

**Jason Dittmer**, *Diplomatic Material: Affect, Assemblage, and Foreign Policy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6882-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6911-0 (paper)

Diplomacy is a weighty affair. Its consequences outlast the times and spaces in which it takes (and makes) place. But it is also weighty in the sense of not being immaterial. It is this diplomatic *material* that is the focus of Jason Dittmer's book. If the world is a stage and diplomats are its most famed political actors, Dittmer asks us to look more closely at these performances. The object is not to train our eye on the bit part actors (the "subaltern" diplomat question) nor to ask what diplomats get up to back stage (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* question). Rather, Dittmer directs the audience's eyes to the stage itself, to the props, occasionally to the theatre (although not, alas, to the clothing). He doesn't, however, use the analytical lens of dramaturgy (Goffman 1956) or performativity (Butler 1990). Although both could incorporate a materialist analysis, the shortcomings of their approaches have been (generously and appreciatively) pointed out.

The work of Goffman and his followers incorporated a front-/back-stage structure that re-worked the North American pragmatist philosophy of the "social self" (divided between the me and the I; see Mead 1934) into the social geography of individual performances. Butler explicitly jettisoned this binary through her performative analysis of the construction of the self in its entirety. While the matter of bodies (Butler 1993) has long been part of the performativity repertoire, these bodies relate to performance through intentional repetition, choice, and the machinations of discourse (although with the possibility of extra-textual slippage and irruption). Dittmer acknowledges work which has drawn, directly or indirectly, on these bodies of scholarship (for instance, see Neumann 2008). His approach, however, falls broadly within the remit of non-representational theory, bringing studies of affect and assemblage, as the subtitle proclaims, to the study of foreign policy. The question, for readers of *Antipode* especially, is whether this brings us new critical tools with which to understand

diplomacy and whether this materialist analysis brings something new to foreign policy studies.

I think it does because, like Dittmer, I “buy in” to the assemblage theory argument that we look for causes and effects in the here and now (or the there and then) rather than looking for extraneous structural explanations (capital, grammar, libido, the social, etc. operating at a distant but causative scale). This is not to jettison studies of the economy, language, psychology, or society. Rather, as geographers, it is to study different scales (often the micro) through studying different sites and actors (often bringing together the discursive and the material as well as showing how micro sites emerge relationally through interactions with distant micro sites). Dittmer’s achievement in the book (and perhaps that for which he should be most lauded) is that of dragging insights from the deepest, darkest depths of theory-land into the light of the everyday. He does this through a zippy introduction to affect and assemblage theory in the first chapter, followed by four chapters which take us from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and from Britain’s construction of foreign policy internally to that through relations with the USA, NATO, and the EU.

The deployment of theory is relatively low on jargon and generally well used (affect, assemblage, atmospheres, *pouvoir/puissance*, governmentality, individual and collective bodies politic). Occasionally the parachuting in of conceptual terminology can feel a little violent (speaking of a Foreign Office building’s “lack of resilience to the force relations unleashed during this period” [p.27]) but in general his argument works through his examples, the structure of the book, and an effective conclusion which makes the broader theoretical contribution of this work clear (“a more-than-human political ontology that rejects stasis and structure in favour of dynamism and becoming, and that locates power in the unfolding of processes in a range of relational spaces and over vastly different timescales” [p.126]).

This emphasis on time is important because this is as much a work of historical geography as of political geography. The book (and it works best *as* an assemblage, more than the sum of its assembled parts) makes the argument that the British state has always

been constituted by its outsides (geography) and its past (history). In one sense the book continues Foucault's governmentality approach which, contra some readings, did not ward us off studies of the state so much as encourage us to look at state apparatuses relationally, relating to smaller apparatuses (the city, the home, the body) and larger ("the diplomatic-military apparatus"; see Legg 2014: 33). But the book also goes beyond Foucault's (and Butler's) model of the subject by appealing to affect theory to tap in to the more-than-human influences on human behaviour, and the pre-personal intensities which create the sites and spaces in which foreign policy is formed (emphasising "force relations" over "social relations" [p.8]).

The benefits of a Deleuzian-assemblage (incorporating but more than a Foucauldian-governmentality analytics) approach is perhaps most apparent in the first chapter proper, which explores materialised diplomacy in London's 19<sup>th</sup> century Foreign Office. Rather than emphasise the typologies of the archive, its circulating rationalities, its geopolitical visions, or the truth-politics of its moral calculations, the emphasis here is on the materialities of the office itself, not its policies. Dittmer perhaps underplays how interesting (and assemblage-like) the institutional history of the Foreign Office is. It emerged in 1782 to replace Britain's two Secretaries of State, one of whom dealt with the north (of the nation and the globe), the other with the south. The Crimean War made clear the need for a new Foreign Office, but consumed the resources necessary to build one. George Gilbert Scott was hired to design a "Palace of Administration" but his design had to keep pace with the rapidly changing administrative landscape (the War Office was housed elsewhere, leaving the Foreign and India Offices, which were later joined by the Home and Colonial Offices). But this already rich story is rightly supplemented by de-centring human agency through an emphasis on *paper*: the exponential rise of the stuff in the offices of power; the inability to house it; the punishing weight of the presses used to print it; and the detrimental effects of it on the health of those who worked with it. The new Foreign Office would better house paper, but also better allow the circulation of air and the penetration of sanitising light.

If affect here was interpreted through paper and material, elsewhere it is explored through bodies and emotions. UK-USA intelligence sharing, a remarkable post-war legacy, is explored (in Chapter 2) as a constructed and more-than-rational sharing of trust. It rests upon a material infrastructure (listening posts, encrypted information) but also on cultivated networks of friendship and lived acceptance of security protocols and hierarchies. NATO “interoperability” is likewise explored (in Chapter 3) as an affective orientation (confidence, urgency, optimism) as much as the ability to fire each others’ bullets. The material of foreign policy here is as much the document which sets a standard and a procedure as it is the capacity to launch a war or gather intelligence (international sanctions now target, for instance, the ability to trade in dollars, which can cripple a state quicker than a military strike [p.97]). EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (Chapter 4) is thrashed out in meetings which depend upon shared personal and material infrastructures (pre-scripted meetings and video-conferencing rooms) but also on affective pressure (getting people in a room and hoping they blink first).

What Dittmer presents is not a radically new model for studying diplomacy or foreign policy. Each chapter starts, quite rightly, with a more traditional, institutional narrative. But as Dittmer (p.14) points out, International Relations has not always succeeded in explaining the relations between nations. Maybe a flat ontology can help? This book suggests that attention to affects and assemblage offer a valuable corrective to traditional approaches, scoping “in” to the material and interpersonal, and “out” to regional relationisms and *longue durée* temporalities.

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