



# A history of New Year's Eve, Sydney: From 'the crowd' to 'crowded places'

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## Abstract

This article presents a history of Sydney's New Year's Eve event. First established when a crowd gathered outside Sydney's General Post Office in 1897 to celebrate the inauguration of International Standard Time, in more recent years it has evolved into a signature event on the city's calendar, drawing in excess of 1 million people into the Central Business District in a spectacular celebration of the global city. For those authorities charged with managing the event an enduring problem concerns the question of security: how is the aggregate of human bodies that gather to be governed in ways that secure it from the risks it presents: be they risks to public order (riot), to the crowd itself (panic), or external to it (terror attack) or to the population (viral spread)? This article maps how crowds have been thought as objects of government in relation to the New Year's Eve event.

## Keywords

circulation, crowded places, crowds, New Year's Eve, social contagion, Sydney

In this article I present a brief history of Sydney's New Year's Eve (NYE) crowds. This is with the intention of considering the problematic of governing the crowd and its changing contours. New Year's Eve in Sydney first emerged as a distinctly urban event in late

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1890s, as crowds gathered in the city's arcades and spontaneously converged on the General Post Office (GPO) to welcome in the New Year. More recently, in pre-pandemic times it has evolved into a signature event in the city's calendar, drawing in excess of 1 million people into the Central Business District (CBD) in a spectacular celebration of the global city. For those authorities concerned with managing NYE crowds, an enduring problem concerns the question of security and the problem of circulation (Foucault, 2009): how is the aggregate of human bodies and the milieu through which it circulates to be governed, so as to secure the crowd from its risks of disorder, panic, riot, terrorism, or, most recently, viral spread?

It is this governmental problematic of securing the crowd that is the focus of this article. Here I consider the changing ways in which the aggregate of bodies that gather is conceived as an object of knowledge by those who would seek to govern it, and the ways in which the particular qualities attributed to it open these aggregations in distinct ways as fields of invention. I consider this problematic in relation to the changing ways in which the crowd has been made knowable and manageable over the history of the NYE event. I examine how those responsible for its regulation have targeted the dynamics of the crowd so as to govern it. This in part is a question about the changing fortunes of the notion of social contagion or 'imitation-suggestibility' as a means to diagnose the crowd's tendencies.

## **Crowds and contagion**

Central to late 19th- and early 20th-century formulations of the classical crowd theorists – key among them, Gustave LeBon and Gabriel Tarde – imitation-suggestibility described a capacity for mimicry, that operated beyond and below the subject's volition, and which accounted for the spontaneous diffusion of particular modes of conduct through a crowd (Borch, 2006; Dibley, 2021). The notion was largely dismissed in social thought from the mid-20th century onward in favour of rational accounts of collective behaviour (Borch, 2006). However, in recent decades there has been a resurgence of interest in this capacity in both social theory and crowd management literature. Social theorists have been concerned to recover the analytical purchase of these formulations rejected by earlier generations of social scientists, revisiting questions of the irrational and plasticity as constitutive of the crowd, and of the social more generally (Borch, 2006; Blackman, 2007). While largely oblivious to developments in social theory, contemporary crowd management has also returned to a concern with the mechanisms that rely on a capacity for suggestion (Borch, 2013). These qualities have resurfaced in concerns with 'crowd mood', which is to be regulated by deploying various 'atmos-technics' that seek to modulate the 'affective atmosphere' of contemporary urban spaces (Anderson, 2009; Wall, 2019). These have featured in policy discussions of crowds in disasters and crowd behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic.

To tease out the ways in which the capacity for imitation-suggestibility has been understood, and has come to be targeted in the management of crowds and their habits, I pose two interconnected questions: How is the aggregate of bodies that gather as a crowd conceived as an object of knowledge by those who would seek its governance? And how do the particular qualities attributed to this aggregation open it as a

field of intervention, particularly as a question of security? These questions concern the ways in which those tasked with managing NYE crowds – the various city authorities, their aligned experts and media commentators – have deployed various knowledge practices about crowds to make the dynamics, the movement and mood of crowds legible and so governable. In particular, this concerns how the mechanism of social contagion has historically come to be constituted in various expert and media discourses that take the crowd as their object. And, how, in being so figured as a field of intervention, the crowd and its milieu are opened as a space of administration, as a space to be secured; that is, as an entity whose conduct can be governed by various techniques, devices and technologies designed to intervene in its dynamics. In relation to Sydney's NYE crowd historically these have ranged from the introduction of artificial illumination to the use and monitoring of social media, from the positioning of street furniture to the weapons of crowd dispersal (batons) and defence (bollards), to hygiene practices, social distancing and so on.

In exploring these questions it is my contention that this mechanism of social contagion establishes the crowd as an ambivalent object of government. On the one hand, it posits a degree of predictability in patterns of crowd behaviour, of repetitions of crowd conduct, that authorities target in regimes of crowd management; and on the other, this same mechanism – the capacity for suggestibility – also risks unleashing disruptive, potentially catastrophic, processes of social contagion – panic, riot, etc. – whose contingencies authorities seek to anticipate and pre-empt in states of readiness, of preparedness, for a crowd disaster. Social contagion, then, establishes the crowd as a paradoxical object of government: at once providing a measure of predictability in the ways crowds behave, while demanding a constant vigilance to the possibility that patterns of orderly following can switch in a moment to those of chaotic, ungovernable following. Crowds, in this sense, are inherently contingent assemblies; as temporal gatherings of disparate elements there is a precariousness to these arrangements. It could always be otherwise. In this sense, as an object of government, the crowd is an entity figured as always already on the edge of chaos. It is this paradox of the crowd that is the shadow that haunts other modalities for governing the multitude. Neither populations nor publics, 'crowds are both objects of intense regulation and political subjects, who [have the potentiality to] disrupt the order and arrangements of power' (Aradau, 2015: 157). These then are the concerns I wish to consider in relation to particular the history of Sydney's NYE event.

The argument of the article is built on the discursive analysis of newspaper articles reporting on the NYE event and the conduct of its crowds, and of policy literature concerned with the governance of crowds and their attendant risks. The analysis focuses on two distinct historical iterations: the first, the establishment of the event as a popular urban celebration in Sydney in the late 19th and early 20th century, where the singularity of *the crowd* was at once feared and celebrated; the second, the refiguring of the event's governance after the siege in the city's financial district late in 2014, which deployed *crowded places* strategies, which have been developed in recent security policy literature for the governance of urban public space vulnerable to terrorism (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). I suggest this trajectory from the crowd to crowded places is one in which the volatile affective qualities once animating the crowd have evaporated in the current diagrams of collective behaviour in

urban spaces, where affective intensities are now increasingly modulated in accordance with highly curated spectacle. It is also a trajectory where the risks to order associated with the crowd move from properties intrinsic to the crowd to threats external to it.<sup>1</sup>

To capture the historical trajectory that I am proposing here, it is necessary to sketch some of the event's key historical contours that bridge the two historical iterations of the event around which my analysis thickens. I begin, then, with a brief history of Sydney's NYE celebrations.

## **Sydney's New Year's Eve crowds: a brief history**

Now firmly integrated into the life of the city, it is perhaps difficult to think of Sydney's NYE celebrations as other than the densely crowded harbour-side spectacle culminating in a massive firework display above the iconic structures of the Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House. However, the hugely popular, officially sanctioned, and tightly choreographed event, with which Sydney-siders and a global media audience are now very familiar, has a history: a history in which crowds gathered in different locations, in different relations with the city, its environs and with its authorities. Early celebrations did focus on the harbour, with reports during the 1870s and early 1880s of a foreshore flickering with bonfires, and crowds watching 'pyrotechnic displays' launched from 'ships in the harbour'.<sup>2</sup> However, by the end of the 1880s, NYE celebrations had moved to the city's commercial district. Illuminated by recently installed artificial lighting, large crowds gathered in King Street, and the Sydney and Strand arcades, before converging on Martin Place and the clock tower of the GPO, then Sydney's tallest building. Here the crowd counted in the New Year in accord with International Standard Time, whose global synchronicity had been introduced in 1895.<sup>3</sup> In this movement to the city's arcades, the NYE festivities took on the distinctive quality of urban modernity, bringing together, as cultural historian Hannah Forsyth writes: 'the elements of the city that the urban crowd considered worth celebrating: artificial lights, [standard] time, commodity consumption and ... the crowd itself' (Forsyth, 2011: 66).<sup>4</sup> It also coincided with the city's massive population growth, which more than doubled between 1881 and 1901.

However, by the end of the 1930s the centre of the event moved from the Commercial District to the Kings Cross, where large crowds gathered, and for which the city's authorities were ill prepared.<sup>5</sup> Cosmopolitan and bohemian the Cross was synonymous with the city's nightlife and had gained a reputation for danger and illegal activities. Razor gangs, sly grog and prostitution had come to define the precinct in the public imaginary. NYE reports in the press from this period describe 'a spontaneous street carnival',<sup>6</sup> with 'Immense crowds jamming the streets, singing, dancing, bringing all traffic to a complete standstill.'<sup>7</sup> In preparing the public for stricter policing measure following the unanticipated 'huge crowds' of preceding years the Metropolitan Superintendent of Police, Mr Collings, was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* advising:

in view of the spirit of the occasion, 'a certain amount of latitude' will be allowed by the police of the crowds in the city to-night, no breach of the law will be permitted. 'Every available man will be on duty,' he said. 'Processions and organised gatherings in public places will be banned. Such gatherings would be a breach of the law, and the law will be strictly enforced.' Mr Collings

emphasised that special attention would be paid to the Kings Cross area, where, last year, huge crowds congregated, and the police ... had to take prompt action.<sup>8</sup>

Though more subdued over the period of the war, with the demands of black-outs curtailing both festive illumination and bonfires, the presence of US servicemen ensured an intensity to the event over this period. On the eve of 1941, 'Huge crowds of revellers, estimated to number 100,000' were reported to have gathered in Kings Cross: 'the busy junction of five streets was turbulent with a mad, joyous, jostling crowd', which had thrown itself 'vociferously into a spontaneous street carnival'.<sup>9</sup> The police of the period were to regularly complain about the struggle to stop 'idiots from taking charge'<sup>10</sup> of Kings Cross Road, with 'special squads of police' working to 'kept the roadway open at Kings Cross until the crowd became too dense for them to handle'.<sup>11</sup>

The disruption and disorder caused by the event continued to exercise authorities over the 1940s, which culminated in the early 1950s with proposals to decentralize the event. This proposition contended people ought to remain in their suburbs to see the New Year in, and not descend on the Cross already plagued by vice to create mayhem. However, other, predominantly commercial, interests prevailed, and this effort to diffuse the event and disperse the NYE crowd ultimately failed. This also coincided with a sustained commitment to formalize the event, with officially endorsed spaces and activities increasingly introduced to not only manage the crowd but to earn a profit from it. Significant was the inclusion of displays of the folk traditions and customs of the city's 'New Australians', recent post-war migrants from southern Europe.<sup>12</sup> This increasing formalization worked to cement the NYE celebrations into the urban calendar as a key event in the city's social life.

By the early 1950s there were increasing calls to bring disorder to an end with the event's official regulation and restructure. The most provocative proposal was from the city's Lord Mayor, Ernest Charles O'Dea, who in 1952 argued for the event's decentralization and dispersal across the city's suburbs. Quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* O'Dea contended:

I don't know why there is always this, emphasis on Kings Cross ... I would rather see people celebrate in the suburbs where they live. They should get together spontaneously and sing in the streets where they live. That used to happen years ago, but now people go to Kings Cross.<sup>13</sup>

Others argued for the event to remain in situ, but for its formal organizing. Another of the city's councillors contended: 'More organized entertainment would stop people from getting into mischief'.<sup>14</sup> This position was also adopted by Kings Cross Chamber of Commerce, which was in 'favour of organising some sort of Mardi Gras'.<sup>15</sup> For the following NYE the chamber proposed 'a mardi gras carnival, plus an orchestra, night club bands, and open-air stage shows'.<sup>16</sup> This was supported by the NSW Minister for Labour and Industry, Frank Finnan, who was categorical on the improving benefits of a planned event: 'If there was an orchestra and organised street dancing at Kings Cross on New Year's Eve it would put an end to the larrikinism'.<sup>17</sup>

Kings Cross would remain the centre of the city's NYE celebrations during the mid century. This was to change with the launch of the Festival of Sydney in 1977, which was jointly instituted by the New South Wales Government and the City of Sydney

with the aim of attracting people into the city over the quiet holiday month of January. The inauguration of the festival initiated the official sanctioning of the NYE event as the opening to the festival. It also established what has become the NYE event's contemporary signature: a spectacular public fireworks display at Circular Quay. This shift in location to the quay was also the beginning of the event's format that has come to characterize Sydney's contemporary New Year celebrations.

The incorporation into the Festival of Sydney presented a switch-point in the event's history. Prior to this the crowd had been something to be managed but largely endured by the city's authorities – something more or less tolerated, but hardly encouraged and celebrated. Post-1977, however, the crowd was actively solicited by the city's authorities and their congregation recognized as a significant official event in the city's life. Nevertheless, over the 1980s the event was regularly marred by street violence, sexual harassment and, in 1986, chillingly, murder. This precipitated a succession of counter-measures over that decade and into the 1990s to curb the violence associated with the event, including ticket-only admission sites, dry zones and intensive public order policing. All of which sought to manage the crowd by corralling it, and containing and dividing it.

Over the 2000s and 2010s, authorities were increasingly exercised not only by the risks that the crowd posed to itself and public order, but also by its vulnerability as a target for terrorism, particularly after the Martin Place siege in December 2014. This is a concern that has only escalated in recent years following vehicle attacks on pedestrians in Nice, Berlin, London, Melbourne and New York. This has seen authorities govern NYE crowds by embracing the counter-terrorism strategies deployed internationally in *crowded places policies*, which I discuss below. More recently authorities have been concerned with the possibility of holding the event during a pandemic, in which questions of how to manage the event as 'Covid-safe' have been foremost.<sup>18</sup>

## The crowd, c. 1900

The 'sudden explosion of New Year's Eve [crowds] in the city's' commercial district, provoked a discourse of 'fear, revulsion and horror' among reporters, who expressed shock at the crowd's revelry and licence, and the disruption to order that it presented. As one commentator wrote in 1898: 'I saw thousands of respectably dressed young men with faces of lunatics, nothing but an inane, Imbecile leer on their faces.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly, but with an additional nod to the animalistic, another wrote the following year: 'Everywhere a bleating, roaring mass of humanity. The same old purposeless imbecile horseplay.'<sup>20</sup>

In its denigration of the crowd, this reportage echoed conservative observers like LeBon, whose book, *The Crowd*, was first published in English in 1896. While devoid of LeBon's theoretical elaborations or its insurrectionary concerns, this media discourse posited the crowd as a psychic entity that came to be coordinated in the presence of a 'group mind', with spontaneous shifts in movement and mood characterized 'as if possessed of a single mind' (Forsyth, 2011: 66). This was one in which there was a pathological lowering of intelligence, whereby normally respectable individuals once aggregated, degenerated into a crowd of imbeciles.

However, the NYE crowd was also regularly presented as a more ambivalent entity than one of pure idiocy. Here the NYE crowd was presented as the confirmation of the city's urban modernity, its presence the acknowledgement and celebration of the city's achievement.<sup>21</sup> And yet, nevertheless, the same crowd rippled with a pathological irrationality, calling into question the very civility of the city's population – well, at least its youthful sub-population. In this sense the crowd was at once the very articulation of urban sociality and always already on the cusp of its destruction.

This tension registered in the crowd's paradoxical constitution opened the way for journalists to engage in a distinct civic pedagogics around the NYE celebration. This, in turn, contributed to the establishment of the rituals and traditions of the event that were quickly cemented into place and, with them, expectations of conduct in relation to the crowd. Here the media played a mixed role. On the one hand, in a sense inciting, provoking a crowd in reports in anticipation of the event that contributed to building its rituals – the exuberance of penny trumpets, firecrackers, crowd surges and street dancing. And in accounts of crowd behaviour that played up the shock and the dismay at its conduct, particularly the mingling of genders and also classes. In this sense, journalists were preparing to be shocked as they in turn prepared revellers to be shocking.

It was, nevertheless, a licence that was contained within the logic of the carnival. This was a notion regularly enough invoked in the press of the day in recognition of a relaxing of the norms and codes governing urban conduct. For example, in 1901, the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the New Year's crowd, as a 'multitude such as can only be found on fete occasions, when the authorities step aside and with general approval allow the conventionalities of every-day society to be disregarded'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in 1905, the *Sydney Morning Herald* contended: 'It was the prerogative of the crowd, sanctioned by custom, to do pretty well as it liked, and the police ... regarded the scene with amused toleration ... They recognized that it was the annual carnival of the crowd.'<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the media provided its own antidote to its provocation: giving instructions on how to conduct oneself with civility in the context of the crowd – that is, offering 'Granny' advice, as the *Bulletin* and others termed it. And the press would also give the impression that these were lessons well learnt, praising the crowd for its 'good nature', 'good humour' and, in one instance, for possessing the 'popular desire for decorum and rational distinction'.<sup>24</sup>

This was a desire cultivated no doubt in part by the advent of incandescent gas lighting that enabled the crowd to gather in the commercial district, in which, artificial lighting presented not only spectacle, but also order and regularity, and with it the promise of security and safety. However, it also marked a distinction between zones artificially illuminated and those that remained unlit, which corresponded to a spatial and social distinction between a disorder that could be indulged, and that which could not. This was a distinction ultimately between the festive crowd and its 'larrikin' underbelly.<sup>25</sup>

Areas without street lighting did come to be lit up by other unsanctioned means. Bonfires were sites of ongoing contestation between authorities and those designated as 'unruly crowds of larrikins', who gathered around and defended burning pyres from the police and the fire brigade. The setting of these fires involved degrees of collaborative planning on the part of their instigators, including pre-emptive tactics that involved cementing

over fire hydrants or setting bonfires atop, to stockpiling large volumes of fuel in their anticipation. By the late 1920s the *Sydney Morning Herald* reassured readers this was a 'Custom Fading Out'.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the paper would continue to report dozens of bonfires in the streets of Surry Hills, Darlinghurst, and Woolloomooloo for the celebrations. In 1929, 80 street fires were reported<sup>27</sup> and this was to remain a popular practice well into the 1960s.

Unsurprisingly, this bifurcation in the presentation of the crowd was one marked by class. The NYE crowd was frequently described as socially heterogeneous. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reporting in 1898 implied a mixture of classes in the Sydney Arcade when it wrote: 'The crowd, good-humoured and crusty, respectable and rowdy, mingled and bustled.' However, as Forsyth (2011) has argued, there is evidence to suggest that divisions of class marked the event spatially. She writes:

For New Year's Eve 1906, a [Sydney Morning] Herald reporter considered it interesting enough to outline who was where, how they behaved and what they generally thought. At the Haymarket end of George St were the working people, described with pity and sympathy. The Queen Victoria Markets, on the other hand, were filled with 'irresponsible youths ... evidently factory hands' who were particularly shocking because both sexes were present and apparently as irresponsible as one another. Worse, they were 'somewhat free in the interchange of greetings'. Criticisms were also implied of the 'better dressed and quieter people' in the city, 'who professed to be profoundly shocked by the antics of the revelling minority' in their designated area. Unsurprisingly, the group the ... reporter probably identified with were those who most seemed to belong in the city on New Year's Eve, according to the report – the straw-hatted office workers in the arcades. (Forsyth, 2011: 79)

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, it seems, the excess associated with the NYE crowd had largely dissipated, which one commentator, lamenting the carousing lost, attributed to greater accountability in individual conduct:

Much of the glamour of New Year's Eve celebrations has departed. With the growth, perhaps, of a deeper sense of personal responsibility a great deal of the noise and the revelry that was associated with New Year celebrations has died. Last Saturday evening in Sydney had none of those high periods of boisterousness that characterized New Year Eves a few years back. [1928] ... saw in upon a *well-mannered city*.<sup>28</sup>

Reporting on NYE 1932 the *Sydney Morning Herald* made a similar comparison, but with little nostalgia for what was lost:

The contrast between the celebration of the new year nowadays and in pre-war years is absolute. There were times not long ago when the scenes in the city streets on New Year's Eve were boisterous. On one occasion they outraged all sense of propriety. Bands of roystering youths roamed the city making the night hideous by their bawling and brawling. Gangs of hoodlums mixed with the crowds and indulged in reprehensible acts. Then the police adopted stern methods of regulating the conduct of the crowds. Their methods were certainly effective, and, combined with the changed habits of the community, have resulted in completely changing the character of New Year's Eve and the face of the city. There were bonfires in the suburbs, but in the city it was



impossible on Saturday night to see any difference between New Year's Eve and the ordinary holiday evening.<sup>29</sup>

I suggest these New Year's Eve crowds of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were enrolled in a double register: first, as modern, urban subjects, illuminated by recently installed street lighting and hailed in the newly established global temporality of International Standard Time; second, as carnival subjects, shedding for the moment the discipline of work-time and everyday routine, ignoring the conventions of civic inattention and pedestrian flows, along with other conventions of being urban and in public – which included the noise and shove of the crowd, the blast of penny trumpets and boisterous singing, the 'push', 'crocodile' dances of bodies revelling in the crowd and indulging in the excess (and in its extreme) of bonfires, drunkenness, and violence. The crowd, as the image of a new urban civility or the threatening inversion of that order, registers its ambivalence. The crowd thus oscillated between being seen as a subject for reform and lessons in civility, or the debased object, pathological and irrational; between that is, the promise of installing new habits of urban 'decorum and rationality', and the loss of civility and the irruption of idiocy and animality. The paradox of the early NYE crowd, then, is that it is at once the celebration of a new urban subject – presented in reassuring press coverage of the crowd as 'good humoured' and 'well-behaved', and, in its inversion, denigrated for its deviancy and stupidity: for its 'imbecile leer'. What is at stake in this Janus-faced image of the crowd, then, is the concern to manage the potentiality of social contagion – between the promise of the spread of new habits of urban decorum and the threat of an infectious social pathology.

### **Crowded places: the contemporary NYE event**

The reliability of a self-disciplined crowd is the precondition on which the city's authorities invite a crowd in excess of 1 million people into the city. The governance of urban crowds became integral to the aims of city authorities concerned with making the city safer, more comfortable and pleasurable. 'Questions of security, entertainment and comfort', as Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Andrea Pavoni (2019: 146) put it, 'converge into a single focus: urban management is no longer simply a matter of either disciplinary training or governmental subjection, but more precisely a matter of engineering safe, comforting and entertaining atmospheres.' The contemporary crowd, then, is conceived less in psychological terms; rather it is the crowd's built environment that is to be governed and its 'motivation, expectations and mood' managed (Douglas, 2018:14). This frequently takes the form of a governmental concern directed at the affective ambience of the crowd's milieu, which is captured by the somewhat elusive notion of atmosphere (see Gandy, 2017).

Faced with a massive and demographically diverse crowd a key strategy for its management has been the division and corralling of its cohorts into distinct areas. Echoing the historical class partitioning of urban space in its late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century incarnations, the contemporary event is demarked into distinct physical zones that register familiar patterns of social distinction. However, rather than a spontaneous segregation, the

contemporary event's zoning is carefully crafted. Ticketed and un-ticketed; licensed or not; BYO (bring your own) or dry: each of the event's 'vantage points' are policed with regard to access and alcohol. The effect is to partition the crowd according to its different dispositions, dividing it by its different capacities for civility. The crowd, then, is split according to different habits of self-conduct – for example, the social habits associated with the young; of those with kids; those of the well-resourced. It is through the establishment of these partitions that crowd members come to be governed through their volition. This is so in the sense that the architecture of the event's zoning is designed to encourage a process of self-selecting, whereby individuals assign themselves to the zone most appropriate to their anticipated conduct and what they desire from others. Similarly, the barrier of the price of admission and its enforcement establishes zones of inclusion/exclusion contingent on the capacity to pay, by which the well-heeled insulate themselves from the touch of ordinary bodies.<sup>30</sup>

In governing through this spatial zoning the intention is that revellers will be hailed into particular intensities of NYE celebration and, by their participation, contribute to the cultivation of the ambience with which they wish to engage. For an event that had continued to be marred by alcohol-fuelled violence, this strategy of imposing patterns of segregation on the crowd was seen as the measure of success for the city authorities. For example – and rehearsing the enduring trope of the crowd as childish – the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared NYE 2015 'the night Sydney grew up and celebrated responsibly'.<sup>31</sup> The city's Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, was quoted celebrating the crowd as 'getting more successful' at drinking in 'a civilized way'.<sup>32</sup> However more was at play than this discourse on the crowd and civility suggests. If the 2015 event was the year the crowd grew up, it was also the year it stayed at home. Attendance at this event had dramatically declined compared with recent years. The record crowd – estimated at 2 million – that attended the previous year's event halved in 2015.<sup>33</sup>

The Martin Place siege that occurred in late December 2014 was seen as the trigger for this reduction in participation. A little more than a week after three people were killed following the 17-hour siege in the city's financial district the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott issued a terrorism warning.<sup>34</sup> Authorities assessed an increased terrorism risk. Intelligence officials and the National Security Committee reported a 'heightened level of terror chatter' and considered a terror attack 'likely'.<sup>35</sup> On New Year's Eve, Abbott announced:

We do need to be conscious of the fact that the terror threat remains high. There are people who would do us harm and who can do us harm ... I do want to reassure you though that our law enforcement agencies and our police forces and our security agencies will be working around the clock to keep you as safe as possible over the holiday season.<sup>36</sup>

Abbott's comments echoed new concerns with the governance of crowds. Ones in which the risk to security was not intrinsic to the crowd itself as a threat to public order, but rather extrinsic to the crowd, which now becomes an entity vulnerable to being targeted in a terror attack. Governing this risk required the development of a counter-terrorism policy designed to foster a resilient 'security culture' in relation to the urban environments in which the NYE event took place. This took of the form of *crowded places policy*.

Such policy has been one of the key ways through which Sydney's NYE crowds have been figured as an object of government in recent years. And, as such, it has been a policy formulation central to the management of its crowds. The event's 'integrated crowd management plan', in which the city's authorities seek 'the safe ingress and egress' of revelers to the event's sites, aligns its protocols with those of the federal government's *Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism* and aims to take 'responsibility for protecting people in those places from foreseeable threats' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). This new strategy for 'protecting people working in, using, and visiting crowded places' draws extensively on similar strategies deployed internationally, particularly the US and UK (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

This literature takes as its primary focus not 'crowds' but rather the urban spaces through which they move.<sup>37</sup> These congested physical spaces are conceptualized in security policy literature as *crowded places* – where these places are understood as 'locations which are easily accessible by large numbers of people on a predictable basis' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). The crowd itself in this context is less a concern for public order than a target vulnerable to terrorist attack. The principal strategy of these initiatives concerns the manipulation 'of the built environment' to reduce the crowd's vulnerability to attack and includes the mass use of security bollards, high-visibility policing and, among other spectacles of security, empty buses and other vehicles 'as blockades in pedestrian thoroughfares' (Coaffee, 2017: n.p.). This defensive modification of the physical environment through which crowds circulate has been a key strategy adopted by authorities in recent NYE events in Sydney. This strategy is no doubt part of the precautionary logic central to current security practices. It is also part of a 'semiotic shift' in which 'security iconography is integrally bound up with the production of contemporary urban spectacles', in which 'high-visibility policing' is designed to procure an ambient sense of safety (Boyle and Haggerty, 2009: 257).

This strategy for securing crowded places through these defensive provisions presents a delegation of safety or risk mitigation from the crowd to the milieu through which it circulates (Brighenti and Pavoni, 2019). However, crowded places are conceived not just as spaces in which the burden of safety is entrusted to an augmented 'built environment' layered with the hardware and the semiotics required to secure urban space. Crowded places are also spaces that entail a distinct 'pedagogy of security', through which the individual subjects that constitute the crowd are 'responsibilized' – that is, made responsible for the demands of their own safety and security (Barnett, 2015; Boyle and Haggerty, 2009: 16). This is not just a question of compliance with the protocols, procedures and routines of security. It is also a question of the installation of a particular mode or practice of attention: one contingent on becoming vigilant.

This question of becoming vigilant is positioned differently in relation to the distinction that crowded places policy literature makes between 'crowd control' and 'crowd management'. Crowd control concerns the mechanisms – devices, technologies, techniques – that seek to regulate the circulation of bodies as entities to be dealt with, since their predictability is fragile and not to be relied on. Crowd control is concerned with a precarious order. It focuses on a dynamic needing the 'constant re-establishing of public order' with the implication that the crowd is always an entity on the edge of the unruly, on the edge of public disorder (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2018: 50). Crowd

control assumes that at any moment the habits of civility, of reasonability, on which the orderly crowd relies, can dissolve into chaos to which retroactive mechanisms must respond.

By contrast ‘crowd management’ proceeds by a ‘proactive approach’ designed to ‘manage attendees’ expectations’, preparing them both rationally and affectively for the event that is to unfold, (including, the mechanisms of crowd control themselves, to which they will be subjected as part of the spectacle of security) (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2018: 50). This anticipatory logic of crowd management rests not on the unpredictability of a crowd always on the threshold of disorder, but rather on the predictability of patterns of crowd behaviour. The allocation of particular habits of conduct to individuals in a crowd establishes a set of assumed variables that is predictable in the matrix of contingencies that need to be considered in the planning of a crowd event. These provide the premise for algorithmic modelling of crowd behaviour relied upon by event planners. In this sense habits are not surfaces of reform, but rather predictable surfaces that authorities assume and on which governmental decisions are to be made to secure crowd security.

The differences in the logics of control and management, then, are between governance as retrospective in the sense of constantly restoring what is (about to be) lost – public order; and governance as anticipatory, preparing attendees for what is to unfold. Both work on a logic of contagion – of its containment and its mobilization. For crowd control, contagion is a threat to security. For crowd management, contagion is a mechanism through which security can be secured. Contagion for the apparatus of security is ‘a problem of circulation’ (Foucault, 2009: 50). Circulation is here understood in Foucault’s sense ‘as displacement, as exchange, as contact, as form of dispersion, and as form of distribution – the problem presented is: how can things be ordered such that *this circulates* or does *not circulate*’ (Foucault, 2009: 50). Together, in this sense, control and management are concerned with limiting the circulation of bad contagion (panic) and facilitating good contagion (buzz/hype/vigilance), promoting the positive sociality of the crowd.

The hallmark of crowded places policy is the strategy of delegating security to the milieu. It is one nevertheless supplemented with other strategies. Key among these is a concern with the protocols of ‘situational awareness’, which are to be installed in crowd-subjects. Here the delegation or disburdening of security to the milieu and its apparent atmosphere of safety and security, feeds a vulnerability – a dis-ease, a latent fear – which is cultivated through various mechanisms that re-burden individuals in the crowd with responsibility for their own safety. As the federal crowded places policy puts it:

All communities and individuals have a responsibility to help detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks in crowded places. *Everyone* working in or using a crowded place should be aware of their surroundings and report suspicious or unusual behaviour to authorities. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017: 9, italics added)

This universal demand for situational awareness, which aims to responsiblize crowd members by installing in them the habits of vigilance, is pursued in the interests of building a robust ‘security culture’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017: 17). This is one that encourages, as it is put in the *Safe and Healthy Crowded Places Handbook*: ‘safe

behaviour and self-care' – reinforcing 'the concept of shared responsibility including encouraging attendees of crowded places to take personal responsibility for their own wellbeing' (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2018: 3). It is this imperative for situational awareness that would seem to underpin NYE's event producer Aneurin Coffey's concern that we all need to 'have an eye out for anything that could be a red flag'.<sup>38</sup> The crowd-subject is thus to assume a responsibility for 'the one and the many' in the habits of vigilance. It is in this sense that Claudia Aradau notes that 'governing crowded places relies on the derivation of crowd-subjects from the generic event of a catastrophe-to-come': 'the generic event of terrorism' (2015: 161).

## Conclusion


In the life of Sydney's NYE event the move to Circular Quay in 1977 was no doubt an important moment. It marked a significant shift in the ways the event was managed by the city's authorities: from a largely reactive response to the crowd's presence that the event's early history revealed, to an anticipatory response, as the event increasingly evolved into a carefully choreographed spectacle. This was a swing whose trajectory might be characterized as one moving from the reactive – the putting out of fires lit by the inebriated; to the anticipatory – the putting on of fire displays with restricted access to alcohol. This trajectory was the culmination of the city authorities' long-standing concern with corralling the carnival, which coincided with a governmental interest in responsabilizing revellers into the habits of a *well-mannered city*.

In this article I have sought to highlight some of the historical shifts that have characterized Sydney's NYE crowd as it has been figured by those who would intervene in its conduct. I have argued that social contagion establishes the crowd as a paradoxical object of government. It provides predictability with regard to the conduct of crowds, but demands constant vigilance, since patterns of orderly following can switch to chaotic, ungovernable following at any moment. As an object of government the crowd, then, is an entity on the edge of chaos. In the case of the crowd *c.* 1900, this figured in media accounts of the NYE celebrations in a Janus-faced image of the crowd, where the management of the potentiality of social contagion oscillated between the promise of the spread of new habits of urban decorum and the threat of an infectious social pathology. Governing its circulation relied on an infrastructure that cultivated a new urban civility and restraint – artificial illumination, arcades, standard time and media civics pedagogy – and the police suppression of a social pathology, a larrikinism that disrupts the social. In the case of the contemporary event the edge of chaos on which the government of the NYE crowd hinges concerns the generic event of a 'catastrophe-to-come' that structures the rise of 'crowded places' policy. In a sense this is a mutation in the habits of urban civility cultivated in late 19th- and early 20th-century NYE crowds. But now, in the interests of the well-mannered city, revellers are to be responsabilized into the habits of vigilance. As a mode of being in a crowd this is an anxious habit, one which rests less on the potential volatility of the crowd, than on the perception of its vulnerability

## Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [DP170100263].

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**Notes**

1. Building on both media and policy discourses the article's empirics draw on related but contrasting images of the crowd. Related, in that both media and policy accounts draw on a shared historical vocabulary establishing the discursive contours of the crowd as one oscillating between a demotic celebratory spectacle and a chaotic risk to public order. Contrasting, in that media and policy accounts produce crowd images for different purposes. Located in media discourses, such images are inseparable from the commercial and political imperatives of the press insofar as they might be invested in urban events like Sydney's NYE. Located in policy discourse, such images populate an anticipatory discourse in which crowds figure as risky contingencies in need of management by authorities concerned with governing major public events.
2. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1880, p. 6.
3. For a social history of the implications of the introduction of Standard Time in Australia see Davison (1992, 1993). See also Kern (1983).
4. Also see Forsyth (2008). The value of Forsyth's account lies in aligning the event's history with the key tropes of urban modernity; artificial illumination, consumption, discipline-time. My focus on the NYE crowd is not on the problematic of modernity that animates her account but rather with the problematic of government. I am less concerned with reading the history of the NYE crowd in relation to the ambivalent achievement of an antipodean modernity, than with how this crowd is conceived as a question of security over time.
5. In 1939 crowds were estimated at around 100,000.
6. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1941.
7. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1940, p. 7.
8. Strict control by police. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 Dec. 1938, p. 13.
9. City greets 1941. Street carnival. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1941, 5.
10. *Daily Telegraph*, 1 Jan. 1945, p. 5.
11. New Year Eve revelry in Kings Cross. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1945, p. 1.
12. Big crowds will welcome New Year. *Daily Telegraph*, 31 Dec. 1951, p. 9.
13. New Year revelry. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Jan. 1952, p. 1.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Organised New Year's Eve. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Jan. 1951, p. 3.
17. Ibid.
18. For New Year's Eve 2020 the possibility for the crowd to gather was unsurprisingly severely curtailed. Access to the CBD was by limited-issue permit and the vantage points to view a shortened fireworks display were allocated to front-line workers in recognition of their service during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The general public was firmly told to stay at home and to watch the pyrotechnics unfold on the small screen. See: Sydney reveals New Year's plans as Australia records zero cases. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Nov. 2020.
19. To the editor, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 Jan. 1898, p. 11.
20. *Daily Telegraph*, 2 Jan. 1899, p. 8.
21. For a historical account of Sydney's emerging cultural modernity see Matthews (2005).
22. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1901.
23. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1905.

24. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1904.
25. For the classic historical account of the role of artificial illumination in the modern city see Schivelbusch (1988). Otter (2008) offers a significant alternative position, rejecting the notions of spectacle and the *flâneur* through which urban illuminations have been thought in cultural theory in favour of one that links it to the problematic of liberal government.
26. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1929.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 Jan. 1928, p. 6.
29. New Year's Eve. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Jan. 1933, p. 4.
30. If you can't pay, then you can't play at New Year. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 Dec. 2014.
31. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Feb. 2016.
32. *Ibid.*
33. James Robertson, Caitlin Wheeler with Pallavi Singhal. Welcome 2015: New Year's Eve: Attendance just 1 million. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Jan. 2015, p. 6.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Rose Powell. New Year's security upgrade. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Dec. 2014.
36. *Ibid.*
37. This is an international policy literature initially developed in the UK in response to the risk of terror attack in urban spaces, which has subsequently been rolled out in many other jurisdictions. For critical assessments see Aradau (2015) and Wall (2019).
38. Rose Powell, New Year's security upgrade. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Dec. 2014.

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