Suely Rolnik

SPHERES OF INSURRECTION

NOTES ON DECOLONIZING THE UNCONSCIOUS

Spheres of Insurrection

Critical South

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To Eugenia, inaugural lucidity

It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 171.

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Introduction

Suely Rolnick's Untimely Insurgency

Stefano Harney

When he was in prison on charges that were later to be thrown out, then former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva gave an interview to the investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald. Greenwald asks what could be interpreted as a question critical of Lula and his time in government. He asks why, given how well big business fared under his administration, capitalists both big and small in Brazil seemed to despise him so much. Lula does not appear to take the question as a criticism, or rather perhaps he does not react to it because he has come to realize the criticism is somehow beside the point. In any case, Lula gives what Suely Rolnick might call, in the vital essays that follow, a micropolitical answer. Lula says that the only way he can explain this hostility is by way of the changes in Brazilian society that took place during his eight years in office (and during President Dilma Rousseff's truncated continuation of Worker's Party rule after him). Through the introduction of family support, affirmative action, employment law, and a host of other measures, Lula and his party greatly enlarged the number of people who participated in Brazil's official economy. And Lula says of those who nonetheless hate him, that they hate him simply because of who now stands next to them in the line at the cinema, the airport and the supermarket. Lula, the embodiment of a macropolitical energy, then as now, perhaps reflecting in his imposed otium, gives us a micropolitical response.

What Lula is able to see is how these changes, attributed to him, activated into vicious reaction the settler colonial desire for the slave and servant society that as Suely Rolnick will tell us, Brazil in large part remains. She writes that the viciousness toward Lula and the rise of now-former President Jair Bolsonaro 'really reveals … that the visceral presence of the colonial and slave-holding tradition in Brazil never ceased to exist in the subjectivity of its middle and elite classes.' This presence is somehow out-of-history as Brazil concludes its 200th year anniversary as a republic. The time of Brazil that accompanies this crucial publication – making Suely Rolnick's seminal essays available to English-speaking readers – is a time of relief. It is a time of the return to power of President Lula, after five years of environmental, social, and economic nihilistic mismanagement under the far-right former President Jair Bolsonaro. For Lula himself it is a time marked by his path from jail to the presidency. It is a return. But this time is also full with what is out of this time. Returns that never seem to stop. The last five years have brought memories and fears of the 1964-1985 military dictatorship to the surface where they linger still, peddling the reactive desires of Ordem e Progresso, the motto of the Brazilian republic. The phrase itself is cut out from the time of the French sociologist August Comte who said 'love as a principle, the order as a foundation, progress as a goal.' In the last five years love seemed to have returned from its excising, but as love for the leader, life-killing love. More untimely still was the nearly half of the population who voted to continue the ghoulish settler colonial performance as Brazil under Bolsonaro renewed its desire to 'open' its interior and build its national destiny, by the violent imposition of property, labour, and profit in the Amazon. Suely Rolnick concludes of the swing of support behind Bolsonaro that 'what the elites behind these operations did not consider was that the high degree of morbidity in the subjectivity of Bolsonaro (a morbidity easily detectable in his personal and political history) would lead him to become the leader of a fascist form of populism.' But perhaps they should have known better.

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Another way to look at this renewed settler desire is to ask what kind of decolonizing is called for in Brazil today? The answer is

that the kind of decolonizing Brazil requires is the anti-colonial kind. As in the United States, we must say that the anti-colonial movement has yet to succeed in Brazil. This is true at the level of desire as much as at the level of property and profit. Anti-colonialism remains the demand of the day. Decolonizing these societies is therefore always an untimely project. And this is precisely why we need Suely Rolnick's work now more than ever, even if now is ever. Because as Lula's answer reveals the struggle to decolonize the colony that Brazil remains, that the US remains, that Israel remains, that Australia remains, that Chile remains and so on, this struggle must take place at the molecular level and not just the molar level. The one continues because the other continues, but the other continues because the one continues. Thus, so too, the two struggles continue.

But in making this statement about micropolitical and macropolitical struggles confronting us, two problems immediately arise, problems with which Suely Rolnick will help us. The first of these problems is that these two forms of struggle do not work in harmony. They do not mirror each other. They do not facilitate a common topography. The insubordination of micropolitics, as Suely Rolnick calls it, provokes not just settler colonial rule, but also something in macropolitical struggle. The macropolitical struggle, the forces of the Left, react to the micropolitical announcements with a strategy of containment. Thus, the first problem we are confronted with is a problem for the Left. The reason for this is that the macropolitical struggle in most historical instances chooses a pragmatic path. The Left often does so sincerely. It often achieves gains by doing so. But what it does not reckon with is that what has been presented as the pragmatic path is in fact a road to absolutism. Because pragmatism is an absolutist ideology. I do not mean this in the anti-communist way such charges are often levelled. In fact, it is not even a charge. It is simply to say that in order for the macropolitical Left to fight at the level of rights, democracy, and sovereignty, as it often must, it is necessary for it to take on the language and the logic of the one. Or as Suely Rolnick calls it, the logic of identitarian politics. Far from being reasonable or moderate, when the Left takes a pragmatic position, it opens micropolitical struggles to great danger.

Because pragmatism of this kind always reinstalls the language and logic of the one, the individual, as the foundation for

politics. This reduction to the one individual, and the many individuals, forecloses the collective enunciations of desire. It spurs the very individuation upon which settler colonialism thrives. The subject, the citizen, the voter, the party, the nation, one nation indivisible, as the American like to say. This is the one who may stand before the law, who may represent others, who may make policy, and who may own property. This is the one who is sovereign, powered by the delusion of self-sufficiency, self-authorship, and self-development. This is the one who holds and enacts this delusion and appoints himself to diagnose the incompleteness of the others not by denying their individuality but by forcing upon them only enough oneness to bring them into the world, the rapacious world of property, finance, labour, and sexual demand. This is the one who says he's the one. And although the exception is going on all around him, he can only see it in his own violation. As Cedric Robinson argues in his classic *Terms of Order*, all Western macropolitics from Right to Left is based on the completeness of the one as the unit of politics. And a pragmatic politics demands completeness.

It is this complete one that allows us to make what at first may seem to be a needlessly provocative statement: that representative democracy, one man-one vote democracy is not the opposite of settler colonialism but a tool of its imposition and rule. Indeed, politics in its reductive, reactive emplotment of the one *is* at base a tool of white supremacism. It is hard for the Left to admit these metaphysical foundations of politics. Though white people seem to know this perfectly well. Because whenever democracy does not result in white supremacist rule, as in the exceptional years of PT government then and now, it is deemed not be democracy but to be instead a stolen election. The history of US coup-mongering against elected governments in the wider region, including the tacit support of President Barack Obama and Secretary Hilary Clinton's for the 'slow motion' coup against Dilma Rousseff, should be enough to state the point. (Then Vice President Joe Biden was the point man on that one by the way.) And here again is indispensability of Suely Rolnick's thought. The pragmatism of the Left – heightened in moments of self-defense against 'the coup' – leads it to ask, and then soon to demand, the same of its micropolitical surrounds, and this must be resisted. This pragmatic demand, which uses the love we retain for those who ask, uses them against our mutual love, to hide its

ultimately absolutist white supremacy. This corrosive demand comes in a number of forms: a call for unity, an exhortation to scale-up, a plea to be strategic, or a return to 'class analysis.' But in order for us to answer this demand, micropolitics must give up its insurgent project of total disorder and identify itself, identify with itself, realize itself and become one completely. As Rolnick writes 'the dominant cartographies' of politics 'seek to prevent the insubordination of the micropolitical.' Throughout these essays Suely Rolnick grapples with this problematic articulation of the macropolitical and the micropolitical and its consequences for the revolt of the unconsciousnesses.

But in Brazil, as in other settler colonial societies, or what Suely Rolnick names pimp-colonial-capitalist societies, the articulation between the micropolitical and the macropolitical is not just fraught on the Left, but also confronts us on and in the Right. This is the second problem, especially since daily life for all of us, or almost all of us, takes place on the Right. By this I mean our habits are mediated by capitalist markets, media, and social institutions that are persistently aligned with the Right and infused with its purpose. We shop, we browse, we work, we text, and we play in this space, regardless of the macropolitical moment. Suely Rolnick suggests this is why we (are forced to) produce so many 'novelties' rather than new ways of living, new potentialities. Brazilians will still be living daily life on the Right under the new Lula administration. Americans are living daily life on the Right under Joe Biden. Of course, many of us also live daily life against the Right. And this means rebelling not just against the overt compulsions of the Right. It also means there is an ongoing insurgency against the reactive desire of the Right, especially as it manifest in such settler societies.

I was reminded of the entanglement of the macropolitical and the micropolitical one day recently in conversation in Rio with my friend Denise Ferreira da Silva, the brilliant philosopher and artist. I said something about the way the Right was stoking fear of communism despite the fact Lula had proved himself moderate in his previous terms. I was surprised, I told her, that this was effective. Denise replied that in Brazil when you say communist, you say black. It was a micropolitical lesson for me. Not clear until it was said, and so clear once it was said. Anti-black desire in Brazil, which is perhaps a more accurate way to put it than anti-blackness, wells up from the settler colonial unconscious

like a toxic effluviant. And it mixes with the overtly macropolitical energies of the Right to the extent that the two feed each other and are hard to separate. When we fight in the realm of the macropolitical in settler colonial societies in those necessary moments of collective self-defense, we are also always fighting on the terrain of desire, reactive desire. Rhetoric emanating from the Right about finance, or education, or health, or even foreign policy is all the time fused to mobilization of reactive desires for dominance over the other, but most especially to anti-black desire. Living as we do involuntarily on the Right, many of us are invited into this mobilization. It is the brilliance of these essays that Suely Rolnick shows us how to resist and to announce our own desires instead, inspired by the ongoing insurgency against settler colonialism carried on by indigenous communities, favela organizers, quilombo communities, feminist organizations, queer communities, and dissident and resistant artists, workers, and others. President Lula's victory provides a measure of self-defense for these always out-of-time insurgencies.

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Despite this moment of untimely relief, Suely Rolnick reminds us that the coup is not a thing of the past. In odorous mouth of Jair Bolsonaro, in the slow-motion coup against Dilma Rouseff, in Honduras coup of 2009 or in Bolivia in 2019, the coup returns as a weapon of white supremacist democracy. But it has increasingly been augmented by another weapon on the Right that also draws from the common commitment to the figure of the complete one, in this case the individual who can stand before the law. Because the rights-bearing subject is also the kind of figure that can have rights taken away as part of the fiction that such rights resided inside the one in the first place. Lawfare has always been deployed against the poor, against indigenous and quilombo communities, and against the poor, workers, women, and queer people, even if these rights-bearing near subjects were adjudged incapable of bearing the rights. But in the last decades it has increasingly become a weapon against the macropolitical Left.

At the time of his interview with Lula, Glenn Greenwald was one of the motive forces behind *The Intercept* investigative news platform, including its specific Brazilian edition. It was *The Intercept* that would publish evidence, in form of leaked

telephone records including voice and text messages, of a conspiracy between the judge in Lula's case, Sergio Moro, and the prosecutors of the case. Moro was heard effectively coaching the prosecutors, while the prosecutors were heard admitting that the case was being pursued for political not criminal reasons, a fact with which they were evidently quite pleased. But Moro was not just any judge, rather he was the key judge in the massive 'Lava Jato' corruption investigations encompassing business leaders, politicians of many parties, and major firms, and extending beyond Brazil as far as Peru and Mexico. Suely Rolnick tracks these investigations at the level of their macropolitical lawfare, and at the level of their micropolitical drama in the third and final of her essays comprising this book. If Moro was dirty (and he was), dozens of high-profile convictions of businessmen and politicians might be overturned. The charges against Lula were quietly dropped with the acquiescence of Brazil's Supreme Court. And again what Suely Rolnick teaches us about this drama is precisely that it played out as manufactured desire on television screens in Brazil at the same time that it played out in the courts. The micropolitical reactive desires produced by the drama fed and were fed by the ideology of the law, of rights, and of the carceral state as safe-guarding those rights by denying them. Sergio Moro is now an elected senator.

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In the face of this constant return of settler violence, Suely Rolnick urges us not to succumb to what Fred Moten and I have called the 'subject reaction' in which we mistake the contingent efforts at self-defence as essential properties of life. There are constant threats to bodies and rights under settler violence, but this should not convince us we have bodies or rights even as we defend them. Suely Rolnick asks us to pay attention to what else is going on even under extreme duress – the experiments and exercises in the extrasensorial, extracognitive, and the extrasentimenal as she puts it. In place of the interpersonal, of interpersonal relations, instating the hazardous figure of the person, an extraentanglement must be militantly preserved and practiced. 'Micropolitics tends to announce through resonances the potentialization of life,' she writes, and it is to the rehearsal and revision of these resonances we must turn.

One way to think of this is through the decolonization of the *other* senses. The decolonization of the hierarchy and weaponization of the five senses must continue. But especially through the work being done around neurodiversity by scholars like Erin Manning, we are aware that the other senses have also felt the violent imposition of settlement. Proprioceptive, vestibular, interoceptive senses are the senses of movement, balance, and the 'internal' which colonialization assigned to the individuated body, but which also exist in the extraentanglement. Colonization has deployed several strategies against these other senses. The first strategy of colonialization is to suppress these senses as senses, exile them from the others and from serious cultivation under colonialism. Hence the prominence of only the five senses. Another strategy is to reduce these other senses to instincts, to group them with the animalistic. And if they must be acknowledged they are put to the specific uses of colonialism. The vestibular is valued only for its uprightness and control, for the balletic. It reinforces the driven stake of the settler and his flag. The interoceptive becomes the symptomatic, which science will address and clarify while substituting its own professional knowledge and expertise. The proprioceptive shows up even more of as a symptom, despite being the only one that admits of anything carrying the extraindividual. The sense of movement in the hands of the social sciences becomes the madness of crowds, the dangerous irrationality of the masses, of collective movement. And any deviation from the colonial use of these other senses is quickly pathologized.

But decolonizing these senses may have much to offer us as part of our accumulation of other desires urged on by these essays. The sense of movement that is named by proprioception may appear the most obvious for a decolonial recovery of common movement. But a simple reversal might well leave us with the classic macropolitical model on the Left of a worker's movement or a civil rights movement. But let us look for a second at the micropolitical movement of the civil rights movement in the United States as an example of a different decolonialization, or perhaps again an anti-colonial decolonization. Oral histories of that movement challenge the dominant narrative in two important ways. First, as great historian Robin D.G. Kelley points out, these struggles were local struggles. Their macropolitical unity unravels as a highly differentiated set of localized

political becomings. Second, the dominant narrative of desire, the desire for integration, is also questioned by a people's history of these movements. Again and again for instance, parents of children who were 'integrated' into white schools insisted in oral testimonies they did not want their children to integrate with white children. What they did want were the resources to be found where white children were schooled. These micropolitical resistances in movement are the qualities of movements that a decolonized proprioception would allow us to feel.

Similarly, a colonized sense of balance stresses equilibrium, from economy to painting. A decolonial balance however includes the vestibular of falling down, of being fallen, of being held up by hands, propped up by hands. A decolonial balance is off its axis, elliptical, and spinning out of control. It lies down on others, with a rock for its pillow. I put internal in quotes because of course the term directs us to the idea of the personal interior, but this too is an effect of colonialism on interception. The great Guyanese poet Martin Carter for instance speaks of a 'university of hunger' – a common internal study that is extraindividual without succumbing to being sociological. But the awareness of something like breath or a heartbeat is only individuated in the process of colonialization and settlement, however ongoing. But perhaps most clearly in music, and black diasporic music most of all, we find centuries of resistance to this individuation of breath or heart, as not only countless lyrics but more tellingly countless beats, pauses, and rhythms testify. It is not just that we are without organs but that we are neither within nor without – our exteroception and interoception are all tangled up.

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A similar thing goes on in Suely Rolnick's writing itself. Her writing is a micropolitical exercise. The continuous revision of these essays over time, under the influence of where she presents them as talks, and in collaboration with her conversations with students, presents us with a practice of writing that dissents from the completed argument, the scholarly object, and the establishment of intellectual private property. Rather than understanding these essays as a response to a particular macropolitical moment or condition, it might be fruitful to understand them as an untimely practice that goes on throughout

such moments and conditions, defending itself where it must, but refusing to be identified in the terms of these macropolitical threats or demands. One way she is able to do this is to remain in resonance with other kinds of practices, the ongoing insurgencies which similarly will not identify themselves. This resonance is not a representation but a commitment to extraentanglement.

Here I am reminded of one of Felix Guattari's discussions of Freud. Guattari speaks of two Freuds. One was the Freud who 'discovered' the unconscious. This is the Freud of dreams, slips, jokes, and the uncanny. This is the Freud who reads and narrates the unconscious and falls back into wonder at its infinite ability to produce symptoms. The other Freud is the scientist who moves toward the id-ego-superego schematic and toward various developmental theories to try to frame this unconscious in consciousness. Guattari marvels at Freud's ability to hold the scientist at bay for as much of his thinking as he did, and to risk the resonance of the unconscious reverberating into a revolt of the unconsciousnesses. This particular discussion I am thinking about takes place in response to a question Guattari receives in an encounter in Brazil facilitated and written up by Suely Rolnick and published in the seminal *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*. This was a book enacted and composed in the last days of the Brazilian dictatorship, published the first years of the return to civilian rule, and whose influence then spirals for decades.

In a preface to one of the editions of *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, Suely Rolnick writes that it was 'a book of many hands.' But one hand could be said to proliferate all the others, and that is the hand of Suely Rolnick. She talks about its profound impact, and she could be talking about me. My encounter with this book was both typical and untimely. It changed my thinking forever, years before I came to live in Brazil or to know it at all. Now as ever, ever as now, the urgency of Suely Rolnick's thinking into a history that is always contemporary is both welcome and necessary. The essays of Spheres of Insurrection will announce themselves where we need them most, even before we know we do!

26 November 2022