

# Reception of Micropolitics in American Studies: Contexts and Concerns

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**Abstract:** The present paper critiques the recurring fetishization and glorification of micropolitics in social justice projects as they get theorized, received, and celebrated in academia, especially in American studies. Presenting the theoretical contexts of micropolitics, the paper critiques American studies scholars' investment in those theoretical concepts that, in the name of evading manipulation, reinforces subservience for the weak and the oppressed.

**Keywords:** Micropolitics, American Studies, Power, Resistance

## I

Isn't it a contradiction that American Studies—within its interdisciplinary approaches—heavily invest in the intersectional analysis to conceptualize the link between power differentials and multiple vectors of differences—race, class, sex, gender, ability, etc.—but regarding resistance to oppression, it recommends identity politics and fragmented forms of resistance as the only viable option? This article emerges from an understanding that this, indeed, is a contradiction, which can be traced back to the institutionalized narratives of power and resistance within American Studies. By “institutionalization of narratives,” I refer to reification of the politics of difference theorized by poststructuralist thinkers: Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze, among others. Inspired by these thinkers, Scott and Certeau and, later, Bhabha theorize certain versions of micropolitics which also get reified by some American Studies Scholars within the logic of the poststructuralist politics of differences. The present article is an attempt to question this fossilization of viability.

## II

In American Studies, identity politics, the politics based on one's race, sex, gender, and so on remains as the viable mode of resistance against this injustice. I acknowledge the contribution of identity politics in the Civil Rights Movement. However, I would also argue that any identity politics has its own limitation: it demands rights to the manipulative forces and imagines that achieving those rights will also transform the manipulative system itself. Also, its boundary drawing for the sake of performing identities is exclusionary and it recommends resistance in bits and pieces. The logic of fragmentary resistance foregrounds the fluidity of power in the neoliberal condition but conceals the requirement of a vertical interconnectedness along with the horizontal infrapolitics and identity politics.

The intertwiningly embedded forms of racism—which get exposed in job market discrimination against people of color or criminalization and mass incarceration of the black and brown bodies within the neoliberal state, for example—shows us that after the abolition of the Jim Crow racism, racism itself has found new resort in the nest shaped by the neoliberal and biopolitical power structures. The situation worsens as the social justice scholars in academia are trained to reject any system theories, theories that question and the totalizing effect of neoliberal capitalism and inspire changes in bits and pieces, through micropolitics.

## III

In this article, I focus on the recurring promotion of micropolitics (explained in section IV) by some American Studies scholars, and I believe—as I will explain below—this resort to micropolitics is driven by two interconnected discourses: the discourses of the infrapolitics (explained in section IV) or the politics of difference and the discourse of power theorized by Deleuze and Foucault. These discourses are later theorized and made popular within the neoliberal intellectual status quo reinforced in and thorough stigmatization of any totalizing theory as foundational and regressive. What such logic routinely conceals is the totality of the neoliberal global capitalism itself which shockingly remains unquestioned and unaddressed, especially when any strategies of resistance within the frames of the politics of difference are imagined within academia. Given the poststructuralist credence in the non-foundational and anti-totalitarian theories, the increasing institutionalization of the latter totalitarianism and the stigmatization of the former totalitarianism—especially in imagining resistance against manipulative forces—appear to me symptomatic of an impasse in which an inadequate understanding of proper resistance against the nexus between the neoliberal capitalist power and the biopolitical power can easily thrive as indicated by our perplexity at flourishing of different forms of injustice: racism, sexism, classism, ableism, etc.

## IV

Though Scott and Certeau have used “infrapolitics” and “micropolitics” invariably as synonymous, I would use these two terms to refer to two different things. By “infrapolitics”, I would indicate the general mode of resistance based on the politics of difference theorized by the poststructuralist thinkers: mainly Foucault and Deleuze and by the postcolonial theoretician Bhabha. My use of the term

“micropolitics” would refer to tactics as everyday resistance (Certeau) and as weapons of the weak (Scott) against the systemic manipulation.

Micropolitics, the tactics of everyday subterranean insurrection towards any manipulative strategies, was theorized by James C Scott in *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) and Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). Scott—based on his findings in his field work in the Malay village—claims to discover some new “observations about power relations and discourse (Scott: x)” which explains class relations—between the poor peasants and the rich landlords—in Malay.

What Scott basically finds is some “weapons of the weak”: poaching, pilfering, and foot-dragging used by the poor peasants in their everyday struggle against the manipulative landlords. These weapons are not intended to abolish the manipulative forces but these, somehow, maintain the interests of the poor peasants as they try their best to make the best use of the worst conditions they find themselves in. Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) argues that the dominated are often considered powerless but they also practice some disguised forms of resistance which his works intends to expose:

The purpose of this work is to make explicit the systems of operational combination which also compose a culture, and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society is concealed by the euphemistic term “consumers”. Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (xi-xii, emphasis original).

Both Scott and Certeau limit the scope of micropolitics as the mode of survival within and adaptation to systems of manipulation. They describe what the poor and powerless, who are considered passive, do to assert their agency against the context of domination. It is not difficult to find their investment in the Foucauldian concept of resistance. Foucault in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) argues “where there is power, there is resistance”. Foucault didn’t offer any comprehensive theory of social transformation. He argues that resistance within the microphysics of power can only be conceived as sporadically pervasive. It seems that Both Scott and Certeau seeks inspiration in the Foucauldian concept of power but they have come out with different theoretical understanding of resistance.

Certeau rejects Foucault’s all-encompassing structures of power. Certeau alleges that Foucault has made concepts of power and resistance too abstract to conceive any meaningful individual agency. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), Certeau enlists concepts developed by Foucault to express the monolithic logic of strategic power: “apparatus, instrumentalities, techniques, mechanism, machineries, etc. (45).” Certeau emphasizes on the limit of control in any strategic manipulation and keen on using the cracks and

fissures so that tactical moves can render an escape if not overthrowing of strategic power.

This escape from strategic power is also the cornerstone of Scott’s micropolitical resistance. In contrast to Certeau and Scott, Foucauldian micropolitics don’t conceive of any escape route from power. Foucault rather believes that there is no outside of power. Also, for him, resistance can be conceived as sporadically pervasive as only viable mode of resistance, if any. Whereas Foucault understands resistance as sporadically pervasive, Deleuze would be the last person to differentiate between the micropolitics and the macropolitics as Todd May have suggested: “Every politics is simultaneously a micropolitics and macropolitics. There are not two realms, the molar and the molecular. There are not two separate levels. But micropolitics comes first (May: 128)”. Deleuze’s micropolitics entails investing upon the line of flight:

To think machinically is to recognize that the given identities of our political thought are more fluid and changeable than we have been led to believe. It is to seek not for the eternal nature of traditional political entities: the nation, the state, the people, and the economy. It is instead to seek for what escapes them. This does not mean that one seeks for what lies outside of them; it means one seeks for what escapes from them and within them; it is a production within the realm of that from which it takes flight” (May: 128).

In contrast to Certeau’s fissures, Deleuze is keen on the immanent suppleness within categories of nation, state, class, race, sex, gender, etc. For Deleuze, any micropolitical intervention must be enacted within this notion of suppleness. In this way, Deleuze’s micropolitical project is more ethical than political.

But no matter what amount of suppleness Deleuze would find in the categories of class, nation, economy, etc. the neoliberal capitalist forces are quick to conceal and blur these categories not because they are supple but because their investment in these categories can expose the logic of hidden and divisive labor upon which surplus values of profit solely relies on.

So, all the four thinkers have invested in the politics of difference but they offer different models of micropolitics. Understanding each of them in the context of their theoretical project is necessary so that we can avoid drawing three overlapping conclusions: (a) all of them glorify micropolitics and suggest similar means of resistance (b) their investment in the politics of difference and subsequent models of resistance offer a complete program of resistance against the neoliberal capitalist and biopolitical power structures and (c) since the theoretical point of departure of both “micropolitics” and “identity politics” is “infrapolitics” backed by “poststructuralist theories” and “the politics of difference”, each of the project involved justifies another and this is end of all consideration regarding the operation of power and viable mode of resistance in the neoliberalist biopolitical mismanagement.

## V

Against this backdrop of possibility, I have found two different kinds of American Studies scholars: first, those who would do all three overlapping mistakes above and, second, scholars who would carefully avoid these mistakes and would come up with projects of resistance which shows potential that they are on the verge of accepting a dialectic between the micropolitical and the macropolitical mode of resistance. The former trend can be identified in the work of Adria L. Imada in *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (2012) and Nadine Ehlers in *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (2012), for example. The latter trend can be exemplified with the works of other scholars: Jasbir K Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Chandan Reddy in *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (2011), Andrea Smith in *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008), and *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (2013).

Stigmatization of totalizing theories makes them underwrite their radical rearticulation. I would bring the theories of space to make them more convinced about the inadequacy of resistance in infrapolitics, micropolitics, or identity politics. Also, I would sketch out a spatialized mode of resistance based on a dialectic between the micropolitical and the macropolitical resistance. Before doing so in chapter two, I would like to present a brief history of the reification of the politics of difference in the global intellectual spheres. To present this brief history I have taken help from Todd May's *Reconsidering Difference* (1997).

Due to pervasive influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism, a paradigm shift has occurred within which a valorization of difference is institutionalized. Thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Irigaray, Levinas, Lyotard, and later, Lacoue-Labarthe, LeDoeff and Nancy have played a pivotal role to make this shift happen. Historically, their common philosophical problem has been shaped around a key question: how to rescue the logic of difference from the logic of the same? How they have come upon this philosophical problem can be traced back to historical contexts to which they respond to.

Precisely, they critique Nazism in Germany and fascism in Italy in the last century which for them is a historical manifestation of totalitarianism seeking justice from the philosophical project of foundationalism. For Nancy and Levinas, for example, totalitarianism is a project “constraining peoples’ lives and identities within narrowly defined parameters” (May: 4)—which seeks nourishment from the philosophical project of foundationalism that can be described as “the project of giving an account that is exhaustive and indubitable” (May: 3). But for poststructuralist thinkers, foundationalism empties out the scope of different lives and identities. So, they want to rescue the possibility of difference and consider attacking both philosophical foundationalism

and political totalitarianism as ethical task. Also, they consider structuralism of Marx, Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, and Piaget as reductionist. One concern for them has been how to do a revision of all structuralist projects. For the poststructuralist thinkers, the holocaust and the events of May 1968 in France only reinforces their concern for rescuing the difference.

In retrospect, however, their project of privileging difference has been both successful and failed. It has been successful on the ethical and intellectual levels but failed in the social and political levels. Rise of racism, religious fundamentalism, war on terror, mass incarceration, the rise of military-industry complex, etc. have been flourished within the neoliberal global capitalist project. One reason this has been gone rampant for me is a tragic irony: the neoliberal project can easily conceal its own totalitarianism using the rhetoric of differences. In a sense, the global neoliberal capitalism has successfully colonized, misappropriated, and derailed the politics of difference. A project which is docile to this kind of misappropriation must be questioned and examined to revise it once again! This again is another historical necessity.

At this conjuncture, all I can see is American Studies following two different paths. There are plenty of scholars in this field who continuously promote the politics of difference. They would rightly argue that the full understanding of differences is yet to be communicated to the world. Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, Juana Maria Rodriguez can be mentioned as examples. There are other scholars who along with promoting the politics of difference critique neoliberal capitalism. Chandan Reddy, Jasbir K. Puar and Andrea Smith belong to this group. But, perhaps, we need a third group of scholars, even more in number, who would not only throw light on the misappropriation of difference within the totalitarian project of neoliberal capitalism, they would also expose the problems with infrapolitics, micropolitics, and identity politics, and attempt to articulate a radical praxis of resistance to structures of power. I identify the present article as an attempt to respond to this need.

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