

GOING ROGUE

The normalisation of under-cover policing

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We don't like undercover cops in Britain. We like our cops big, uniformed and bovine, not slippery and sly. The British have Dixon while the USA has Dirty Harry. There are no British Princes of the City - and therefore no Serpicos. Jack Regan of the Sweeney may have been hard drinking, violent and sexist, but he wore his kipper tie, tight jacket, and flares like a uniform (see Open University on late night TV), and he never sold out to the villainry, only going over to the other side when at the wheel of his Cortina. We like our rules bent not broken, and the undercover police officer must play by a code that is impossible to



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regulate, and often difficult to justify according to legal precepts.

The rhetoric of British policing has traditionally been antipathetic to any form of covert activity. Although this is largely due to the enacted environment of detective work being located some distance from that of the uniformed officer, the contrast in working environments is exaggerated by wide differences in their historical, organisational and ideological foundations. The introduction in 1829 of a benign, uniformed, 'Bobby', established the importance of prevention as the basis of the early British police mandate, and did much to allay the fear of republicanism that was associated with

continental policing (Radzinowicz, 1956).

From prevention to detection

Covert policing was associated initially with France and the republican threat, and has since become established as something both alien and dangerously seductive. Consequently any move towards non-uniformed policing has been carried out with few fanfares. The forming of the detective branch as early as 1842, and its gradual evolution - via several revelations and bribery scandals into the Criminal Investigation Department in 1877, should be regarded as a significant shift from prevention to detection, and by association of covert policing. The CID was formed as a totally autonomous force with a structure and hierarchy bearing little resemblance to the uniformed branch. The ensuing expansion of the CID has resulted in an ambiguous image of state control, punctuated alternatively by scandal and

narratives of informal, sometimes omnipotent competence (see Hobbs 1988 pp 17-83).

Yet even if its disclosure should create scandal, some form of covert activity has always found its way into the toolbox of the police. Further, the withdrawal of most detectives into a bureaucratic role, thereby removing

officers from the routine acquisition of intelligence, makes specialised covert incursion into criminal cultures a pragmatic inevitability.

The new law 'n' order

However, the frenzy that has accompanied the apparent abandonment of any political control over the economy, has created a parliament of rabid Rambos who, in seeking to devise something for the electorate, promise to dish out vote winning portions of law and order to the most revolting, despicable and dangerous in our society: football fans. As Gary Marx has indicated in his seminal work on covert policing, "Undercover means lend themselves well to inferences of

guilty knowledge" (1988 pg 48), and in late twentieth century Britain there are few more guilty than football fans.

Prime Minister Thatcher promised a tight law and order regime that would allow first generation home owners to walk tall on their newly reclaimed avenues and boulevards. Alas, set pieces such as the 1984-85 coal dispute are expensive, and the police versus inner city youth fixtures of the early 1980s lost much of their popular appeal with the murder of PC Blakelock in 1985. Meanwhile the grinding drudgery of escalating burglary, car crime and violence, was rapidly reducing significant pockets of our abandoned cities to deathless parodies of their industrial prime.

Something had to be done. Football in England was a perfect arena for law and order campaigns, being physically contained and highly routinised, with press and most importantly TV cameras ever present. When a small group of Millwall, Leeds or Chelsea fans performed for the cameras, it made News at Ten. The horror of Heysel, and periodic deaths or injuries in car parks, pubs and railway stations, made it possible for our political leaders to ignore the daily misery endured by many of its citizens, in favour of an all out assault on the national game.

Policing football hooliganism

Undercover operations against football hooliganism were pioneered at Scotland Yard's Public Order branch in 1985. Volunteers were, in some cases, given false identities and set forth to live the hooligan life. Mass arrests followed often in dawn raids involving dozens, sometimes hundreds of police officers. Wherever the 'dawn swoop' was carried out the hooligans had been 'kept under surveillance' and 'infiltrated'. Ringleaders were identified, many of whom were charged with conspiracy either to cause an affray or to commit violence, indicating that there was seldom sufficient evidence to link individuals with specific crimes. Those arrested were revealed as the 'generals' or notorious core hooligans.

As has been suggested elsewhere, the success of police operations against organised football violence has at best been mixed, with cases dropped for lack

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of evidence, evidence fabricated (Armstrong and Hobbs, 1994), suggestions that undercover officers had 'gone rogue', and in at least two cases

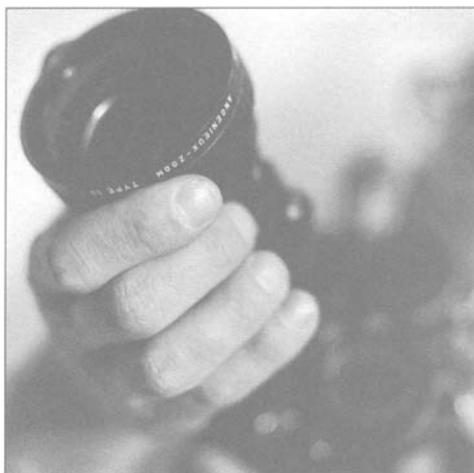
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undercover police officers arrested by uniformed officers. Despite the traditional antipathy to covert policing mentioned above, its strategic utility in and around football grounds, coupled with the intensive use of CCTV, has succeeded in pushing state surveillance up a couple of crucial notches (Armstrong and Hobbs 1994). Walk past a stadium on a Saturday afternoon and you stand a good chance of being filmed by a police officer with a portable video camera on his shoulder. Pay £15 or £20 to watch a match and you will be filmed,

photographed and your space infiltrated by undercover cops. Imagine the outcry of the Breweries, if the state, in response to the time honoured carnage of the beer monsters, attempted to impose a similar regime upon your local branch of the "Pig and Scrotum".

Marx has noted that undercover policing is well suited to partisan political use (1988:138), and as a strategy against football violence it has more symbolic than pragmatic utility (Manning 1977). Nobody wishes to see football grounds turned into battlefields, but the new moral order embraces forms of social control that threaten to manipulate large swathes of our population who are problematic, rather than inherently criminal.

Covert policing should be reserved for the most serious end of the crime spectrum. But now that it has been normalised along with various forms of electronic surveillance, we may see it emerge as a prime piece of heroic rhetoric that bears little relation to most people's lived experience of crime.



Robert Newton

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