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Title: **Micropolitical entanglements: Positioning and matter**

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Author: Michele Lancione

## **Micropolitical entanglements: Positioning and matter**

Michele Lancione

How could one harness a ‘micropolitical/minor ethics’? I take this question as an invitation to reflect on the ways micropolitics intersect with ethnographic endeavours inflated by an activist ethos. What I want to put into focus here is the nexus between Deleuzian-Guattarian metaphysic, ethnographic praxis and grass-root politics – a nexus that, I believe, was a primary concern for the two French thinkers and it definitely is as such in my current research. I will introduce my discussion by quoting two short passages from Deleuze and Guattari. The first reads:

Molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 219).

The second, longer quote comes actually from Guattari only and it can be found in that powerful collection of essays called ‘Soft Subversions’. In there we can read:

I believe that there is a collective, unformed search, from above and below, for another kind of politics. This is what I call ‘micropolitics,’ and ‘molecular revolution.’ It begins with very immediate, daily, individual preoccupations, yet remains connected to what happens at the social level, and even, why not, at the cosmic level (Guattari 2009, p. 138)

In these quotes, Deleuze and Guattari are inviting us to move from the molecular to the molar, and back again<sup>1</sup>. It is in this journey that I see the activation of a ‘minor’ politics. This is because to perform this journey means to re-shuffle things constantly, to link, de-link and re-link them. Such an *oeuvre* does not provide a once-and-for-all recipe for political action, but it invites by default, by the immanent act of doing and (re)doing

things, to a minor politics characterised by a capacity to become, to articulate difference and to open new articulations that are not to be subsumed by ‘a redundant majority’ (Conley 2010, p.167). What really interests me is how we – as academics – can actively perform this journey from the molecular to the molar. Even more precisely, how can we ethically perform this kind of journey and the related minor politics?

One needs, first of all, to understand what kind of ethics we are confronting. Since I am constrained by space, and since much has already been written on this subject, I will define it clearly from the very beginning: without diminishing the importance of fundamental and universal rights, it is not in the light of these rights that we are moved ethically, but in the contextually-based construction (and deconstruction) of these rights. Ethics is, in other words, always contextual – part of a ‘context’ understood as matter of processual unfoldings (Thrift 2004), embodiment (Bignall 2010), post-human entanglements (Braidotti 2013) and eventful possibilities (Dewsbury 2000). Although it is still related to certain standard norms – as any molecular thing is related to a molar one – the kind of ethics that fuels the work of Deleuze and Guattari is there first and foremost to challenge those norms starting from the ‘micropolitics of the social field’, the very specific social field in which we find ourselves plugged-in.

The ethics sketched in the above lines is characterised by two interlinked facets. First, there is the performative facet of ethics: ethical actions and blueprint to actions are always contextual, because they are understood as material and immaterial practices arising from the performed field rather than deriving from a universalising norm. Second, there is the normative facet, which states that ethics should be always attuned to a minor form of politics against the normalising forces that tend to control and reduce the potential of contextual becoming. On the basis of these two facets, a micropolitical/minor ethics is a matter of field performances and production of knowledge that are *relevant to the context in question*. Without such a relevance, there would be no ethics, no politics, and – for what matters to me at least – no research as well. This is because it is only in-context that these things are rendered visible, defined, and assume meaning. As it will become clearer in a moment, I intend this process of ‘making things relevant’ - hence of performing an ethically-sounded research endeavour - to be an *unavoidably* collective

enterprise, not something ‘owned’, ‘started’ or ‘performed’ by the researcher only.

### **Positioning and matter**

The kind of contextualised and committed engagement just evoked does not come automatically and it is quite difficult to attain. In my practice as an urban ethnographer and activist all this comes down to a matter of performativity and positionality. How we perform the field and how we position ourselves within the latter, how we plug into it, are the most subtle moments in harnessing a contextually relevant minor ethic. How do we make the other aware of who we are and of what we want to achieve? How do we negotiate the affective relationship that is avoidably going to take place in the encounter? How do we become aware of the unconscious process underlying the encounter itself, which comprises also articulations with – and through – post-human matter? Finding a way to approach these questions with the right sensibility – one able to enhance rather than reduce the complexities and multiplicities of any context – is a preliminary task to harness a micropolitical/minor ethics.

I attend to positionality driven by the aim of producing practice-based, contextually relevant and committed knowledge. In this sense, I follow Haraway when she claims that the only way to be objective about something ‘turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility’ (Haraway 1988, p. 582). This is about recognising that if we cannot be the other we cannot also be totally detached from the other (and its contexts). In the moment in which I enter the field I become part of that collective subject; I am into it, I am part of it, I change it and I change with it. Borrowing from the work of Cindy Katz, we can say that practising and enacting the space of the field is about positioning in-between our accustomed role and the other (Katz 1994), in ways that are not limited to the acknowledgement of a hybrid positionality, but committed to meaningful engagement and change. This is about doing something ‘relevant’ not only ‘for’ the other, but with the other, both in the sense that the (often unconscious and provisional) definition of what is ‘relevant’ is joint, but also that action is taken together. It is about what Gillian Rose has

called a 'constitutive relationship': "researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves are 'interactive texts'" (Rose 1997, p. 316). Sometimes it is difficult to let the 'other' understand that we are not looking for data, but for a relationship, and sometimes those relationships can turn bad, but this is part of the embodied form of engagement that a micropolitical ethics requests (and aims for).

Harnessing a micropolitical/minor ethics means approaching the world through a particular sensibility, one attentive to the numerous nuances making up the studied contexts because it is only from these nuances, which often involve non-human actants, that one may be able to prepare the ground for a positive, meaningful and relevant 'constitutive relationships'. We may call this sensibility 'poetic' (Lanne 2016), because it is not about romance, but about potential, the potential of materiality, of meaningful positioning, of encounters: the minor/micropolitical potential of resisting and challenging the forces of normalising power (Lancione 2015). I would like to consider a short but concrete example of what I am arguing for, taken from one of my latest ethnographic experiences in Bucharest, Romania.

In Bucharest, I followed for more than ten months a community of 100 Roma people, who, in September 2014, had been evicted from their homes. From that moment on, half of these people constructed makeshift dwellings on the pavement located in front of their old homes and they are still there at the time of writing this piece (July 2015). Conducting an ethnographic study with this community has meant, first and foremost, supporting their cause. These people are in the street because they are protesting against the inertia of the State's housing policy, against racism in housing allocation and against the rampant neoliberal urban economy characterising contemporary Bucharest. If these are all issues that I generally consider to be worth fighting against (thanks to a moral ethos that I share with millions of others on the planet), it is only in the day-to-day grounded entanglement of these people and their street that I could find a way (a micropolitical/minor ethics) to perform ethically as a researcher and activist.

On a first level, enacting a minor ethics in the field has meant supporting these people in their protest; being there with them in the street almost every day, sharing the cold evenings in front of a fire, listening to their stories, giving them a place to sleep in

my flat, to take showers or wash their clothes, but also following and documenting the whole process, moving in that third space between academia and activism argued for by Routledge (1996). In this regard, an important role of my endeavours as an activist has been to present a visual ethnography of the community's daily protest, by producing videos and photos, as well as an online blog that I set up and manage following an idea from a young Roma woman evicted from her home,<sup>ii</sup> in order to render their story more visible. Producing these videos brought me to the second level of my minor/micropolitical ethics, which was essentially related to the everyday effort that this requires. Such effort is not human-defined or dependent, but it is enmeshed in the micropolitics of life, in the alignment of small devices that may break, not work, or render everything incredibly slow and painful. To work for the kind of 'constitutive relationship' that a minor/micropolitical ethics requires, one has to acknowledge such efforts and not to diminish its value both as a necessary *oeuvre*, and as an *unavoidable* part of being in-context.

Something of this nature took place when the evicted people asked for copies of the videos I was producing for their blog. *Perfect*, I said to myself, *this would be a very easy way to 'give something back' to them*. So one afternoon I sat at my desk and started to edit some of the videos. Doing this took only a few hours; I burned a DVD and happily gave it to them. However, when we sat in a friend's house with a few Roma women to watch it, we realised with disappointment that it did not work. The reason was that I had burned the DVD to be read by a computer, not a DVD player. *Stupid me!* I thought. Therefore, the next day, I went back to my desk, where the nightmare began. The open source software that I was using at the time (KDEnlive) did not want to export the newly edited video. It was stopping at 00:14 seconds before the end of the process. Without a clue what the problem was, I embarked on a long and exhausting day in which I tried, over and over again, to export the DVD in a DVD-player friendly format. I read countless blog-posts on the topic, downloaded and installed countless plug-ins and codex, I re-edited using different effects and cuts...All this for nothing. One should also consider that – again for ethical and micropolitical reasons – I am a Linux (Mint) user; an operating system that is as beautiful as it is painfully irritating when it decides not to work. When it does not work, much of the time it is simply because the user is ignoring to activate an



obscure option that is not available from the graphic interface, but contained in a line of code to be entered somewhere. The un-savvy Linux user like myself keeps on installing software, shouting at the screen, but nothing changes, until one finally finds, in some mysterious on-line forum, the answer to the problem. This is what eventually happened to me at 4am that day, 18 hours after I began that quest. I burned 21 DVDs, one for each family, this time of the right format, and I *happily* shared those with them.

## **Conclusion**

The minor/micropolitical ethics that I have tried to evoke in this paper is one of contextual commitment. It is about the DVD, a request that came from my Roma friends; it is about the liminal pleasure that that DVD produced in them; it is about the enormous stress that that same DVD produced in me; it is about their protest; about me going into their makeshift homes with my camera and them coming to my flat for a shower, etc. All this is about the positioning which as an activist/researcher I had (and still have) in the community – one aimed at supporting their struggle against the molar power that makes them poor, diverse, expelled. And all this is assembled through numerous technologies that have their own right not to work – like my Linux software – which renders things even more difficult, but, nonetheless, necessary. It is through the entanglement between these things and people that we can find relevant and meaningful ways of moving from the molecular to the molar and back again - or, to say it differently, to harness a ‘micropolitical/minor ethic’.

Micropolitics is not something one does, but something one is always in. What matters to me is how we position ourselves within it. In my research and activist endeavours, I am driven by a contextual form of ethics, by what is relevant in that place, in that moment, in order to speak the truth to the molar and molecular power of that place in that moment. This is about performances, bodies, affects, and subjectivity. It is about things. Losing time. Stressing out. Aiming for. It is about an embodied and collectively negotiated form of micro-politics that is key to activism, politics *and* academic research.



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i Moving from the molecular to the molar does not mean moving from the micro to the macro. The two terms are used to identify matters of intensities, perspectives and points of reference (Bonta and Protevi 2004): the molar is organised with reference to a standard norm, while the molecular is not.

ii [www.jurnaldinvulturilor50.org](http://www.jurnaldinvulturilor50.org)