Becoming Seattle

The State of Activism and (Re)Activity of the State

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One characteristic that seems pervasive recently among many political actors (including anarchists) is a fixation with the State's incessant "failures." From the vulnerability that the State experienced on 9/11/01 to the breakdown of the State during Hurricane Katrina, there is a palpable sense that we are witnessing a "crisis" that is strategically exploitable. But who finds this account compelling? It is no revelation to say that State "failure" is often a way of developing a more powerful State. This narrative fuels Leninists and other shadow-dwellers waiting to seize opportunities for a revolutionary moment. Failure can happen within capitalist states (e.g. "failure of communication" among intelligence agencies leading to more integration via the Department of Homeland Security) or within a Marxist critique ("your State and its service-providing function has failed you, we will enter and fill the lack with our bigger State provider").

Is there another path to understanding recent State crises, one that does not judge success or failure, but diagnoses forces in combat? I offer here one attempt via a Nietzschean/Debordian strategic evaluation of activism and the State.

Let's return to New Orleans. By now, many readers will be familiar with the fact that anarchist medics and activists converged in the Big Easy, especially the Algiers neighborhood, to assist in the self-reconstitution of the area. The inability of the government and its proxy, the Red Cross, to organize and provide resources significantly contributed to this opening.

But let's step back to Wednesday August 31, 2005, two days after the Hurricane made landfall and two days before the full militarization of aid. One thousand residents of nearby Lafayette, Louisiana showed up in 500 boats to perform citizen rescues. They were blocked at the edge of New Orleans by FEMA and eventually told to go home, while inadequate yet good-for-TV helicopter rescues plodded on. This inefficiency, along with numerous others (the Superdome and Convention Center being the most spectacular; many other FEMA and police blockades, preventions, and emergency communication severances), contributed to a crisis scenario that "demanded" swift military and federal law enforcement action, which came with fanfare later that week.

George Caffentzis calls the failure of FEMA "necessary" for another solution: "neoliberal militarization." Thus, it only makes sense to say the State failed from a "public welfare" perspective. If we define the State as the monopoly on legitimate violence, then the martial law and armed privatized reconstruction of New Orleans was no failure at all. At the very least, we can see the scenario as an ongoing experiment in destruction and creation, de- and re-composition.

Mutual aid didn't only blossom in the State's cracks-it was the initial tendency, and the State's function was to prevent certain forms of it while managing the chaos that resulted from this prevention. Enclosures depend on deterrence of composition in advance. The State needs chaos in order to impose its own solutions (no matter how ultimately successful or not those solutions are). To put it simply, the State is reactive, even proactively reactive to the self-organizing potentials it detects. Political theorist Melinda Cooper calls this "pre-empting emergence," a war strategy that draws upon microbiological discourse to make sense of threats.

Gone is the image of the State as totality with cracks; instead, we see a tactical expansion of crises, the experimental distribution of perturbations. Art historian Malcolm Bull calls this interventionism the creation of "dissipative structures": control mechanisms that emerge after a deliberate activation of disruptions and management of emergences. At the same time, some mechanisms seek to prevent other emergences. We can call this the State of emergence/y: the capacity to engender and prevent surprise formations — especially spontaneous ones.

The US military strategy in Iraq has been characterized as having this quality. As foreign policy critic Stephen Zunes remarks, a few analysts (including ardent neo-cons) note the strategic usefulness of an Iraqi civil war, even suggesting a calculated series of provocations and inflammations. Calling it a failed policy misses the trees for the forest judging the totality without looking at the specific operations.

While a sweeping judgment might deliver an immediately gratifying feeling ("another Vietnam!") it misses what is potentially the simulated, even spectacular, character of defeat and the multiple levels of strategic planning. These are the same easy sentiments that lead people to believe that Donald Rumsfeld resigned as a result of the Democratic Party taking the House of Representatives in November 2006 or that withdrawal from Iraq will be due to a Cindy Sheehan-led popular movement. In other words, they do not take the State's capacity to strategize seriously, thus making the mistake of underestimating the adversary.

Comments on Debord: a counter retort

In its recently touted work *Afflicted Powers*, the political research collective Retort draw upon Situationist Guy Debord's writings to assess the contemporary capacities of Capital/Spectacle and of antagonistic movements. Retort is to be commended for not just relying on Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* for their conceptual tools, working as they do with the little cited, but much more relevant, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. (Part of the reason for the book's subordinate status is its translated title. In French, the title translates as Treatise on Secrets, but the English version ended up making it sound like a fragmented secondary work or the theoretical equivalent of a DVD extra.)

While not as conceptually dense, *Comments* reads as a manual for strategic thought, a result of Debord's preoccupation with warfare (see Agamben's *Means Without End* for more on Debord as strategist). Debord's musings on terrorism, unspecified enemies, generalized secrecy, organized insecurity, preventive civil war, and covert operations which turn "secret agents into revolutionaries and revolutionaries into secret agents" are even more germane today than they were almost 20 years ago when he wrote them.

Retort's opening towards this important text is closed down when they fold it back into *The Society of the Spectacle*, thus limiting its powers of thought, Of particular significance is one selection by Retort, one that grounds their post-9/11 analysis. I do this not to rescue Comments, but to continue its analysis of the State/Spectacle as a way to understand what we're up against.

Retort argues that 9/11 represents a profound moment of vulnerability in the powers of the State, even calling it a "wound" and a "defeat." In part this vulnerability means the State "can no longer be led strategically" (the key insight they borrow from Debord). We can agree that 9/11 was a wound and a trauma, but what kind and for whom? Whether the knife was held by oneself, a paid accomplice, or a former employee, the end result cannot he simply seen as a surprising and devastating shock. So many simulations of the very logistics of that day existed before the event that "surprise" cannot take on the same meaning. (Among the examples where this or a similar scenario was imagined: an episode of the TV show *The Lone Gunmen*, various comic books, an album cover of the radical hip-hop group the Coup, and in military simulation exercises going on that very day.)

Systems engineers love failure; they learn from it in order to raise the powers of the system. When it comes to the spectacular trauma of 9/11, we need only point out the dominant narrative already in place for that day's events. We don't have to sign up for the 9/11Truth.org mailing list to see how quickly 9/11 was defined as the "New Pearl Harbor." This framing device was circulating well before the event thanks to the neo-con Project for The New American Century.

For whom is this wound ultimately damaging? Psychically, physically, and politically the trauma has radiated devastating effects on people in the US and abroad. At the same time, the State (its foreign campaigns and its

securitization of everyday life) has continually re-empowered itself by invoking that trauma (and now linking it to the once comical Axis of Evil, e.g. Iranian nuclear capabilities and North Korean missile testing).

In other words, vulnerability can be put to use strategically. This is Debord's insight in *Comments*: while the State may not be led strategically anymore, it does multiply and extend its tactical operations. Failure can be a spectacular narrative, a way that the spectacle organizes critique about itself. Debord discusses operations such as "false attacks" and "showy failures," whose very ineptitude is designed to create a call for more efficiency. Most important here is what he calls networks of influence and promotion/control, whose purpose is to ensure certain narratives remain dominant about these maneuvers (even how to reveal them publicly).

Psywar operations, especially disinformation, become as strategically crucial as the material violence that underpins them. Their aim is to continue turning the populace into spectators, even while they're given some peeks into the inner workings of the spectacular state.

In the integrated spectacle, where dissuasive, deterrent, and subversive tactics swarm, Debord reminds us that the decentralization of State power does not result in a reduction in control mechanisms. Researchers working on neoliberal governmentality and control societies have reached the same conclusions.

Like Cooper's notion of preempting emergence, Debord notes that surveillance networks now seek to combat a threat "in advance." A distributive spectacular State does preventive work-subverting an emergent self organization with one more amenable to guidance.

If this sounds like a paralyzing analysis, then it is not doing its work. The State cannot be all-powerful if we leave the dialectic of totality and its fragments altogether. Instead, we are entangled in mobile and proliferating experimental techniques; a teeming set of image-commands, material violence, and tricks that keep the integrated hybrid spectacle moving. What makes the state unable to be led strategically is the abundant swarm of surveillance and deterrence mechanisms, whose dispersion overlaps to the point of major tangling.

Rather than presume a "vulnerability" (which may be a public secret that allows the State to increase its capacities), we need, as Debord reminds us, to have "historical knowledge" of the fine tissue of spectacular power and State forces. It is a helpful reminder: do not be taken in by sentimentality as strategy, one that makes us feel superior while remaining spectators–a smugjectivity. "Tactical successes can thus lead great powers down dangerous roads," says Debord. We take those tactical successes (even wounds) seriously in order to map out the entangled networks' lurch forward. Perhaps even to leave a few decoy road signs.

What we are left with, then, is an active State, but action that is primarily preventive: in other words, it is reactive. Now we can turn to the question of what it reacts to, namely the activity of activism.

Becoming-Seattle

The Novel Intelligence for Massive Data Program (NIMD), hatched in 2002 as part of the US intelligence community's Advanced Research and Development Activity (ARDA) and worming its way to Stanford University, had as its stated mission the detection of "strategic surprises." Researchers study data flows to locate spikes that might signal an emergent shock-and-awe event. The content of the unexpected act at this level doesn't matter-the very fact of it warrants attention, even computer modeling.

It is no surprise to say that surprise has long been associated with guerrilla tactics. Eliminating insurgent or popular surprise seems to have moved from a low-intensity concern to a full blown urgent strategy. Homeland Security, so dependent on the deployment and management of uncertainty, itself does not want to be shocked.

Seattle 1999 was just such a watershed surprise. It needs to be invoked, not to revisit a past glory nor find in it a model of action to repeat (only to melancholically be disappointed), but to detach from it in order to remake it. If we treat Seattle as a model or ideal type, we will find ourselves frozen in time, seeking its narcotic effects again, stuck in its shadow and in the State's reactive grip. The desire to repeat Seattle finds expression in the karmic dance of contemporary street action. How do we overcome the residual sadness (sadness defined here as thought that stalls around a limited number of ideas of loss)?

Not enough has been written on the affective history of Seattle and its aftermath on anarchists. Affective here refers to the capacity and incapacity for action, the degrees of enhancing one's powers (at times literally one's

bodily abilities). What did Seattle do to bodies-individual and political-and their nervous systems? With a nod to the current work on the carnivalesque, I will note that what often lingers regarding Seattle's legacy is its "form of organization" (consensus-building) and "type of action" (direct). What about the broader questions about the types of subjectivities formed (relations with body, time, sexuality, culture, work, desire)? What are the affective aftereffects?

Here it's important to pause and take into account the effects on/of the counterinsurgency practices. One can trace Seattle's significance (for official counterinsurgents like the NIMD and RAND Corporation) to the centuries-long fascination with the unpredictable "crowd." Seattle revived this bodily amassing with the added surprise of networks and swarms. And, it did it on the streets, the very space of the crowd so feared by government planners and studied by social scientists a century ago.

The State needed to react with both direct repression and subtle preventive interventions: the neutralization efforts by police involving innovative local tactics (e.g., FTAA in Miami 2003; the spatial and mobile interventions into New York City Critical Mass–see Will Weikart's analysis) and reliance on old techniques (infiltration and surveillance in the case of the Green Scare prosecutions). Not only do they seek to pre-empt emergence, they do so by rerouting and dampening enthusiasm for the possible.

Counterinsurgent forces adapted to Seattle's "strategic surprise." One way to remember this is to think of Seattle as an event rather than model, making it a becoming. This means taking it out of history (as an actualized occurrence bound by particular time/space circumstances, e.g., "N30/Seattle") and into the realm of transhistorical experimentation (see Deleuze on "Control and Becoming").

Seattle belongs to what autonomist theorist Toni Negri calls "constituent time": a temporality in which the event bursts forth, breaks, and interrupts; it is an acceleration. For Negri, the creative powers of the species form a collective reason that moves by leaps and catastrophes, becoming "cataclysm." In other words, there is no need to wait for a collapse, a wound, or incompetence to recognize the surprise-power of emergent mutual aid.

Seattle was a catastrophe, in the sense Melinda Cooper draws from microbiologist René Dubos' approach to infectious disease: a sudden field transition, a creative and destructive perturbation. It revived the State's interest in preventing emergence and controlling surprise. Chaos theory and cybernetics were no longer just resources for anarchist metaphors and poetry (but thanks go to Peter Lamborn Wilson for weaving the conceptual latticework for years). They took on an acute direct-action form.

While there had been many preceding attempts to put these processes into effect (e.g. Reclaim the Streets), Seattle was a heightened convergence of these distributed and emergent acts. To continue drawing from fluid dynamics: Seattle was a break (in the sense of a wave breaking) and a breach (as when a whale bursts through the surface of the sea).

What follows from a perturbation, cataclysmic or not, is re-organization, a move from chaos to order. These poetic images are embedded in organizational forms, in affective relations, in day-to-day tactics. Perhaps, as Wilson, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, and others remind us, these images/practices are lodged deep in the history of social systems. Today, they are being activated in the name of anarchism.

How to make a Becoming-Seattle as surprise? It wouldn't limit itself to the immediate build-up (the "planning and organizing") and certainly not the result. What about reviving the pre-conditions? This event-time could be said to have lasted a couple of decades (e.g., the countercultural scene in the Northwest US) or, anthropologically speaking, many millennia.

This revival would be a new catalysis, where Seattle becomes a feedback loop-image provoking a political body to learn. As neurologists and immunologists are quick to point out, bodily learning is rarely conscious. Immune systems and neural networks develop pattern recognition systems for emerging threats.

What would it mean for an activist political body to cultivate this ability to recognize and respond to changing patterns? By transforming Seattle into a "new image" we can create a different pattern-recognition, one belonging to a subject/system that increases its ability to accomplish goals.

According to Melinda Cooper, "We must become capable... of responding to the emergent, long before it has actualized in a form we can locate or even recognize." Cooper mostly focuses on the Pentagon's war strategy (pre-empting the emergence of unspecified terrorist enemies) but extends it briefly to resistances. Pattern recognition is geared around threat-detection.

Of course, it is crucial to detect the infiltration of the State into activist forces, be it via embodied agent provocateurs or more insidious State forms of thought/action. But give to the State what is the State's: reactivity. The State, no longer defined solely as the agent of order but as chaos manager, depends upon interactions and bottom up emergence. It seeks to thwart certain kinds, to harness the power of others, and ultimately to give perturbations a new dissipative control structure. Its reactive quality means that it is antithetical to life itself.

As for the activist body, we continue to ask (and in asking, contribute to making): what is this emergent body, its resistances and its capacities? Pattern recognition of the emergent need not be defined around threat-detection. We can cultivate an alertness to the unpredictable within as well (becoming-Seattle) as a way of developing the conditions of irruptive, even cataclysmic, emergence.

A new spontaneism, one that belongs to life itself. Not a concentrated media event (what some might call a spectacular surprise). We'll leave that to the State. Rather, one whose emergence will not be prevented because by the time it is recognized it will have been too late. This is an active activism, one that turns its own history into a source for self-transformation, and realizes something bacteria do all the time: horizontal transfection in which, as Cooper tells us, "resistance is literally contagious."

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