Micropolitics and the minor

Thomas Jellis and Joe Gerlach

Abstract

Micropolitical investments and minor theoretical energies are of growing concern to geographers, yet conceptual ambiguity has inhibited broader discussion and deployment of these terms; even if they are the pivots of what we understand as, or take to be, the 'political'. In an effort to reinvigorate a dialogue about these crucial but underplayed concepts, and in an effort to push a micropolitical ethos in and of itself, we introduce a forum composed of six short interventions by geographers engaged in matters of the minor and micropolitical. Following these interventions, and leaning on a landmark article published in this journal twenty-one years ago, Cindi Katz revisits and reflects upon a vibrant conceptual assemblage that perhaps matters more now than ever, not least in questions of hope, discipline, ethics, existence, and politics itself.

Key words

Micropolitics; minor theory; ethics; hope; discipline

Twenty-one years ago this journal published 'Towards a Minor Theory' by Cindi Katz (1996).[i] Despite the scale of the conceptual challenge laid down by Katz, specifically in unpicking the 'mastery' at work in much of critical geography, the article garnered little attention, in citation at least. It was something of a slow-burner, a sleeper-hit lurking in the annals of contemporary geography. Harnessing, therefore, what seems to be a recent growing interest in the micropolitical and the minor in geography and the social sciences, the aim of this forum – itself composed of minor interventions by several geographers – is to re-invigorate these enigmatic concepts. These interventions return to the intellectual forum that gave rise to such concerns, but in a time when these provocations matter still further. This highlighting begins with a moment of critique. Specifically, that questions concerning the *what*, *why* and *where* of micropolitics and minor theory are missing, even from scholarship in which they act as anchoring concepts, not least in our own research into experimentation (Jellis, 2015), cartography (Gerlach, 2014; 2015) and impractical philosophy (Gerlach and Jellis 2015a; 2015b). This forum attempts to push and proffer a series of conceptual nodes, a collection of points of departure for engaging in the micro and the minor. This is to tread a precarious line: on the one hand tentatively generating critical momentum to concepts so that they might be put to work in geographical and political assemblages, yet, on the other hand,

acknowledging that such concepts elide policing. Indeed, they demand that they not be policed in any singular manner, nor to any singular end. Pursuant to this caveat, what follows is a series of short interventions by geographers on micropolitics and the minor, conceptual exposures in part generated by a panel discussion convened on this theme at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the AAG in Chicago but also by a sense of 'something/happening'. Rather than begin at the 'beginning', and acknowledging the potential foolhardiness of recounting an origins story, we nevertheless want to foreground the underlying inspiration for this conversation.

Understandings of micropolitics and the minor are ambiguous. Indeed, such ambiguity fuels the motivation for this piece. Yet, nonetheless, we feel that some conceptual constraint can be useful, and at the risk of sound forthright, we would insist from the outset that both the micropolitical and the minor cannot be allied to any particular scale or register of significance. An appeal to the small would itself be small-minded, as would any allegory toward ideology. Risky as it is, micropolitics and the minor are not beholden to any particular (macro)political pole or spectrum. If anything, it demands a 'letting-go' of the left and the right as political axioms, as it requires an abandonment of the affixation of labels 'radical' and 'critical', imposed by way of intellectual vogue. Instead, micropolitics and the minor is always, already present; it is what one makes of it as a mode of action that matters. Part of this mode of action is simply one of asking awkward questions, and readers will note that all the following interventions are propelled by questions of how the micropolitical can be apprehended. To understand how the micro and minor can be harnessed is to ask, simultaneously, 'where' can it be encountered? Himada and Manning (2009) suggest that it can be found in the interval between feeling and doing. To be sure, this is more easily *written* than it is felt, done, or otherwise (let alone seen). Yet it provokes experimentation in method, discourse and practice. And in sensibility, too. As Himada and Manning (2009: 5) concede, "…this may make it sound like a 'soft' politics" yet they contend, "it's quite the opposite. What is usually constituted as the real thing – Politics with a capital P – is far less rigorously inventive, precisely because it operates in the sphere of representation where precomposed bodies are already circulating. The micropolitical is that which subverts this tendency in the political to present itself as already fully formed." Micropolitics and the minor attend to and work at the edges of knowing, at the register of the sensibility minus a sensible

normativity. But, for all this conceptual insistence toward a particular theoretical assemblage, the ambiguities of micropolitics and minor theory refuse their apprehension in singular terms. On this point, the very convening and composition of this forum has been an exercise in questioning 'what counts' as micropolitical, or what passes the threshold of the minor.

Against our own inclinations that matters of the micro and minor do not add up to the summation of an identitarian based politics, a number of interventions made in this forum argue otherwise. In these instances, a turn to the micropolitical and to the minor is a deliberate spotlighting of the occluded, the repressed, the subaltern. To that end, lines of affinity oriented around race, class, gender and sexuality remain the mainstay of mainstream politics. The questions for us are: do we ignore this tension between different conceptual modes of the minor and the micropolitical, and their concomitant attributes? How does one adjudicate between such disparate understandings? And does it matter? What does it mean for Geography to revisit and reflect once more on the role, or even status, of so-called minor theory? How does it recast questions and techniques of positionality? These questions are all the more urgent because since the initial AAG sessions in 2015, there has been a flurry of calls for paper, colloquia, and, to some extent, the obligatory prefixing of the minor to any matter of concern. Indeed, the minor is seemingly in vogue – paradoxically so – given the minor is, by definition, something peripheral, molecular, or subordinate. To that end, might the minor supplant the critical as a de-rigeur prefix of choice? This forum seeks to grapple with such questions and to pose still further questions. It offers an injunction, too, one that reads across all the interventions to come, that we cannot allow the minor to be crystallised, policed, ossified. Insisting, thereby, that a multiplicity of minoritarian fronts, "cannot be reduced to a simple political line" (Sibertin-Blanc 2016: 271).[ii] In sum, even in instances whereby assemblages cohere around the 'segmentarity' of class, race, gender and so forth, it is important to reiterate that such categorisation, "does not preclude the existence of an entire world of unconscious micropercepts, unconscious affects, fine segmentations that grasp or experience different things…" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 235).

To that end, the interventions that follow offer both points of resonance and dissonance in animating the micropolitical and the minor. Secor and Linz's playful opening to this forum illustrates that the mattering of micropolitics is not solely located in content, but in mischievously subverting expectations of style too, in this case of a manifesto that offers *no answers*. Michele Lancione then goes on to furnish a discussion on what might constitute a micropolitical/minor ethics. Introducing an empirical ambit to questions of the micropolitical, Lancione animates fieldwork undertaken with the Roma in Bucharest to examine the precarious journey between the registers of the molecular and the molar. As such, he raises the prospect of working micropolitically between activism and academia thereby questioning the legacy of our own cartographic coordinates in the conduct of research. Cristina Temenos also calls for an empirically grounded praxis, and sees it as holding the most potential for establishing a closer relationship between the intellectual agenda, not to mention ethos, of relational urbanism and the minor. In doing so, she draws parallels between Cindi Katz and the work of Doreen Massey, arguing for theory that must not simply highlight the political but itself be political. Caroline Faria likewise finds inspiration in Katz's work, this time drawing on the notion of an 'academic home' and working through what this might entail for her in light of ongoing campus violence. Faria seeks to trouble the major theory in a number of ways, not least through complicating the notion of a single major account. Indeed, she demonstrates not only how the minor operates in and through these plural majors (even if only fugitively), but also how a minor reading can radically unsettle conventional accounts of violence.

Holding on to the tension between major and minor registers, but this time more overtly alongside the geographical project, Andrew Barry, riffing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) reading of Kafka, asks how might Geography be understood as a 'minor' discipline. Often figured as a 'major' discipline preoccupied with synthesising the natural with the social, Barry considers what kinds of obligations and practices geography as a minor discipline might evoke. In response, one wonders how geography as a minor discipline might be adjudicated on minor terms? How might geographical research have impact in a minor register, in registers of existence, rather than on terms imposed from above, concerned only with metrics? We leave that question as a minor, if not subtle, provocation for readers. The sixth

intervention weighs upon a moment, or space, of hope. Ben Anderson, in prefacing the hope and promise of the micropolitical, critiques the macropolitical for all it elides; for all the subtlety, candour and sensibility it ignores in the world. But he also warns us that the micropolitical need not be synonymous with the resistant or the oppositional; he asks us to remember how disciplinary power can work micropolitically to increase the docility of bodies of all kinds.

The final piece in the forum is by Cindi Katz. Reflecting on the conceptual trajectory of the 1996 article since its publication, she examines how a conversation that 'seemed to go nowhere' has recently sparked a surge in academic interest (see, for example, Oswin forthcoming). Despite the passage of time, Katz insists that the key vocation of minor theory remains constant as much as it remains vital; that it can be used to displace thought and matter. We hope that this is simply the beginning of further engagements with the minor and the micropolitical; the relation(s) between those two terms; and the alliances that might be cultivated between critical geography and a so-called 'minor geography'. It is in this push for a hopeful micropolitics on which this introduction ends, minus the spurious comfort of a formal conclusion.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the participants of the 'Micropolitics and the minor' sessions at the AAG 2015 in Chicago; namely, Ben Anderson, Andrew Barry, Nicholas Crane, Cindi Katz, Michele Lancione, Scott Sharpe, Sean Tanner, Nina Williams, and Kathryn Yusoff. Likewise we are grateful to Natalie Oswin and the editorial team at *Society and Space* for their support and enthusiasm for this forum.

References

Deleuze G and Guattari F (1986) *Kafka: towards a minor literature*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Deleuze G and Guattari F (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.

Gerlach J (2014) Lines, contours and legends: Coordinates for vernacular mapping. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(1): 22-39.

Gerlach J (2015) Editing worlds: participatory mapping and a minor geopolitics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40(2): 273-286.

Gerlach J and Jellis T (2015a) Guattari: Impractical philosophy. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5(2): 131-148.
Gerlach J and Jellis T (2015b) A lovesick note to the impractical. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5(2): 177-182.
Jellis T (2015) Spatial experiments: art, geography, pedagogy. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2): 369-374.
Himada N and Manning E (2009) From noun to verb: the micropolitics of making collective. *Inflexions: a journal for research creation* 3: 1-17.
Katz C (1995) Major/Minor: Theory, Nature, and Politics. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85(1): 164-168.
Katz C (1996) Towards Minor Theory. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14: 487-499.
Oswin N (forthcoming) Planetary urbanization: A view from outside. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.
Sibertin-Blanc G (2016) *State and Politics: Deleuze and Guattari on Marx*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).

[i] We might also note that there was a slightly earlier piece (Katz 1995), which had signaled an interest with the minor in the form of a book review.
[ii] This is something we've had to reflect on, in terms of the location of this very forum. We have ended up using the major technology of the published paper but, we hope, in a disruptive and (deterritorialised) manner.