



Research Paper

A Query into Infrapolitics in American Studies

Mohammad Raihan Sharif

Abstract: *This paper examines infrapolitics as celebrated by some American Studies scholars. Infrapolitics are small acts that are believed to usher in social justice. The present paper emerges from an uncertainty and disbelief in the efficacy of infrapolitics. The paper argues that infrapolitics must undergo spatialization and thus help a society progress towards social justice.*

Keywords: *Infrapolitics; American Studies; Spatialization; Social Justice*

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In *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity* (2013) and *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008) Gaye Theresa Johnson shows how infrapolitics can go beyond the sphere of the individual and how it can be communal, social, collective and participatory. “Although racism persisted, resistance always existed”, says Gaye Theresa Johnson as she foregrounds anti-racist and egalitarian cultural politics between African Americans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. She theorizes the infrapolitics practiced by the black and brown residents of Los Angeles as “spatial entitlement”:

a way in which marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also new and imaginative use of technology, creativity, and spaces. In many instances overlooked by social historians, everyday reclamation of space, assertion of social citizenship, and *infrapolitical struggle have created the conditions for future success, in organized and collective movements*” (x). (Italics mine)

Noticeably, spatial entitlement is unique at least in two ways. It prioritizes coalitional politics over identity politics. It seeks for imaginative and creative ways of unlocking spaces as a critical response to multiple segregation, separation, and exclusion within physical places. In this sense, it does spatialize infrapolitics as it attempts to establish the tripartite dynamics of time, place, and being as suggested by Henry Lefebvre (1991).

“Spatial entitlement” refers to collective struggles, not any individualistic attempt to seize upon the cracks and fissures within a hegemonic condition. The latter is promoted by Certeau (1984) Bhabha (2012), and Scott (1990). Apparently, Gaye Theresa Johnson aligns her spatial entitlement towards the infrapolitics theorized by James Scott. But importantly, James Scott, unlike Theresa Johnson, does not provide any futuristic possibility of infrapolitics as Scott zooms in the sporadic attempts of counter-resistance among farmers in a Malaysian village. Those attempts are sporadic, inconsistent, and haphazard through Scott would have argued that they are spontaneous, hence, “natural” and, thereby, free from romance of revolution as the authority—in the imagination of the farmers—are too powerful to fight against. It leads us to another important difference between Scott and Theresa Johnson. Scott’s infrapolitics is bereft of any cultural politics while Theresa Johnson mobilizes cultural politics as nucleus to reclamation of shared struggle among the blacks and the browns. Against, housing segregation in the ghettos, spatial entitlement creates new modes of coalition within as shared soundscape:

“[t]hey did not have to be in each other’s physical presence to enjoy the same music at the same time as it was broadcast to them on radios in living rooms, bedrooms, neighborhood hangouts, and automobiles. These strategies and affinities speak to the power of popular music and of popular culture to envision and create new political possibilities” (xiii)

While Scott invests in identity politics, Theresa Johnson relies on coalitional politics. In today’s multicultural, multi ethno-racial condition of spaces across the world, “spatial entitlement” promises a futuristic politics against multiple forms of manipulation. Theresa Johnson’s spatial entitlement “connects local articulations to international movements” (xii). The infra-politics here wants to transcend boundaries of one’s

own community in order to connect other possible coalition building efforts. In this sense, spatial entitlement is an “Avenue to Highway Infrapolitics” which has much more potential for organizing a social movement.

In brief, Scott, Certeau, Bhabha, and Johnson focuses on the everyday form of resistance, but what makes Johnson stands out is her investment in the politics of space as she goes on to articulate significance of creating everyday space by mobilizing coalition right here right now and projecting spaces towards futuristic politics. I found “memory” as another important component in “spatial entitlement”. Apart from Johnson’s emphasis on the history of African legacy in Mexico and the common struggle of Afro-mestizos, I would like to reveal the technical erasure of an important space as a result of a very common practice of binary positioning of the macro-narratives and the micro-narratives. In other words, imagining the macro-narrative and the micro-narrative as mutually exclusive—as if one were intent to cancel the possibility of another—creates a “systemic vacuum” within which any attempt for resistance runs the risk of being coopted within the spaces of convergence between the neoliberal capitalist forces and the postmodernist intellectual enterprises.

Against such intellectual blockade, spatial entitlement foregrounds memory as important element in mobilizing counter-hegemonic struggles. Noticeably, we have not found this innovative reliance on memory in the theories of infrapolitics promoted by Scott, Certeau, and Bhabha. In fact, they identified infrapolitics as disconnected to any vestige of collectivity as an only option left for the folks, given the all-encompassing forces of the biopower meshed with the neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s. As a result, their infrapolitics ignores not only memory but also collective participation from an organized community. They make infrapolitics solely individualistic which is one step behind identity politics and two steps behind coalitional politics, vis-à-vis the emerging necessities of a new kind infrapolitics in our time. Andrea Smith (2008) emphasizes on reframing issues for coalition building and for managing broader support. Reframing while taking initiatives for coalition building is what Smith theorizes as the “politics of articulation”. She believes that mere representation of reality to outsiders and hope for support to come may reinforce hegemonic condition instead of dwindling it. So, she emphasizes on becoming the actors of social change as she relies on the observation by Laclau and Mouffe: “our task is not to organize the revolution but to organize ourselves for the revolution; not to make the revolution but to take advantage of it” (xvii). Smith’s politics of articulation depends on enthusiastic organizing of coalitions. So, it is different from Scott’s spontaneous or natural form of resistance in the Malaysian Farmers. For Smith, Scott’s infrapolitics reinforces hegemony instead of combating it. Therefore, I would like to categorize it as “Blind-alley Infrapolitics”.

“Native people are thought to be hopelessly mired in identity politics, concerned only about cultural particularities”, Andrea Smith (2008) observes. She argues that going beyond the conventional and fossilized notion of the allies and adversaries is important for all of us, partly because we can rightly identify ourselves as playthings in the hands of biopolitical power-blocks called the neoliberal capitalistic mismanagement of differences and mainly because we all want to mobilize emancipatory politics as resistance to hegemonic forces. Transcending the fixed boundaries between allies and adversaries can open a new vista of micro-politics as Smith emphatically reminds us: “[i]n doing so, we might open ourselves to unexpected strategic alliances with groups across the political spectrum that furthers our politically progressive goals (xi)”. Basically, Smith wants to reconceptualize identity politics as coalitional politics. Also, she wants to move towards a new politics that goes beyond the left- versus right-wing politics. Using “religious and political configurations of Christian Right and American Indian Activism”, Smith rethinks “the nature of political strategy and alliance building for progressive purposes” (xii). As a case study, Smith shows how the coalition between the Christian Rights and American Indians orchestrated a successful campaign across white and non-white communities. As a result, the Exxon and Rio Algom were compelled to stop mining in Wisconsin.

Spatial Politics of Coalition Building

In contrast to fragmented resistance through either individualistic or mechanistically organized micropolitics, I also observe attempts to form coalitions that transcend the horizontal categories: race, class, sex, gender, et cetera. Because of the urge to transcend, this coalitional politics has radical potential. I will call it spatial infrapolitics, or spatial micropolitics. Spatial infrapolitics can be discussed with references to two books: *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*(2013) and *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances*(2008).

In *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity* (2013), Gaye Theresa Johnson shows how infrapolitics can go beyond the sphere of the individual and how it can be communal, social, collective and participatory. “Although racism persisted, resistance always existed”, writes Johnson, as she foregrounds anti-racist and egalitarian cultural politics between African-Americans and Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles. She theorizes the infrapolitics practiced by the Black and Brown residents of Los Angeles as “spatial entitlement” and describes it as

“... a way in which marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also new and imaginative use of technology, creativity, and spaces. In many instances overlooked by social historians, everyday reclamation of space, assertion of social

citizenship, and infrapolitical struggle have created the conditions for future success, in organized and collective movements” (p. x). (Italics supplied)

Noticeably, spatial entitlement is unique in at least two ways. It prioritizes coalitional politics over fragmented politics. It seeks for imaginative and creative ways of unlocking spaces as a critical response to multiple segregation, separation, and exclusion within physical places. In this sense, it does spatialize infrapolitics as it attempts to establish the tripartite dynamics of time, place, and social being, as suggested by Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). In other words, spatial entitlement refers to collective struggles, not to any individualistic attempt to seize upon the cracks and fissures within a hegemonic condition; the latter is promoted by Certeau, Bhabha, and Scott.

Apparently, Gaye Theresa Johnson aligns her spatial entitlement with the infrapolitics theorized by James Scott. But importantly, Scott, unlike Johnson, does not provide any futuristic possibility of infrapolitics. Scott simply zooms in on the sporadic attempts of counter resistance among farmers in a Malaysian village. Those attempts are inconsistent, and haphazard, though Scott would have argued that they are “spontaneous,” hence, “natural” and, thereby, free from the romance of revolution, and that the authority—in the imagination of the farmers—is too powerful to fight against.

I strongly criticize this approach of Scott and Certeau as they are limiting political imagination here. They accept the status quo as inevitable, intact, irreplaceable, and unchangeable. This is totally against the spirit of the material dialectic of Marx and Harvey (1996), as I explain in the next section, and leads us to another important difference between Scott and Johnson. Scott’s infrapolitics is bereft of any collectivity while Theresa Johnson mobilizes collective politics as a nucleus to reclamation of shared struggle among “the Blacks and the Browns.” Against housing segregation in the ghettos, spatial entitlement creates new modes of coalition within a shared soundscape, as Johnson argues:

“[t]hey did not have to be in each other’s physical presence to enjoy the same music at the same time as it was broadcast to them on radios in living rooms, bedrooms, neighborhood hangouts, and automobiles. These strategies and affinities speak to the power of popular music and of popular culture to envision and create new political possibilities” (p. xiii).

While Certeau, Bhabha, and Scott invest in fragmented politics, Johnson relies on coalitional politics. In today’s multicultural, multi ethno-racial condition of spaces across the world, spatial entitlement promises a futuristic politics that stands against multiple forms of manipulation. Johnson’s spatial entitlement “connects local articulations to international movements” (xii). I found “memory” as another important component in “spatial entitlement”. To show how memory helps collective organizing, Johnson emphasizes the history of African-American in Mexico and the common struggle of Afro-mestizos. Infrapolitics here wants to transcend boundaries of one’s own community in order to connect other possible coalition building efforts. In this sense, spatial entitlement has much more potential for organizing a social movement. In brief, Scott, Certeau, Bhabha, and Johnson focus on the everyday form of resistance, but what makes Johnson stand out is her investment in the politics of space. She goes on to articulate the significance of creating everyday space by mobilizing coalition here and now and projecting spaces towards future as she argues

Struggles for freedom and equality currently engaged by multiracial social justice movements emerge from the enduring historical relevance of Black-Brown spatial struggles and coalitional politics. It is a past whose legacy has too much power to remain unacknowledged and unexamined, particularly as evidence of what cultural workers and community activists have already accomplished on the road to a just future (xxii).

Johnson’s spatial entitlement thus relies on a legacy of struggle across ethno-racial boundaries to usher in a just future.

In a similar vein, Andrea Smith, in her *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008) emphasizes reframing issues for coalition building in an attempt to achieve support from unlikely allies. While Johnson shows likely alliances, between racial minorities of black and brown folks, Smith emphasizes unlikely alliances in a recuperative move that seeks to work upon the stagnancy of political imagination, a stagnancy that situates Native Americans and Christian evangelicals as unlikely partners in the first place.

It is often thought that Native Americans and white evangelicals would likely pursue different goals in their respective and necessarily separate activism. The source of such belief resides in valuing the ease in organizing activists from the homogenous groups centering on a single vector of differences: either race or class, for example. But such ease in organizing may prevent us from achieving larger goals: instead of placing demands within right-based frames, we must attempt reconfigurations of structures of power that always dictate terms of rights, pacify dissent here and there, and appropriate forms of resistance that become threatening—all to maintain the status quo of any tyrannical system. Therefore, it becomes a radical move as Smith promotes coalitional politics and not identity politics.

Smith shows how both the Native Americans and the Christian Right can foreground pragmatic collaboration. As an example, she explains how Native environmental activists can go beyond their own communities and find allies among white progressive ecojustice activists. Smith rightly marks the danger in

such alliance, as white ecojustice activists may appropriate the agenda of the Native environmental activists. But she is careful to debunk the myth of appropriation, a stalemate reinforcing boundary drawing activism in both communities. She does so by proving examples of an innovative tactic: re-centering Native concerns in the context of the Christian evangelicals. As a case study, Smith shows how the coalition between the Christian Right and American Indians orchestrated a successful campaign across white and non-white communities. Thus, Exxon and Rio Algom were compelled to stop mining in Wisconsin, which pollutes water bodies and forests, sources for fishing and hunting for Native Americans.

Thus, reframing separate activism while taking initiatives for coalition building is what Smith theorizes as the ‘politics of articulation’. She believes that mere representation of reality to outsiders and hope for support to arrive may reinforce a hegemonic condition instead of combating it. She thus emphasizes becoming an actor of social change. Based on the observation by Laclau and Mouffe, Smith argues: “our task is not to organize the revolution but to organize ourselves for the revolution; not to make the revolution but to take advantage of it” (xvii). Smith’s politics of rearticulation depends on enthusiastic organizing of coalitions. Thus, it is different from Scott’s spontaneous or natural form of resistance in the Malaysian farmers. Compared with Smith’s project, Scott’s infrapolitics reinforces hegemony instead of combating it.

“Native people are thought to be hopelessly mired in identity politics, concerned only about cultural particularities (xi)”, Andrea Smith observes. She argues that going beyond the conventional and fossilized notion of allies and adversaries is important for all of us, partly because we can rightly identify ourselves as playthings in the hands of biopolitical power-blocks within the neoliberal capitalistic system of management of differences, and mainly because we want to mobilize emancipatory politics as resistance to hegemonic forces. Transcending the fixed boundaries between allies and adversaries can open up a new vista of micro-politics, as Smith emphatically reminds us: “[i]n doing so, we might open ourselves to unexpected strategic alliances with groups across the political spectrum that furthers our politically progressive goals (xi)”. Basically, Smith wants to reconceptualize identity politics as coalitional politics. Also, she wants to move towards a new politics that goes beyond the left- versus right-wing politics. Using “religious and political configurations of Christian Right and American Indian activism (xi-xii)”, Smith rethinks “the nature of political strategy and alliance building for progressive purposes” (xii).

Thus, understanding the potential of spatial micropolitics confirms one thing: spatial micropolitics and macropolitics are not mutually exclusive but supplementary. Binary juxtaposition of them may create a “systemic vacuum” or intellectual blockade within which any initiation of resistance will be derided as inadequate. To prevent this intellectual blockade, it is important to recognize the radical potential of Johnson’s spatial entitlement and Smith’s politics of articulation as I have explained above. I will once again state that for Scott, Certeau, and Bhabha, infrapolitics is basically disconnected from any vestige of collectivity. For them, attempting to avoid the grip of any manipulative system is the only option left. Transforming the system is not the objective of their project. Thus, their infrapolitics ignores not only Johnson’s memory and spatial entitlement but also Smith’s politics of articulation. Scott, Certeau, and Bhabha make infrapolitics solely individualistic. In a sense, their micropolitics is one step behind identity politics and two steps behind coalitional politics, vis-à-vis the emerging necessities of a new kind of infrapolitics in our time.

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