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State Phobia, State Philia, and their Discontents: Left Structures of Feeling Between State and Community

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Abstract

After decades of neoliberal austerity, the crises of the early 2020s have seen both increased pressure on state actors to publicly provide for social reproduction and resurgent interest in practices of mutual aid, independent of the state. This paper examines the collective affective orientations – what cultural theorist Raymond Williams called "structures of feeling" – that shape contemporary fantasies about the state and mutual aid in debates within the U.S. Left. It sketches ostensibly distinct but often overlapping affective orientations among Leftists toward the state and mutual aid in recent debates, including "state phobia" and "state philia." Rather than resolving the tension between state philia and state phobia, the paper argues the necessity of grieving the limitations of both statist and anarchist approaches on their own in order to imagine better Left horizons for political-economic transformation.

Keywords

Affect, mutual aid, state, socialism, ambivalence, structure of feeling

Introduction

Although the tension between socialist and anarchist approaches is a noted and enduring feature of Left social movements worldwide, the crises of the 2020s (so far) have seen renewed and intensified debates in the U.S. about the roles of the state and the community in Left strategy. In 2020, the second Bernie Sanders presidential campaign surged, only to meet a carefully orchestrated intrapartisan demise, fueling deepened cynicism about the limits of Left electoralism. At that very moment, the emergent COVID-19 crisis saw mass demands on state actors at various scales to prohibit evictions, cancel rent, seize vacant buildings, and provide people with basic income and adequate housing, among other needs. Yet the abysmal failure (or engineered neglect) of the U.S. state's public health response also informed a proliferation of interest in practices of mutual aid and informal solidarity, independent of the state, within the communities hardest hit by COVID and the economic crises that accompanied it. That summer, the George Floyd rebellion made state racism impossible for even the most insulated to ignore, and abolition – a horizon forged through decades of organizing and theoretical debate (Gilmore 2022) – became a household (if still poorly understood) word. The decennial of the Occupy Movement the following year prompted competing further critical reflections about whether Occupy's leaderless, horizontalist approach was its core contribution to the Left or its Achilles heel (Fong and Offenbacher 2022).

Together, these and other developments bring new urgency to longstanding, contentious Left exchanges about the roles of the state and the community in forging more just futures (Sparks 2021). Are projects of mutual aid – from independently organized free clinics to crowdfunded support for striking tenants to coordinated efforts to deliver groceries to vulnerable elders – meant to prefigure state provisioning for basic human needs at scale, given states' greater capacity to provide for those needs on a more universal basis (Taylor 2020, Kaba 2021)? Or do such collective projects proffer prefigurative glimpses of "people's infrastructure" in worlds without states or capitalist markets at all (Spade 2020, 20)? Is mutual aid a well-intended but potentially problematic distraction from sustained socialist efforts to build working-class power, one ultimately compatible with neoliberal devolution of state responsibilities (D'Aprile 2019, Illner 2021)? Or is it a vital, dexterous complement and supplement to other forms of organizing more explicitly addressed to the state (Henwood 2021, Sparks 2021)?

This paper does not claim to offer any insight or expertise of a strategic nature. If I were to speculate about an efficacious Left – to envision what we might call "a Left that cares" (see Malatino 2020) – both state socialism and "co-operative human efforts," independent of (and often antagonistic to) the state would feature prominently (Gilmore 2007, 241). But such a vision is already widely shared by many Leftist organizers, whose work often and simultaneously demands concessions from state institutions and engages in mutual aid as a matter of course. What a little cultural geography can contribute, however, are some critical observations and reflections on work of *affect* – the underlying expectations, good-life fantasies, and attachments that structure a wide range of possible emotional states – in recent debates on mutual aid and the state in Left movements (Berlant 2011).

Some may find a sustained turn to affect unnecessary here, granting that political strategic debates elicit passion but maintaining that debates concerning Left strategy are nevertheless a largely rational, cognitive affair among hard-headed materialists with genuine intellectual differences. I disagree. Critical theorists have long and convincingly argued that it is through affects that capitalist ideologies are apprehended, lived, and refused in everyday life (Williams 1977, Berlant 2011, Pile 2019). Such a claim is perhaps easy enough for many Leftists to accept, so long as one assumes that it is the emotional lives of others that are caught up in ideology's lure, and not one's own. Yet it remains equally, if less comfortably true that affects – complexly entangled, as they are, with material interests – also animate our own attachments to Left political ideals and participation in social movements. Scholars in fields ranging from social movement history (Gornick 2020) to political theory (Brown 1995, Dean 2018) to

cultural studies (Georgis 2013) have demonstrated that different Left projects have produced and necessitated subjects of very different kinds, in response to historical developments that are felt as much as they are thought.

In *Marxism and Literature*, cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1977, 132) proposed the term "structure of feeling," to describe "changes of presence" in excess of more formalized belief systems, that "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set affective limits on experience and on action." In defining the concept, Williams gestured to noticeable generational shifts in language, to changes in "impulse, restraint, and tone," suggesting that it is at moments of transition or conflict when competing structures of feeling might be identified (1977, 132). These observations should resonate for almost anyone who has spent time in different corners of the Left. What differentiates efforts to radicalize public sector unions from organizing against the carceral state, dissident corners of the non-profit industrial complex from insurgent electoral campaigns, or horizontalist economic justice organizing from a centralized communist party apparatus, is not merely a question of strategic goals, political analyses, social locations, or material interests. The vibes, to put it colloquially, are often decidedly different, too.

With such affective heterogeneity in mind, this paper asks: What are the structures of feeling that shape contemporary fantasies about the state and mutual aid in debates within U.S. Left social movements? What affective histories and geographies shape calls for mutual aid and for state socialism, and what exactly do proponents of each goal desire in calling for them (Trinh 1989, Brown 1995)? How might traces of those animating affective structures surface, however obliquely, in debates about Left strategy? Finally, what might there to be learned from the affective convergences as well as productive tensions between ostensibly competing structures of feeling?

Scholarship on mutual aid's affective dimensions remains remarkably patchy and uneven despite growing and often enthusiastic interest in the topic. Anarchist ethnographers have produced defiant, celebratory, and sophisticated readings of everyday practices of consensual cooperation and infrapolitical resistance to state and market coercion and racial liberalism (Scott 1990, Conroy 2019), while scholars operating in a more socialist tradition have offered thoughtful hesitations about the durability and scalability of such efforts and their compatibility with extant forms of economic domination (Elyachar 2002, Joseph 2002, Illner 2021). Mutual aid's most ardent champions simultaneously frame it as an organic result of humans' innately cooperative nature (Springer 2020), and emphasize the deliberate, resistant, and radical intentionality with which such practices are undertaken (Hough 2021). Often harkening back to the concept's early formulation by the Russian anarchist geographer and naturalist Peter Kropotkin (1975), these works even offer strategies for farsighted practitioners hoping to preempt the cooptation of their work (Spade 2020). Yet others, particularly historians, have both documented and lauded mutual aid practitioners' radical intentions and actions, and chronicled the limitations and unintended consequences of such efforts, despite practitioners' considerable vigilance (Murch 2010, Fernández 2020). Traces of affect suffuse such literature, which evinces a wide range of conflicting feelings about the state and mutual aid. Yet affect is rarely, if ever, theorized or addressed as such.

Perhaps the most notable recent exception in this regard is U.S. lawyer/scholar/organizer Dean Spade's (2020) important primer *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And The Next)*. Drawing from decades of experience working for racial and economic justice in queer and trans movements, Spade defines mutual aid broadly as "survival work… done in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change" (1). He differentiates mutual aid from both non-profit charities and social services, elaborating on the advantages of solidarities independent of both the state and the non-profit industrial complex (INCITE! 2007, Gilmore 2022) and offering strategies for working through the subjective conflicts that can arise in such efforts. Spade's sensibilities are more anarchist

than socialist, but his book is capaciously written for a broad Left audience, and even for many liberals, whose trepidation in the face of the current crises might yet sow seeds for radicalization.

Remarkably, Spade's guidance for working through conflict in mutual aid efforts veers quite heavily into the realm of psychology, and even a term sometimes used as a synonym for mutual aid: self-help. It would not be much of an exaggeration to remark that the primary object in the second half of Spade's book is less the social movement or the community than the psyche, perhaps even the soul. Spade assuages readers that although their conditioning – in families of origin, workplaces, and encounters with state institutions – might engender conflict-avoidance and deference to authority, they can expand their capacities to engage in collective action through experienced facilitation, intentionality, reflection, and self-care. He offers an optimistic, even humanistic model for the (re)formation of individual and collective political personhood.

Given his text's affective richness, importance, and influence, this paper engages Spade's book as a key point of departure and return in mapping affective orientations toward the state and mutual aid on the contemporary U.S. Left. My aim is less to offer an extended book review than to ask what the renewed discourse on mutual aid, in which Spade's work is central, might index about Left structures of feeling more broadly. Virtually all of the paper's other reference points are likewise in the U.S. and largely focused on matters of social reproduction typically reified as "domestic" to the nation. Despite this admittedly parochial and incomplete geographical and analytical scope, the paper implicitly argues against exceptionalizing accounts of the U.S. state, insisting that historical-geographical context and contingency are crucial in evaluating affective attachments to the state and mutual aid as good or bad objects. The following sections sketch two distinct but often overlapping affective orientations: a Left "state phobia" that idealizes mutual aid and a Left "state philia" that melancholically shores up the remnants of the liberal welfare state. The paper concludes by reflecting on the affective possibilities that emerge from the overlaps and tensions between the two.

I offer these observations less as a social movement "expert" than as an often-inchoate participant-observer who has bounced around Left movements in the U.S. and Canada over the past two decades. I have gone on strike as a rank-and-file public-sector union member; interned and volunteered for NGOs working variously for environmental justice and LGBTQ rights and against incarceration and gentrification; raised money for and made donations to mutual aid funds; been an active and an inactive member of the Democratic Socialists of America; marched for Black lives and public banking and against deportations, the war in Iraq, and the School of the Americas; and knocked on doors for Leftist and, all too often, (sigh) liberal candidates, within and outside the Democratic party at federal, state, and municipal scales. Such varied experiences are probably more common than not among Leftists. Many of us are no doubt guilty of the kind of frenetic, unfocused "activistism" described by Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti (2004) in their provocative call for a more focused, strategic Left. But if there is an advantage to such a wide-ranging itinerary, perhaps it is that it enables some small measure of belated insight into the disparate but hardly discrete structures of feeling that shape the everyday tenor of different corners of the U.S. Left.

State Phobia

Perhaps the most striking affective thread in recent literature on mutual aid is aptly described by Michel Foucault's term "state phobia" (qtd. in Hannah 2015). Although Foucault was a frequent critic of state power (see Hannah 2015), he nevertheless warned against the analytic limits of state phobia, which posits a "kinship, a sort of genetic continuity or evolutionary implication between different forms of the state, with the administrative state, the welfare state, the bureaucratic state, and the totalitarian state all being… the successive branches of one and the same great tree of state control" (187). From a state phobic perspective, all dimensions of the state power across time and space are insidiously linked, all these dimensions serve the same privileged interests and oppressive social functions, and the state's

relationship to privileged interests and oppressive social functions is necessary, rather than contingent, contradictory, or contestable.

Spade's (2020) discussion of the state's telling absences and presences offers a representative and influential articulation of Left state phobia. *Mutual Aid*'s treatment of charity and state social services shuffles rapidly between the two, jumping from a critique of the moralism and inadequacy of medieval European Christian charity to the problems of contemporary U.S. neoliberal austerity, devolution, and means-testing. The struggles over state promises of universal social citizenship (see Cohen 2014) so central to the centuries between these two examples get scant discussion. Repressive state actors, rather than exploitative market actors, appear most frequently in Spade's rendition of neoliberalism's destructiveness, leaving it up to communities to "come together to care for each other and share resources when, *inevitably*, the government is not there to help, offers relief that does not reach the most vulnerable people, and deploys law enforcement against displaced disaster survivors" (2020, 12, emphasis added). What is noteworthy here is the surety with which state-led abandonment and state repression are cast as "*inevitable*," rather than the historically contingent and specific result of decades of concerted effort by what abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) calls "anti-state state actors." Gilmore, who is hardly jejune about state violence, nevertheless carefully differentiates anti-state state actors, who expand the state's capacity to cage and kill, from "pro-state state actors," who might yet build the state's capacity to provide universally for people's basic human needs (Gilmore and Murakawa 2020).

We also glimpse a powerful instance of state phobia in "Caring for Each Other," an important essay by the late writer and poet Joseph Beam (2020 [1986]). Beam, a Black gay man who was based in Philadelphia and New York and passed away in 1988, was a noted advocate for safe sex and for solidarity and care among Black men who have sex with men in the early years of the AIDS crisis. For Beam, the state is little more than "a euphemism for white people," and describes a formation that "has never been concerned with the welfare of Black people" (46). Arguing that any recent commitment to civil rights on the part of the U.S. state and civil society needs to be understood as belated, inadequate, and provisional, Beam cautioned against relying on either the state or the non-profit industrial complex to take the health and well-being of Black men who have sex with men seriously. As an alternative, he drew on the work of the late Black gay American poet Essex Hemphill, who wrote movingly to Black audiences that "We should be able to save each other" (qtd. in Beam 2020 [1986], 47).

A third iteration of state phobia surfaces in the work of another important radical writer who, coincidentally, shares Joseph Beam's surname. In, *Gay, Inc.: The Non-profitization of Queer Politics*, gender studies scholar Myrl Beam (2018) offers an incisive and fine-grained ethnography of the U.S. LGBTQ non-profit industrial complex. The latter Beam provides detailed observations of how non-profit organizations in the gentrifying and heavily policed Midwestern cities of Chicago and Minneapolis are set up to regard their heterogeneous constituents unequally. From these racist and classist political-economic foundations, he argues, it is no surprise that such organizations cater to wealthy white donors and serve poor Black and Brown queer and trans people with grievous inadequacy.

In his monograph's bracing conclusion, Beam acknowledges growing calls to tax non-profit foundations as a means of curtailing their role as tax shelters for wealthy donors who set non-profit agendas on undemocratic terms. Remarkably, Beam argues against such proposals. Although "those billions of dollars in increased tax revenue could easily meet the basic needs of people living in poverty," he warns that "increased money would not necessarily be spent on creating a welfare state—a change of this magnitude would require the pressure of a social movement" (192). Given the devastating effect of decades of neoliberal austerity and non-profitization on the organizing capacity of the U.S. Left, Beam asserts that prospects for a social movement demanding greater investment in the welfare state arising are slim, at best. Beam's argument is offered on strategic terms, yet there is an unmistakable pessimism here about the state as a vehicle for downward redistribution.

It is not difficult to imagine strategic counterarguments against such Left state phobic positions. Geographer Matthew G. Hannah, for instance, draws on Foucault to warn against an "undifferentiated state phobia" on the Left, advising sympathetically that it is "a temptation to be resisted" (490). Hannah insists on the "political polyvalence and potential usefulness of the state," and surveys geographical scholarship that understands the state on contingent and relational as well as critical terms (477). Hannah and other geographers have long contributed to efforts to combat "undifferentiated state phobia" in this regard, shedding empirical light on the state as a heterogeneous, multiscalar, contingent, and contested assemblage rather than a singular, essentialized monster serving static and uncomplicated functions (e.g. Painter 2006, Isin 2007, Gilmore 2022). Scale is not, to be sure, an inherently redemptive category; even the local state's most quotidian, caring, and downwardly redistributive institutions, from libraries to sanitation departments, are routinely weaponized and repurposed as apparatuses of surveillance, exclusion, and punishment. But at the very least, approaching the state as a multiscalar assemblage helps scholars and organizers to identify more avenues of contestation, and more exploitable contradictions between state agencies and actors, than an axiom like "the state won't save us!" can know in advance.

Yet as persuasive as diagnostic accounts of state phobia might be for some socialists, their analyses pivot from affective understanding to the cognitive terrain of logical argumentation, leaving state phobia's affectivity unaddressed. We get a little closer to an affective understanding in an important recent interview with political theorist Wendy Brown, who worries that "the anti-statism of the neoliberals is one of those *inadvertent* inheritances that is also part of what shapes" contemporary Left movements (Brown and Denvir 2020), citing "the emphasis on mutual aid today that's coming out of the anarchist wing of a lot of these social movements, the *absolute suspicion* of state forms of distribution, the way abolitionism has moved across every domain of state power and the *suspicion* of any possibility of democracy, social justice, or socialism entailing state power or the use of the state" (emphasis added). If Brown is correct about contemporary Left state phobia's neoliberal genealogies – and if that inheritance is indeed "inadvertent," perhaps even unconscious – then it behooves us to ask how this "absolute suspicion" takes hold in an affective register. Rather than refuting state phobic claims, what if we are first curious about the structures of feeling (Williams 1977) that give rise to them?

Following Gilmore (2002, 2022), we might say that Left state phobia persists in part, not as a result of some transhistorical, transcultural anti-statism in the U.S., but because of the historically specific, grindingly painful empirical reality of ongoing, "group-differentiated premature death" inflicted in part at the hands of anti-state state actors (Gilmore 2002, Gilmore 2007). Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Left state phobia is frequently sanctioned by references to traumatic experience, authorized in the name of the most marginalized and abused people in U.S. society – poor and working-class people; drug users; sex workers; Black, Native, and other racialized people; queer, trans, and disabled people. The phrase "most vulnerable" appears 9 times in the Spade's slim, 161-page volume, the word "impacted" another 6 times. Rather than standard-issue social justice argot, what if we read such invocations as affective shorthand – abbreviations that allude to more complex histories of injury (Georgis 2013)? For people on the receiving end of the state's most brutal, carceral, racist, classist, wealth-protecting functions and those who care about them, anti-statism is not simply a political orientation grounded in rational, material considerations of a racist capitalist state's social functions. It is also an affective response to individual and collective experiences of loss.

Observing that oppressed people or the Left are traumatized might read as sentimental, pathologizing, or fetishistic – and as obvious, besides. But when we approach Left state phobia as a structure of feeling, we might come to recognize in it what psychoanalytic cultural theorist Dina Georgis (2013) calls a "better story" – a collective affective narrative that both recounts and defends against painful histories and points toward particular alternative horizons. Spade, Joseph Beam, and Myrl Beam each offer an iteration of a state-phobic better story that goes something like this: The U.S. state has

always been genocidal, rapacious, racist, capitalist, colonial, and violently antagonistic to oppressed peoples. Even radical efforts at Reconstruction, at remaking the state and forging a multiracial, non-colonial, working-class democracy have been *inevitably* exclusive or brutally undermined, perhaps even doomed from the start. The best available alternative is for oppressed people to divest their hope from state-oriented action and turn lovingly, with all the material scarcity but cultural richness that they possess, toward each other, extending enduring, in some cases precolonial traditions of resistance and non-state mutual aid.

I am less interested in debating the (considerable) truth-value of this particular better story than I am in Georgis's (2013, 10) observation that the political mobilization of trauma "both resists and reveals lost memory," at once invoking experiences of loss and turning away from them. Contemporary Left state phobia (Spade 2020, Beam 2017) keenly remembers the devastating Reagan-era history of the anti-state state that slashes public assistance precisely by demonizing the racialized figure of the "welfare queen." But it often simultaneously forgets about the working-class Black women who went toe-to-toe with the Great Society – and the white, male professional-class leadership of welfare rights movements – to appropriate welfare state resources for their own, truly downwardly redistributive, truly universalist ends (Nadasen 2005, Orleck 2005; see also Nash 2019, chapter 4 on Black feminists' unfinished business with the state). Both of these historical scenes return us to searing pain – hunger, poverty, indignity – that condense into the signs of race, class, and gender. Neither paints a rosy picture of the state as such. We do not live in either historical moment; we live in the aftermath of both. But remembering one moment and forgetting the other preserves the state as an inevitably bad object (see Ince and De La Torre 2016) while foreclosing the power of the oppressed to forge an insurgent universalism from below that might yet extract downwardly redistributive concessions from and through various state institutions (Haider 2018).

When we approach state phobia as a psychical defense, we might notice that it simultaneously offers oppressed people an affective means to survive and, like all "better stories," might under some conditions risk becoming rigid, defensive, and unresponsive to surprise, and unable to imagine transformative change. Left state phobia's "absolute suspicion" (Brown and Denvir 2020) of state-led redistribution is not simply counterproductive on strategic grounds. In tethering traumatic experience to a complete affective divestiture from the state, it can also get mired in self-destructive and resentful "logics of pain" (Brown 1995, 55). As philosopher Olúfémi O. Táíwò (2020, n.p.) has argued, "humiliation, deprivation, and suffering can build" radical political consciousness – yet "these same experiences can also destroy." Left state phobia is contradictory – completely understandable as a response to state violence and often correct in its anticipation of future state violence, but also potentially self-destructive as a fixed affective state.

We get a clear illustration of this contradiction when we consider both the *envious* affects that mutual aid efforts can elicit and the envy that their proponents at times project. Envy is particularly palpable in anti-state state actors' bearing toward the moral legitimacy and impressive efficacy of mutual aid communities. Consider the widely cited example of the Black Panther Party's (BPP) successful and popular efforts to provide free meals, healthcare, transportation, and political education in Black communities on a non-means-tested basis in cities including Oakland and Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s (Murch 2010, Nelson 2013, Collier 2015, Spade 2020, Illner 2021). In a notorious 1969 memo, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover singled out the BPP's Breakfast for Children Program, advising his agents that it, "represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for" (qtd. in Spade 2020, 10). As Spade recounts, "The night before the Chicago program was supposed to open, police broke into the church that was hosting it and *urinated on all of the food*" (10, emphasis added).

This outrageous attack on the Chicago BPP has long and rightly inspired reams of critical commentary. But for the purposes of this paper, what's most notable about the odious episode is how it showcases the viscerality and affectivity of state actors' efforts to delegitimize radical, Black-led mutual aid projects. Although the state's repressive apparatus largely serves the interests of the white capitalist bourgeoisie, the principal *affect* at work here is not capitalist greed, exactly, but envy. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, envy is, first and foremost, an angry attack on an someone else's object, an object that the attacker recognizes as desirable and good (Spillius et al. 2011). The maternal breast – metaphorically understood as the plenitude conferred by a primary caregiver of any gender in the early months of life – was an especially paradigmatic object of envy for Klein, and the supplantation of "penis envy" by "breast envy" is among Klein's most celebrated feminist contributions to psychoanalysis (Kristeva 2001). Whereas greed aims to destroy an object by devouring it, taking it in, envy, "not only seeks to rob in this way, but also *to put badness, primarily bad excrements and bad parts of the self into the mother*, and first of all into her breast, *to spoil and destroy her*" (Klein 1957, 181, emphasis added).

Klein's account of breast envy adds a crucial affective layer to Left readings of the FBI attack on the Chicago Breakfast Program. Klein helps us to see that urination is not just one incidental means of attack among many, but a deliberate means of ruining and spoiling the BPP Breakfast program as a hated metaphorical "good Black breast," which provided plenitude, sustenance, and survival for ordinary poor and working-class Black Chicagoans (see Musser 2018, Nash 2021). As numerous historians of the BPP have demonstrated (Murch 2010, Nelson 2013), despite a masculinist militant image cultivated both by party foes and at times by some of its leaders, many chapters of the party were composed predominantly of Black women. Here, the anti-state state envies the goodness and legitimacy of the BPP's "maternal" capacity to achieve through mutual aid what a racist welfare state had failed, in many cases deliberately, to do: provide for the reproduction of Black life on a daily and generational basis (Katz 2001).

But there might also be a perverse sense in which envy courses in another direction, between more state phobic proponents of mutual aid and state institutions. Consider the question of how mutual aid might scale up its efforts, among the most recurring questions that mutual aid proponents face. Spade laments that, "Because of the dominance of corporate and non-profit models, people often think that 'scaling up' means centralizing and standardizing projects, but this runs directly counter to the wisdom of mutual aid" (40). Refusing larger or consolidated forms of organization and privileging local knowledge, he advocates instead a proliferation of "locally operated mutual aid" efforts, "intergroup coordination, the sharing of resources and information, having each other's backs, and coming together in coalitions to take bigger actions… Governance and innovation remain local, but knowledge, support, and solidarity are networked and shared" (41). The answer to the quite serious problems of scale and capacity, perhaps offered in a polemical vein, is to simply advocate for less of the state, less of the non-profit industrial complex, and… more mutual aid.

Such a romance of local knowledge is far from new. Advocates of decentralized urban planning and disaster relief have long decried the trampling of local knowledges and interests by unresponsive centralized state authority (see Illner 2021, 96-106 for a genealogy). There is a sense in which the turn to local knowledge is itself a kind of better story, a much desired and hoped for way out of bureaucratic, rigidly normative, belated, and inadequate approaches to disaster relief (Georgis 2013). But as historian Donna Murch (2010), sociologist Alondra Nelson (2013), and others have documented, numerous BPP chapters in fact worked with corporations and state institutions to finance many of their important mutual aid projects, coloring outside the tidy lines between state, capital, non-profit industrial complex, and mutual aid drawn by some mutual aid proponents (on white radicals' idealized imputation of the language of "mutual aid" to complex, extant organizing in racialized communities, see also Kim 2021).

Political theorist Jodi Dean (2018) argues that Left hostility to scaling up is the product of a kind of "Left realism," a realism that "feels realistic to some because it resonates with the prevailing ethos of

late neoliberalism that tells us to do it ourselves, stay local and small, and trust no one because they will only betray us" (71). Although Dean's capacious strategic vision for a renewed communist party includes mutual aid efforts, she cautions that the fantasy "that society can seize itself" directly, without the state, "is a myth that has outlived whatever usefulness it might have had for the Left" (206). Dean's practical case – that the state so thoroughly mediates life that not seizing it is not an option for the Left – will be convincing for many. But what is most significant here is Dean's critique of an *affective* Left realism, her careful attention to the structures of feeling through which histories and movements form us as feeling political subjects. We can also again turn to Klein, whose concept of "manic denial" describes a subject who copes with anxiety-inducing dependence on an object through unconscious fantasies that either deny dependence on a hated object (in this case, the state) or idealize a split-off part-object (in this case, mutual aid efforts) by flying into fantasies of omnipotent independence (Alford 1989, Money-Kyrle 1951).

The moralistic determination *not* to be like the big bad state and the big bad non-profit industrial complex, whatever the cost also recalls Klein's second understanding of envy. In this latter formulation, the object targeted for envious destruction is not an imaginary "good" breast, like the life-giving BPP Breakfast program, but a "bad" one, like the stingy, means-tested, and discriminatory configuration of much of the U.S. welfare state. Psychoanalyst Meira Likierman (2001) explains that alongside "good" breast envy, Klein theorized the case of "the *unavailable* breast," which triggers envy "by the pains and suffering of deprivation" (180). Although Klein is often read as a biological essentialist for her account of infants' innate greed, sadism, and aggression, Likierman points out that in theorizing the unavailable breast, "Klein necessarily brings into the picture the role of the external environment in determining infantile aggression" (180).

Mutual aid's most state phobic proponents are no doubt right in wanting to ruin the "bad," unavailable state, the state whose abundance is made unavailable and whose bellicosity is made all too real in processes of "organized abandonment," which converge with but also predate neoliberalism (Gilmore 2022, Cebul Geismer and Williams 2019). Yet if anti-state state envy of mutual aid is openly odious and destructive, then Left envy of state capacity risks something more subtle: quietly stymieing Left visions for possible future pro-state states, turning an injured collective will to power back toward and against itself, staying local and small and "passing around the same $20" out of spite, fear, envy, and rage while capital laughs all the way to the bank (Brown 1995; Barcelos 2022, 36). (The ironic, unwitting resonances here with right-wing anti-statisms should not be ignored.) Crying out from the vicissitudes of trauma and oppression, the state phobic better story "knows some things well and some things poorly" (Sedgwick 2003, 130).

Following affect theorist Lauren Berlant (qtd. in Seitz 2013), perhaps one ethical response to undifferentiated Left state phobia is less to argue with it or minimize the suffering that animates it than to gently ask, "Is that all there is?" On offer here is by no means a call to uncritically embrace the state or other political "bad objects." Rather, it is to simply heed Georgis's insight that "there is no final story," that "if the story never ends, there is always a better story than the better story" (26). When we approach Left state phobia as a historically situated, defensive response to (ongoing) loss, perhaps we can allow ourselves to be touched by its truth, while remaining curious about when it might not be the only possible feeling, or about when that feeling might not have the last word.

State Philia

If Left state phobia is not only a cognitively derived social movement strategy, but a psychic defense against a state that kills, wounds, and abandons, then this defense also frequently provokes an anxious counterdefense from other Leftists and liberals who espouse more statist politics. Instances of what we might call Left state philia are legion, ranging from the dubious online ravings of "tankies" enamored of authoritarian regimes that claim Left or anti-imperialist stakes, on the one hand, to ostensibly wholesome anti-austerity organizing affirming the necessity and dignity of public services and

public-sector jobs, on the other. We can find considerable evidence of Left state philia in the extent to which the Sanders (and to a degree, Warren) presidential campaigns captured the imaginations and energies of many self-described Leftists. We see Left state philia, too, in the often-prominent place afforded to electoral politics by institutions like the Democratic Socialists of America, at times to the chagrin of many of its more anarchist- and communist-leaning comrades.

But if such state philia assumes many objects, the object of state philic discourse that circulates perhaps most frequently within the contemporary U.S. is the New Deal. Invoked in national political registers by the likes of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and even Barack Obama, this affective object is also regularly conjured and resignified by climate justice organizers pushing for Green New Deals at various geographical scales. I refer to the New Deal as an affective object, rather than a contradictory suite of political, economic, and social reforms from the 1930s and 1940s, because the New Deal's contemporary invocations often condense conflicting feelings about numerous aspects of 20th-century U.S. state formation well beyond the New Deal into a single metonym. Political historians Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams (2019) observe that contemporary liberal and Left political and academic debates tend to collapse a myriad of developments – Fordism, Keynesianism, New Deal liberalism, post-war prosperity, the historical apex of union density in the United States, and the decidedly uneven racialized and sexualized social geographies of all of those phenomena – into an amalgamated object of either revulsion or defensive nostalgia, depending on whom you ask.

We find a representative iteration of the "reductive revulsion" position on the New Deal in Spade's text, which contends that the New Deal "emerged to quiet the anti-capitalist rebellions brought on by the Great Depression and stabilize the capitalist system, [and] was designed so that women and domestic and agricultural workers (disproportionately Black and Latinx) were excluded from the benefits created. By tying many benefits to work, the New Deal also perpetuated a status quo of grinding poverty for people with disabilities" (2020, 36-7; see also Katznelson 2006). These historical facts are indisputable, and to be fair, the New Deal is merely a passing example in the text's case against looking to an oft-exclusive welfare state to provide for people's survival on a universal basis. But its broad narrative, prevalent among contemporary liberals and Lefists alike, reduces a rich, complex, and contested history spanning decades of struggle, much of it forged through multiracial working-class alliances (Cohen 2014), into a seemingly monolithic force that ostensibly gave cisgender, able-bodied white men jobs at the racist-ableist-patriarchy factory at the hands of a singular, unchallenged, designer (Jacobin 2022).

Again, what's at work here is not simply a cognitive or factual error, nor even an ideological sleight of hand, but an affective orientation toward the state as an always already bad object – what cultural theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick influentially referred to as a "paranoid" reading (2003). Sedgwick drew on Klein to contend that a great deal of contemporaneous literary and social criticism, from Frederic Jameson to Judith Butler, was preoccupied with anticipating and exposing hidden forms of violence, and ever-so-sure of the badness of its objects of analysis in advance. Sedgwick's aim was by no means to offer a psychological diagnosis, nor did she regard paranoid readers (which, she admitted, included herself) as single-minded or incapable of nuance. To the contrary, Sedwgick remarked that paranoid readers were often simultaneously capable of what she provisionally called "reparative" readings – modes of interpretation were no less critical of structural violence, but simultaneously attuned to ameliorative possibilities for good surprise and to the interruption of relations of domination. Among the methods Sedgwick used to trace a paranoid structure of feeling in representative texts was close attention to the verbs at work in the writers' accounts of power (2003, 139). If we take Sedgwick's approach to the passage in Spade on the New Deal above, we find a U.S. state that, even at its most robust and downwardly redistributive, can only "quiet," "exclude," "design," "tie," and above all, "perpetuate."

Sedgwick's account of paranoid reading is worth invoking in this section because Left state phobia regularly triggers counterdefenses that are no less paranoid, in a sense elaborated by Klein. It is in response to renditions like Spade's that we might situate contrasting, state philic readings of the New Deal such as the one offered by "The Living New Deal" (LND), an online public history and geography project based at the University of California, Berkeley. Anticipating critiques of the New Deal's racialized, gendered, and ableist exclusions, a detailed section titled "New Deal Inclusion" counters that:

> The New Deal did a great deal of good in overcoming the exclusion of neglected, oppressed and marginalized people in American life. It aided the elderly, women and people of color, as well as the disabled and refugees. The New Dealers were, in every case, faced with a daunting task of overcoming long-established patterns of discrimination and social hierarchy. They could only do so much to reverse ingrained opinions, habits, and power relations in the United States. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate how much the New Dealers tried to oppose discrimination and the many accomplishments of their progressive policies (Living New Deal 2021a).

Here, a strikingly different list of verbs emerges – verbs that, like the state phobic repertoire, contain traces of affect and elicit identifications that work to move the reader. The New Deal "did good," "overcame," "aided," "faced," "could only do so much," "tried," and "accomplished." Revealing, too, is a section titled "New Deal Smiles," an impressive compilation of 122 photos of diverse, generally beaming aid recipients of various New Deal programs that aims to counter the dour stock images of breadlines so often in circulation (Living New Deal 2021b).

We also get glimpses of a kind of sovereign or monotheistic Left state philia in historian Joanna Wuest's (2020) provocative essay, "Mutual Aid Can't Do It Alone." Like LND, Wuest acknowledges many of the New Deal's racial and gender exclusions. She offers a compelling materialist analysis of the historical and geographical conditions that have necessitated mutual aid projects. Yet, perhaps in a moment of rhetorical flourish, Wuest goes so far as to argue that "the New Deal rendered mutual aid *obsolete*" (emphasis added). The curious affective subtext of such a claim would seem to be that when the state is working well, there need (must?) be no informal redistribution exterior to it at all. Both New Deal historiography (see Kelley 1990) and Left experience from social-democratic and socialist societies around the world amply attest to the persistent need for social movements, for forms of provisioning that remain external and antagonistic to even the most downwardly redistributive of states. If undifferentiated state phobic perspectives refuse to grant the existence of "good" actors or institutions internal to the state, a defensive state philia here seems to will into being an ahistorical and implausible, idealized state.

Reading texts like LND or Wuest for affect in no way necessitates dismissing them as mere statist propaganda. But Left state philes are clearly themselves also engaged in profoundly *affective* work, libidinally invested in particular structures of feeling and habits of reading the state, figuring the New Deal not as the work of conspiratorial, bigoted villains but of valiant, if historically constrained, heroes. Here again, Klein's notion of manic denial is useful. As noted above, for Klein, manic denial describes a defense against anxiety about an object upon which one depends, either by idealizing the object or through phantasies of omnipotent independence and control (Alford 1989, Money-Kyrle 1951). One form that imagined omnipotence can take involves what Klein called "mock reparation," or "phantasies of being able to repair the damaged object magically" (Alford 1989, 92). Both LND and Wuest toggle between a somewhat more disillusioned acknowledgment of the state's contradictions and vulnerability to cooptation by white bourgeois interests, on the one hand, and a more defensive idealization of the vestigial liberal welfare state as such as either indomitably good (all those smiles, rendering mutual aid obsolete) or available to be retrieved and perfected.

Brown (2003), among others, has warned against "Left formulations that tend to have as their primary content the defense of liberal New Deal politics and especially the welfare state," observing that

a Left that can only preserve and defend the liberal welfare state's legacy institutions "is caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past" (463-4). But such Left melancholia is also palpable in state philic attachments to more recent, even contemporaneous lost objects, perhaps most obviously the prospect of a Sanders presidency. Melancholia is, as Judith Butler (2003) reminds us, "the loss of loss itself" (467). For Sigmund Freud (1957), melancholia diverged from ordinary mourning in that the melancholic can identify the lost object but does not know precisely what they have lost in it. Freud gave the example of a broken engagement. This example is especially telling, because it speaks to how genres structure expectations and emplot fantasy (Berlant 2011, Georgis 2013). The broken engagement transgresses one of the core expectations of the bourgeois romantic comedy genre – a genre that, for better and for worse, shapes the good-life fantasies of millions of people — which predictably ends in a (literal or metaphorical) wedding. If federal elections are, among other things, a kind "family romance of the state," (Berlant 1991, 176) then Sanders' defeat might be thought of as a kind of broken engagement in its own right, one made all the more poignant, perhaps, for Sanders' many supporters who have already had their own good-life fantasies attenuated or deferred by the ongoing grind of capitalist crisis.

To be sure, the comedy that ends in a metaphorical wedding between Sanders and the nation-state would have given way to a messy marriage, fraught with its own crises, compromises, contradictions – and backward-looking, idealized speculation has little to offer in helping the Left, as Gilmore so subtly puts it, "prepare to win" (2022, 453). But arguing against such idealizations on cognitive, strategic terms alone fails to recognize that no melancholic lets go of an idealized lost object easily or gracefully, whether that object is a lover or a political form (Georgis 2013). Many, if not all of us know a "Bernie Bro" (of whatever race and gender identification) who is still pining for the presidency that could have been; some of us even have been that bro. *Jacobin* magazine appositely captured this melancholic structure of feeling in an important recent issue aptly titled "The Left in Purgatory" (Sunkara 2022).

For many Left state philes, Sanders embodies a kind of better story – an affective object that promises a way out of decades of neoliberal immiseration and Left fragmentation, revivifying a bottom-up universalist politics that enacts robust forms of downward redistribution from pro-state state institutions (Georgis 2013, Gilmore and Murakawa 2020). Embitterment about his defeat is sometimes channeled into other worthy efforts, electoral and otherwise, across the Left, including the work of critical, self-reflective post mortems on the campaign itself. But such embitterment can also spiral into a self-destructive rage against the usual suspects ("postmodernism" and "liberal identity politics"), against any prospect of social change, even against the passage of time itself (Brown 1995). As with Left state phobia, perhaps the question for the melancholic Left state phile likewise becomes, to recall Berlant (Seitz 2013): Is that all there is? If there is always a better story than the better story, what might that better story be (Georgis 2013) for all those disillusioned Sandernistas?

Convergences and Productive Tensions

Reading Left debates on mutual aid and the state for their structures of feeling, rather than for their strategic analyses as such, suggests that for all the strategic disagreements between anarchists and socialists, Left state phobic and state philic affective orientations share in a defensive relationship to loss. Left state phobia fears that Left aspirations to seize state power will squander the transformative potential of social movements, either inevitably failing or propping up the same old state violence under a more insidious, emancipatory guise. Left state philia fears that too strident a Left critique of the limits and exclusions of residual liberal institutions will obliterate what little remains of the welfare state, and with it any possibility of true universal social solidarity. Each affective orientation imagines in the other not just incorrect analysis or bad strategy, but a possibly ruinous indulgence of the worst affective attachments of liberalism.

I did not promise to offer a strategic resolution to this problem, and I do not offer one here. But the advantage of approaching state phobia and state philia as affective orientations rather than discrete ideological camps is that it offers an amalgamated map of contemporary U.S. Left subjectivity as ambivalently attached to *both* positions, rather than stuck in one or the other. Long a fecund concept for psychoanalytic geographies, "ambivalence describes the coexistence of opposing impulses, which persist alongside one another without annulling each other or being capable of being resolved" (Seitz and Proudfoot 2021, 216). In more Freudian and Lacanian approaches (e.g. Proudfoot 2019, Meyer 2021), ambivalence's lack of apparent resolution can make it a state of stuckness, of being at an impasse. But for Berlant (2011), although an impasse might well entail the uncertainty brought on by acute loss or chronic structural violence, it might also have the potential to "dissolve… old sureties and force… improvisation and reflection on life-without guarantees" (200).

Improvisation in Berlant's idiom signals neither an individualistic fantasy of sovereign agency nor another tired neoliberal call for "resilience," but rather a curiosity about the affective states in which Left social movements, at once state phobic and state philic, both spontaneously and strategically play with the state (Winnicott 1973). Elsewhere, Berlant explained:

> I could love the state because it delivers resources to a whole set of people not really caring about the specificities of who those people are, and I could hate the state because it tries to produce universal citizenship. Those two conflicting thoughts don't make me psychotic: contradiction enables people to proceed wanting a whole set of things from their institution or from their object. (qtd. in Seitz 2013)

If there is a Left better story than the better stories of mutual aid, the New Deal, or a Sanders presidency (Georgis 2013), then, perhaps it will emerge come from tolerating our ambivalent attachments to them all – and from mourning the inadequacy of any one of those idealized part-objects in and of themselves to bring about the thoroughgoing transformation the Left wants (see Illner 2021, 116). Wuest (2020) is certainly correct that mutual aid can't do it alone. But neither can the state. Perhaps part of the affective (and not merely analytical) task before Left social movement scholars, then, is letting go of the fantasy that either, on its own, ever could.

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