

## Hope and Micropolitics

How might a micropolitical analysis inhabit 'the present' if we start from the presumption that the micropolitical is not synonymous with the subversive or the oppositional or the resistant?

In her remarkable account of the communities that form in the midst of disasters and emergencies, Rebecca Solnit (2009) shows how rather than fracturing already weak social ties disasters are often met with outpourings of altruism and generosity. In the 'intensified present' of disaster she finds joy in the enactment of kindnesses and the giving of help. One example she gives is of the 'historical event' now known as 9/11 and the "phenomenon of convergence": the seemingly spontaneous movement of ordinary peoples and materials to the site of the World Trade Centre (that coexists with and can sometime complicate or disrupt official movement to the scene of an event). Of course, what she calls the "desire to help" (ibid. 195) on September 11 2001 was overdetermined by the media and political coding of 9/11 as an attack on a wounded, unified American nation, but it was not completely reducible to that coding. For Solnit, it both enacted and prefigured something else, something more. She writes: "The streets of New York were flooded with people desperate to find something to give, to do, someone to help, some way to matter. In a sense they were taking care of themselves, but a society in which this was how people ordinarily did so would be a paradise indeed, one in which every corner of suffering and lack would have been scoured by generosity" (ibid. 197).

Macropolitical approaches to the politics of emergency fail to notice, pass over or quickly forget such momentary, exceptional acts of coming together. Too often what they look out for in the complex life of emergency situations and scenes is an actual or potential intensification of state power in relation to (often already) vulnerable peoples. A macropolitical analysis of the harms or damages that are or threaten to be produced as emergencies are governed is, of course, a necessary part of any politics of emergency. But it is not sufficient. It risks missing what else might be or might have been emerging in, though, and around whatever eventually comes to form. It may miss, for example, how never quite forgotten but mostly invisible acts of kindness amid the despair and grief of disaster enact forms of yearned for but normally unrealised belonging. It may

miss the detail of how new or barely recognised forms of belonging and attachment surface to reinvigorate dormant promises of how to relate and be with others differently.

But a macro-political analysis may also miss, at the same time, how forms of power work through the micro-political. The micropolitical is not synonymous with the resistant or subversive or oppositional. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari (1997), a little suppleness is not enough to make things 'better'. They remind us that "fine segmentations are as harmful as rigid segments". Developing from their comments on the micropolitics of Nazi fascism, Massumi (2015: 64-65), for example, writes of how today's US led militarised 'ontopower' involves a "colonisation of the micro-political". Think of how disciplinary power across space-times of enclosure works micropolitically to organise intensive forces in order to simultaneously increase a body's usefulness and docility. A key question becomes, then, how and with what consequences the forms of damage and harm that characterise the contemporary condition – disappearance, depreciation, enclosure and so on - work micropolitically? What 'fine segmentations' enable them to function? How do the micropolitical and macropolitical 'boast' or 'cut into' each other as capitalism, neoliberalism and so on come to form? Let's return to the example of the emergency state. We might speculate on how the aura that, for some at least, still surrounds the sovereign state in emergency times is a state effect/affect produced through the detail of scenes of heroic response; the responder who rescues a body seemingly rendered vulnerable by the event, the responder who inhabits an inhospitable, barely bearable environment.

Thinking micropolitically does something more, though, than once more expand our understanding of how power operates as it becomes immanent to life's unfolding. As I hinted at through discussion of Solnit on disaster, micropolitics is one way of inhabiting situations and scenes that stays with and discloses how what Povinelli (2012) calls the 'otherwise' is immanent to any arrangement of the actual. For me, the hope of micropolitics is that it invites us to learn how to act in the midst of ongoing, unforclosed situations and experiment with ways of discerning and tending to the 'otherwise'. To return again to the scene of emergency, we might learn to stay with moments of kindness - the reassuring touch of a stranger, the held hand - where lines between the state and people or lines between peoples perhaps blur, perhaps fray, are perhaps momentarily suspended. We might ask, though, how to stay in the midst of

processes if we take seriously that the 'micro' of micropolitics is not synonymous with the small or local? How might a micropolitics "engage becoming" (Massumi 2015: 71) if the situation it must try and be in the midst of always-already exceeds a local context or demarcated site?

For me, a micropolitics is and is not a form of critical practice/ethos. It is critical in that, as with all critical practices, it embodies a hope for other futures. Any critique is undertaken for an as yet unrealised (and perhaps unknown) future through the promise of inaugurating (through a practice of judgment) some kind of more or less dramatic disruption or interruption in the existing organisation of the actual. A micropolitics stays with and tends to the becoming otherwise that is folded with the actual. It differs, though, from recent experiments with critique that invest hope in revealing the contingency of the apparently settled (as constructionist accounts) or in showing the diversity of the seemingly singular (as in versions of 'ontological politics'). If it shares the hope of critical work, the interest in micro-political analysis also resonates with a recent dissatisfaction with how a certain style of critique has become habitual. The charge is that a specific practice of critique has come to function as a consoling mechanism that, to paraphrase Sedgwick (2003) on paranoid ways of knowing, always finds what it already knows. Critique reduces the present and near future to another expression of a supposedly settled and named source of harm or damage. Always in the midst of unforclosed situations, micro-politics, by contrast, might best be characterised as a 'method of hope' (after Miyazaki 2004). By which I mean that micropolitics involves a temporal reorientation of knowledge practices to the emergent and the prospective (what has not-yet become). We might say that as well as showing how power operates micropolitically, a micropolitical analysis attempts to apprehend 'sparks of hope'. Perhaps Solnit's way of paying attention to the new modes of relation and belonging that temporarily come to form in scenes of disaster is one example of a mode of analysis that tries to fan 'sparks of hope' and provide other images of the present

## References

- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Massumi, B. Continuum: London
- Massumi, B. (2015) *Politics of Affect*. London: Polity
- Miyazaki, H. (2004) *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press
- Povinelli, E. (2012) *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick E K (2003) *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Solnit, R. (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*. Penguin: London
- Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.