

# Three Miles from Anarchy

## Managerial Fear and the Affective Factory

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### I. Death in the Factory

I was going around today, giving out photographs of workers. I was in the Finishing department and I gave this guy a photo of his Best Worker presentation ceremony. Then another guy came up behind me and said, 'Where's my photo?' And then the person I just gave the photo to said, 'Yeah! Where's his photo?' And then all of a sudden, all the people in the section were crowding around saying, 'Where's his photo?' 'Give him his photo'. And I was saying, 'OK, it's no big deal! You haven't got a photo. I'll just go and get another one printed. It's no big deal!' But I mean they were getting really agitated. Really agitated! Just because of the photo! And then, just for a moment, I thought they were going to lynch me...

In September 2008, an Indian executive at a major European auto parts manufacturing unit in North India was rushed to hospital after sustaining multiple head injuries in the courtyard of the factory he managed. He was pronounced dead soon after arrival.

The circumstances surrounding events at the Swiss-Italian owned Grazioni factory in Greater Noida, where Lalit K. Chaudhary worked, remain unclear. At the time, however, the dominant media story quickly became one of murder in the factory: an act of vengeance and retribution carried out by a group of sacked and disenfranchised workers. "Lynched by the Mob", screamed one Italian newspaper headline.

If you want to be a general manager, you have to be a psychologist. You have to be an anthropologist. You have to be a sociologist. You have to look at things from the worker's perspective. You have to ask yourself: why is that guy working on the machines so angry with me?

The death of a manager at a global factory in India realises and sustains in the most powerful way the basic fear of people who oversee production in the country's transnational manufacturing units: the fear that they might fail to control the people they employ. For companies that remain competitive by keeping labour casual, insecure and precarious, this fear becomes inseparable from production processes.

In the aftermath of the events at the Grazioni factory, managerial fear circulated openly in the international business media. Foreign and domestic industrialists described their panic and alarm at being confronted by workers who were "very extreme" and "very radical". "It's becoming increasingly difficult to work under these conditions. No one is protecting us", an Italian manager told the *Financial Times*.

Last week, some of these same guys put down their tools and stopped work. They were like that for a couple of hours and then they just went back to work. That worries me. That really worries me. Do you know why? Because that means they're not ready to strike yet. They're preparing... preparing for war. So what am I going to have to do? Well, I'm not going to wait. I'm going to have the war now. I'm going to have the war on my terms.

For 12 months in 2005, I was granted privileged and extended access to a very large European manufacturing unit at a special economic zone in South India. The factory's manager was a middle-aged British man whom I shall call 'the Factor'. The Factor allowed himself to be interviewed inside the factory in his air-conditioned office or on the floor of dusty manufacturing sections and outside the factory in his rented apartment or in city restaurants. Over the course of a year, I recorded several hours of unstructured interviews during which he spoke frankly about the everyday work of keeping the factory low cost and globally competitive. Against the backdrop of rising discontent over wages and working conditions, our conversation frequently addressed concerns over the loss of control.

I mean, I read the papers, right? And in the back of my mind I'm thinking, how far away before things blow up here? 'Cause I don't want to be here when it does... I mean... any nation... any factory... can turn in on itself. We're all just three miles from anarchy.

In this brief essay, I combine extracts from these interviews with a reflection on the nature of fear at sites of global production. Rather than think about managerial anxieties over worker discontent and the loss of control as emotional epiphenomena, or the outward expressions of psychological drives, I propose that we approach managerial fear as an 'affect' of the factory itself.

Affects are not simply feelings or emotions, wrote Gilles Deleuze – appropriating the term used by the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza – affects are sensations and subjective qualities that exist outside and move through the human subject.<sup>1</sup> Building

directly on Deleuze's writings, cultural theorists have begun to re-locate their reference point for sensual intensities outside the body and away from the sub-conscious, in spaces and objects, environments and things.

In this tradition, we can begin to see fear not only as an inner state of being that effects how human subjects perceive and act in the world but as an *affect* of those worlds that subjects inhabit and interact with. Not as an experience borne by a single individual but as an emission that is released by machines and devices, buildings and landscapes. In this vein, I argue, global factories are deeply affective institutions that elicit states of fear in their workers and managers, just as they do hopes, aspirations and dreams – to profitable ends.

## II. Engineering Sentiments

A few months ago, we tried to hold meetings with workers on the factory floor. But we just couldn't do it. What happened? Two or three people stood up and started yelling and whooping about wages like animals, and the rest followed like idiots...

We can't have that. What we need here are teams. Teams! Teams that we can love. Teams that we can make love the company.

Love the company! Teams. Certificates. Uniforms. Employee-of-the-Month Awards. Technologies of governance in the modern factory have always been both affective and discursive. Corporate executives like the Factor have learnt to engineer the souls of their working subjects through the production of affective responses as much as through the production of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Pastoral modes of discipline engender workers' consent to hyper-intensive and low-waged work regimes by fostering their pastoral or filial bonds to the company; by celebrating production as a patriotic duty; by casting efficiency as a path to moral or spiritual reform; and by championing hard work as a route to social mobility.<sup>3</sup>

Fear is a vital element in this affective fabric. Managers manipulate feelings of precariousness and vulnerability – just as they do hope and desire – to political effect. Statistical tools, charts and databases for measuring performance. Timekeeping devices, clocks and watches for monitoring productivity. Work sections, cells and teams for organising flow. Closed circuit television equipment and glass partitions for increasing visibility. The array of spatial and surveillance technologies in the modern workplace ensures the constant insecurity of workers.

Who says management is a science? Bullshit! The principles might be scientific. But as for how you apply them, well that's all down to you! All the best managers use their intuition. They say, 'I know it sounds sensible. But something doesn't look right. Something doesn't feel right'.

The factory manager – the factor – is a central figure in contemporary political and economic transformations. But our understanding of what takes place on the floor of the global factory is impoverished if we think about managerial decisions as characterised by pure calculation. Instead, what counts for knowledge and judgement in these spaces, the world's global manufacturing units, is organised around the interplay of reason and affect.<sup>4</sup> Managerial subjectivities are 'shaped by' or 'embroiled' in their environments as much as the workers'. And fear is never just a malleable affect that managers can utilise or deploy to their own ends.

These people! *These People!* They're the same people in Indonesia. The same people in the Philippines. They hate us. [The Factor is sitting in his air-conditioned office looking at a report in a communist party magazine describing working conditions in this factory.]

They hate these zones. They want the zones closed. And now they're targeting us. [The Factor points his finger at a hammer-and-sickle emblem in the corner of the page.]

Can you imagine what they're saying? [He begins to speak in a grave, serious voice, pushing out his chest and pumping his fist in the air.] Brothers and Sisters, we are going to strike until we get more salary... Until we double your salaries... Until the company gives you housing... They're like an opposition party. [He begins to jab at the hammer and sickle. He jabs slowly at first and then jabs harder. Eventually, he is pushing down on the hammer and sickle with his forefinger, smudging the ink, rubbing it out.]

I consider this the single biggest threat to this factory, to the viability of this factory. Can you imagine! There's a whole group of them and they come together, sit together, every night and talk and talk about this factory. They're very clever. They're much more clever than I imagined. But they're not cleverer than me.

### III. A Monument to Control

This factory is just like a computer game... You have these little guys with stubble around their faces, hunched up, walking around, doing things and causing trouble, and your job is to control them.

The factory is an elaborate apparatus for controlling space, time and people in order to produce things. Like other modern institutions, the factory is an architectural, technological and relational triumph of governance. When it is operational, the factory stands as a monument to control.

I'm a capitalist... Productivity equals profits. Efficiencies equal wealth. That's what I believe. I believe... I know... that the kind of stuff I do here, the kind of stuff I do in this factory, works. It's a win-win situation. I really, truly, cannot see a loss in it. Anywhere! But I also know that it takes a lot of effort... a hell of a lot of work... by general managers and middle managers and lower-level managers to keep this seemingly effortless cycle going.

Yet control is never permanent or given. Control is always a temporary achievement, an incomplete and unsteady accomplishment.<sup>5</sup> Control must be worked towards, asserted, maintained and renewed. Control must be co-ordinated, monitored, managed and made. Every operational factory, then, also stands as a perpetual reminder that control is an unstable edifice. Control, the factory constantly reminds its managers, is ephemeral, tentative and un-assured.

We need to make sure that if someone does something wrong, everyone knows. And so that when we kick them out, everyone else will say, 'What did he expect?' We can do, really do, things here, but first I'm going to have to crucify some people in a very public fashion.

What kind of affect, we might then ask, does such a complex socio-technical apparatus emit? What kind of affect does an environment that is designed explicitly to impose control have on the people who are employed to manage it?

Look. You can see him now on the CCTV screens. This guy... the one with the stubble. He's one of the troublemakers on our list. He's one of the Loud Boys. He's one of the guys who've been trying to hurt us for over two years. Did you see what he just did? He walked into that section and spoke to the people who were supposed to work overtime. And now those people are not sitting in the section anymore. Now they're sitting in the bus outside and not working overtime. Now they're indoctrinated. People like this guy are just so anti-company that no matter what we did for them, they'd still hate us. It's inbuilt. You see it in their eyes when you talk to them. You can see it in their body. They bow their heads down, they hulk their shoulders up and they glare at you. It's disturbing. But I've seen that look before. In England. In Manchester. You can say anything you like to people like that. You can say, 'If I give you everything you want, will you work hard for me?' And you know what they'll say back? 'Fuck you'. No, we can't have people like that here. They're the people that we are going to have to fire.

The very apparatus that is designed to ensure and extend control over labouring subjects – 'the workers' – has an opposite and unintended affect. The same social relations and technical systems that are designed to assert control over a labour force also generate an anxiety that control cannot be guaranteed. Managerial anxieties over the loss of control in the global factory are 'subjective feelings' and 'spatially effected feelings'.

The factory exudes fear as its own affect. The socio-technical architecture for asserting control – the buildings and workspaces, machines and technical devices, the modes of social difference and distinction that comprise the global factory – gives off or emits a fear that control can be lost.

[The Factor is on the telephone.] Who are all these people standing in the lobby?... What are they all doing there, standing around?... Recruiting day? I didn't know today is recruiting day!... But who are they? Who are they? How do we know they haven't been trained before coming here? How do you know they haven't been trained by a union to infiltrate us?... We have to find out who these people are. We have to find out what they have been doing for the last six months! And we have to find out now!... We need to get the consultant in... Today. Tomorrow. Next week is going to be too late.

Fear acts upon managers in generative and unanticipated ways. The apparatus of control generates anxieties that can be fed back into factory organisation in constructive ways; constituting managerial subjectivities and driving innovation. Fear is inseparable from the rationalisation of power and opens up the possibility for particular paths of action.

[The Factor spins around in his rotating office chair to look out of the mirror glass window behind him. A crowd of blue-uniformed production workers mill around outside, waiting for the start of the 2 p.m. B shift. He turns back in his chair.]

I don't know how to divide and rule here. I need to isolate the good from the bad. But I don't know how to separate the two. And then you have the grey... And I don't know who the grey are at all.

In his drive to ensure the company remained globally competitive, the Factor was locked into a perpetual search for efficiencies in production. Each successive innovation in targets, wage schemes, layouts or work organisation was a further rationalisation of time and space designed to increase the intensity and efficiency of labour power, and extract ever-greater surplus from the labour process. His anxieties at worker discontent and the loss of control were harnessed and marshalled into ever-more creative systems for asserting control and extracting value. Fear as affect is interwoven in the socio-technical apparatus of production.

#### IV. The Affective Factory

In newspaper reports of Lalit K. Chaudhary's death, the industrial workplace was more than a backdrop to the story. Journalists lingered on spatial details not just as context, but as if the factory itself had been a crucial or complicit actor in his death. In the Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, for example, the factory become the *teatro della rissa* or the 'theatre of the brawl'. Thinking about managerial fear as affect is to understand the factory in precisely this way: as a spatial environment and socio-technical apparatus that makes particular feelings and actions possible. The affective factory is a unique environment in which fear is both a product and a motor of control.

In Deleuze's wake, cultural theorists have become increasingly alert to the non-discursive sensations or affects that environments and objects can create,<sup>6</sup> as well as to the ways that architects and designers can write affective responses into them.<sup>7</sup> As the philosopher Brian Massumi puts it, affect is an "intrinsic variable of late capitalism... as infrastructural as the factory".<sup>8,9</sup>

We all know that fear as affect can be mobilised and manipulated to political ends. The global factory offers an important reminder that contemporary systems of low-cost, hyper-efficient capitalist production hinge on the fear of managers as much as of workers.

#### Notes

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8. Nigel Thrift. "Intensities of Feeling". In *Geografiska Annaler* 86 B (1), pp. 57-72 (2004).
9. Brian Massumi. "The Autonomy of Affect". In *Cultural Critique* 31, pp. 83-109 (Fall 1995).