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Ontopower. War, Powers, and the State of Perception.

Brian Massumi, Duke University Press, 2015. 306 pp. \$24.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-0-8223-5995-1

In Spinoza's work, the scholastic notion of 'natura naturans' is cast as something akin to an invisible wellspring of the world given to empirical experience. It designates God's continuous yet imperceptible activity of generating the reality which will eventually present itself to our senses: 'natura naturata'. In *Ontopower*, Brian Massumi suggests that, in this capacity, as author of our experience, God is currently represented by the political legacy of the Bush Administration. To be sure, Massumi is by far not the only commentator to notice an unusually extravagant sense of mission emanating from the White House between 2001 and early 2009. But, while the godlike aspirations of the most recent generation of America's neo-conservatives in power have so far often been, perhaps, the subject of satire, Massumi's latest monograph scrupulously argues that the words and deeds of the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and George Bush Jr. were part and parcel of a then-emerging "new mode of power" (page vii) so extensive that it might in fact come close to Spinoza's idea of God. This new mode of power, of course, is the eponymous ontopower.

Ontopower, one is told, subsumes and transcends bio-power (page vii). Readers acquainted with the work of Michel Foucault will probably already be familiar with this notion. In a nutshell, Foucault claims that an era of bio-power—that is, an era where power is exercised over the "life" of groups and individuals with the aim of either "foster[ing] [it] or disallow[ing] it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1998: 138)—began in the late eighteenth century (Foucault, 1997: 242), when existing mechanisms of disciplinary power, operating on individual bodies, were complemented with 'biopolitical' techniques for the management of populations.

The exercise of this bio-power is assisted by various bodies of knowledge which may change their shape or be replaced over time. In a unique study of twentieth-century affairs, Foucault's 1978-79 lecture series at the Collège de France, entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, concerns itself with the changing shape of such 'governmental' knowledge in his day. More precisely, in *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault contemplates how the gradual ascent of neo-liberal reason in the first three decades following the Second World War set forth to alter the ways in which populations and individuals can be governed. Massumi's argument expands on one particular observation Foucault makes along the way. Towards the end of the course, in

the eleventh of twelve lectures, Foucault proposes after a lengthy discussion of the figure of Homo Oeconomicus in Gary Becker's work that, instead of operating directly on groups and individuals, neo-liberal governmentalities aim to "act on the environment and systematically modify its variables" (2008: 271). To Massumi, this proposal has proven to be a prescient anticipation of the evolutionary path of governmental technology from the time of Foucault's lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* until our early twenty-first century. Within slightly more than thirty years, he contends, we have witnessed power "becoming-environmental" (page 23), shifting its immediate focus from "the organic individual body and the species-being of the population" (page 26) to nature.

Ontopower argues that power's 'becoming-environmental' is the result of a symbiosis between neo-liberal governmentalities and neo-conservatism (page 234). In describing how this symbiosis supposedly came about, let me first go into some more detail about how Massumi thinks liberal and neo-liberal governmentalities differ from one another. In a brief excursus on Foucault's concepts of bio-power and governmentality (pages 22-27), Massumi explains that classical liberal governmentalities still operated on the basis of normative preconceptions about human beings, most of which were closely bound up with the idea of material progress (page 24). Although these norms were variable, to a certain degree, they nonetheless served as a rough orientation and justification for attempts at guiding the conduct of human beings in a specific direction. Neo-liberal governmentalities, on the other hand, have in Massumi's view given up any such preconceived notions about how humans ought to comport themselves. What counts in neo-liberal governmentalities, he writes, are impulsive, momentary expressions of subjective interest (pages 25-26) which may fade away or even turn into their opposite at any time.

This has two particularly important consequences for Massumi's overall claim. For one thing, the disappearance of general principles to serve as a yardstick for governmental practice also means that there are no more conditions of provisional normality one could work towards. "[R]ationalized regulation," which Massumi deems a hallmark of bio-power, thus gives way to what could be called a 'regulation of affectivities' (page 26). Secondly, given the possibility that different subjective interests might occasionally conflict with one another, the question arises as to how these conflicts should be dealt with. Massumi seems to indicate that, in practice, the tendency is to leave conflicts to be settled by the market unless they are thought to be capable of endangering national security (pages 54-55, 232-235). The crux is,

however, that as soon as one ceases to believe in the obtainability of even just provisionally stable life environments, one also makes the emergence of national security threats a permanent possibility. Or to use Massumi's own words, in a "nonstandard environment" (page 26), where 'rationalised regulation' is impossible, "[t]hreat is [...] tirelessly agitating as a background condition, potentially ready to irrupt" (page 30). Here is where the neo-conservatives come into play.

In their 2002 National Security Strategy, the Bush Administration announced the doctrine of pre-emption. Pre-emption supersedes the cold war doctrine of deterrence, which the [2002 strategy document](#) declared to be inadequate in the face of "new deadly challenges [...] from rogue states and terrorists." As Bush himself put it earlier that year in a [speech to West Point graduates](#), with regard to these 'new deadly challenges', "the only path to safety is the path of action" (quoted in Massumi, page 3).

But at what exactly is pre-emptive action directed? Elsewhere in his West Point speech, Bush states that America "will have waited too long" if it "wait[s] for threats to fully materialize." Massumi takes this statement to be far more than just political rhetoric. To him, it contains a fundamental insight into the way pre-emption works. First of all, Bush's remark about the need to deal with threats before they fully materialise is understood by Massumi as acknowledging the permanent presence of 'background-threat' as a defining feature of life in the early twenty-first century (pages 9-11). Once one acknowledges this permanent presence of threat in the background, the aim of one's efforts can no longer be to get rid of this circumstance. The best one can do is to make it work for one's own benefit. Massumi considers the military doctrine of pre-emption a way of 'operationalising' (pages 67-71) indeterminate threat; or in other words, a way of making indeterminate threat determinate. This gives us an answer to the question of what the object of pre-emptive action would be: initially, it has none. There is no concrete threat which pre-exists pre-emptive action and could justify it in advance. Before a pre-emptive strike, threat exists only as some kind of formless primordial sludge; as white noise humming away in the background; as chaos in its strict etymological sense. Massumi understands pre-emption as an ontologically and epistemologically productive "operative logic" (page 15), whose driving force, "objectively indeterminate or potential threat" (page 14), exists only incipiently and does not yet have a distinctive form within the realm of actual experience (pages 34-35). Effectively, his argument holds that the doctrine of pre-emption allows the US security apparatus to set 'processes'

into motion that tap into and actualise a “threat-potential” (page 32), and in so doing shape our lived realities according to their own inherent logics. The ultimate aim of setting such processes into motion is not so much that of producing predictable, hence knowable and ‘rationally regulatable’ situations, but first and foremost to hinder other parties from tapping into and actualising this ‘threat-potential’ themselves (pages 100-102). In having adapted this strategy, the US security apparatus now wields precisely what Massumi calls an ontopower: “a power through which being becomes” (page 71).

This newly acquired capacity of certain institutions to bring experience into being is what Massumi means when he proclaims that power became ‘environmental’. He does not deny that we are still subjects to norms, rules, and laws, but claims that power is no longer confined to the interiority of the “social systems” (page 29) where these norms, rules, and laws operate. Massumi’s assertion is that power has moved to a liminal sphere at the threshold between the interiorities of these systems and their “evolutionary outside” (page 37). Prior to its ‘becoming-environmental’, life environments had thus been merely passive givens to power. Nowadays, Massumi proclaims, power is actively involved in constituting the environments we live in. If this sounds like Spinoza, it is no coincidence. Massumi actually associates ontopower with ‘natura naturans’, Spinoza’s active aspect of nature, while ‘natura naturata’ is identified with the derivative environments which later ensue within “particular systems” (page 36), such as the social ones just mentioned.

The book’s argument unfolds over the course of seven chapters, plus a preface and afterword. The preface and the first two chapters introduce the core concepts of pre-emption and ontopower. Chapter One distinguishes between three different types of anticipatory action—pre-emption, prevention and deterrence—in terms of their epistemological and ontological premises. Here, Massumi explains that pre-emption stands out from those three because its epistemological condition is explicitly one of “objective uncertainty” (page 15), whereas prevention and deterrence “[assume] an ability to assess threats empirically and identify their causes” (page 5). The second chapter starts off with Massumi’s interpretation of Foucault’s work on neo-liberalism in the *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, and then goes on to outline the concept of nature employed in the book. Massumi holds that “a new concept of nature” is necessary to engage meaningfully with the “major shift” (page 26) in the modus operandi of power suggested by Foucault’s lectures. This re-conceptualisation of nature eventually leads to Massumi’s linking of ontopower to natura naturans.

Chapters Three, Four and Five explore the theory and practice of pre-emption in more detail. Chapter Three draws on findings in the field of experimental psychology to explain how subjective experience comes into being and how this process may be manipulated. Massumi refers in particular to research suggesting that “micro-events occurring” during “attentional blink[s],” that is, “fraction[s]-of-a-second blanking out of conscious awareness,” are capable of “[modulating] the coming perception[s]” (pages 65-66). He then demonstrates that these ideas have been picked up by military theory and put to use in contemporary US military tactics, and thus infers that “[w]ar” is “no longer a power of the human but a power productive of it [...]: an ontopower” (page 84). The fourth chapter, by far the longest of the book, provides an in-depth discussion of how contemporary military theorists’ assumption that ‘uncertainty’ is now an irremediable part of warfare led them to rethink the strategic role of information. The thrust of Massumi’s discussion in this chapter is that theory advocates to reduce the “quantity and quality of information” (page 99) and to focus on the speed of information processing. What matters most under conditions of permanent uncertainty is that environments are under permanent surveillance and indicator variations relayed instantly to the military personnel concerned (page 127). In Chapter Five, one reads that the ultimate, yet unattainable (pages 156-160), practical aim of the doctrine of pre-emption would be its fully autonomous operation. Ideally, different pre-emptive ‘processes’ will acquire the potential to exchange information between themselves in real-time, and thus eliminate any need for coordination by a superordinate authority (page 164). This is what military theorists refer to as “self-synchronization” (page 165).

Chapters Six and Seven examine the impact of pre-emption on matters of internal security. The sixth chapter considers what Massumi terms the “[calibration] of the public’s anxiety” in post-9/11 America through the introduction of the Homeland Security Department’s “color-coded terror alert system” (page 171). Massumi’s discussions in this chapter exemplify how neo-liberal governmentalities regulate the ‘affectivity’ of a population. He argues that the purpose of the terror alert system is to prevent the onset of “fear fatigue” (page 171), and, in the long run, condition the public to respond with a reflexive show of fear to specific “perceptual cues” (page 172). Chapter Seven cites a number of false terror alerts in the US and Canada to claim that “[d]efensive preemptive action in its own way is as capable as offensive preemptive action of producing [an affective climate of fear]” (page 195). Massumi holds that false alerts like the ones mentioned will eventually begin to form series, and these

series, in turn, will finally cause the emergence of threat as “a felt quality, independent of any particular instance of itself” (page 199). The afterword offers some concluding clarifications on Massumi’s conceptualisations of pre-emption and ontopower, as well as a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the book.

Ontopower is an impressively dense and insightful enquiry into the global consequences of contemporary United States security policy and practice. Although Massumi’s restless, speculative prose, which has a tendency to move from one postulate to another without much explanation, can be quite demanding at times, *Ontopower* should nonetheless be an enjoyable book for readers versed in the thought of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead. The large number of recent events and primary sources discussed by Massumi in fact allow for his book to be read as a work of contemporary history just as much as one of philosophy. This immense analytical depth alone will make *Ontopower* impossible to ignore for scholars on the field of critical theory interested in the ‘war on terror’. But as Massumi himself already anticipates (page 156), any work making an assertion as sweeping as to describe the “operative logic of power defining [our current] political epoch” (page 5) is unlikely to go without contestation. Let me, in closing, highlight just two points about Massumi’s work which I find potentially problematic.

The first point has to do with the concept of power underpinning Massumi’s study. Although it seems as if the socio-philosophical framework of *Ontopower* draws generously on Michel Foucault’s work, the book understands power as exercised exclusively by two entities: state security apparatuses and what he calls the “capitalist process” (page 55). This runs diametrically counter to Foucault’s understanding of power as an intersubjective relation (e.g. Foucault, 2015: 228-233; 1998: 92-102; 1997: 27-31; 1988: 1-2, 10-12; 1983: 219-222). Understanding power in this way would suggest a reverse analysis to Massumi’s, beginning with the “relation between two free subjects” (Foucault 1988: 2) and working one’s way from there to power’s more abstract mechanisms. This, however, would put in question Massumi’s entire argument about our subjective experience being conditioned by the workings of his proposed ontopower. Despite having written a book which presents itself as a commentary on Foucault’s work on power in Western modernity, Massumi, oddly enough, omits any discussion whatsoever of how Foucault himself defines this absolutely central term of his oeuvre. Whether or not Foucault’s concept of power allows for the wholesale elimination of

self-reflective subjectivity performed by Massumi (pages 42, 221-222) is far less obvious than *Ontopower* makes it seem.

My second point concerns the practical consequences brought about by the almost metaphysical reading of contemporary politics performed by Massumi. In *Ontopower*, the rhetoric of pre-emption and the putatively pre-emptive action undertaken by the US security apparatus seamlessly add up to one coherent 'operative logic' generating the conditions of our current, late-modern experience. I wonder whether, in accepting the Bush Administration's discourse on pre-emption at face value, Massumi might not have needlessly blown up a mere convenient justification for state aggression to gigantic proportions. Does Massumi fail to distinguish the euphemism from the deeds it is supposed to conceal? In any case, the interpretation of contemporary global politics offered in *Ontopower* reduces the political to the question of who possesses sufficient resources to mould an unstructured, chaotic sludge of proto-experience into the determinate, nameable sensations we have to contend with in our daily lives. This makes resistance to ontopower, a topic Massumi briefly touches upon in conclusion (pages 242-244), an incredibly difficult affair. For it to be effective, resistance would ultimately involve ousting who or what currently governs our experience and replacing them with another dominant authority. Resisting ontopower thus essentially becomes a matter of material strength. Furthermore, the inevitable result casts doubt on the rationale behind the action, since afterwards one would not be governed any less than before, but merely have replaced one ontopower with another.

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