toward certain feelings and ways of emoting. It operates at a nonconscious level by and large. I prefer *nonconscious* to *unconscious* because the word unconscious, as used in psychoanalytic theory, requires repression, whereas *nonconscious* denotes anything outside of conscious awareness. Now, of course, processes like disavowal or denial which push painful or traumatizing perceptions out of conscious awareness oftentimes are in play, but not always, and not only. That’s why I prefer the word *nonconscious*.

An emotional habitus is not consciously taken on and consciously used, but rather is something that works *through* us. By which I mean, it is produced and reproduced through a social group’s emotional practices, and as a member of that social group engaging in and subject to such practices, it gets into you, suffuses you, becomes your “nature.” What we experience and understand as our own nature, our human nature, is about this habitus shaping us, and disposing us towards particular actions. A habitus, as in a kind of disposition, an orientation, a kind of common sense, an axiomatic way of perceiving and being and acting, that’s all happening largely outside of our conscious awareness. You’re not thinking, oh, in order to be legible as an X, I need to walk in this way, and hold my body in this way, or talk in this way. It doesn’t happen like that. It’s more that we imbibe ways to be a proper X in a given field, through all of the ways that we look around ourselves and learn – that’s what I mean by pedagogy; I’ll return to that.

In terms of an emotional habitus for, as you said, group members *to use*, that sounds slightly purposive, and voluntarist, and strategic. To be sure, that certainly happens. An example I discuss in *Moving Politics* is from very early on in ACT UP when AIDS activists wondered, “How do we turn grief into anger? How do we turn people’s rage into action?” That was a form of strategic thinking around emotions. Activists do indeed sometimes try to cultivate in themselves and others what they think are the proper feelings for their activist goals. And that purposive “emotion work” helps to create the group’s emotional habitus. But in using the term habitus, I’m trying to emphasize the more bodily and less-than-fully conscious dimensions of its forcefulness.

Here’s how I see an emotional habitus working. Operating beneath or to the side of conscious awareness, and instantiated through practices like enactments or intimations of feelings, and through statements about what is (non)normative regarding feelings and their expression, an emotional habitus provides members of a social grouping with an emotional disposition, with a sense of what to feel, with ways of figuring out, understanding, and naming what they are feeling, and with ways of then expressing those feelings. It is an emotional pedagogy in the sense that it offers a sort of template for what and how to feel under particular circumstances. It guides people’s feeling and emoting by conferring on some feelings and modes of expression an axiomatic, natural quality and making other feeling states unintelligible within its terms and thus in a sense unfeelable and inexpressible.
Arlie Hochschild’s important notion of “feelings rules” speaks to these social and cultural dimensions of feeling and emoting. What I like about the habitus concept is that it allows us to see how such feeling rules or norms operate beneath conscious awareness. Indeed, an emotional habitus has force precisely because its bodily and axiomatic qualities obscure the social, conventional nature of feelings and generate the sense that what you are feeling is natural and individual, entirely your own. The habitus concept also allows us to grasp the bodily, nonconscious, affective processes through which we all are conscripted, unwittingly but willingly, into the social.

RB: Do you think there’s any way to disrupt the flow of the consciousness into the nonconsciousness in order to make people aware of that process?

Gould: I do think it’s possible to make what is nonconscious more conscious. I think that’s a really good question. Psychoanalysis is a theory and method that uses talk therapy to make conscious what is unconscious; it is about trying to become more aware. Affect theorists such as Massumi talk about attending to the newness of every situation, being sensitive to its openness in the sense of remembering that nothing is predetermined and sensing that things could go in a number of different directions even if there may be a tendency for the present to unfold like the past. So, that sort of sensing and tuning in to the unactualized potentials of any situation, tuning in to and amplifying alternative responses, alternative capacities that have been potentiated by the unfolding of an event but that aren’t yet being tapped into, that is a way to try to make more conscious what is happening at a nonconscious level.

Something I’ve noticed in some contemporary activist contexts, some groups have what’s called a – what is it? It’s like a “feeling monitor,” but there’s a name for it and I can’t remember what it is. Oh, it’s a “vibe watcher,” and sometimes that person will interrupt the whole meeting and say something like, “There’s a lot of tension in the room right now.” That may sound kind of new age-y, but really they’re simply tuning in to the dynamics in the room, sensing that things are going awry or that the meeting has hit an impasse, they’re feeling into the affects circulating in the space and interrupting a particular unfolding by drawing attention to what may be barely conscious but in the room even so, and exerting force. The way I understand it, the vibe watcher is paying attention to, trying to tune in to, the affects in the room, thereby opening up the possibility that the group might navigate internal dynamics and difficulties differently. That’s an example of trying to tune in to the complex feeling states circulating in a scene of some sort, and trying to make them more conscious. And it’s not that we can then navigate everything perfectly, but rather than allow them to take over and drive, it’s about trying to develop more of a relation to the affective dimensions of activist scenes and use that greater awareness to hit pause: “Oh, something’s happening here. Let’s see if we can actually try to talk about it, think about it, and maybe approach things differently.”

RB: That’s really interesting.
Gould: Yeah, so the habitus concept as Bourdieu developed it ended up sounding very structural, almost deterministic, and very much about social reproduction. I don't really read him that way. I read him as thinking in terms of tendencies, probabilities, likelihoods, and I see him as recognizing that there's a *shaping* rather than *determining* quality to a habitus. So it's flexible in that sense. And I see it as flexible because a habitus gets reproduced – if differently – through practices, human practices, human doings, through sociality, through the events of affecting and being affected by. All of those practices can cause a habitus to shift over time. In a way, *Moving Politics* is an ethnography of a shifting emotional habitus. It tries to account for an initial emotional habitus that shaped lesbians' and gay men's political horizons in very specific ways, their senses of political possibilities early in the AIDS epidemic, and then explores how that emotional habitus was transformed in a manner that opened up different, more militant political horizons in lesbian and gay communities across the United States. I was interested in how that newer emotional habitus emerged and then was reproduced over time – how it took form, how it crystallized and solidified, and then why and how it too eventually was transformed, a transformation that contributed to the shrinking of ACT UP and the decline of many chapters nationwide. My point is that it's important to think about a habitus processually and historically. An emotional habitus comes into being under particular historical circumstances, or more precisely, through human practices that are shaped by and unfolding within particular circumstances, and as it solidifies and congeals and later may be transformed, all of that happens under very specific historical conditions. And, as I said earlier, I think all of those practices occur largely non-consciously. Which is not to say that there aren't conscious, purposive, strategic attempts by activists to alter an emotional habitus. But you can't simply say, "Okay, everyone! Be angry!" and then everyone suddenly is angry. It doesn't work that way. The task as a scholar is to track, through painstaking empirical research, the discursive, bodily, gestural, emotive practices that bring an emotional habitus into being, that stabilize and reproduce it over time, and that sometimes transform it as well. The political dimension of this scholarly pursuit is that it's helpful for us as activists to think about those practices and about the ways that a resulting emotional habitus shapes political collectivities, their political horizons, and their political doings.

RB: You discuss the role that affect has in political and activist movements at several points in your book, especially in your observations about ACT UP's utilization of negative affects. In contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter, there's also this use of affect both positive and negative, and we can see this in other movements like Water is Life, in the Standing Rock movement, and MeToo – being probably one of the most recent of these – and the very titles of these movements are based on affective responses to the hegemony. And you know, Black Lives Matter uses both positive and negative affects in phrases like, "Stop killing us!" "I can't breathe!" so in that sense it's similar to what ACT UP does. But in the case of BLM, the title itself refers to a positive affect. Do you feel that positive affects can survive generationally as a strategy the way the negative affects in social movements have?
Gould: I’m not sure I’m fully grasping your question, but what you’re saying about positive and negative affect and social movements makes me want to say that movements, even if they’re not aware of it, engage in affective politics in the sense that they often attune to the affects circulating in a given context and, often not consciously, engage in practices that try to bring out some of the potential of the moment. Consider, for example, the Black Power movement and its symbol of the raised fist. That symbol consorts with positive affects like pride, black pride, joining that feeling to power and political militancy; the Black Power movement tapped into that militant potential. That raised fist is a symbol, tethered to pride and militancy, that has endured, and it has migrated: to women’s and gay liberation movements, for example. Sometimes movements try to reckon with the hard, negative affects – the bad feelings that people can have – trying to transform those into either more positive feelings or activating feelings or whatever. Consider the women’s movement; consciousness-raising groups in some ways were reckoning with the depression that some women were feeling given life in a male supremacist society. Depression can be a very individualizing feeling where the person feeling depressed might say, “There’s something wrong with me.” Consciousness-raising groups provided a different narrative: “No, there’s nothing wrong with you, and you’re not depressed, you’re angry.” That consciousness-raising work was emotion work. It transformed people from feeling depressed into feeling angry, allowing women to collectivize, and the women’s liberation movement was in some ways born within and out of that process of emotional transformation.

So, movements engage in emotion work; not necessarily consciously and strategically and purposefully, but sometimes they do, in order to produce the “right” kinds of feeling states to activate people. In my experience, the left sometimes prohibits certain feeling states. I write about despair at the end of Moving Politics, how there wasn’t much space for it in the movement. And that’s true in many left contexts. You’re supposed to feel hopeful, and you’re supposed to feel angry about all of the social injustice – this is kind of the pedagogy or emotional habitus of the left, you know – feel angry, and enraged by what’s going on, and feel hopeful that through our collective action, we can and will change the world. And if you feel despair, well, there’s not a lot of space for that. But come on, it’s a really important negative affect. And there’s a lot to feel despair about. So, in that chapter in Moving Politics about despair, I was trying to think about what it would have been like if, rather than disallowing despair, the movement had carved out some space for us to experience that despair collectively. Because the imperative was to be angry, and to continue to be hopeful that we would save our friends’ and comrades’ lives, and our communities. So, when people began to feel despair – this was before the invention of protease inhibitors, so people were feeling despair about the never-ending deaths, and about our inability to actually do what we said we were going to do which was save people’s lives and bring social change – there was no collective space created for that bad feeling. So what ended up happening is people who started to feel despair would just kind of slink away from the movement, especially as the refrain in the movement increasingly became, “Where’s your anger? Where’s your anger?” And at a certain point, some people just felt despair.
Many bad feelings are political. Disappointment is a deeply political feeling, and if the left was able to reckon with it, and politicize it, and collectivize it, we might be able to address that feeling and thereby mobilize people. I don’t want to sound so instrumentalizing, as if we even could instrumentalize people’s feelings for the purposes of social change, but my point is that those feelings are out there, and if we ignore them, if we don’t create a space for them, or if we simply hector people into not feeling them, telling them, “No, don’t feel despair, you’ve got to feel angry,” then we’re not really dealing with reality. And there’s a lot of political potential in those bad feelings.

RB: Yeah, so I’m thinking about how despair is highly discouraged, and you’re only supposed to feel anger and hopefulness— that kind of ties into purity politics, and it drives a lot of people away. I think we live in a very apathetic time right now, and I think that these kinds of trends have kind of contributed to that. Do you think there’s any way to utilize affect as a way to kind of collectivize, as you say, and kind of transform these apathies into despair, or as a collective kind of emotion that moves us forward into political action?

Gould: So apathy implies not caring about what’s going on, and I would rather understand what gets called apathy through what people’s behavior actually is, which is political withdrawal; in multiple ways, people have withdrawn from political life. To call it apathy presumes to know that people are withdrawing because they don’t care very much about what’s going on, but we actually don’t know whether people care or not. My hunch is that people actually do care deeply about what’s going on around them, and so the question is, why then have they withdrawn? Why do people withdraw from the political? And I think that’s really complex. Sometimes it has to do with the ineloquence of the political, by which I mean the way in which the political doesn’t speak to them, doesn’t address them, doesn’t acknowledge people’s needs, and desires, and aspirations, and pain, and difficulties. To the contrary, elected leaders, politicians, say things like, “the recession is over,” and “the economy’s booming.” So then, if you’re not booming, it must be your fault. What I’m saying is that the political repeatedly fails to address people where people are at in terms of their needs and wants, and so on. So then, I wouldn’t call it apathy; what we see around us is political withdrawal, and that raises all kinds of questions as to why. I think that what we were talking about earlier—about tuning in to feelings—can help us, because if people feel disappointed by the political, if they feel dismissed by the political, if they feel unaddressed by the political, those are feeling states that if we tune in and attend to them, we can say to ourselves, well what kind of a political context do we need to build that actually listens to what many people are feeling, and that cares about people’s disappointments, and despair, and furies, and so on? Turning towards affect is in some ways just attuning to what’s already there, which is that people are affected by whatever is going on around them, and if we’re going to try to collectivize, we need to be really attuned to what people are affected by, and what that then makes them do or not do. And the idea of potentiality, the notion that things could go in this direction, or this direction, or this direction, and that the direction things will go is not predetermined, that is suggestive of the need to really try to tune in to the affects that are circulating, because in that attunement we might gain a more adequate grasp of what’s going on, and that might allow us to push some of that potentiality in a good direction, in a direction that would, for example, bring about greater social change in the form of, say, greater freedom and a more just and equal distribution of resources.
RB: Yeah, we could also go into how other forms of not constructive political movements utilize affect as a way to kind of push things in a different, more unjust direction.

Gould: Yeah! And of course all movements – whether from the right, or the left, or the middle – are trying to build some sort of a collectivity, and they’re trying to intervene in some kind of way, and all of them are trafficking in affect. And of course the state works to produce all kinds of affective states like fear and anxiety that help to control populations. They may not be doing that purposively, or they may be doing that purposively, that’s a question to be investigated, but my point is that we can’t think politics without thinking affect, whether the politics is happening on the left, or the right, or the middle, or from the state, or from the people, from different groupings of the people. Affect saturates the political.

RB: Yeah, I agree. So related to the last question, the neoliberal hegemony has caught on, in a sense, and I don’t know if “appropriated affect” is a good term –

Gould: Neoliberalism certainly lassoes affect, yes –

RB: – yeah, as a method of manipulation in order to sell the hegemony. Seemingly “activist” organizations and movements such as “It Gets Better” is a good example of this, because they’re kind of pushing a more capitalist, normative framework. Do you think that affect can be used to combat affect – and we’ve kind of touched upon this already – does it open up political horizons that were previously cut off? Do you think leftist activism can ever successfully use affect as a way to move on the offense rather than perpetually being on the defense?

Gould: Yeah, I think so. What your question gets at is the way the state uses affect to control populations, to maintain the status quo, to continue the project of profit-making and staying in power. And movements are constantly lassoing affect, consciously or not, to oppose things, or to pursue their own agenda. I don’t know that it’s affect alone that would allow the left to go on the offensive rather than be always on the defensive. That requires organizing, building movements. There are already many movements, so it’s about figuring out how to amplify those, how to have cross-fertilization among them, and affect obviously is in the mix there. Figuring out how to amplify solidarities, how to create the conditions for people to touch across difference and feel okay about that, and to desire that, how to create the conditions in which people feel they can survive in their daily lives while being activists as well. All of those are things that we need to figure out. Once again, I’ll just say that affect is in the mix there. You can’t think about these kinds of questions of organization and of solidarity and movement-building without thinking about affect and emotion.
RB: A question regarding your most recent book project – the “Not-Yet” of politics – how do we decide what’s possible? What do you envision as the next step for leftist activism?

Gould: I’m not sure about the second part of your question, about what I envision as the next step; my talk this afternoon is in some ways about not knowing what is to be done, and about inhabiting that unknowingness in a manner that allows us to act even so. But regarding the question of how do we decide what’s possible. The word “decide” makes it seem like there are several options and we decide which one, or that we can simply sit down and consciously decide what’s possible. And of course activists do sit around and ask, “Okay, what can we achieve here? What do we want to try to do?” But senses of possibility and impossibility, I think, are deeply political, as your question suggests, and movements need to be concerned about where senses of possibility, and perhaps more importantly, senses of impossibility, come from. We can’t say in an abstract sense, or in a transhistorical sense, where a sense of possibility comes from or how we decide what’s possible or not. But again, from a political perspective, it’s important to be thinking about that question: where do senses of possibility come from? How do they emerge and take hold, and then sometimes change over time? Sometimes it’s an external event that challenges our sense of possibility. Maybe you see what happened in Cairo, people occupying a public square and collectivizing themselves and challenging state authority and in fact bringing down a 30-year dictatorship, and you say, “We could try to do that too.” You see what happened in West Virginia with teachers going on strike and winning, and you’re in Oklahoma, and you say, “Maybe we could go on strike too.” And so in thinking about this question of senses of possibility, we should note that we give one another senses of possibility. We also oftentimes destroy one another’s senses of possibility by saying, “That’s not realistic, that’s not going to happen, that won’t work.” It’s useful to attune to those tonalities, to those forms of knowingness, it gives us a sense of how we participate in creating particular senses of possibility and impossibility. Attuning to that is really important, I think. Which is all to say, I like the sentiment of your question a lot! And I think it’s important to have an orientation towards creating senses of possibility. But of course, if we think about that question of what’s possible only in terms of what’s achievable, that can truncate our political horizons. We need to think about the seemingly impossible if we want to bring it into being. If we only allow ourselves to think about the achievable, we never think beyond what is; what is tells us what’s achievable, and it thereby limits what’s achievable, so we have to think beyond that, otherwise we can get stuck. In any event, this question of senses of possibility and impossibility is a very important question.

RB: It’s probably one we’ll be spending a lot of time on as organizers.

Gould: Yeah, definitely.
RB: Returning to the question of despair – in *Moving Politics*, you address some of the potential political potency of despair. In our current political climate, do you feel despair has a productive role to play? How can we harness our despair to effect social change?

Gould: Yeah, I mean, as I said, I don’t have a blueprint [laughter]. But yes, I think we need to attune to despair and other bad feelings, and not deny them by demanding we all be hopeful and angry, you know, “Don’t mourn, organize,” as they used to say, or “Turn your grief into anger,” or “Turn your despair into rage,” or whatever. You can’t command feelings into being. To harness our despair would require acknowledging it and trying to see its political sources, and then trying to lasso it, I suppose. During the Bush years – the Bush II years – and the beginnings of the (second) Iraq war, there was a group that formed that I was a part of called Feel Tank Chicago; it’s a feel tank as opposed to a think tank, a group of artists, activists, and academics who are interested in the role that feelings play in public life. We held international parades of the politically depressed as a way to try to politicize our bad feelings, our political depression and despair. Politicize, collectivize, and put it out there into the world. There was so much response. We made t-shirts that said, “Depressed?” on the front, and “It might be political,” on the back, and people either were confused or their faces just beamed with recognition. The shirt spoke to them, it’s like we were saying, “We feel you.” People’s reaction of almost relief at being seen and felt really impressed upon me how important it is to politicize and collectivize these bad feeling states, because they’re out there, and they often do have political sources, but they can be quite individualizing and defeating, leading people to withdraw from political engagement.

RB: And it’s increasingly widespread.

Gould: Yeah. The parades of the politically depressed were a way of trying to reckon with those widespread bad feelings, to bring them into the public sphere in a way that might help to build collectivities to fight what prompts those feelings in the first place.

RB: That’s amazing.

Gould: Yeah, they were fun.
RB: So the last question is, what role does affective despair play outside of activist circles? That's kind of a hard question!

Gould: Yeah, it is. Well, regarding despair, you're right, it is widespread, and I think it's often individualized, and people just kind of throw up their hands. It's in activist scenes where, rather than throwing up our hands about how awful everything is, we typically try to figure out what to do. So, how appropriate in activist scenes to try to figure out what to do with that widespread despair? We do indeed need to tune in to the affective states that are widely circulating, and consider their sources, contours, and how they affect the composing, and decomposing, of collectivities. So, yes, despair does play a role outside of activist circles, and in some ways, that's precisely the audience for activist circles.

RB: Right, that's where activists need to be attuning to.

Gould: Yes, exactly.

RB: Thank you so much for talking with us.

Gould: Thank you!