# Boredom, excitement and other security affects

**Dr Ben Anderson**

**Department of Geography**

**Durham University**

**South Road**

**Durham**

**Ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk**

**Abstract**

Expanding from Barnett's critique of the emphasis in critical security work on 'subjectivity through subjectification', this response explores some of the ways in which geographers and others might attend to the diversity of security affects. Fear and anxiety do not exhaust the affective expressions of security and affect is not simply another medium for the successful implementation of programmes of rule. Rather, affects are imbricated in the ordinary work of securing and publics are formed in and through encounters with the devices, techniques, objects and people and promises that make up 'security'. Securing, and encounters with security, are themselves enveloped, pressured and otherwise conditioned by collective affects.

Keywords: Affect, Security, Securing

**Boredom, excitement and other security affects**


How might we think the affective life of security beyond the culturalist focus on 'subjectivity –as-subjectification' that Barnett (2015: 15) rightly critiques? How might we think of security affects as more than a new means for the top-down operation of "sinister power being exercised behind people's backs" (ibid. 22)? To explore these questions, questions provoked by Barnett's paper, I start with an example of boredom and the ordinary work of policing.

Didier Fassin's (2013) extraordinary ethnography of a police 'rapid response' 'anti-crime' squad in a precinct in a Parisian suburb reminds us that the affective life of security extends beyond what Barnett (2015: 27) variously calls "the modulation of affective moods' through public means.  A range of affects other than or in addition to fear and anxiety animate and infuse both security practices and public relations and responses to security. The police officers' work oscillates between long periods of waiting for something to happen, and bursts of violent intensity once something, however minor, has happened or might be happening. Mainly the work is uneventful. There are long periods of inactivity during which boredom stills and slows the ordinary spaces of policing; the car, the precinct headquarters. Ordinary policing is coloured by a mixture of frustration and boredom for officers drawn to the role by, in part, the promise of excitement; a promise that has to be maintained to get through the ordinariness of police work and is supported by an affective economy of, amongst other things, American television cop shows. Animated by racialised stigmatisation, when police response does happen it frequently erupts in

spectacular violence. For most residents of the suburb, encounters with the police are to be avoided. Animated by memories of past humiliations and everyday acts of racism, some residents adopt a passive style of comportment in encounters with police. Their weak hope is to stay in the ordinariness of situations that they judge could suddenly, and unexpectedly, escalate and be made violent by the police. Fassin shows how the weak cognitive-affective hope for the uneventful, for just getting by, juts up against the police's desire for excitement and the martial logic of 'war' that conditions and infuses the practices of policing Parisian *banlieus.*

The importance of excitement and boredom to how securing through 'rapid-response' policing happens reminds us that the affects of security cannot be reduced to the "inculcation of anxious states of mind and fearful habits of mind" that Barnett (2015: 8) rightly decries. What an analysis that pays attention to specific affects scrambles is the too often assumed connection between the negative emotions and the securing of consent or acquiescence for processes and forms of securitization. In the Parisian *banlieus,* fear by the public of the police mixes with the promise of excitement and the deadening reality of boredom for the police. Hopes for just 'getting by' condition how an already marginalised public relates to security practices and professionals. It complicates the relation between security and affect by, as a first step, orientating inquiry to the imbrication of innumerable affects in the ordinary, ongoing work of securing.

Paying attention to a wide variety of security affects may be one way, then, of introducing greater uncertainty into confident and programmatic diagnoses of how life today is secured by working on and through non- or pre cognitive processes. It

may also be one way of interrupting and reframing claims about the relations between different publics and security devices and techniques and about the ordinary work of security professionals in relation to publics. This is not quite how Barnett sees it, though. Affect is a marginal concern in Barnett's paper. Only quickly and dismissively mentioned, work on affect is at best indicative of and worst intensifies many of the problems Barnett diagnoses with contemporary work on security. Referring to what he takes to be one dominant trajectory of research, Barnett writes of how:

> "Although the theoretical frontier may have shifted from discourse to affect, the critique of security retains an investment in a well-established model of cultural politics, in which the critique of power is focused at the level of revealing the subject-effects sought and achieved by top-down programmes of rule".
> (Barnett 2015: 13)

Now, I am not sure this is what the limited amount of work on affect and security is doing given that much of it pays attention to the ordinary work of security practices. But Barnett's wider critique is compelling. It is not only that work on security has little to say about the public values animating security, it is also that work on security has reproduced a particular style and habit of analysis that centres how programmes of rule achieve subjective effects. Barnett's charge against the 'subjectivity as subjectification' trope goes beyond work on security. Critical work on

security is but one iteration of a very particular way of being critical; one based on exposure of how subjectivity is produced or constructed by forces outside the subject and about which the subject is, at best, dimly aware. It is focused on revealing how power operates behind the backs and against the interests of subjects. What might appear to be a discontinuity in approaches – say the recent shift to non-representational approaches to security – compounds the initial error by miss or not recognising it. So work on security is not alone, according to Barnett. Not only is it telling some of the same meta-stories of the contemporary as other 'critical' approaches, about for example the accentuation of public life, more problematically it also embodies the same style of analysis. Deploying what after Sedgwick (2003) we could call a paranoid style of analysis, although Barnett does not use that phrase in this paper, critique is everywhere vigilant to the hidden reproduction of power. Work on affect may, on this account, offer little but a new means to once again affirm the deviousness and brilliance of 'power'.

Whilst I think there are elements of caricature in how Barnett presents some of the work on security he critiques, there is much I agree with in his diagnosis. I think he is right that some, but by no means all, critical work on security has worked with a thin conception of the public and public action (Fassin's ethnography being one notable exception). I agree that we should open out a wider range of responses to security and its scenes and situations than paranoid readings based on practices of suspicion might allow, although Barnett does not put it in those terms. And I think he is right that if the emphasis of critical work is on the manipulation of populations as affective publics then it risks reproducing a limited conception of public action.

As I have stressed elsewhere (Anderson 2014), affect is not only, if it is at all, an object-target of and for forms of power and manipulation is but one mode of action amongst many. However, if we look a little closer at the role of affect in work on security, we find it plays a quite different role to that claimed by Barnett. It is not that affect provides yet another surface for the insidious and successful operation of power over 'whole populations'. Most work stresses the indetermination of affect. Affective effects can never be guaranteed in advance. Consider, for example, Massumi's (2005) discussion of how 'threat' operates affectively. We could read Massumi as problematically implying a direct link between a threat-signs and what he terms "variation of intensity of feeling over time" (ibid 32) resulting in the "spontaneous mass coordination of affect" (ibid. 33). However, Massumi does stress what I would call the mediation of affect. How fear happens is mediated by:

"… regimes of external signs in play, the nature of the contexts through which they multiply, the acquired skills of suppression impressed on the bodies populating those contexts, and the techniques of attention in operation … "
(Massumi 2005: 44)

One task for analysis has been, then, to try and square an account of the indetermination of affective life (because of the multiplicity of channels and forms of mediation, rather than the supposed non-representational status of affect) with efforts to understand its intentional constitution. Part of the response to this problem has been to find conceptions of action adequate to understanding the play of

determination and indetermination as efforts are made to work on and through affective life. We might think, for example, of Massumi (2014) on 'priming' or Ash (2012) on 'amplification'. What these terms have in common is that they do not assume that effect can be read off intention but experiment with complex understandings of causation (see also Connolly (2005) on 'resonance'). Moving beyond the 'population' to consider how affective publics are shaped by acting on 'environments' or 'envelopes', this work aims to disrupt the 'subjectivity as subjectification' paradigm that Barnett is also critical of. However, Barnett's critique does have purchase. For what this work risks doing is providing a more sophisticated response to the same question of how 'top down' security succeeds by working affectively. Fassin's (2013) ethnography of policing reminds us that multiple affects are imbued in ordinary practices of securing and collective affects continually condition, they limit and press and envelope, how securing happens. What other security affects – beyond the emphasis on 'subjective dispositions of entire populations' (Barnett 2015: 19) - might work on security attend to?

Fassin reminds us that publics do not relate to 'security' per se. 'Security' is encountered as specific devices, techniques, objects, and personnel that oscillate between absence and presence as they fold with everyday lives. Lives that are always lived in relation to and made through much more than 'security'. In the Parisian suburb, publics are made through encounters with the wail of a distinctive police siren, the stare of an officer, a slowing patrol car, a truncheon, a racist insult, and so on. And those encounters are saturated with everything from disdain to humiliation, resignation to a muted sense of outrage at what has become normal. We

might begin, then, with how publics form around security's ordinary presences and absences, rather than with processes of subjectification or subject-effects (see Murphy 2012). Many of the publics in Fassin's ethnography are ephemeral; intimidation of young residents is witnessed by passers-by, before they quickly move away; a slowing police car is waringly watched by a crowd of young people hanging around, and so on. But he also shows how these kind of affect imbued encounters with security's presences and absences fold into and settle in people's dispositions and, importantly, the ways in which people make sense of and judge situations and adjust what they do around the police. Staying with ordinary scenes and situations in which security presences and absences are lived with might also mean holding onto the ambivalences and incoherencies of people's attachments and investments in and rejections of security.

Encounters with security devices, personnel and so on may be conditioned by amorphous, perhaps only dimly felt, collective affects. Take the promise of excitement that is sustained by 'rapid response' police work, even as the typical experience of that work is of boredom as police wait for something to happen. The promise of excitement is an atmosphere that 'gets into' many of the encounters between police and public in the suburb, through the police's tendency to escalate ordinary, initially seemingly innocuous situations into violent confrontations. Excitement is also an atmosphere that envelopes police work per se, conditioned by the form and content of TV cop shows organised around the pleasure of urgent action and the fantasy of making a difference. Other collective affects will 'limit' and 'pressure' security and condition and fold into security practitioners day to day

work practices. Consider Hall et al's (1978) account of inner-city policing in 1970/80s, UK (an account that has many resonances with Fassin's study). Policing of young black men was, in part, conditioned by a series of moral panics around the racialised figure of the 'mugger'. But it was also conditioned by a widespread sense of something like crisis, in particular a crisis of public confidence in law and order and a crisis of the state. Collective affects, like crisis or panic or excitement, will also emerge from and fold back into ordinary scenes of living with security and its presences and absences. In the context of a mood of crisis, for example, 'security' may be lived as an atmosphere felt incoherately through a sense of reassurance and continuity.

Affects are more, then, than a new object-target for power today. Affective publics may form as security devices, techniques, personnel and so on are encountered in the midst of everyday lives that are always made up of more than security. Folded into the ordinary work of particular actors doing security will be particular spatially and temporally extended moods. And encounters with security, and the work of securing, may be conditioned by collective affects that are at once public and expressed and reworked by publics.

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