



Affect, state theory, and the politics of confusion



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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the notion of 'state affects' to describe the errancies that often characterize everyday statist relations. Where structured conditions and intelligibilities, such as the government of populations, engender state effects that veil the state's non-existence, state affects, I argue, enroll bodies and differentiate masses through what Secor has called 'unrecognizable conditions.' Particularly where such conditions are bungled and baffling, they constitute a field of problems that enable the formulation of an affective 'politics of confusion.' Several models of affect and emotion provide a glimpse at the possible biological–methodological and epistemological–ontological stakes of such negotiations of affective uncertainty in state errancies. I anchor these to Spinoza's notion of 'inadequate ideas,' a mode of embodied not-knowing that has important political consequences for describing the opacity of affect in everyday encounters. Finally, the New York City Police Department's bungled management of protest during the 2004 Republican National Convention offers multiple lenses for reading the spectrum of ways in which deployments of the state's monopoly on violence and the work of its ostensibly dissociated materialities sustain the political tensions between a state's non-existence and its affectiva-emotive power.

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The policeman isn't there to create disorder; the policeman is there to preserve disorder.

Richard J. Daley, Mayor of Chicago, 1968

Overture

During the final week of August 2004, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) arrested over 1800 protesters on the island of Manhattan – 1200 on August 31 alone (Dwyer, 2005; Ferguson, 2004; Gonnerman, 2004). It was the summer of erstwhile President George W. Bush's re-election campaign and New York City – 'ground zero' for a recent terrorist attack and subsequent rallying symbol behind the so-called 'global war on terror' – had been selected to host the Republican National Convention (RNC). As the occasion that would officially endorse Bush's candidacy, the political mega-event should have meant big business for the city. However, key components the Bush Administration's political hegemony concerning post-9/11 anti-

terror securitization discourses backfired when the RNC came to town.

Earlier that summer, the city was witness to regular rumblings about massive protests being planned to coincide with the convention. Borrowing the rationale of conducting "preemptive investigations into suspected terrorists" (Gonzalez, 2004), undercover FBI and NYPD agents were quickly deployed to cities across the country to infiltrate activist groups and harass political organizers. Their nebulous justification for wide-spread domestic surveillance kept in perfect step with broader Bush Doctrine-era affective 'logics' of homeland securitization:

the government has deemed it a plausible strategy of consensus making to wage war not on terrorism or terrorists as such, but on Terror, a feeling, a feeling deemed evidence of injustice and justification for state antinomianism ... The vague, shapeless, and pseudo-transparent qualities of Terror, and the relative autonomy of Terror from events and agents, make it possible for the government to motivate a situation of unending war and juridical crisis as though these practices constitute the just response of a representative state to the felt needs of its citizens. (Berlant, 2005, p. 48)

Easy to stir up, the fears of true-believers are difficult to manage. Rather than allaying concerns, preemptive policing

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brought to a boil latent fears long cultivated by the Administration. Would-be convention goers, hoping for a carefree week of Republican revelry, conspicuous consumption, and disaster tourism, were instead set to worrying that the event might be targeted by terrorists. By early August, the number of delegates opting to make the trip to the Big Apple was rumored to be shrinking. Usually a boon for local businesses, the convention threatened to be a bust.

Having apparently crunched the last-minute delegate numbers against the growing volume of expected protesters, New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg did the only thing he could do: he held a press conference. Speaking from “NYC & Company, the city’s tourism office,” he offered buttons reading “Peaceful Political Activists Welcome” to the estimated 250,000 protesters who were about to flood the city (Fig. 1). Wearing such a button entitled ‘peaceful political activists’ to big discounts at:

select hotels, museums, stores and restaurants around town during convention week ... Protesters can present the buttons at places like the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Sex, the Pokémon Center store and such restaurants as Miss Mamie’s Spoonbread Too and Applebee’s to save some cash during their stay. (Steinhauer, 2004)

After all, “[i]t’s no fun to protest,” Bloomberg observed, “on an empty stomach” (2004).

Many quickly dismissed the announcement as a “transparently mercantile bid to keep protesters from disrupting the Republican National Convention” (2004). But is it perhaps too generous to conclude that, by waving the white flag of cheap food and tchotchkes, Bloomberg was merely attempting to pacify an imminent, left-ish mob? Considering the city’s preparatory investment, the looming possibility of an anemic turnout meant capitalizing on whoever did wind up making the journey to New York. To be sure, such a cynical financial exploitation of what might be called protest’s ‘spatial fix’ trivializes political dissent. But Bloomberg’s gesture also obscures the real likelihood that the RNC would set the scene for the NYPD’s excessive and violent management strategies. Spotlighting this veiled probability, the international women’s



Fig. 2. Code Pink’s response. Courtesy of Code Pink.

activist organization, Code Pink, released their own prescient *détournement* of Bloomberg’s button: “Peaceful New York Police Welcome.” (Fig. 2)

That August, news media offered views of cheering conventioners accoutered in red, white, and blue cowboy hats to honor their West Texan candidate and waving ‘flip-flop’ sandals to mock the ostensible fickleness of his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. The silliness of the display heaped insult upon injury as, outside, in the streets beyond the convention’s militarized bubble, the city arrested nearly 2000 people. Many arrestees were the product of the NYPD’s mass-arrest strategy, which typically involves encircling large numbers of protesters with long, orange nets or enclosing them in the sealed ends of a small city block (Dwyer, 2005; Gonnerman, 2004; G.B. Smith, 2004). Police often employ such ‘kettling’ strategies to channel protesters toward an exit or to contain a specific action within an enclosed space – both featured prominently, for example, during London G20 actions during summer, 2009. The purpose of the NYPD’s RNC strategy, by contrast, seemed to be aimed at clearing the streets altogether. Drag-netted arrestees with zip-tied hands were loaded *en masse* into busses and carted off to makeshift ‘processing centers’ located in distant parts of the city. Yet, despite their familiarity with mass arrest procedure and months of advance planning, the NYPD was – whether by intent or incompetence – wholly unprepared to manage the volume of convention week arrestees. Sweeping and indiscriminate drag-netting inevitably ensnared local residents, commuters, and passers-by; the makeshift ‘post-arrest staging areas’ quickly grew over-crowded; and arrest processing times dragged well in excess of the city’s 24 hour rule. As the week wore on, police reports began pouring in, filed by concerned friends and family seeking loved ones who had disappeared on their way to market or home from work. Like the clumsy governmental appropriations of public fear and the cynical exploitation of an imminent protest ‘market,’ the management of protest stumbled, erred, and created many familiar – yet somehow unthinkable – crises. Confronted with such comical bumbling and disastrous violence, does it still make sense to conclude that these relations culminate in some sort of singular entity called ‘the state’?



Fig. 1. Bloomberg’s button <http://gothamist.com/2004/08/18/mayor_bloomberg_wants_peaceful_protesters.php>.

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