Contact zones: Rethinking the sensual life of the state
Uli Linke

Anthropological Theory 2006 6: 205
DOI: 10.1177/1463499606065037

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ant.sagepub.com/content/6/2/205

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for Anthropological Theory can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ant.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ant.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://ant.sagepub.com/content/6/2/205.refs.html
Contact zones

Rethinking the sensual life of the state

Uli Linke
Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, USA

Abstract
Much of the recent scholarship in anthropology and related disciplines suggests that attempts to theorize the operations of power under modern capitalism require us to rethink the state as a site of meaning production, emotional investment, and fantasy. But, moreover, as I argue here, modern states are not just imagined or discursive cultural regimes but also embodied forms. Political fields and national spaces have a visual, tactile, sensuous, and emotional dimension: the life of the state has a corporal grounding. My argument is centered on those sensually concrete spaces of power, where the machinations of state and the embodied subject collide: in these zones of contact, the political field assumes a somatosensory gestalt. By a focus on the entanglements of subjectivities, bodies, and states, my essay aims to contribute toward a new cultural analytics of political regimes.

Key Words
contact zones • embodiment • national states • political somaticity • politics of the senses • sensual regimes • sentiments • subjectivity

As anthropology has moved into the new millennium, its theoretical apparatus remains remarkably unprepared to deal with one of the major developments of the late 20th century: the pervasive presence of state culture in everyday life. With the analytic turn toward the nation as an ‘imagined political community’ (Anderson, 1992) and the corresponding concern with how conceptions of peoplehood are forged under the impact of global capitalism, media technologies, and scientific ideology (Cooper and Stoler, 1997; Gilroy, 2004; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002; Nairn and James, 2005; Schein, 2000; Stoler, 2002), there is an urgency to systematize and synthesize the theoretical tools for engaging the operations of modern state systems within the anthropological canon. Our analytic preoccupations, whereby we see the state either as an institution, as discourse, or as culturally imagined, tend to coexist with little interpretative integration. Thus our understandings of ‘catastrophic nationalism’ (Geyer, 2002) and the state’s potential for mass violence and use of political terror (Aretxaga, 1997; Bauman, 1989; Feldman, 1997a; Herzfeld, 1993; Scott, 1998) are staged against
the magico-mythical qualities of the state and the performative practices through which its terrifying history is remembered (Cassirer, 1946; Kapferer, 1988; Stoller, 1995; Taussig, 1997). Building on these insights, and through a critical reading of the pertinent literature, my aim in this article is to provide new analytic possibilities by interrogating the sensual life of the state. This approach is important for several reasons. A growing number of scholars have suggested that attempts to theorize the operations of power under modern capitalism require us to rethink the state as a site of meaning production, emotional investment, and fantasy (Buck-Morss, 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Taussig, 1992; Wolf, 1999, 2001; Žižek, 1989). But, moreover, as I argue here, modern states are not just imagined or discursive cultural regimes but also embodied forms. Political worlds have a visual, tactile, sensory and emotional dimension: the life of the state has a corporal grounding. Modern governmentalities act on and inhabit the body.

In the following, my argument is centrally concerned with the ways in which states are invested in the formation of our sensual and bodily experience. With an eye to the ‘structure of feelings’ (Williams, 1977), with which the state apparatus tends to flow through the domains of daily life, my article attempts to theorize those contact zones, where the political field asserts its presence through bodily experience and engrafts itself – even if only through the ‘taste of words’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 293) – in and through the memory of the senses. My analytic gaze is centered on those sensually concrete spaces of power, where the machinations of state and the embodied subject collide: in these zones of contact, the political field assumes a somatosensory gestalt. By a focus on the entanglements of subjectivities, bodies, and states, my article aims to contribute toward a new cultural analytics of political regimes.

‘LOVE’, POLITICALLY SPEAKING: POWER AND PASSION – NATION AND SENSATION

The sensual or emotional register of modern states, perhaps because of a preoccupation with the masculine-rational edifice of government, has received markedly little attention in the anthropological literature. Previous works, as Benita Parry notes, sought to uncover how political regimes ‘entered the social fabric, the intellectual discourse and the life of the imagination’ (1993: 24). The world of emotions escapes notice, subtly excluded as if somehow untouched by the intimacies of state power. Such analytic oversights only make sense when we look back to tenacious claims about the tangible unreality of states. Theorized as a disembodied abstraction, ‘the state’, as Radcliffe-Brown proclaimed in African Political Systems, ‘does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction’ (1940: xxiii). Although modern critics have uncovered ‘precisely the existence and reality of the political power of this fiction, its powerful insubstantiality’, as Michael Taussig (1992: 113) observed, earlier scholars, while reifying the state-thing as an abstract entity, began to explain the discernible manifestations of statehood in terms of a cultural symbiosis: ‘The state’, Michael Walzer asserts, ‘has no palpable shape or substance. The state is invisible: it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived’ (1967: 194). From this culturological perspective, the formations of political affect and, correspondingly, the sensual apprehension of political fields, are construed as mere reverberations or echoes of the order of signs. From such a position, the state is envisioned solely as a cognitive
construct: in this scheme, political sentiments come into being simply as side-effects and byproducts of a semiotic conceptual operation. Such notions belong to those ‘pernicious postulates’ (Tilly, 1984) and ‘architectonic illusions’ (Brubaker, 1998: 274) that I wish to contest. Political sentiments, I argue, are more than symptomatic surfaces: emotions possess a formative power, an embodied agency, which is at least in part constituted by the existential ground of being: lived experience.

Without a doubt, personification, symbolization, and imagination are discursive forms whereby the state-making thing, as Michel Foucault notes, ‘is rooted deep in the social nexus’ and, as it were, is brought ‘into being’ to ‘live in society’ (1983: 222). But such chronotopic animations also continuously feed on a ‘sensualization of power’ (Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1983: 173). This very link between power and passion, although widely acknowledged by contemporary scholars, has largely been confined to discussions about national sentiments and the entanglements of ‘nation’ and ‘emotion’ (Burton, 2003; François et al., 1995; Handler, 1988; Rae, 2002). As Craig Calhoun observed: ‘The discourse of nations is couched especially in terms of passion and identification’ (1997: 3). Likewise, in their introductory essay to Becoming National, Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny point to ‘pleasure’ and ‘desire’ as categories of political understanding that should be invoked when studying ‘the power of national loyalty’, ‘the meanings and effects of a ‘sense of national identity’’, and the formation of the ‘intimate connections between personhood and belonging to a nation’ (1996: 19, 24, 25).

However, in such works, despite the consistent emphasis on nation and sensation, any subsequent scrutiny of the matrix of emotional labor tends to fall short. The modalities of national fervor such as ‘loyalty’, ‘solidarity’, and ‘love’ or the ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘feeling at home’ are glossed over, repeatedly mentioned but prone to reification in categorical terms, given ontological status, and narrated as commonplace clichés. While relegating emotional regimes to the margins of analysis, the nation-state is brought to analytic visibility by a focus on the hegemonic landscapes of ideology, representation, and imagination; subsequently, and with a tautological twist, the emotive agency of subjects is explained away as an effect of the formative power of discourse. Indeed, as I suggest here, by privileging the discursive machinations of postcolonial state-making, even with the analytic turn toward performance, agency, and the subject, the political productions of national affect have all but been ignored.

This is surprising because the ‘structure of feelings’, according to Raymond Williams (1977, 1985), is clearly not outside the matrix of power. Moreover, political subjects, as James D. Faubion notes, are not just ‘bearers of intersubjectivity’, but also ‘the locus of subjectivity’ – of ‘sentiments and desires’ (1995: 9, 10). The logic of emotions is firmly rooted in the social (Csordas, 1997; Desjarlais, 1993; Lutz, 1988), and, under modern capitalism, the entire ‘system of feelings’, following Jean Baudrillard, may be conceived as an ‘organized extension’ of subjects constituted as ‘a productive force’ (1995: 202). But our analytic understanding of the modernist coupling of affect and power, I argue, requires further deliberation. Although political ‘symbolization’, as Walzer (1967: 194) asserts, ‘does create units – units of discourse [and] units of feeling around which emotions of loyalty and assurance can cluster’, and while a ‘national symbolic’, to invoke Lauren Berlant (1991: 5), tends to fasten ‘regulation to desire’, thereby ‘harnessing affect to political life’, we must nevertheless inquire how a national ethos is enunciated or grounded in ‘the interiority of a conscious, individual, meaning-giving subject’.
(Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1983: 57). As Rogers Brubaker succinctly points out, ‘[p]eople do not necessarily respond particularly energetically or warmly to the nationalist utterances of politicians who claim to speak in their name’ (1998: 284). This poses the question of whether there actually exists any congruence between nationalist discourse and everyday sense-making. The anchorage of political passions in common sense-experience is, according to Brubaker, one of the ‘difficulties involved in the “work of nationalization”’ (1998: 305, n29). Even when framed by state power, Brubaker (1998: 298) asserts, the everyday formation of political sentiments ‘cannot properly be taken as given or axiomatic’. These are crucial points. It is precisely this relation between subjectivities and political discourse that I here want to interrogate further.

Thinking along similar trajectories, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 149) asks: why should a nation be ‘loved’ – what makes it ‘lovable?’ – and then proceeds to inquire how ‘the feeling of devotion or adoration’ takes form. His insights unfold from an analysis of ‘existing life practices and their archives’ (2000: 20). Indeed, by juxtaposing distinct Bengali literary histories, Chakrabarty not only engages ‘the plurality of the category “imagination”’, but also brings to light those ‘radically contradictory modes of vision’ with which the ‘nationalist eye’ sees the nation (2000: 178–9). Such a potential range in the syntax of national optics, which attest to ‘heterogeneous practices of seeing’ and ‘perceiving’ Bengali nationhood (2000: 149), moves Chakrabarty to argue against the possibility of a single, totalizing register for the political field. For there are, he concludes, diverse ‘ways of being-in-the-world’, wherein we ‘live within our different senses of ontic belonging’ (2000: 255, 254). The formation of political subjectivities is thus clearly not simply an effect or symptom of the ideo-symbolic machinations of national discourse. Rather, following this argument, emotions are tied to divergent perceptual practices and lived experience, and, as I propose in this article, are engendered by the everyday zones of contact between embodied subjects and the political state apparatus.

In her recent work on the ‘illegal, contested’ state, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2003) proposes a similar turn. Taking as her starting point the divergent and opposing imaginaries of state in Cyprus, she convincingly shows how a subject’s political experience is complicated by military state violence, national and international legal discourses, distinct law enforcement practices, and the limitations on subjecthood imposed by transglobal regimes of ‘documented lives’ (e.g. passports, birth certificates, visas, permits and so on). Given these complications, we cannot but surrender to the conviction that the microphysics of sensation and feeling are governed by an emergent dynamic. National passions are not a unitary surface or skin which envelops the imagined totality of the state. Rather, such emotive figurations are linked to diverse possibilities of perception and experience. In other words, I contend that the political field consists of a multiplicity of points of confluence or zones of contact, where the formation of relative subjectivities takes place.

**‘SOMETHING SO STRANGE . . .’: ABSENT SUBJECTS AND FEELING SIGNS**

But an analytics of modern nationhood tends to treat political subjectivities as unmediated (sometimes organic) extensions of a hegemonic dead logic – external to the subject. Michael Taussig, for instance, writes:
When the human body, a nation’s flag, money, or a public statue is defaced, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself . . . Something so strange emanates from the wound of sacrilege wrought by desecration . . . It is the cut of de/facement that releases this surplus, the cut into wholeness as holiness. (1999: 1, 3)

In this meaning-making universe of transference and dissociation, which brings forth an uncanny emotional discharge that magically erupts from the sacred body of signs, the feeling subject is absent: a non-presence. The emotional labor is, according to Taussig, mimetically performed by the defaced object – a signifying fetish. Such an enigmatic erasure of subjectivities from the relations of signs and power necessarily incarcerates the analytic gaze in the hermeneutic space of discourse. This is, I suggest, a problematic closure of interpretation.

By similarly sighting the affective trace within a semiotic system, Benedict Anderson asserts: ‘political love can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, Vaterland, patria) or that of home’ (1992: 143). Certainly, within nationalist discourse, terms of endearment like ‘father state’ are used as metaphors to transport sentiments of domesticity and kinship to the level of the sovereign community, which, as Anderson claims, like ‘the family has been traditionally conceived as the domain of disinterested love and solidarity’ (1992: 144). Yet these so commonly accepted ‘just so’ metaphors of normative discourse require analytic disentanglement from political practice. The postulation of a unified field of discourse and affect is, as I suggest, an untenable conceptual fiction. Nevertheless, and in a similar vein, Eley and Suny proclaim: ‘the nation has invariably been imagined via metaphors of family, and has accordingly replicated the patriarchy of conventional familial forms’ (1996: 26). Such assertions are highly problematic in their confusion of cause and effect. I certainly do not wish to contest that the political economy of the modern nation is infused with a moral economy that promotes marriage and the family as a state agenda. Thus in their analysis of ‘State Fatherhood’ in Singapore, Heng and Devan (1997) have shed light on a phallic Confucian narrative, a nationalist narrative, which links the reproductive success of the Chinese family to state interests. Likewise, in the United States, the figure of the traditional family form has emerged as a governing agenda, which at the level of state politics is imbricated by moral discourses of heteronormativity, and, I would argue, the promotion of a white public sphere. But our analytic grasp of the operation of these bio-political regimes, when confined solely to the hermeneutic stratigraphy of the national imaginary, is blatantly deficient. Such procedures of semiotic decipherment, while bringing to light a political discourse of sacrality and/or legitimation, reveal in my assessment little about the complex ways in which the imaginaries of the state take on a social life through the subjects’ capacity to perceive, feel, and interpret. People’s feelings about the nation cannot simply be inferred or asserted from the hegemonic order of discourse. Our musings about the production of political realities, as I argue here, have to include the formative possibility of anti-state and anti-nationalist sentiments. We cannot ignore the existence of relative or oppositional subjectivities.

In a critical turn against the ‘problematic unity of the nation’, Homi Bhabha (1990) effectively contests the alleged homogeny of political fields, but in this endeavor he
sidesteps the matter of affect almost entirely. Given his analytic focus on the ‘constitutive contradictions of the national text’, political sentiments come into view only through strategies of textual inquiry, as Bhabha put it, in ‘narratives and discourses that signify a sense of nationness’ (1994: 308, 307). Here, the social life of political passions is deposited into the performativetextuality of signs. But the political universe of modern nations is more than a mere system of cultural signification. Nations, I argue, are discursive phantoms with political bodies. National imaginaries are never ‘super-organic’ entities, to borrow Alfred L. Kroeber’s (1917: 212) phrasing, that is, disembodied and bodiless or ‘unsubstantial’ cultural figurations. Rather, political fields and national spaces, I argue, are corporal, somatosensuous formations: not just ‘sociohistorical ciphers’ (Buck-Morss, 1977: 102, 109), but fundamentally bodied productions. Such a perspective, I contend, posits a radically different interpretation for the structuration of political affect and feeling.

**NOT JUST ‘SOCIOHISTORICAL CIPHERS’: NATIONAL STATES AS CORPORAL FORMATIONS**

Following these discussions, I propose that we need to rethink the work of nationalization in terms of an embodied practice. National regimes, with their disposition for unity and utopian ‘redemptive . . . promise of wholeness’ (Eley and Suny, 1996: 26), are inclined to reach into society’s interior spaces, into the somatosensory recesses of daily life. In these highly significant interior zones, political passions are concentrated through ‘techniques’ and ‘memories’ of the body (Connerton, 1989; James and Allen, 1998; Mauss, 1979 [1934]; Stoller, 1995). As the national state inhabits these micro-forms of practice, its contours come into visibility, and into sociological evidence, through a distinct ‘corporal habitus’, as Marcel Mauss (1992 [1934]: 458) observed. The nation form, as it were, is brought into being, as a perceptual entity, through bodily practices. As such, it takes on a physiognomic gestalt by assuming what I want to call a performative realism: it becomes a distinct body politic by staging itself ‘both on bodies and between bodies’ (Haroche, 1998: 219). In addition, the national state also acquires what I here call a sensual realism by penetrating further into the societal interior, indeed, by entering into ‘the citizen’s subjective experience of . . . civil life, private life’ and ‘the life of the body itself’ (Berlant, 1991: 20). The nation’s corporal formations, including postures, facial expressions, gestures, and movements, are often habitually enacted, seemingly ‘protected by their very insignificance’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 9). Although operative in the course of daily life, and therefore ‘intimately part of ourselves . . . in our lived space’ (Connerton, 1989: 93–5), these corporal memory practices are, however, not affectively neutral. Rather, as Norbert Elias (1978) observed, they are entwined with moral codes, with regimes of emotions, body feelings and sensual perceptions, and I would argue, at base, a sense of proper coordination and execution.

**OPTICAL TACTILITY: POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND VISIONARY GOVERNANCE**

Moreover, these body-archives of personhood, with their incorporated memory stores, come under the purview of the state’s visionary governance. In concrete zones of contact, as I argue in the following, the national state asserts its presence, and enters into experience, through a particular kind of visual realism – a simultaneous production of optical
facticity and ocular exposure. Although political visualization, understood in a most
general sense, has conventionally been brought to meaning by analyzing the representa-
tional labor of the symbols, signs, and gestures of state (Benedict, 1983; Bloch, 1989;
Firth, 1973; Kantorowicz, 1981 [1957]; Kertzer, 1988; Muratori, 1993), there is yet
another, more invasive, side to such optical regimes. Beyond the legitimating functions
of ritualized image-making, the politics of visualization reveal the state's ocular intru-
sion, which I suggest requires us to take a different interpretive route.

When bodies are nationalized within the spaces of state, the subjects' somatosensory
skills, along with the corresponding repertoires of affect, are pushed into the political
field of vision: in specific contact zones, the minutiae of bodily matters are brought into
focus, into visibility, as objects of scrutiny and censorship. In the modern era, under a
militarized capitalism in the 20th century, these 'scopic regimes' become operative in all
interior zones of life, from consumerism to practices of violence (Feldman, 1997a,
1999, 2002b; Kemp, 1991, 1995: 53). Thereby, as Helmuth Lethen phrased it,
'all figures in the field of the social are given perceptible contours. All phenomena – from
body physique to character, from handwriting to race – come to be classified. Strangely
enough, new technological media, like photography, serve as meaning-making instru-
ments in this enterprise' (1994: 10–11). For as the modern state begins to invest itself
in the management of populations, 'the eye of power' or political gaze, to invoke
Foucault, seeks to gain 'access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures
and all their daily actions' (1980a: 148). Under the state's ocular apparatus, interioriza-
tion, discipline, and subjection by desire (or 'a gain in pleasure') become, according to
Foucault, integral to the governing modus of modern political power.

But such a notion of the national state apparatus, conceived as a rational totality, as
a total system, sanitized of violence and devoid of antagonistic forces, is in my view
theoretically misleading. For as the political gaze comes to invade the crevices of everyday
life, it is precisely matched by the subjects' experience of intense distress: this 'somati-
cization of the state's gaze' within 'a unified field of fear', writes Allen Feldman, 'is state
terror sunk into the lived body' (1997b: 50, 51). Indeed, in his work on counter-
insurgency in Northern Ireland, Feldman successfully unmasks the violence of those
visual regimes that stretch their 'totalizing, engorged gaze over the politically prone body'
(1997b: 29). As he points out, 'a scopic regime, like Foucault's panopticon or Lacan's
mirror stage, is an apparatus that has no human eye as its point of origin, for seeing, no
matter how privileged; it is but a position internal to, and a function and product of,
the total scopic apparatus' (Feldman, 1997b: 33). But, following Feldman's argument,
such a voiding of seeing subjects, and the negation of sensuous subjectivities, also
produces 'zones of blindness and inattention' that invariably conceal the very forms of
terror produced by 'the agendas and techniques of political visualization' (Feldman,
1997b: 29–30). Thus, in Northern Ireland, as Feldman's research suggests, 'political
subjects are formed, in part, within a circuit of visual prosthetics: the surveillance
camera, the helicopter overflight, the panoptic architecture of the interrogation room
and prison, and the aimed gun' (1997b: 29). Moreover, 'these instruments of fatal vision',
writes Feldman, which 'are evident in the visual staging and technological penetration
of the body’, take control of concrete corporal sites to ‘unite both seeing and killing,
surveillance and violence' (1997b: 30). Under the state's visionary governance, the
diverse contact zones not only reveal the terrifying modus of political power, but also
become sites for the making of subjectivities through the production of terror and violence. On the ground, in the zones of contact, where the gaze of the state seeks to penetrate the lived body, the political apparatus acquires a sensual realism and, as I argue here, must be analyzed as a somatosensuous formation.

The panoptic and scopic regimes of violence attest to the somaticity of the state. For political visualization, regardless of the optical technologies deployed, locks in on bodies. Consequently, we cannot ignore the significance of the ‘visceral quality’ of the relation, the ‘sensuous connection’ that exists ‘between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’ (Taussig, 1993: 21, 24, 25). Under the state's optical apparatus of violence, there is a merging of bodies, of seeing and being seen, in concrete contact zones, whereby the political enters subjective experience. Indeed, Walter Benjamin’s (1969) concept of ‘optical tactility’ serves as an important reminder that political power penetrates the life world by an intimate touch of sight. In the context of state terror, I argue, these everyday zones of vision-contact are integrated into a violent economy of the senses.

Let me disentangle these insights further by analyzing a concrete example. During the 1930s, the Nazi state relied on such optical tactics in its manufacture of racialized outsiders. Stereotyping by looks – branding on sight – was basic to German anti-Semitism, a ‘visually centered ideology’ (Mosse, 1985: 133–52). Indeed, as I argue here, the initial stages of Judeocide came to be closely coordinated with the state's assault on ocular space. More specifically, the compulsory display of the yellow six-pointed star not only made Jews highly visible in public space, but also implemented a regime of optical terror that facilitated daily intimidations, street violence, and, ultimately, murder. The panoptic architecture of German public space was seamlessly integrated into the state's carceral zones: the body, the street, the ghetto, the concentration camp. By incarcerating Jewish populations in concrete visual fields, the scopic regime of the state entered the ongoing life process: in effect, it transformed the everyday socialities of ordinary sense-perception into exceedingly volatile zones of vision-contact between Germans and Jews. In other words, I suggest that by restructuring everyday ocular space, the state expanded its visual range to include the corporal habitus of face-to-face looking relations. In the public sphere, born out of this new violence of vision, the gaze of German nationals, the subjects’ seeing eyes, became a weapon, as an appendage to the state’s instruments of terror. Indeed, governed by the racialization of sight, these common sense-habits of anti-Jewish violence also contained a ‘blind zone’ (Buck-Morss, 2000: 2–3), which harbored yet another terrain of terror: the unspoken but embodied, sensuous knowledge of Judeocide. According to Michael Taussig, the hypervisibility of such a ‘public secret’, in this case the scopic targeting of Jews, perforce ‘magnifies a reality’ that is ‘generally known, but cannot be spoken’; and, confined to ocular space, it is made to be seen, rendered optically familiar, ‘so as to preserve it’ (1999: 50–1). By operating at this level of somatosensory involvement, where the regime's assaults of visual aggression are ‘built into the social routines as bodily dispositions’ (Taussig, 1993: 25), the violence of the Nazi racial state was to become ubiquitous. Assimilated to the ordinary sensory practices of everyday life, and, as such, embodied without interpretive mediation by the subject, state terror was affixed to the societal interior: in German ocular space, the commonplacencies of anti-Jewish violence came to be systemic, albeit normalized, thereby giving form to what Hannah Arendt (1964) described as ‘the banality of evil’. The formation of the Nazi regime was inherently linked to this normalization of violence: that is, this
transformation of the entirety of public space into political space and into contact zones between subjects, Jews, and the state.

CORPORAL INTENSIFICATIONS: THE SENSUAL AND SOMAESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF STATE

Such an intimatization of violent body regimes, taken in a general sense, belongs to the operative technology of all modern states. Indeed, under capitalist modernity, as cultural historians have shown, the administration of society comes to be governed by institutional forms – schools, judicial systems, bureaucracies, healthcare, and welfare – which forge a national body politic by regimenting subjects’ everyday corporal habitus (Foucault, 1979; Frazer, 1989; Singer, 1993). But these historical developments, as suggested by my example of the Nazi state, cannot be described solely in terms of the pacification of lived experience or as a ‘civilizing process’ (Elias, 1978), that is, as a progressive containment of everyday violence. For the techniques of embodiment conjointly serve the ‘productive union of the Welfare State and the Warfare State’, to borrow Herbert Marcuse’s (1964: 19–55) phrasing. Disciplined (docile) bodies, trained to be obediently compliant, as I suggested earlier, are also dangerously violent. Moreover, the global intensification of warfare in the 20th century, accompanied by the perpetration of state terror, racial eugenics, genocide, torture, soldiering and rape, shows that the concentrated ‘performance of violence on the bodies’ of select populations ‘can also be a national act’ (Eley and Suny, 1996: 26). The nation’s investment in bodies, ultimately to ‘claim the entire individual’ (Marcuse, 1964: 10), undoubtedly accelerates the citizens’ participation in the symbiotic projects of the state: the enhancement of life as well as the production of death.

It is no coincidence that catastrophic nationalism, as in the German case, is firmly coordinated with a monumentalization of bodily performances. Thus during the Nazi era, the official staging of corporal ideals should become omnipresent in public life. Fascist aesthetics – with its sublime ecstasy of discipline – prescribed the choreographed performance of bodies in public spectacle: in political rituals and ceremonials, sports, military parades, mass media, schools, museums, art, and architecture (Kertzer, 1988; Linke, 1999; Mosse, 1975; Pini, 1992; Wölbert, 1982). Commenting on Nazism’s increasingly regimented corporal habitus, Horkheimer and Adorno (1987 [1947]: 264) observed that the nationwide adoption of such bodily practices was not accomplished in a mechanical, emotionless manner: the instrumentalized object-body required sexualization, the infusion of a libidinous charge, in order ‘to be at once desired as that which was forbidden’. The state’s machinery of death was hereby synchronized with the formation of a national erotic in vision and experience.

Likewise, in analyzing testimonies of violence from the apartheid-era in South Africa, Allen Feldman points out that the scenes of ‘clandestine state violence involving interrogation, torture and execution’ by police and army personnel not merely took form ‘in disfigurement and pain’, but also in ‘culinary imagery’ – in tropes of ‘consumption and commensality’ – ‘which rechanneled the violated and consumed black body as a renewed productive fuel for state power’ (2002a: 242, 245, 259). Extending ‘from the locales of torture to the corridors of the apartheid state’, the perpetration of violence was enmeshed with the extraction of ‘pleasure and identity from these atrocities’ (Feldman, 2002a: 253). Thus torture, with its bureaucratic rationalization as ‘interrogation’ and ‘political
intelligence gathering’, as Feldman shows, was in reality driven by the perpetrators’ indulgences in the magical substance, and the odors, scents, and aromas of burnt human fat. Acts of state violence, as I suggest here, are clearly also enmeshed in an erotics of the senses.

Moreover, at this juncture, in specific zones of contact, where the violent spaces of state and subjectivity interlock through practices and regimes of the body, emotional sentiments are further elaborated by the machinations of national discourse. Nationalization proceeds by a sensationalism of bodies. Discursive formations nourish a sensualized, sexualized, and racialized ‘intensification of the body’ (Foucault, 1980b: 123; in Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1983: 140–1; also see Mosse, 1985; Parker et al., 1992). Through the controlled enunciation of subjectivities in the political field, as I contend, the disciplinary spaces of state enter into everyday body-space. Or stated somewhat differently, within the political fields of vision, in specific contact zones, the subject’s entire ‘body-feeling’ becomes entangled with the ‘whole national feeling for the body’, as Ludwig Wittgenstein phrased it, when commenting on the disfigurements of experience and ‘sense of body’ under German anti-Semitism in the 1930s (Shusterman, 2003: 214). By highlighting the emergent synchrony between the ‘former aesthetic feeling for one’s body’ and the new political discourse about Jews as a ‘disease and anomaly’ – a ‘tumour’, Wittgenstein (1980: 20–1) anticipated the unproblematic incorporation of the fascist body politic into German sense experience.

But racial intolerance, according to Wittgenstein, was not solely a discursive formation. Racism, he suggested, operated as a ‘somaesthetic’ practice (Shusterman, 2003: 202): its enactment in the lifeworld required, as it were, grounding in specific subjective experiences of bodily integrity. In contrast to the racial rhetoric of state, as Wittgenstein noted, these corporal sensibilities were embedded in social practices, that is, ‘ways of acting’, ‘speaking’ and ‘thinking’, which had been forged by historically specific ‘forms of life’ and, as such, lived experience (Heyes, 2003: 4–5; Tully, 2003: 28–9; von Wright, 1990: 209–10, 212). The lifeworld of bodies, in contradistinction to the state’s racist regime, was in Wittgenstein’s view grounded in the grammar of cultural conventions. But this ordinary universe of attitudes and meanings was not forever frozen or ‘“closed by a frontier” once and for all;’ for the everyday – ‘the whole hurly-burly’ of life, as he phrased it – held multiple ‘possibilities of thinking and acting differently’ (Shusterman, 2003: 207; Tully, 2003: 41–2). Thereby the very ‘sense of body’ or ‘body-feeling’, as Wittgenstein noted, while enunciated within the nation’s anti-Semitic regimes, remained a potential site of negotiated struggle. In this context, however, we need to inquire how such an oppositional interiority can be sustained. By what means can subjectivities resist or evade the hegemonic apparatus of the state? And how do we theorize the political agency of embodied subjects without recourse to a corporal essentialism?

**NOT JUST BODIES: POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND THE DIALECTICAL INTERIOR**

Taking the body as my point of departure, I argue that embodiment incites an additional register of the senses: incorporation brings into being a sensual interior or ‘inner space’ (Marcuse, 1964: 10) that works as a counter-memory to the textual or narrative archive of states. In his work on the anthropology of the senses, the philosopher Helmuth Plessner (1970 [1941]: 23–37) theorized this interiority as an intrinsically precarious set
of relations: of being both ‘of the body’ (leibhaft) and ‘in the body’ (im Körper). The formation of subjectivity is thereby complicated by the postulation of a dialectical interior, which constitutes our inner, albeit embodied, experience of subjecthood. For, according to Plessner, we not only inhabit a physical body, through which we perceive, feel, and are sensorially present in the world, but our everyday experience and our engagement with the world is also mediated by our embodied bodiliness – by being a lived body. From this phenomenological perspective, bodiliness is never an unequivocal state but a formative process:

This internal location of myself in my body is enmeshed, in a way entirely obvious to common sense, in an immediate location of myself within the space of things. Here I am separated from the ‘outer’ world, not by an intermediate layer, which I, as a separate entity, live through and ‘comprehend’ from within, but as myself a piece of the external world, somewhere in a room or on the street. Here stands my body qua content of my visual or tactile field, of my locomotor, attentional, and visceral sensations, on the same line with other physical things which appear within the horizon of my perception. Regardless of whether I move about and do something or quietly let the images of the external world, including my own body as part of it, act on me, the situation of my existence is ambiguous: as lived body – in the physical body. (Plessner, 1970 [1941]: 35–6, emphases in original)

Subjectivity, following this approach, is constituted by a dialogic reciprocity of internal bodily standpoints: our body feelings, as it were, talk back to and enter into a conversation with our existential experience of being a body. These ongoing dialogues between the perceptual body and embodied self-experience set the stage for the making of reflexive subjectivities and thereby, in turn, political agency.

Within this conceptual frame, the tensive paradox between the sensorial physical body and the sublime body – ‘this immaterial corporality of the “body within the body”’ (Žižek, 1989: 18) – occupies a central position. Standing at the threshold between interior and exterior worlds, subjects negotiate everyday experience through their bodies’ somatosensory capacities. But, moreover, every sensation and, correspondingly, emotional situations involving shame, terror, repugnance, or pleasure, can be apprehended as ‘bodily events’, which ‘acquire in the body a symbolic stamp’ (Plessner, 1970: 33, emphases in original). Subsequently, through the language of bodily performances, such as facial mimicry, gesticular speech, and expressive movements, affective states come into cultural expression, become perceptible on the peripheral mirror of bodily surfaces, and, at the same time, enter into lived experience, as a sense of sensuous immediacy: of being self-present in the body and thereby in the world. Our everyday experiences, including our encounters with the state in specific zones of contact, are firmly grounded in this sensually mediated immediacy. Such a notion is by no means a departure into corporal essentialism. On the contrary, it suggests that the making of political subjectivities is an ongoing constitutive process. Moreover, the dynamic structure of feelings does not exist in a cultural void: it ‘springs from no timeless ground’, and is never ‘non- and transhistorical’, but is ‘historically bound precisely in our everyday understanding and experience’ (Plessner, 1970: 18–19). The reflexivity of sensual embodiment is situated in social time and political space.
From this decidedly anti-Cartesian perspective, the production of political agency does not proceed by incarceration in a closed universe: neither enchained in lifeless signs, in discursive systems, nor in the object-body. Rather, subjecthood belongs to a constitutive order of relations. As Plessner elaborates: ‘the body as expressive surface is no passive envelope... but a felt boundary surface over against’ the external world; the ‘shaping of the “internal” takes place immediately on the level of expressive movement’, as an ‘affective resonance of sensory life’ (1970: 41, 44, 63). But this dialogic relation between emotional engagement and sensory presence demands reconciliation, for a human being ‘neither is just a living body’ nor ‘just has a body’ (pp. 37, 39). The underlying paradox remains firmly intact even in those instances of motor-sensory training, where the physical body-machine appears as both the instrument and means of memory-techniques, and seemingly remembers its own corporal habitus, as ‘a knowledge and remembering in the hands and in the body’ (Connerton, 1989: 95; also Mauss, 1992; Rothschild, 2000). In such instances, the mediating dialogue between body-self and embodied experience merely ‘takes place more readily and quickly’ (Plessner, 1970: 37), suggesting the simultaneity of self-control and self-transparency.

Such a perspective seems to me especially important when rethinking the problematic of ‘disciplinary subjectivation’ (as prevalent throughout Foucault’s work), an analytic turn that erased the possibility of agency by positing the total and complete capture of subjects by regimes of power. The successful interiorization of political fields was here treated as unproblematic by envisioning subjects as unidimensional entities, as flat exterior (body) and interior (soul) surfaces. Accordingly, the modus of internalization was mistakenly conceived as a functional resonance or effect of disciplinary tactics: power somehow inhabited and acted on and through an aggregate of bodies. By analytically ignoring the interior complexities of a conscious, individual, meaning-giving subject, the hold of political power was sketched out in terms of an unmitigating totalizing universe. By contrast, Plessner’s phenomenological approach, with its recognition of an embodied dialectical interior, presumes the potential agency of subjects from the very start. By a focus on the formative power of sensual experience, it acknowledges the order of significance of a reflexive, meaning-making subjectivity. This approach forces us to reconsider any assumptions we may hold about the presumed unity of national states: for subjects can successfully resist or evade the homogenizing tendencies of the modern state apparatus.

In the course of everyday life, and within particular political fields, I subsequently argue, subjects can harness their bodily experiences as a productive force. Feelings are not ‘passive states without any dynamic’ (Plessner, 1970: 64). Sensations and emotions, including the predicaments of ‘the individual’s plight between love, angst, work, and death’ (Trommler, 1998: 23), have agency. As embodied forms and, moreover, as sites of incomplete or ambivalent performance, affective experiences can become constitutive moments in the formation of political culture. In other words, I suggest that the dynamic of feelings, and, as such, the uneven synchronization of political discourse and embodiment, holds transformative possibilities: it opens up a critical potential for the unmaking of ‘unthinking conformity’ (Tully, 2003: 27). In turn, however, we need to ask how those contact zones, where the matrix of state power touches the subjects’ everyday lifeworld, are sensually encoded by distinct regimes of gender, class, race, or violence. How does the discursive physiognomy of the national state apparatus, such as the anti-Semitic
regimes of the German racial state, take hold of the subjects’ emotional bodies? Or stated differently, in the words of Jean Baudrillard (1995: 195), how can the relation between subjects and the state be ‘consummated’?

STATE AND SUBJECTIVITY: THE PRODUCTIVE LABOR OF THE NEGATIVE

In scrutinizing these complications, Slavoj Žižek (1989: 43) revisits the process whereby ‘the ideological state apparatus “internalizes” itself’: he inquires how ‘ideological belief’ and ‘the interconnecting effect of subjectivation’ become integral to the political field. According to Žižek, we cannot ignore

that this external ‘machine’ of State Apparatuses exercises its force only in so far as it is experienced, in the unconscious economy of the subject, as a traumatic, senseless injunction [and] that this ‘internalization’, by structural necessity, never fully succeeds. (Žižek, 1989: 43–4)

Following Žižek’s formulation, the state-thing touches the subjects’ most intimate emotions by remaining partially outside, as incomprehensible Other, constitutively senseless, not understood, ‘which cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe of the subject’, and therefore, in specific zones of contact, is experienced as traumatic. It is by means of ‘this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism’, Žižek (1989: 37) asserts, that subjects become ensnared in the fantasy constructions of the state: for the externality of the symbolic order carries a mask of truth that penetrates the everyday experience of political reality itself. But since these zones of national fantasm, which seek to sustain their authority through embodiment, are subversively decentered, as I here suggest, the state’s ideological hold on subjectivity remains fundamentally unstable.

In the heterogeneous zones of contact, I further contend, political realism unfolds in a drama of negative mimesis. Concrete encounters with the bureaucratic state apparatus produce a subjective experience of incapacity, of traumatic senselessness, which, in Žižek’s view, is simultaneously impregnated by intimate desire: a passionate insistence on understanding and the desperate belief in a political universe in which the otherness of the state can be meaningfully deciphered. Since such attempts at sense-making remain incomplete, indeed always have ‘a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it’ (Žižek, 1989: 43), the subject’s internalization of the state’s hegemonic enunciations cannot be completely successful. Due to this constitutive incompleteness of ideological submission, obedience remains external: symbolically unintegrated, ‘reduced to “gestures and grimaces of the body”’ – an ‘empty external ritual’ (Žižek, 1989: 211–12). The manifestations of the state apparatus thereby remain confined to what I have termed a performative realism or physiognomic gestalt, which is concentrated in the subjects’ ritualized mimicry of submission and deference. Such performative practices, however, must not be confused with the formation of normative subjectivities, for different contact zones may open up alternative possibilities for emotional engagement. A habitual demeanor may thus indeed be a mere façade that can be deployed to conceal divergent or contradictory affective commitments.

But in order for the state to function, the senselessness of these performances, the very fact that political authority is devoid of truth, must somehow be repressed. This
operation, Žižek contends, is facilitated by the ‘imaginary experience’ of the meaning of the state: by the subject’s affective belief in the ultimate ‘justice, truth, and functionality’ of the state (1989: 37–8). The work of nationalization, as I argue here, is thereby contingent on a negation, on a negative dialectical procedure. For the apparent void in political meaning is sublimated by exteriorization, that is, by the subject’s transference or delegation of the ‘most intimate beliefs’, ‘emotions’, and ‘feelings’ to the external political field. National fervor is therefore never just an intimate subjective experience. Rather, political belief is ‘radically exterior’, as Žižek (1989: 33, 34, 36) asserts: it materializes itself in our corporal habitus, ‘social activity’, and ‘conduct’ in concrete zones of contact with the state. Thus the love of a nation, this antagonistic intensity of pleasure over and against the terrifying sense of state, is brought into being as an effect of the performative requirements of ideological fantasy: as a negation of the negative, the voided trauma of a negated subjectivity. In other words, by endowing the state with a libidinal charge, subjects may recover their sense and experience of agency. While we may not agree with this interpretation in its entirety, it leads us to reflect on the complex entanglements of subjectivities, bodies, and states from a different vantage point. Certainly, when seeing the state as a site of emotional investment and fantasy, we also need to pay attention to the agency of the embodied subject in our analysis.

AN ‘INTERRUPTIVE INTERIORITY’: THE SENSUAL LIFE OF THE STATE

My focus on the sensual life of the state seeks to offer new venues for thinking about political fields. My analysis is situated at the nexus of late modernity and capitalism, where the making of docile bodies also produces disorders and voids: a muting of affect, of memory, and of time (Bauman, 2000, 2003; Feldman, 1994, 1997b; Marder, 2001; Schepers-Hughes, 1992; Sennett, 1994; Seremetakis, 1996; Zerubavel, 2003). The conditions of modern life, as Walter Benjamin observed, ushered in an ‘increasing atrophy of experience’ (1983: 113). But in this age of the copy, the simulacrum, the artifact, and what I call the dead zones of affect and sensual crisis, the state-making apparatus begins to propagate counter-experiences of intense sensual realism by flowing through the pleasure zones of sex, leisure, and consumption. My analysis re-examines these contact zones, those complex sites where discourse, representation, and practice collide or interlock, and where the trace of the political field not only materializes through a system of signs but becomes a felt presence through a ‘curious linking of power and pleasure’ (Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1983: 173). Here, at this nexus, the semio-prosthetic contours of the state apparatus are fastened or moored to the sensual fabric of everyday experience. Political power, I argue, operates through the senses. In the zones of contact, the microphysics of statehood enter into a visual, acoustic, and spatial, even tactile or olfactory presence, magnifying ‘the citizens’ pleasure’ by a multitude of interventions in public life, including the spectacular productions of ritual, media, and violence (Borneman, 1992; Kapferer, 1988; Kertzer, 1988; Mosse, 1975, 1985; Trommler, 1998: 27). Here, in these contact zones, in turn, political ideation ‘presses close to its object’, to use the words of Adorno (1970: 11), ‘as if through touching, smelling, tasting, it wanted to transform itself’. Thus even when the state circulates in the political imagination of its subjects as discourse or ‘ideological fantasy’ (Žižek, 1989), it incites apprehension through sensuous practices. Since, as Adorno asserted, ‘the act of
cognition itself has a somatic character’ (Buck-Morss, 1977: 83, 248 n14), we need to rethink the work of nationalization in terms of a dialectical social praxis, which treats the subjects’ reflective capacity as firmly embodied in lived experience.

In his work on *Phantom Communities*, Scott Durham (1998), however, warns us that ‘the coherence of this experience’ is intrinsically problematic: sensual realism emerges from heterogeneous domains of social practice that, in their stubbornly serial and fragmentary character, may lead us to doubt our capacity as individual or collective subjects to articulate, in a coherent narrative or representational schema, our shifting relations to these ubiquitous images [and sensory fields] as we pass from one sphere or cultural subsystem to the next. (Durham, 1998: 3)

But this very incoherence of sensual fields is precisely matched to the operations of state power. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002: 2) observed, the state is not a fixed or static entity: rather, like a phantom, it haunts a multitude of sites, ‘appears in many guises and constantly transfigures itself’. This figure of what I here call the *flexible state*, taken together with the uneven adhesion or union of sensual fields, suggests that the totalization of national culture and, likewise, the production of normative subjectivities, is never unproblematic – and in fact can never be completely achieved. For the zones of everyday experience also contain a nation’s ‘interruptive interiority’, as Homi Bhabha (1994: 310) phrased it, from which alternatives of sense-making and interpretation may emerge. This fissure in the social fabric of the nation’s interior – this paradox of non-integration – opens a potentially antagonistic space that is only in part sutured by state ideology (Žižek, 1989). Or, stated differently, the work of nationalism reveals an ongoing ‘constitutive incompletion’, as Ernesto Laclau (1989: xiv) phrased it, which introduces into the very architecture of political space certain conditions of possibility: these may, as I have argued, engender alternative constructions of political identity or discursive hegemonic rearticulations.

The ‘nation’, as Max Weber stated long ago, ‘is a community of sentiment manifest in a state’ (1994 [1948]: 25). But the formation of national sentiments or the love of a nation is neither inevitable nor self-apparent, nor natural. Political passions are tied to a cultural history of the senses, to specific forms of governing, to technologies of communication, and to the making of subjectivities under modern capitalism. An analytics of modern statehood must turn its eye toward ‘the nervous system’ (Taussig, 1992), that is, the sensuous realism of *feeling the nation*, as I have argued, which brings into play the entire sensorium of the body, including the micro-politics of sense experience as well as the polymorphous incitements to sensuation that are evident in the making of political subjects. In other words, my analytic focus on the sensual life of the state advocates further scrutiny of the somaticity – the somatosensory *gestalt* – of modern states and the formative moments of political experience.

**Acknowledgements**

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the European Association for Social Anthropology in Vienna in 2004 and the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago in 2003. I thank Jaro Stacul and Gregory Feldman for organizing the respective sessions at these events. I am especially grateful to the journal.
editors Joel Robbins and Jonathan Friedman and the external readers for their constructive commentaries.

References


ULI LINKE is a political anthropologist who has conducted ethnographic field research in Europe and the United States. She has taught at the Central European University (Budapest), the University of Tübingen (Germany), Rutgers University (USA), and the University of Toronto (Canada). She is currently Associate Professor of anthropology at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. Her research interests include visual culture and violence, the political anthropology of the body, and the cultural politics of memory. Linke has written several books (German Bodies, 1999; Blood and Nation, 1999; Denying Biology, 1996) and many articles about the nexus between gender, race, and nation. Her recent publications include ‘Touching the Corpse’ (Anthropology Today, 2005) and ‘Ethnolinguistic Racism’ (Anthropological Theory, 2004). She is currently working on a new project in which she explores the political technology of the senses in modern states. Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Rochester Institute of Technology, 18 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester, NY 14623, USA. [email: uhlgss@ad.rit.edu]