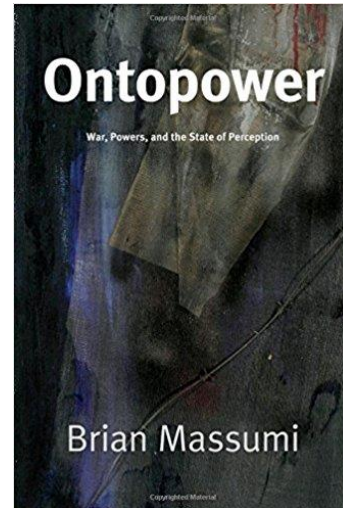


Brian Massumi, **Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 306 pp., \$72.95 (hardcover), \$23.70 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Catherine Chaput  
University of Nevada, Reno, USA

Brian Massumi's **Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception** offers a concrete response to the pressing question of how to analyze affective power within the discursive terrain of political action. As the English translator of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Massumi has long been interested in what Jon Beasley-Murray (2002) calls the politics of posthegemony. The theory of hegemony advanced by Antonio Gramsci (1971) and refined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) positions agentive subjects at the center of material and discursive power struggles. Poststructural political theorists—such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004, 2009)—view contemporary power struggles as mediated by affect more so than discourse and understand subjects as nodal points in a complex circulation of power potentials rather than as unique sites from which to lodge political action. Among the defining features of this position are two central premises: (1) Subjectivity cannot be located on a grid of identity, and (2) communication is not limited to conscious deliberation. Like these theorists, Massumi believes that ideological inquiries into the field of representations have all but exhausted themselves. Without being supplemented by attention to the order of affect and sensation, semiotic analyses will remain, at the very least, incomplete. *Ontopower* presumes an audience that shares this posthegemonic interest in the realignment of political struggle from slow, conscious discourse and deliberation to fast, nonconscious embodied practice and affective circulation. Taking for granted the critical role of affect in communication studies, Massumi unknowingly responds to Jon Beasley-Murray's (2003) call for "a methodology appropriate to the understanding of affect" (p. 120).

A collection of new and previously published chapters, *Ontopower* offers both a methodology for and a case study of the affective politics of the pervasive War on Terror and its militarization of life. As he explains in his afterward, which functions like an introduction, the book follows Foucault in its attempt to articulate a "history of the present" (p. 208). In what he purports to be equally pragmatic and speculative, Massumi historicizes the contemporary moment as defined by the central tendency toward preemption. His main argument is that whereas Cold War politics and its military strategy worked according to the operative logic of *prevention*, the War on Terror and its accompanying geopolitical and military strategy unfolds according to the operative logics of *preemption*. From his perspective, preemption activates ontopower by turning its anticipatory relationships among time, perception, action, and decision into a productive weapon in the ongoing offensive against terrorism.



The book is organized in three sections. The first part sets up the author's idiosyncratic terms of analysis and places Massumi in dialogue with Michel Foucault, the premier thinker of power. According to Foucault (2007), disciplinary power normalizes bodies, and biopower acts on a milieu to orient a population of such bodies; Massumi supplements these two modes of power with one that temporally precedes other power formations and takes up residence in the microspaces of becoming, where muscles flex, hearts beat, vascular structures expand and contract, and neurological and chemical processes communicate decisions. In the high-speed operations of the body's materiality, what he calls "bare activity," the culture-nature divide collapses and "natured nature" (p. 38) emerges. For Massumi, ontopower resides in the bare activity of a body's "dynamic indeterminacy agitating the field of life's emergence" (p. 44), and natured nature results from the process by which life gets hold of this bare activity, creating "provisional stability under conditions of instability" (p. 45). Those familiar with Spinoza's *Ethics* (2000) cannot help but read his *natura naturans* or the expression of the infinite in the finite in Massumi's characterization of this process "through which being becomes" (p. 71). In other words, his conceptualization of the potentiality of bare activity has more in common with Deleuze's (2001) "pure immanence" than with Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 2005) concept of "bare life."

After outlining the terms of his analysis, the next section investigates how contemporary U.S. military strategy mobilizes bare activity to constitute bodies whose natured nature is primed for preemptive action. Drawing on experimental psychology, Massumi explains that priming works in the preconscious arena of bare activity, using the fraction of a second prior to conscious decision making to influence future experience. U.S. military strategy, he argues, increasingly operates in this space to influence action. Rather than focusing on propaganda, information gathering, or other traditional modes of communication, the U.S. military, since the late 1990s, has focused on honing "the modulation of readiness potential, the productive power to influence what comes next" (p. 97). In a long, central chapter, Massumi performs a close reading of two military documents—*Network Centric Warfare* (1999) and *Power to the Edge* (2003). These texts, both published at the turn of the millennium, illustrate the transformation of military training from a skills-based enterprise to "a practice of perceptual priming" (p. 123) that "augment a body's capacity for unreflected action" (p. 121). This new form of military training bypasses reflective knowledge production, as it "fuses sensing and acting into immediate decisions" (p. 143). Its goal is "to contract all war into the micro-interval of perception, in order to re-factor its power potential" (p. 147). Ideally, military personnel come to cohabitate within this power potential so that they respond to perceptual cues in unison, acting synchronistically and without conscious communication.

The final section of the book focuses on the domestication of this preemptive military tendency. In particular, it addresses the second Bush administration's "color-coded terror alert system" (p. 171) and the ability for such terror alerts to produce a pervasive climate of fear throughout society. These two chapters are followed by a substantive afterward that reflects on the book's postpolitical positionality. Not surprisingly, Massumi repositions political communication, and thus resistance and change, into the preconscious nanosecond informing potential action—what he calls "the untimely interval" (p. 208). For this reason, he says, "the concept of 'agency,' with its 'the' subject-of-an-action connotations, is assiduously avoided in this book. It is replaced with more quasi-causal, field-friendly notion of 'triggering,' 'catalyzing,' and 'priming'" (p. 222). Discontented with the language of political agents and agencies, the book is replete with neologisms that reflect a shift in political orientation away from discourse and

collectivity and toward affect and individual bodies. At the center of this new lexicon lies ontopower as the primary force of contemporary politics. In the contemporary political world, time is nonlinear and perception takes place prior to conscious reflection; therefore, careful, reflective decision making based on cause-effect logic is antiquated. To keep pace with this communicative landscape, individual action must be attuned to the multipotentiality of the given moment. In such attunement, bodies become rich sensory sites that act nearly instantaneously on the layered, simultaneous information they receive.

Massumi references an immense range of scholarship both implicitly and explicitly to explain preemption as the operative logic of the current War on Terror that takes hold of individuals at the affective rather than cognitive level. His characteristic prose style performs this argument—it moves from claim to claim without full explanation, cites multiple (at times contradictory) definitions, and agitates the reader into experiencing the moment of becoming that precedes full deployment of knowledge. For instance, he grounds the practice of ontopower within the affective realm, which he sometimes disarticulates from the body—calling it “nonsensuous” (p. 66), “metaphysical” (p. 83), and “superempirical” (p. 87)—and elsewhere characterizes as “radical empiricism” (p. 156), or the bare activity of living bodies. Similarly, this book suggests that ontopower emerged in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, whereas his *Power at the End of the Economy* (2015a) identifies ontopower as entangled within the Scottish Enlightenment thinking that undergirds free market economic theory. These different characterizations are not errors, but part and parcel of Massumi’s belief in affective performativity. Affect, as he sees it, operates on a register separate from and immune to the “rules of noncontradiction” (p. 194). In a recent interview, he describes his rhythmic approach to writing as kinesthetically, rather than structurally, faithful. Massumi (2015b) says, “Think in terms of conceptual directions that get developed sometimes sequentially, sometimes concurrently, but in either case find a way at points to intersect, interfere with each other, eddy together, then overflow again into at least potentially separable currents” (para. 28). Such a writing practice produces texts that, for the uninitiated, may appear obtuse and abstract rather than perceptive and concrete. For such a reader, Massumi’s earlier *Parables for the Virtual* (2002) may help grease the wheels of this intentionally jarring reading experience.

Even for the reader well versed in Massumi’s style, his refusal to conform to the conventions of theoretical analysis begs several questions. For instance, how does his understanding of “affective tone,” “atmosphere,” and “way of life” intersect with what Raymond Williams (1977) calls a “structure of feeling” or what Thomas Rickert (2013) more recently identified as “ambient rhetoric”? Does his theory bolster or undermine those cultural and rhetorical studies that engage similar problematics? Moreover, because Massumi positions bare activity as the terrain through which neoliberal economic and neoconservative political practices emerge as well as the terrain through which “radical forms of political resistance” (p. 243) materialize, politics, he claims, must attend to the role of this priming and preemption in the affective sphere. Yet his dismissal of critical agency leaves the progressive reader uncertain about what must be done to transform this crucial space colonized by the capitalist political economy into a site of resistance. Without the possibility of positively constituting a radical subjectivity, we are left to merely elide the macrosystems that capture and orient life potential. Although Massumi describes his book as both a pragmatic and speculative intervention, he may fall short on both accounts. This shortcoming stems from his tendency to separate the affective and the symbolic, positioning the affective beyond critical intervention and imagining the pragmatic as little more than an active avoidance of affective

capture—what Hardt and Negri (2000) call exodus and Paolo Virno (2004) names the politics of exit. Experimentations in the positive constitution of a critical subject could productively add to Massumi's kinesthetic movement of ideas. To that end, one wonders whether Massumi might have a more generous engagement with critical subjectivity if he supplemented his reading of Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) with *The Courage of Truth* (2011).

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