

Micrology/Micrologies

Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat

Translated by Millay Hyatt

All experiments have both a micrological and a macrological dimension and are constantly moving from a “macro” plane to a “micro” plane. This flip-flopping from one plane to another introduces a kind of distancing within the experiment or situation itself. Micro and macro, far from excluding or opposing each other, reciprocally interpellate and question each other. By frequently changing planes, by slipping from one logic to another, an experiment thus incorporates several points of view and several perspectives within its own movement. Hence it never completely coincides with itself but is necessarily surprised by an eruption of the micro (an encounter, a cooperation, a desire...) that disturbs the overall order of the situation, be it of daily life or of work. Conversely, and in a reciprocal manner, macro problems regularly break into quotidian discussions or activities, demonstrating to what extent even the most everyday experiments are traversed by the major contradictions of society, be they of the register of daily life or of work.

We studied this reciprocal interpellation between micro and macro in the context of our research on the ECObox experiment, which we undertook at the invitation of Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou in the La Chapelle district in Paris.¹ The following engages with several aspects of this research.

1. Two kinds of writing for the same experiment

Macro and micro introduce two possible kinds of writing and thus invoke a two-fold question: what does the macrological writing of a situation tell us? And its micrological writing? As Gilles Deleuze emphasizes in his discussion of Michel Foucault's ideas, the difference between micro and macro is not one of size, as if the micro dispositives had to do with experiments of a lesser scope or with small-scale ensembles. “It [is not] a matter of an extrinsic dualism, since there are micro-dispositives immanent to the State, and segments of the State apparatus also penetrate the micro-dispositives—complete immanence of the two dimensions.”² To propose a dimension of scale for the purpose of opposing the two terms is no more pertinent than assimilating the macro to a strategic model and the micro to a tactical one. Any such attempt of distinguishing the micro from the macro in a dualist fashion poses the question of their difference on a plane where it does not actually take place, and formulates it in terms of a reductive either-or ill suited to understanding either side. The difference in fact is neither of size nor scale; it is rather to do with different ways of coming into existence, different ways in which an experiment constitutes itself. Micro and macro represent two possible modes in which one and the same reality can become constituted. The same action may at times be in the micro mode and at times in the macro mode. It is thus important to think of these two “ontological operators” not in terms of a head-on opposition but rather in terms of reciprocity. Each contributes to the dynamics of the experiment according to its own particular focus. This constant movement from a macro plane to a micro plane and back again introduces a tension into the experiment that is largely profitable to it, particularly from a reflexive point of view. This disequilibrium, if it is skillfully maintained, keeps the experiment from focalizing or from contracting exclusively onto one of its dimensions. It introduces a kind of critical distance into the heart of the experiment itself. For instance, at any moment, a global contradiction linked to the expression of social relations (in the context of work, knowledge, sex...) is liable to disrupt the ordinary progress of an

1 The following research note can be downloaded from www.iscra.fr: *Un projet d'Éco-urbanité: l'expérience d'ECObox dans le quartier La Chapelle à Paris*.

2 Gilles Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure.” Trans. Melissa McMahon. <http://info.interactivist.net/print.pl?sid=02/11/18/1910227> [February 5, 2007]. Translation modified. Original published in *Deux régimes de fous (textes et entretiens 1975-1995)*, Les éd. de Minuit, 2003, p. 113-114.

everyday situation. Conversely, even in a context heavily constrained by social norms or programming, an event can occur that reopens the trajectories and causes the situation to bifurcate, redeploying and re-singularizing it.

2. Internal critique

Micro and macro reciprocally put each other to the test: each plane construes itself as revealing the other, as the other's best "analyzer," capable of objectively analyzing it as it unfolds.³ The question then is not whether it is appropriate to privilege one or the other plane, but rather to learn all the possible heuristic and political lessons from this tension immanent to the planes, which introduces a contradiction into even the most "completed" of experiments. This tension, then, comes from within to launch critique into the heart of all kinds of situations. Henri Lefebvre, in his foreword to the second edition of the Introduction to the *Critique of Everyday Life*, very aptly describes this process of analysis, which is objectively constituted in the real movement of the situation: "Far from eliminating the critique of everyday life, modern technical progress achieves it. Technicity replaces the critique of life from the perspective of the dream, of ideas, poetry, or other activities taking place above the everyday with an internal critique of daily life: an auto-critique, a critique of the real by the possible and of one aspect of life by another aspect. In relation to inferior and degraded levels, those aspects of everyday life that are superiorly equipped take on the distance and removal and familiar strangeness of dreams."⁴ If we assume this methodological preference—this epistemic privilege accorded to internal critique—we discover the analytical function of the tension between situations determined to be "superior" and those considered "everyday." The analysis is not effected from an exterior or elevated position, but is practiced internally, by engaging the different points of view that the experiment incorporates into its own development. Every point of view, whether micro or macro, puts the experiment to the test of its own contradictions. Seemingly common and simple questions (life matters) quickly turn into major problems (forms of life). Every experiment, whether work-related or creative, is "naturally" interpellated by this *familiar strangeness* that determines it, that arises within it and disrupts it. Every individual implicated in an experiment, every collective engaged in a project, finds itself confronted by this critical force, inherent in action and potentially at work in any kind of situation. But how can we get a hold of it, put it to work? With what assemblage, what dispositives? This is where a major political question arises. How can this critical potential be integrated into the development of a project or an experiment? How can we work with it? How should we think about and evaluate it? Into what constellation of meaning and action should we inscribe it? Can it be profitable to the project, favorable to the experiment?

3. A glimpse, a snapshot, a gap

This indeed is where the interest of micrological approaches lies: they initiate reflection and invite questioning. They cut straight to the quick; they ignite meaning. Ignition is an appropriate image for micrology: an active and incisive setting into motion that transcends, outstrips, or bypasses institutional boundaries (established functions, long-standing rules, commonly held ideas, etc.) so as to better confront them. Micrologies vary the intensity of situations. The difference Deleuze wants to make between micro and macro in his discussion of Foucault becomes clear in this context: "In any case there

3 See work done on this trend in institutional analysis: **Rémi Hess**, *Centre et périphérie (Introduction à l'analyse institutionnelle)*, Privat, 1978, p. 182.

4 *Critique de la vie quotidienne – I. Introduction*, L'Arche éditeur, 1958, p. 16.

is a difference in kind, a heterogeneity between micro and macro. Which in no way excludes the immanence of the two. But my question would be, in the end, this: does this difference in kind still permit one to speak of dispositives of power? The notion of the State is not applicable at the level of a micro-analysis, since, as Michel [Foucault] says, it is not a matter of miniaturizing the State. But is the notion of power any more applicable, is it not also the miniaturization of a global concept? Which brings me to my primary difference from Michel at the moment. If I speak with Félix Guattari of desiring-assemblages, it's that I am not sure that micro-dispositives can be described in terms of power."⁵

Sometimes qualities are attributed to micro strategies that they do not actually possess. For example, someone initiates a project and relies on micro notions in hopes of mastering the undertaking, when in fact the approach has been determined as micro merely in an attempt to keep it simple. Such a designation is misleading and in error, as Foucault emphasizes. It is tempting to miniaturize matters, as if by making them small or by formulating them in a small way they could be better managed. The global nature of the process is sacrificed in hopes of acquitting oneself more easily of one of its dimensions. But the micro is neither a substitute for the real, nor a reduced version of it. If we follow the thinking opened up by Deleuze, we discover that micrological experimentation loosens the hold of force relations, not in order to construct a simplified (pacified) relation with the real but, on the contrary, in order to invest it more directly, more intensely, without letting oneself be slowed down by attempting to seize power immediately. When it conceives of itself as being on a micro plane, an experiment does not dispense with power relations and global questions posed by these relations, it simply does not refer exclusively to them, nor lets itself become spontaneously blocked by them. The micro is a plane on which an experiment accelerates and intensifies, thus gaining rapid access to the most sensitive issues. At this micro scale, it is possible to make out the most intimate and familiar elements within social relations. The micro represents a glimpse, a flash—a snapshot, as it were, of society. It is able to crystallize a number of social issues precisely because it doesn't allow itself to be slowed down by the most weighty and obvious institutional limits. In this sense, the micro is also a form of withdrawal from power, as Deleuze understands it, while keeping in mind that a return to power can happen just as quickly. Nevertheless, in the space-time that takes shape between withdrawals from and returns to power, the micro plane will have allowed a gap to open up, will have made a breach or a hole, something that is of the order of desire. An intensity.

4. Disinhibiting practices and imaginaries

A micrological experiment is distinguished by the fact that it includes its own limit. Even in the midst of unfolding, it inevitably allows itself to be recaptured by its environment or context and by the questions that inhere there. It gives rise to doubts or hesitations because it always remains slightly deficient towards itself. The micro experiment is never self-sufficient. It cannot contain within its own development all the questions it incites or all the dynamics it sets loose. There remains a gap, a certain porosity. The micro experiment thus integrates its own critical dynamic by virtue of the fact that it never perfectly coincides with itself (due to its discordance, its imbalance, its incomplete fulfillment) and by the fact of being constantly interpellated by macro issues unrelentingly overflowing its porosity, fissures, and bifurcations. It is in this sense that Henri Lefebvre ascribes true strategic value to this kind of micrological engagement. "What escapes the state? That which is derisory, the miniscule decisions in which

5 "Desire and pleasure," op. cit. Translation modified. *Deux régimes de fous*, op. cit., p. 114.

freedom is found and felt [...]. Freedom gathers speed in these micro-decisions. If it is true that the state leaves outside of itself only what is insignificant, it is no less true that the politico-bureaucratic-state edifice always has fissures, interstices, and intervals. On one side, administrative activity desperately tries to stop up the holes, increasingly diminishing hope in what we have called interstitial freedom. On the other side, the individual tries to widen these fissures and to pass through the interstices.”⁶ Following Lefebvre, we could say that micrological experiments introduce ruptures (fissures, cracks) into belonging and identity; they crack open, they hint, they displace...They signal in fact a kind of recovery of the time and space of our lives. To choose the micro is to make a strategic attempt to experience (and experiment) in different terms and from an unfamiliar perspective with the realities of life: it is the recovery of a certain receptiveness, a different way of becoming active, a means of disinhibiting practices and imaginaries.

5. Harassing the real

Micrology defines itself above all as a mode of access to situations, whereby these situations aren't in and of themselves particularly small, ephemeral, or anecdotal. The strategy is micro but the realities concerned don't have to be. We should not confuse the logic of the action (micro-logic) and the situations interpellated and worked upon by this action (forms of life). To choose what is “small”⁷ does not signify a preference for realities that are at hand or in close proximity, thought to be easily manageable because of this accessibility. To choose the “small” is in fact a strategy of action, and it is much more offensive than it sounds. To proceed from micro-dispositives is an entirely appropriate way to give impetus to a project or an experiment. The (active, creative, life...) process gains its momentum from these dispositives. It is given a boost, restarted, reactivated. It gains in intensity and range of action even if it might lose some of its developmental scope. The micro logic is a strategy of intensification. To choose the “small” is also a strategy of harassing the real—a way of constantly interpellating it from all sorts of angles. The micro logic is thus a strategy of dispersion and dissemination, not for the sake of multiplying ad infinitum, but for working situations from different points of view, on multiple occasions, and from diverse perspectives. Micrology is a choice for mobility and responsiveness in hopes of eventually provoking fissures, introducing porosity, and of cracking situations open. It is thus a strategy with a double thrust: it is both a logic of intensification (of giving momentum) and a logic of opening (of causing breakthroughs that give a certain drive to projects and experiments).

6. Expansion of time and contraction of space

We thus recognize two qualities of micrological experimentation: on the one hand its ontological power (the micro as privileged and swift mode of access to existence, the micro as the operator of existence); on the other its porosity, for, as we have shown, micrological experiments always remain on this side of completion. Such a practice can hardly be self-sufficient. In a way, it carries within itself its own abandonment. And this is precisely one of its greatest qualities: a guarantee of openness and an immunization against the temptation to close down around a fixed identity. A third quality equally deserves to be emphasized: the micrological experiment performs a distortion of time and space. It expands time while contracting space. It proceeds inversely to what we are

6 *Critique de la vie quotidienne III. – De la modernité au modernisme (Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)*, L'Arche éditeur, 1981, pp. 126-127.

7 **Miguel Abensour**, “Le choix du petit,” afterword to **Theodor W. Adorno**, *Minima Moralia (Réflexions sur la vie mutilée)*. Payot, 1991, p. 231 and passim.

accustomed to in our life and work experiences. In reference to urban activity, Pierre Mayol writes: “[I]n an urban environment, generally speaking, the link between habitat and place of work is marked by the necessity of a spatio-temporal coercion that requires a maximum of distance to be covered in a minimum of time. [Conversely,] neighborhood practice replaces necessity with gratuitousness, and privileges a use of urban space that is not solely defined by its functionality. It ultimately aims at spending a maximum of time on a minimum of space in order to set free the possibilities of strolling.”⁸ The micrological experiment makes for new kinds of receptiveness. By narrowing space it reopens time—time that can be spent on strolling, conversing, creating, imagining... By freeing us from certain spatial constraints (distance, length, expanse), it enriches the time in which we live and act. It intensifies time (acceleration, branching, discontinuity) or distends it (extension, duration, receptiveness). At the micro scale, time takes on a new texture, becomes more alive and responsive, more differentiated and rhythmic.

8 **Pierre Mayol**, “Habiter” in *L'invention du quotidien – 2. habiter, cuisiner*. Coll. Folio, 1994, p. 23.