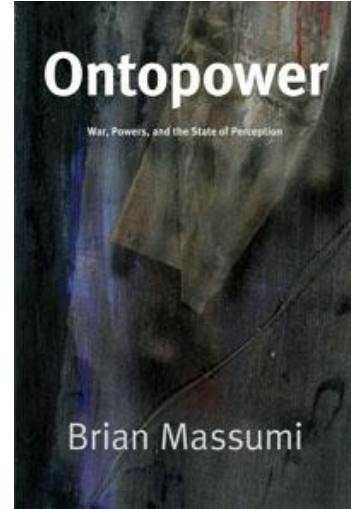


Brian Massumi, **Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 320 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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War on terror. Preventive attacks. State of alert. As security fears emerge all over the world, we experience threats in a new way. Brian Massumi's latest book, **Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception**, is a key contribution toward understanding how a new kind of power has emerged from a new ecology of menace. After *The Power at the End of the Economy* and *Politics of Affect* in *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* Massumi opens up new paths for philosophical reflection and also for political engagement. Skillfully weaving philosophy and contemporary political life (he cites many examples from the George W. Bush administration as well as the invasion of Iraq and the diplomatic tensions with North Korea) into a dialogue with other fields such as political philosophy and military theory, the book can be seen as a kind of guidebook but also as an intellectual warning against the perils of the militarized threat and its consequences on public perception, informational power, and collective affections.



*Ontopower* is a thought-provocative examination of postmodern experience that creates its own vocabulary: *power to the edge*, *bare activity*, *syncopating politics*, just to give a few examples. In large part, this is due to the strong influence of the philosophical writings of Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Agamben, James, and Simondon. Notably, the book seems to receive a special influence of Whitehead's process philosophy. Moreover, its considerations on neoconservatism and neoliberalism are contributing factors to the theoretical solidity the book presents. The many excursions in the text are, in fact, important complements to the chapters' main arguments. Instead of distracting the reader, they enable Massumi to provide a critical commentary on the ideas of major philosophers (see p. 44).

*Ontopower*, Massumi claims, is a new type of power encompassing both soft power (surveillance) and hard power (military interventions). It designates a "changing ecology of powers" (p. vii) and a power of emergency: It encompasses "the serial production of variations belonging to the same power curve, or tendency" (p. 221). It is a positive force and a force of life since it produces the particular form a life will take next. It is a bringing into being (hence, "onto"). The analyses in the book include co-related subjects that are explained in seven different chapters: the reconfiguration of power, the war-weather continuum, perception and power, power and information, transhistoricity, the modulation of fear (and emotions), and affective facts. From a communications point of view, chapter 4 ("Power to the Edge") is perhaps the most fascinating. It talks about making information "pointy," that is, making it a direct weapon of war through a

self-deciding network of action-potential (p. 98). Thirteen steps describe that objective, including "capture chance," "sample the future," and "self-synchronize and differ."

But what gives theoretical homogeneity to these (almost autonomous) chapters is that they all include different variations on the same theme: operative logic. Massumi describes "operative logic" as combining

an ontology with an epistemology in such a way as to endow itself with powers of self-causation. . . . An operative logic's self-causative powers drive it automatically to extend itself. Its autopoietic mode of operation is one with a drive to universalize itself. (pp. 200–201)

It governs a pragmatic effectivation. Since it is a productive construction of complex orderings, resonations, and interferences, it lacks inherent meaning and it operates in an element of vagueness and objective uncertainty. An operative logic is, thus, a proliferative openness to a productive and emergent form.

The book's main thesis is that preemption is the most powerful operative logic of the present. "It is the untimely force of attraction around which the field of power is bending" (p. 209). The doctrine of preemption (as exemplified by George W. Bush's "war on terror") is, thus, considered the driving force for a reconfiguration of powers, and it is at the center of this newly consolidated mode of power: *ontopower*. As Massumi states,

preemption is when the futurity of unspecified threat is affectively held in the present in a perpetual state of potential emergence(y) so that a movement of actualization may be triggered that is not only self-propelling but also effectively, indefinitely, ontologically productive, because it works from a virtual cause whose potential no single actualization exhausts. (p. 15)

The threat exemplifies the operative logic of preemption: If we feel a threat, there was a threat. A threat is affectively self-causing. This means that preemption, because it occurs within the potential emergence of a threat, is ontologically loaded with the ability to bring to the present a future threat. Preemption means a threat that has not even emerged (it is still indeterminately in potential), yet it is now felt as reality.

Because of these types of considerations, *Ontopower* can be regarded as a pragmatic book on potentiality that departs from current examples of American political life and offers a well-written and stimulating read. It is the notion that an operative processual logic is concretized in a historically specific apparatus that makes Massumi consider (especially in chapter 5 and the afterword) the tension between historiography and the philosophy of history. By talking in terms of "singular transhistorical tendencies" (p. 238), he is capable of integrating potential—the book's core concept, we would say—into the course of history. In fact, he posits potential to be transversal to history.

No one ever speaks or acts as if all would then be said and done. Words and deeds are always for what more may come. What comes, of course, is contingent in circumstance. But the trigger-hold circumstance has on potential is what makes it a force of history. (p. 155)

We can, hence, understand that the goal of this book is philosophical rather than historical. And since we need to move into an abstract level in order to capture the movement of history, the historical task of philosophy must be radically empirical: "Each empirically observable, actual working-out of the tendential problem is a power expression of the operative logic. A philosophical analysis of the historical field is tasked with evaluating the power expression" (p. 220). So the object of Massumi's analyses is not so much the historical events he alludes to. It is mostly the driving force of their formations—such as operative logicslike preemption—that urge through them.

*Ontopower* is a satisfying book that articulates major philosophical concepts (such as potentiality, collective individuation, process, and affect) in a compelling questioning of key episodes in contemporary history. Perhaps one of the book's vulnerabilities comes precisely from this substantial nature. In some passages, readers may possibly feel they should get more from the book. In fact, there are concepts fundamental to the book that are not fully examined. This is not to say the book is lacking something. It only emphasizes that, given the quality of the philosophical questioning, the reader would expect some concepts to be dealt with more comprehensively. I refer mainly to the ideas of potential and emergence that inform the discussion—although the discussion on preemptive logic surely contains vital insights on this matter—but also to the very concept of ontopower. A chapter on ontopower could provide a useful summary of the concept, and it would also enable to give it more emphasis and separate it from other concepts (for example, preemption as an operative logic). In effect, it seems that it is preemption that animates each chapter, not ontopower. The book seems to be made up of chapters that each show ontopower in a different light, not chapters that build on one another to produce a full account of the concept.

In addition, the discussion of ontopower could receive key contributions from other well-established concepts. Although Foucault's biopower is mentioned (chapter 2), the book does not fully examine the differences between these concepts, nor does it answer the question what is the relationship between biopower and ontopower? It is true that Massumi is careful in distinguishing preemptive power from biopower (p. 40). But, in what respect does preemptive power correspond to ontopower? And even if we can assume it is a type of ontopower, it is not totally clear if, to Massumi, it is the only one. The analysis of Foucault's governmentality and biopower in conjunction with Massumi's conception of ontopower would indeed have enriched this book.

Overall, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* is a significant book that deals with contemporary problems without losing its intellectual allure and philosophical perspicacity. Its captivating commentaries on the reconfiguration of power, as well as the proposal of its own vocabulary to deal with this new phenomena of power, will certainly appeal to readers interested in understanding the intermingling of politics, power, and today's society.

### **References**

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