

# Politics as an Art of Living

*by Solange Chavel*

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**What if it were necessary, in politics, to allow ourselves to be guided by our affinities rather than trying to build a general and often too distant theoretical position? And what if proximity had more value than truth? This is Valérie Gérard's hypothesis, in an open-minded and stimulating book.**

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On: Valérie Gérard, *Par affinités. Amitié politique et coexistence*, Paris, Collection Inventions, 2019, 221 p., 18 €.

*Par affinités. Amitié politique et coexistence* offers thoughts, partly inspired by Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil, about a hypothesis that can be expressed quite simply: in politics, it is not only fruitful, but also entirely legitimate, to allow ourselves to be guided by our 'affinities.' Those who ground their political positions solely on detached reason run the risk of wavering more greatly than those who allow themselves to be guided by their attraction for certain people and certain ways of life. Valérie Gérard presents the book's reflections as a way of taking the opposite view to a classical stance in philosophy: 'I like Socrates, I like Plato, but I like truth even more.' Quite the contrary, she tells us, in politics it is not only tempting, but also absolutely fundamental, to allow ourselves to be guided by our preference for our friends.

## Defending and illustrating a logic of affinity

The argument is based in part on three hypotheses that emerge from the very stimulating series of ‘Introductions to the book’ which are then explored throughout its two sections.

- The first hypothesis is epistemological, and consists of an acute sense of the limitations of abstract reason in determining our positions on political issues. The book is based on a form of humility; an awareness of the limitations of our capacity to ground each of our political opinions in rational thought, highlighting instead the considerable weight of what we like and dislike, of how, emotionally and existentially, we subscribe to a way of being in the world: ‘affinities steer us, independently of the order of reason, because they are about having a taste for certain very concrete ways of being and a taste for the company of certain people, which can only be experienced and which imposes itself upon our sensibilities’ (p. 21);
- The second hypothesis consists in asserting the properly *political* nature of these affinities, which mean choosing a world: these affinities are not just of a moral order; they also have a specifically political meaning. In this respect, Valérie Gérard’s reflections align with Arendt’s understanding of the political as also being about choosing ways of living and invoking the depth of ethical judgments;
- The third hypothesis consists in asserting that there is a difference between affinity-based and identity-based positions: ‘affinity-based positions are not necessarily sectarian’ (p. 21). Valérie Gérard wagers that these affinity-based positions are not the result of fixed, predetermined communities.

Taken together, these arguments make the work very welcome reading, not least because its style and format encourage the reader to play an active role. In keeping with its initial epistemological hypothesis, the book is more of a conversation with its reader than a closed demonstration. Valérie Girard explores avenues, tests hypotheses, and invites us to experiment with new ways of thinking about politics, taking a humble approach encouraging active, involved reading. I mentioned the multiple introductions earlier: Valérie Gérard offers several starting points for her reflection and this feels right. She shows how thinking about the affinity-based logic of politics is rooted in a series of experiences and starting points that can vary from a conversation in a high-school playground at the start of the year to reading Arendt to discussions among friends. This is where our daily experience of politics is rooted and it is very valuable to find a work of political philosophy that makes room for this, asking what the impact on political thought might be of the fact that it is first constructed in our daily conversations, with all their concomitant context, emotion, and sensibility.

In this respect, the book’s format contributes to the reading experience: the first part is embedded in dialogues with other writings—both philosophical (Arendt, Cicero) and literary

(Woolf, Goethe)—while the second interweaves text (La Boétie, Simone Weil) with recent experiences of political contestation—in which the author comments on ‘a few political banners’ (this is the title of one section) and conversations held in the context of political struggles.

The book mounts a strong defence of a certain way of understanding the political—as a question of choosing a world and a way of being in that world, with a fully present existential dimension. There are few philosophical models that give positive recognition to the importance of the emotional and existential forces that affect us in this area. Valérie Gérard’s book offers a stimulating illustration and strong defence of this conception of the political.

## **When the order of affinities comes up against the order of ideas**

In this defence, the author often espouses stances which are no less radical for the caution with which they are expressed. In order to establish her argument that affinities are relevant in politics, she embraces a marked opposition between affinities, on the one hand, and ideas, on the other. Indeed, it is one thing to say that ideas and reasoning are *complementary* to experiences and affinities, but quite another to say that ideas and reasoning are *opposed* to the latter and that therefore it is sometimes necessary to choose between them. Either affinities and ideas do not function on the same level, in which case there is not in fact any opposition between them, or they do, in which case it is sometimes necessary to choose one rather than the other. The author seems to be arguing for the latter throughout the book, with expressions such as ‘putting affinities *before* ideas’ (p. 26), ‘choosing positions based on people *rather* than ideas’ (p. 41), ‘because what is at stake in affinity-based positions are ways of inhabiting the world and the quality of our human bonds, shared emotional experience therefore comes *before* argumentation’ (p. 58), through to the final phrase: ‘it’s therefore ultimately a question of dethroning truth’ (p. 214).

While Valérie Gérard clearly seems to be opting for the latter stance, she sometimes connects her choice with statements about her lack of affinity with certain official proponents of reason—those who call themselves ‘philosophers’. ‘And when philosophers claim to take an interest in the political in their capacity as philosophers, with the attendant status and habitus, there is a strong chance that they will continue to consider it irrelevant to take into account people or the lives in which certain ideas are rooted and which are affected by the spread of certain ideas. This is what can make them arrogant and insufferable’ (p. 41). This could, however, raise the question of whether affinities, in this case, do not lead to a slightly too radical stance: it is not because some philosophers are presumptuous that we must necessarily place ideas and affinities in opposition; there might in fact be room for a humble philosophy of the political, which, it seems to me, is precisely what Valérie Gérard happily offers us.

This opposition between affinities and reason, openly embraced in several pages in the book, is perhaps also what calls into question the notion that affinity-based logic and identity-based logic can truly be distinguished from each other. The author clearly asks and addresses this question at the beginning of the book, when she quotes Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*: 'unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence.' The challenge of the political consists precisely in living with others with whom we feel we cannot associate and taking this challenge seriously is one of this book's major contributions. Valérie Gérard tells us that affinity-based logic can be distinguished from identity-based logic above all because the latter is closed, immutable, and not particularly open to new members, whereas the former is, on the contrary, open and founded on communities of thought that can be expanded. This is indeed an important distinction. But it might beg the question of whether or not it is sufficient to respond to the challenge of coexistence in cases where affinity is absent. The fundamental question, which is truly where this book's relevance lies, is how to hold three remarks together:

- it is a fact that, in politics, we do choose positions largely based on affinity;
- if we accept the book's arguments, these positions are not only a fact, but also a right, insofar as they are legitimate: politics is a question of choosing a world, and to empty politics of that existential depth is to reduce it to a fantasy;
- and at the same time, for politics not to be totalitarian, it must above all be about the coexistence of diverse affinities. How can I let myself be guided by my affinities and, at the same time, accept political coexistence with those whom I find distasteful? In other words, how can we deal with distaste in politics?

From this point of view, I did sometimes wonder about the status of some of the book's assertions in which the author shares her own affinities with the reader. For example, at a certain point, Valérie Gérard comments and criticises Ayn Rand's philosophy. She makes it very clear that she has no affinities with Rand's thinking—and, on a personal level, as a reader I share her taste and distaste in this regard. But what should we make of the following sentence: 'Ayn Rand's book was a work of political propaganda which, disconcertingly and disturbingly, met with considerable success' (p. 89). Can we really be surprised that some people should have an affinity with Ayn Rand? If we are surprised to discover that the world is inhabited by people whose tastes we find not only 'disconcerting', but also 'disturbing,' have we not failed to take up Butler's challenge: politics as the art of living with people with whom we are tempted to think we cannot associate?

## Sharing a political world with people with whom we do not like to associate

I emphasised earlier that part of the book's value lies in its style and the way it is structured: in keeping with its epistemological humility, it offers not so much a closed demonstration as a series of propositions to encourage reflection, fuelled by philosophical and literary readings, conversations with friends, experiences of political struggle, and even photographs of slogans, demonstration banners, and graffiti. I would like to echo this choice by offering, in turn, two contextual experiences: the first, in my view, underlines the book's main value and points to the way in which I believe it does indeed hit on the truth; the second engages with the more problematic issue of coexistence with those with whom we wish not to associate.

In the second part of her book, Valérie Gérard comments on, among other things, some pieces of political graffiti: '*L'important c'est les ami·e·s*' ['Friends are what matter,' written in the inclusive, non-gendered, form], '*Imaginons une autre façon de vivre, émeutière et aimable*' [Let's imagine another way of living, both agitational and agreeable] etc. I would therefore like to offer the following contribution to this little collection of photographs: '*L'amor és el motor de l'odi contra el vostre sistema*' [Love is the driving force for hatred of your system'].



This serves as a pendant to the images discussed by Valérie Gérard: it contains the same mixture of love and conflict, which makes up the flesh and blood of experiences of political conflict and which raises the question of how far our love for our friends (and our hatred for others, or their lifestyle) can go without becoming exclusive, dominating, or totalitarian?

My second experience is more critical. Valérie Gérard posits that it is legitimate to adopt positions based on affinities given that, in this case, the latter are the starting point for a political position. When affinities are lacking, then we are in disagreement. What unsettles me, however, is the extent to which the causal link between affinities and political positions seems sometimes to be established in reverse order: because we have a political disagreement, we invent, sustain, and overplay an antagonism. It is difficult to be in conflict with friends, so sometimes—and social psychology confirms individual experience in this regard—it is easier to make enemies of those with whom we are in conflict, to stop associating with people whose words and ideas are not in keeping with our own, even though we could have concrete experiences in common.

Given that Valérie Gérard bases her book on contextual experiences of recent political conflicts in France, it seems justified for me to refer here to the political conflict between the region of Catalonia and the Spanish state that has been ongoing since 2010 and that is producing ever more markedly polarised positions with each year that passes: what was once a moderate autonomist stance among many Catalans is veering towards separatism. What strikes me here is the parallel evolution between political discord and an increasing sense of disaffinity. Returning from the recent demonstration in October 2019, after the sentencing of the political leaders behind the controversial referendum organised in 2017, a neighbour confided in me, visibly overcome with emotion: *'no tenim res a veure culturalment amb aquesta gent; no ens volen, tenim que marxar'* (we have nothing in common with those people, culturally speaking [the people in Madrid]; they don't like us, we have to leave.) What is the causal relationship here? Has lack of affinity led to political conflict? Or, on the contrary, has political conflict led to the construction of a lack of affinity, which means that we wish, at all cost, to distinguish ourselves from 'those people' as people not only with whom we cannot be friends but also with whom we cannot coexist? This question seems to me to be at the heart of the affinity-based logic championed by Valérie Gérard.

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