Interactional and Categorial Practices in the Strange Case of the United Nathans Weapons Inspections

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Political demonstrations have been studied extensively, but few studies have focused on the interactional practices and mediated actions in which the assemblage of actors and artefacts in the event, and the event’s relationship to the conduct of others and to the future, are contingently achieved and made visible in situ. In addition, it is rare to find a study of governmentality that attends to the micro-ethnographic detail of actual practices, procedures and technologies – the techne – of governance, especially those practices that manifest as what Foucault called ‘counter-conducts’. In this paper, the interactional practices of a prefigurative protest demonstration are examined. Video recordings were made of a creative, peaceful event called ”United Nathans Weapons Inspections” in February 2003. The paper draws upon Mitchell Dean’s analytics of government in order to undertake an analytics of protest by uncovering how fields of visibility, forms of knowledge, technologies and apparatuses, and subjectivities and identities are negotiated and accomplished collaboratively in social interaction.

The paper explores some of the tools and methods that are well suited to investigating the situated practices, procedures and technologies of governmentality in a specific setting. Conversation analysis (CA) helps us document the ways in which fields of visibility and modes of rationality are sequentially organised. Membership categorisation analysis (MCA) provides an approach to uncovering the categorial work by which subjectivation is morally accomplished in social interaction. The paper shows how CA and MCA can help trace the interactional, embodied and categorial practices that are endogenous to conducting the conduct of others and the self, and thus which constitute or contest the rationalities of governmentality. It is argued that even though the conduct of the protesters was partially rationalised in terms of dominant regimes of government, they succeeded in making visible another way of being governed, by other means.

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