



Spycops in context: Counter-subversion, deep dissent and the logic of political policing

Connor Woodman
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About the author

Connor Woodman is the 2017/18 Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust Research Fellow, hosted by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

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Foreword

Since late 2017 the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has been delighted to host the author of this briefing, Connor Woodman. Connor came to the Centre as The Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust Research Fellow. This annual research fellowship gives young researchers the opportunity to further develop their skills and interests through partnering with a host not-for-profit organisation for one year.

This is one of two papers which are a product of this fellowship. We are pleased to publish these papers as part of our commitment to supporting the fellowship's intentions: to provide a dedicated space to develop research interests and enhance the long term development of radical research.

The subject of these papers, the undercover policing of political groups in England and Wales, is a challenging one for any researcher. Developing a research agenda about the hidden subject of undercover policing requires many skills. The energy and determination with which this opportunity was approached are in evidence in this publication as well as its companion paper, *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*.

The existence of police units with officers dedicated to assuming false identities to infiltrate political movements in England and Wales has promoted numerous questions. Chief amongst these has been: why? What was the rationale for these activities? It is the argument of this report that the official justifications offered for who was targeted – that of crime control, countering violent domestic extremism or maintaining public order – do not offer adequate explanation. Connor Woodman makes the case here that the two police units under investigation are a part of a broader apparatus which functions to constrain and eliminate deep dissent against Britain's hierarchical social relations. Not only a counterblast to official explanations, this report also boldly scopes out what an analytical framework for an alternative explanation could look like.

Helen Mills is Senior Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

The companion paper, *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*, provides a chronological sweep of how the British state has monitored and combatted political dissent since the 1800s.

See www.crimeandjustice.org.uk.

Introduction

To take one example of one of these groups, they were not made up of a bunch of eccentric, if well-meaning, hippy idealists [...] but they supported violent resistance to oppression and they believed that in particular ‘violence was needed to transform society and challenge the ruling classes’ [...] you will undoubtedly need to see [...] the work the police did to uphold the democratic values of this country by avoiding influence by industrial or extremist means.

Metropolitan Police lawyer at the Undercover Policing Inquiry, 2016¹

Few have looked at the state long and hard from its sordid underside – an interstice that is the sum of addiction, avarice, blackmail, cowardice, scandal, torture, venality, and violence.

Alfred McCoy, 2011²

For over 40 years, two police units – the London-based Special Demonstration Squad (SDS, 1968-2008) and the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU, 1999-2011) – sent undercover officers into social movements, political organisations and family justice campaigns, often for five-year long deployments. These ‘spycops’ slept with activists, fathered children, engaged in high-level direct actions, stood in court under false names, and stole the identities of dead children. Only exposed in 2010, their actions are subject to a public inquiry set to report in 2023.

Scandal, whilst it often emerges in a near-instantaneous flash of headlines, Tweets and condemnation, is not usually reflective of a singular or spectacular event. Rather, it is often the outcome of some deeper, underlying process or activity which may have gone long unnoticed or concealed. The moment of scandal is the moment when the contradictions rupture, when the grating of social inequality, regulatory neglect and corner-cutting spark the flames of Grenfell Tower; when the whistle-blower, the journalist and the victim form a circuit, lighting the bulb hanging over undercover policing.

When undercover infiltration of political groups was sanctioned and funded at the highest levels of the Metropolitan Police and Home Office, and continued for 40 years – with its tactics copied and expanded nation-wide in the 2000s – it is vital to ask why. What is the political logic underlying the existence of such specialised policing units?

The undercover units were one part of a vast, long-running anti-subversion apparatus in Britain

Many explanations of and justifications for Britain’s political policing units have been proffered. The companion paper, *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*, refuted one dominant line of argument: that the undercover units were ‘rogue’ squads, not fundamentally indicative of anything about Britain’s police or social order.³ In reality, they were one part of a vast, long-running anti-subversion apparatus in Britain: for over 100 years, significant time, resources and organisational effort has been put into monitoring, containing and disrupting political actors challenging the status quo. The scale was industrial – over 1,000 organisations were caught in the SDS’s and NPOIU’s surveillance net alone.⁴

In official state discourse undercover units protect parliamentary democracy from dangerous subversive and extremist elements

Other understandings of Britain’s political police have been advanced. For some, the political police neutrally enforce public order and social tranquillity. For others, the only concern is the conduct of undercover officers, their impact on individual rights. In official state discourse, the undercover units protect parliamentary democracy from dangerous subversive and extremist elements; the issue is one of crime, even if politically-motivated.

This publication moves beyond such explanations. Whilst they contain elements of truth – although not always in the way their purveyors believe – they all fail to account for the breadth of the surveillance, its consistent patterns, and the statements of

secret state officials themselves. The *Spycops in context* papers are an attempt to unmask the strategic logic of British political policing, a logic only partly captured by the dominant narratives.

The companion paper offers a chronological narrative history of the British state's concern with political dissent. Whilst the papers can be read in any order or in isolation, it is recommended to begin with *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*. This publication begins to peel back the surface explanations of British political policing, revealing the issue's underbelly, its structural and political-economic logic. This paper seeks to ask, who and what do the political police protect?

The political police protect the dominant hierarchical social relations which order British political and social life

The answer, it will be suggested, is that the political police, of which undercover officers are one part, protect the dominant hierarchical social relations which order British political and social life; social relations of racism, patriarchy and class. The secret state protects these social relations from 'deep dissent': 'dissent that seriously or fundamentally challenges the existing apportionment of wealth and power in society'.⁵

This publication garners evidence of this common explanatory denominator apparent in the history and practice of the secret state. An examination of which organisations and individuals are routinely targeted, of official state discourse, and of the statements of secret state officials, reveals a clear pattern. Groups which – whether or not they possess explicitly revolutionary aims – threaten to denaturalise, undermine or shatter dominant state-enforced social relations, are liable to surveillance, infiltration and disruption. This logic renders the otherwise-bewildering array of groups subject to state surveillance explicable.

This paper abstracts from more immediate causal variables driving particular behaviours of the police and intelligence agencies, in order to more clearly analyse the long-term underlying foundations and patterns of the secret state. Differences in the purpose and cause of state surveillance across time and space are largely placed to one side, whilst the primary logic structuring political policing is centred. This paper does not make a claim to explain all the behaviour of the secret state and the police, only to clarify its key function and role in the social power struggle. A more fine-grained analysis and documentation of the particular political dynamics at play in the relation between state and movement at given times and places must be left to others. The *Spycops in context* papers lay out a framework of analysis for that task.

In what follows, certain key concepts, discourses and features which arise when examining the secret state – for example, counter-subversion, public order, and capitalism – are examined in an attempt to unveil the political logic underlying the state's concern with dissent. For an explanation of terminology and the different agencies which comprise the British secret state apparatus, see the 'Terminology, intelligence and state agencies' section of *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*. Throughout this publication, other common explanations of, and justifications for, political policing are critiqued and expanded. Examples of political policing in other liberal democracies are brought in to illustrate how the structure of state repression recurs elsewhere.

Groups which threaten to denaturalise, undermine or shatter dominant state-enforced social relations, are liable to surveillance, infiltration and disruption

Whilst the SDS and NPOIU have been shut down, the political logic underlying them remains. The century-old counter-subversion apparatus will remain a feature of the British polity for as long as social strife and conflict continues – analysing that apparatus's history and practice will equip us better for the turbulent times that likely lie ahead.

Counter-subversion: protecting parliamentary democracy?

What does the secret state claim to be protecting, and from what? In official parlance, countering so-called subversion was a substantial component of Special Branch and MI5's responsibilities from their inception, and was the *raison d'être* of the Special Demonstration Squad. There is no better place to begin an exploration into political policing than the state's own official discourse – but that discourse stands in curious contradiction to many of the actual practices and features of the secret state.

The definition of 'subversion'

Subversion, as constitutionally defined for the security services in 1972, consists of actions:

...which threaten the safety or well-being of the State and are intended to undermine or overthrow Parliamentary democracy by political, industrial or violent means.⁶

Several things stand out. Firstly, the object of 'safety' and 'well-being' is not the general population, or even a particular set of people: it is the set of institutions which constitute 'the State'. Sometimes officials render the formulation more prosaic, as when then Home Secretary Merlyn Rees admitted in 1978 that Special Branch's job was to 'collect information on those who I think cause problems for the state'.⁷

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Secondly, the definition commits the security services to protecting a particular *state form*: parliamentary democracy. This state form might more accurately be termed 'parliamentarism', given the drastically *undemocratic* nature of the British political system, even according to the classic tenets of liberal democracy.⁸ Regardless, this commitment to parliamentary democracy is a representational device regularly used to justify the secret state's actions, both to its practitioners and the wider public. In 2015, a former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, for example, described the establishment of Special Branch in the 1880s as a response to efforts to 'change the political course and direction of a democratically elected government'.⁹ The efforts he refers to were those of the Fenians, an armed anti-colonial movement attempting to eject the British from Ireland. How 'democratically elected' the British government was in the 1880s, let alone in colonised Ireland, is not directly relevant here. The point is that parliamentary democracy is a legitimising frame regularly drawn upon by the secret state. As we will see, however, the secret state routinely violates parliamentary democracy itself.

One of the primary sites of counter-subversion practice and thought has been within British colonies

The example of the Fenians points to a curious feature of the state's counter-subversion discourse: its connection with British imperialism. One of the primary sites of counter-subversion practice and thought has been within British colonies. General Frank Kitson's 1971 book, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping*, a classic of anti-subversion literature,

is primarily concerned with suppressing indigenous anti-colonial rebellions.¹⁰ In Malaya, Kenya and elsewhere, those seeking self-determination from the British Empire were denigrated as subversive operators. If, as some would have it, countering subversion is about protecting Britain from internal elements linked to a hostile foreign power, the intimate connection between counter-subversion and imperialism appears hard to comprehend. As a foreign power, Britain was invading and conquering overseas domains, and resistance to that meddling was labelled 'subversion'. What was being protected by the imperial counter-subversion apparatus, it seems, was something other than Britain's domestic parliamentary order.

Undermining parliament in order to protect it

Even domestically, the practice of the secret state appears in tension with its formal veneration of ‘parliamentary democracy’. Parliament is not, in fact, inoculated from the secret state’s attentions. Parliamentary practitioners have found themselves monitored, elected governments have been undermined by factions in the intelligence agencies, and violations of parliamentary democracy are even constitutionally embedded within the secret state’s official responsibilities.

Violations of parliamentary democracy are even constitutionally embedded within the secret state’s official responsibilities

1980s, the system had expanded to include MI5 vetting of civil servants for any subversive views or associations, with 1,420 employees – primarily Trotskyists, with no connection to any foreign powers – kept from promotions, moved around and pushed out.¹² A range of MPs – Diane Abbott, Jeremy Corbyn, Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and Peter Hain, to name a few – has been monitored whilst being elected MPs, none of whom had any links to a foreign power.¹³ Clearly, then, commitment to parliamentarism and lack of connection with foreign espionage is insufficient to protect one from the secret state’s machinations.

Further, the 1924 Zinoviev letter and the 1970s ‘Wilson Plot’ – dealt with in *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain* – illustrate how sections of the security services are willing to try and topple ‘democratically-elected’ parliamentary governments in the interests of their particular politics. These episodes, however, are usually deviations from the constitutional purpose of the intelligence agencies, linked to particular maverick individuals and cliques.

Violations of parliamentary democracy are more constitutionally embedded within the intelligence agencies than these examples suggest. For decades it has been standard procedure for MI5 to monitor parliamentary candidates for subversive associations or links with foreign powers. Dossiers on potentially unreliable politicians are drawn up before the election and handed to the new prime minister, who is expected to keep those individuals out of the cabinet – the existence of the practice is not even secret.¹⁴

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The official definition of counter-subversion, then, fails to articulate precisely what it is the secret state is supposed to be protecting. If civil servants and MPs can be monitored, ministers’ views secretly declared out of bounds by the intelligence agencies, and anti-colonial resistance labelled ‘subversion’, something more than simple lack of enthusiasm for British parliamentarism must be operating. An examination of the state discourse of ‘domestic extremism’, which emerged partly to replace the language of subversion, moves us slightly closer to an answer.

Domestic extremism: the criminality of the minority?

The bombings and other violent activities of a small group of terrorists [...] brought about an extension of the Metropolitan Police remit to cover what we might describe as 'political crimes'.

Lord Peter Imbert, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (1987-1993), 2015¹⁵

The twenty-first century has witnessed the decline of the state discourse of subversion and the emergence of a new language: domestic extremism.¹⁶ Like the official discourse of subversion, the rhetorical justification and explanation of domestic extremism policing fails to capture its actual practices and effects.

Domestic extremism defined

The definition of domestic extremism differs subtly from that of subversion. In the 2000s, the term included:

Activity, individuals or campaign groups that carry out criminal acts of direct action in furtherance of what is typically a single issue campaign. They usually seek to prevent something from happening or to change legislation or domestic policy, but attempt to do so outside of the normal democratic process.¹⁷

The term trades off the long-running use of the label 'extremist', which became infused within the British state's political lexicon in response to the Indian anti-colonial movement in the early twentieth century. 'Police reports produced by the colonial administration in India', Alun Kundnani explains, 'categorized anticolonial militants who favored full independence as "extremists," while those, such as the Indian National Congress, whose demands were limited to administrative reform, were dubbed "moderates"'.¹⁸ Like the counter-subversion infrastructure, this domestic political outgrowth has deep imperial roots.¹⁹

The rhetorical justification and explanation of domestic extremism policing fails to capture its actual practices and effects

In the definition of domestic extremism, the 'normal democratic process', an undefined and ambiguous phrase, stands in for 'parliamentary democracy'. Only political energy channelled through the ballot box, or perhaps limited to formal lobbying of parliamentary representatives, appears to be permitted. This broad definition essentially inhibits the self-organisation of those outside the ruling class, at least when it has any political direction. Industrial activity with any aims above and beyond the immediate conditions of workers, such as a solidarity strike or factory occupation, can now be considered domestic extremism. Legislation limits legal strike activity to narrow and limited action over pay and conditions, whilst trade unionists who embrace wider political strikes fall under the domestic extremism branch of the state.

Depoliticising the political

Domestic extremism discourse tends to emphasise criminality more than subversion discourse, partly a reflection of its etymology in the milieu of public order policing. Anton Setchell, former National Coordinator for Domestic Extremism, said in 2009 that the term 'refers only to the crime and disorder committed by this minority, not their views'. The police's aim, according to Setchell, is merely to stop a 'protest being hijacked by the small minority who seek to commit criminal acts to further their cause'.²⁰

The reality is that a large proportion of those on the domestic extremism database have no criminal record. The lack of criminal records on the part of those subject to the label appears to undermine police claims that domestic extremism is about a criminal minority or groups intent on carrying out 'criminal acts of direct action'.

The police have attempted to bring consistency to this seeming contradiction by asserting that, 'Just because you have no criminal record does not mean that you are not of interest to the police. Everyone who has got a criminal record did not have

one once'.²¹ This argument dramatically expands the pool of people potentially liable to political surveillance to those not actually engaged in any criminalisable activity.

Domestic extremism is often mixed into a stew of labels – ‘terrorist’, ‘criminal’, ‘subversive’ – which operates to obscure the political content of an individual’s or group’s actions, portraying them as irrational and dangerous threats to society’s order which can only be met by force. A recent Counter-Terrorism Policing slide show, for example, divides UK-based extremism into ‘Islamist Terrorism’, ‘Kurdish Groups’, ‘Extreme Right Wing’ and ‘Domestic Extremism’ – the latter of which includes anti-fascists, animal liberation organisers, hunt saboteurs and online hacktivists.²²

The label ‘subversive’ can be applied to a broad swathe of individuals, depoliticising their actions and legitimising harsh state responses

Like the label ‘subversive’, the concept ‘criminal’ can be applied to a broad swathe of individuals, depoliticising their actions and legitimising harsh state responses (surveillance, arrest, imprisonment). The notion of domestic extremism, with its emphasis on criminality, constitutes part of the ‘high-security wall that the concept of the criminal builds around the sphere of sanctioned political engagement’.²³

The ‘domestic extremist’ label can be placed on anyone who attempts political self-organisation outside of the parliamentary sphere

Thus, a whole swathe of activities ordinarily considered well-within the normal bounds of liberal public engagement – demonstrations, public rallies, perhaps even leafleting and petitioning – are now open to being sullied with the label ‘extremist’ and ‘criminal’, potential targets for police surveillance and suspicion. The ‘domestic extremist’ label can be placed on anyone who attempts political self-organisation

outside of the parliamentary sphere, from peace campaigners in Brighton and living wage campaigners in Birmingham to anti-fracking organisers in Lancashire and Green members of the London Assembly.²⁴ The discourses of subversion and domestic extremism are, in essence, a way of delegitimising any substantial dissent, parcelling off those who desire change from the non-subversive population, rendering the subversives fair game for state repression. In short, these discourses are the ideological coat worn by the material apparatus of force which operates against deep dissent.²⁵

Deep dissent, social relations and public order

If the official pronouncements of the counter-subversion apparatus appear in tension with the actual behaviour and policies of the police and intelligence agencies, we must look elsewhere to understand the real function of the secret state.

Counter-subversion is a state-created discourse which means little outside of the actual practices of its enforcement. Whilst its formal definition is interesting and revealing, one cannot understand the function, role and meaning of counter-subversion in Britain without looking at how it is concretely historically enforced, who is subject to it, and why.

The breadth of state monitoring

The sheer scope of individuals and organisations classifiable as subversive – 50,000 people according to MI5 in 1985,²⁶ with maybe a million individuals' details recorded by the secret state in some form – helps illustrate counter-subversion's function.²⁷ Sometimes, MI5 and Special Branch claimed that their interest was only with subversive individuals and fractions operating within wider milieus – Communists within a strike, rather than the strike itself – but locating the supposed radical-within often requires monitoring, in some form, an organisation's complete membership. Entire mass movements have been formally or informally labelled subversive: CND in the 1960s and 1980s, the National Council for Civil Liberties (now Liberty) in the 1970s.²⁸

Once an individual or organisation is labelled a 'subversive' or 'domestic extremist', a whole panoply of state powers can be arrayed: phone taps, electronic monitoring, tailing, photographing and blacklisting for example. Those concerned with ending the war in Vietnam, halting the destruction of the living world, improving working conditions, stopping British military abuses in Northern Ireland, halting the mass slaughter of non-human animals, preventing nuclear apocalypse, abolishing the Crown, breaking down racism, achieving the vote for women and justice for murdered Black people – to name only a handful of examples – have been declared subversive by the British state.

Not all – and possibly only a minority – of the groups targeted aimed at the revolutionary overthrow of the state or parliament. Even two former Special Branch police officers, Ray Wilson and Ian Adams, in an otherwise-gushing recent history, write that many of the groups targeted historically 'could not be described as remotely subversive',²⁹ and that the 'term "revolutionary" was applied to a surprisingly wide range of organisations'.³⁰ Why, then, is such a large array of individuals and organisations encompassed within the actual practices of the counter-subversion apparatus?

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Enforcing hierarchical social relations

Nearly all of the groups targeted aimed to disrupt, denaturalise or dissolve some set of dominant social relations which the state has and does serve to enforce. To take one example, the Legitimation League campaigned at the end of the nineteenth century to lift the social stigma attached to children born out of wedlock. On first glance, it is hard to argue that the League sought to 'threaten the safety or well being of the State' or 'undermine or overthrow Parliamentary democracy' – the definition of subversion – but it was infiltrated and literally destroyed by Special Branch in 1898.³¹

The problem was not that the Legitimation League posed a general revolutionary menace, but that it threatened to weaken the normative bonds of the Victorian nuclear family, norms which were, at least in part, state enforced and protected. Indeed, as late as 1994, MI5 still considered 'homosexuality, debt and promiscuity' to be 'character defects'.³² In this sense, the 'safety and well being' of the state was indeed threatened by the Legitimation League. Because the state helped to enforce an order based on the

Victorian family structure and division of labour, organisations seeking to reconfigure this gendered order were challenging the state.

As late as 1994, MI5 still considered 'homosexuality, debt and promiscuity' to be 'character defects'

the US to the British Empire to apartheid South Africa, the state has been a primary upholder of the racial hierarchy. Anti-racist campaigns, revolutionary or not, soften the glue of the racial order, confronting a basic mechanism of power. Resistance to foundational social relations – deep dissent – cannot be tolerated by the state which enforces them. From this vantage point, the 'wide range' of organisations targeted by the state, to take the words of the bewildered historians of Special Branch, does not appear so 'surprising' after all.

This puts the SDS's deployments into Black justice campaigns in a slightly different light. On one level, the deployments – for example, officers infiltrating groups campaigning over the police handling of the 1993 Stephen Lawrence murder – were a simple attempt to protect the institutional reputation of the police.³³ This was certainly one motivation for the operations.

But on another level, the operations served to bolster the racial order at the heart of British life. They served to protect the hierarchical social relations underlying the British polity. Race (and racism) itself is socially constituted through mental conceptions and material practices. There is no unchanging, biological 'race' which can be read off a person's genetic code; race is a historically ever-shifting, socially-imposed category. As such, the racial practices of the state – the large number of Black people put in prison, the disproportionate deployment of police into Black areas, the lower educational standards, pay and life earnings of Black people in the UK – are partly *constitutive* of the racial order.³⁴ Police practices routinely impact people of colour more substantially than White people in the UK, from stops in public to strip searches to deaths in custody.³⁵ This experience is partly what it means to be a person of colour (and poor) in Britain. The SDS's deployments into family justice campaigns, a deliberate sabotaging of attempts to challenge the racist practices of the police, are themselves one facet of the racist social relation. Indeed, the police have long been at the sharp edge of the enforcement of, and a primarily target of resistance to, the British racial order.

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Similarly, Special Branch has long functioned to bolster patriarchal relations. For one, the Branch actively worked against the Suffragettes, possibly extending the number of years it took for women to win the vote.³⁶ Other feminist and/or women-centred organisations, like the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp and Big Flame, were infiltrated by the SDS to unknown effect.³⁷ Secondly, the activities of the SDS were themselves 'institutionally sexist', as described by the victims.³⁸ Women activists were treated as disposable sources of information and reputation-boosters for infiltrating officers, deceived, lied to and abandoned: a paradigmatic example of state-enforced misogyny. Indeed, one woman who was deceived into an intimate relationship with an undercover officer felt like she had been 'raped by the state'.³⁹

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concern with those who would alter society's underlying social relations, whether racial, colonial, gendered or classed. The counter-subversion apparatus ossifies these relations, rendering attempts to shift them like dragging a shovel through half-set concrete.

Similarly, many of the anti-racist groups and Black justice campaigns monitored over the last 60 years have lacked explicitly revolutionary intentions, but their limited aims nonetheless cut against one of the most fundamental ordering principles of the British polity: racism. Racism has been a staple of British imperial domination and domestic inequality. From

the US to the British Empire to apartheid South Africa, the state has been a primary upholder of the racial hierarchy. Anti-racist campaigns, revolutionary or not, soften the glue of the racial order, confronting a basic mechanism of power. Resistance to foundational social relations – deep dissent – cannot be tolerated by the state which enforces them. From this vantage point, the 'wide range' of organisations targeted by the state, to take the words of the bewildered historians of Special Branch, does not appear so 'surprising' after all.

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It is clear from this history of enforcement that rather than purely protecting the institution of parliamentary democracy, the counter-subversion apparatus is really about excluding 'deep dissent': 'dissent that seriously or fundamentally challenges the existing apportionment of wealth and power in society'.⁴⁰ Whether British social movements, dissenting parliamentarians or anti-colonial guerrillas, the term's unifying essence is a

The public 'order' of what?

Why should the stability and 'smooth functioning' of the nation state be deemed to have more value than facilitating challenge to its basic injustices?

Spalek and O'Rawe, 2014⁴¹

I know you got to disturb the peace when you can't get no peace.

Aretha Franklin, 1970⁴²

This analysis undermines descriptions of undercover infiltration and political surveillance as the neutral enforcement of 'public order', an oft-repeated police defence. Fundamentally, the question to ask is, what kind of order is being protected?

An African American walking into an all-White lunch counter in the segregated South was disrupting the racial order of US society; a Saudi Arabian woman taking the wheel of a car is disordering the gender structure of the Kingdom; a homeless person taking food from Tesco is undermining Britain's legal order of property. Alternatively, US financial institutions forcibly evicting one million people from their homes a year is legally sanctioned;⁴³ British intelligence collaborating with a global regime of kidnapping and torture is considered beyond the reach of the law;⁴⁴ the deaths of tens of thousands of British residents, possibly as a result of the Conservative austerity regime, is a quotidian aspect of the societal order.⁴⁵

British intelligence collaborating with a global regime of kidnapping and torture is considered beyond the reach of the law

If the law protects regimes of oppression and inequality – whether wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, racial discrimination and segregation, or explicitly homophobic legislation – then restricting the realm of legitimate dissent to that which remains within the law's bounds will likely fail to challenge those regimes. Even if the police were purely concerned with enforcing public order legislation against social movements, they would be helping to 'preserve the distribution of power in a given society'.⁴⁶

If the law protects regimes of oppression and inequality then restricting the realm of dissent to that which remains within the law's bounds will likely fail to challenge those regimes

The deep dissent which the state's anti-subversion and domestic extremism institutions monitor and undermine – and which most significant social movements in British history have at least flirted with – is intrinsically linked with breaking this form of public order. As philosopher Koshka Duff puts it, 'since business as usual means the oppressed not having their voices heard, speaking out against power usually requires some disruption of business as usual'.⁴⁷ Many discussions of political surveillance fail to recognise this fact.

The secret state's relation to the far-Left and -Right

Evidence for the analysis outlined above – that the counter-subversion apparatus is about constraining and eliminating deep dissent against Britain's hierarchical social relations – can be found in the history of the secret state's relation to fascist social movements.

The secret state has not meted out equal treatment to the far-Left and -Right. If political policing is merely about protecting democracy against extreme anti-democratic threats, one would expect the fascist and hard-Right to be given a proportional, if not far greater, fraction of the secret state's attentions. The history does not bear this expectation out; the secret state has even been intertwined with the far-Right in various respects.

Equal concern for Left and Right?

For one, there is a general asymmetry in focus between Left and Right. During Basil Thomson's reign as head of the Directorate of Intelligence from 1919-1921,⁴⁸ 'the movements most closely monitored were those on the Left where revolution appeared palpable. Individuals on the Right received only cursory attention'.⁴⁹ As European countries fell to fascism between the World Wars, 'MI5 paid "practically no attention" to [British] Nazism – nor did Whitehall expect that it should'.⁵⁰

Indeed, as historian Richard Thurlow records, 'As far as the Security Service was concerned the danger of British fascism was that it encouraged the growth of a much larger anti-fascist movement under the alleged influence and control of Comintern/

Only three of the confirmed 124 political groups infiltrated by the SDS and National Public Order Intelligence Unit were from the extreme-Right

CPGB'.⁵¹ In the 1970s, during the peak of the fascist National Front, MI5 had 'one person covering all of right-wing subversion', but 'many dozens' covering Communism, according to former MI5 officer Cathy Massiter.⁵² As recently as 2011, the National Domestic Extremism Unit did not consider the far-Right English Defence League a 'domestic extremist' group, unlike anti-fascist, environmental and animal rights campaigns.⁵³

The Special Demonstration Squad's (SDS) 'Tradecraft Manual' for undercover officers had, around the turn of the millennium, ten sub-sections dealing with various forms of progressive dissent (anarchist, environmentalist, pacifist etc.) but only one dealing with 'the right wing'.⁵⁴ As the *Guardian* and Undercover Research Group have recorded, only three of the confirmed 124 political groups infiltrated by the SDS and National Public Order Intelligence Unit over a 40 year period were from the extreme-Right.⁵⁵

The far-Right and the secret state: animosity or affinity?

Further, there has been an interpenetration of elements of the far-Right and the secret state. During the General Strike of 1926 the state's strike-breaker, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, was staffed in part by members of 'extreme right-wing organisations, the remnants of the British Empire Union, and the Economic League'.⁵⁶ In the 1920s, Maxwell Knight, soon to be MI5's star agent-runner, was Director of Intelligence for British Fascisti (BF).⁵⁷ In a 2015 history of Special Branch two former officers, Wilson and Adams, casually write that since BF's 'Grand Council included some very senior former military officers [...] BF could hardly be described as a subversive force'.⁵⁸ An explicitly fascist organisation, it seems, does not meet secret state officials' definition of 'subversion' if its membership is composed of members of the elite. Similarly, in the 1970s, the hard-Right and royalist paramilitaries which began

There has been an interpenetration of elements of the far-Right and the secret state

to crop up in opposition to Wilson's Labour government were often 'linked to individuals with senior intelligence, security or military connections'.⁵⁹ Unlike the Left, these groups were subject to little surveillance or harassment by the official secret services.

Parallel patterns are evident in comparable liberal capitalist states. Of hundreds of operations carried out under the FBI's mid-twentieth century Counterintelligence Programme, a multi-decadal effort to smash domestic political threats to the US order, 'nearly all of them [were] aimed at the Left'.⁶⁰ Infiltration of far-Right groups like the KKK appears to have been carried out mainly in order to provoke those organisations into more violent confrontation with the Left and civil rights movement.⁶¹

Of hundreds of operations carried out under the FBI's Counterintelligence Programme 'nearly all of them [were] aimed at the Left'

Indeed, the secret state's relation to the far-Right is a sub-set of a wider phenomenon of state collusion and interpenetration with neo-fascist organisations. From local Metropolitan Police officers shielding racist murder gangs in the 1990s,⁶² to German intelligence turning a blind eye to neo-Nazi killings in the 2000s,⁶³ to the Greek Hellenic police actively collaborating with the fascist Golden Dawn more recently, the state and the far-Right often have a cosy relationship.⁶⁴

Social relations, the secret state and the far-Right

Under most of the usual justifications offered for political surveillance – a group's proclivity for inter-personal violence, or its threat to democracy – the far-Right poses a substantially greater risk than the Left. Far-Right groups' very aims are for the forcible racial purification of the British polity, and their *modus operandi* is often street terror against migrants and other supposed deviants. Nothing similar could be claimed of most left-wing groups. The Metropolitan Police itself admits that the progressive organisation most heavily infiltrated by the state, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), 'does not have a recorded propensity for violence'.⁶⁵ Clearly, the criterion for infiltration – at least 24 officers over 37 years, in the case of the SWP – is not simply a group's criminal or violent potential.⁶⁶

The reason for the secret state's relative lack of interest in the far-Right, then, is because the Right does not pose a threat to the state-enforced social relations constituting the current order. Rather, the far-Right represents those social relations *in extremis*: racism, gendered division of labour, imperial expansion, extreme hierarchy, coercive punishment, business profitability.⁶⁷

There may be various reasons why the ruling class currently rejects the far-Right's extreme manifestations of society's social relations – but the Left, which seeks to undermine those social relations, reduce their efficacy, and even eliminate them

The Left represents deep dissent in a way the Right usually does not

completely, poses a qualitatively different threat to the ruling class. The Left threatens to undermine the material and ideological power bases of the ruling class itself. It represents deep dissent in a way the Right usually does not.

In 1933, MI5 finally began to investigate Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF). By 1936, as Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini consolidated their rule in the heart of Europe, MI5 ended the investigation, satisfied that the BUF 'did not pose a significant threat to the British constitution'.⁶⁸ The Nazi-supporting BUF, with its upper class members, racism and pro-capitalist orientation, was not considered a threat to the 'British constitution'. Contemporaneously, the Hunger Marchers, working-class unemployed struggling for state support during the Depression, were.⁶⁹ Rarely has such clear evidence been provided of the fundamentally political concerns of the secret state apparatus.

Surveillance and operations: tools in the power struggle

By providing intelligence you rob these groups of the element of surprise [...] Once the SDS get into an organisation, it is effectively finished.

Peter Francis, former SDS officer (1993-1997), 2010⁷⁰

A lot of their missions never happened because of me.

Anonymous former NPOIU officer, 2011⁷¹

If political policing is about monitoring, constraining and disrupting deep dissent against the *status quo*, the practices of the intelligence agencies – surveillance, infiltration, counter-operations – are tools in the power struggle between the state and deep dissenters.

The practices of the intelligence agencies are tools in the power struggle between the state and deep dissenters

The tools used, therefore, exhibit certain tactical logics and characteristics. Surveillance is not a purely passive endeavour; rather, tracking and studying threats to power is a necessary pre-requisite for acting against them. As two leading scholars of British intelligence, Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich put it, 'Intelligence is a force multiplier. It is a special kind of

information that not only provides warning, but also allows more effective action'.⁷²

This section examines the sometimes ambiguous role political policing plays in the power struggle between state and movement.

'Geysers in a volcanic field': why are so many small groups monitored?

Many factual materials are there [...] but they need to be pieced out, brought together, sorted out, and ordered from the policing point of view [...] in order to know with more certainty than now how extensive a revolutionary drive of various associations has become [...] what dangers of excesses threaten the country, people, and ultimately the authority.

H V Monsanto, Advocate General in the colonial Dutch East Indies, 1919⁷³

There is a group of people in the community [...] who are determined to provoke trouble with established authority [...] A careful watch must be kept on any intentions they may have.

James Callaghan, Home Secretary, 1968⁷⁴

Bewilderment has been expressed over the fact that British undercover officers, and the political policing system in general, have been aimed at such a dizzying array of political organisations. Many, though by no means all of these organisations, were small and seemingly insignificant. One full-time undercover police officer spent time infiltrating the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army.⁷⁵ Another penetrated a dozen-strong Maoist reading group.

Such operations open the door to a common mainstream response: ridicule. How laughable to see agents of the state growing their hair to infiltrate vegan squats in London. The infiltration and monitoring of such small groups, however, exhibits a clear tactical logic. An examination of the writings of one prominent character in British secret state history, Basil Thomson, helps illustrate this fact.

The infiltration and monitoring of small groups exhibits a clear tactical logic

Sometimes one elite figure synthesises the anxieties and conceptions of a ruling class in publicly-available writing. Such individuals give us a glimpse into the purpose and function of the power system they preside over, and the elite milieu in which they reside. Examining them holds value not only because they are influential in constructing the apparatus beneath them – and their personal imprint perseveres past their time – but because they express an elite consensus. The fact that these men reach the position which they reach is itself indicative of an institutional function; who gets promoted indicates which values, orientations and desires are given primacy.

Basil Thomson, the vainglorious, anti-semitic head of Special Branch following the First World War,⁷⁶ is one such figure whose honesty reveals much about British elite attitudes, and about the function of state monitoring. Thomson, who rose to prominence in the Branch 1913, was an appropriate representative of the ruling class response to the era's political turbulence. As a colonial official in Tonga, New Guinea and Fiji and governor of Dartmoor and Wormwood Scrubs prisons, he had presided over some of the British state's most repressive systems and had experience controlling unruly populations at the social margins.⁷⁷ Class conscious and conservative, Thomson believed before 1914 that 'unless there were a European War to divert the current, we were heading for something very like a revolution'.⁷⁸ The establishment shared his fear: in the midst of the massive strike wave of 1918-1919, 'Lloyd George summoned [Thomson] to No. 10 to reassure a group of Tory and Labour MPs that the politically subversive elements in the country were under control'.⁷⁹

Who gets promoted indicates which values, orientations and desires are given primacy

Thomson had a clear conception of the danger posed by small groups of political dissenters

Thomson's writings and career illustrate the explicitly counter-revolutionary function of the surveillance system. All potentially subversive groups must be monitored, according to Thomson, for one cannot predict in advance which groups will expand and gain a critical revolutionary mass.

Supporters of the *status quo*, Thomson warned in his memoirs, ought not to 'forget what determined minorities can do with an irresolute mass. A single fox will clear out a hen-roost while it is cackling its indignation to the skies'.⁸⁰ Thomson had a clear conception of the danger posed by small groups of political dissenters:

*There is a rapid evolution in political unrest. Subversive societies are like the geysers in a volcanic field. After preliminary gurgling they sprout forth masses of boiling mud and then subside, while another chasm forms at a distance and becomes suddenly active.*⁸¹

'In Paris', he noted, 'a street riot became a revolution'.⁸² For Thomson, 'minorities could make revolutions' and his job as a result was 'to watch the formation of subversive bodies'.⁸³ Thomson's words parallel those of a key architect of the early Special Branch in the 1880s, Edward Jenkinson, who argued that the activities of the Branch were 'not a work to be taken up in troubled times, and then to be abandoned. It must be carried on persistently, patiently and methodically [...] through quiet and uneventful times without any interruption'.⁸⁴

Indeed, Thomson's reign coincided with a particularly tumultuous social situation. Following the First World War, the labour movement stepped up industrial action, and trained ex-servicemen returning from the front represented, according to one historian, 'a movement whose disruptive power was capable of destroying the government'.⁸⁵ As Thomson would later write, 'I do not think that at any time in history since the Bristol Riots we have been so near revolution'.⁸⁶

This helps explain why the SDS spent so much time penetrating seemingly marginal and miniscule groups like the tiny London Greenpeace (no relation to its larger namesake) in the 1980s and 1990s. As Noam Chomsky has argued in relation to the domestic political operations of the FBI, the operative principle is that "preliminary stages of organization and preparation" must be frustrated, well before there is any clear and present danger of "revolutionary radicalism".⁸⁷ During the twentieth century, the fear of latent revolutionary passions bubbling to the fore was ever-present in the mind of the ruling class. Lord Milner, 'next to Lloyd George the most influential voice in the war cabinet' during the First World War, put it thus: 'I fear the time is very near at hand when we shall have to take some very strong steps to stop the "rot" in this country, unless we wish to "follow Russia" into impotence and dissolution'.⁸⁸ What political monitoring allows, then, is for the state to be in a position to take such 'very strong

During the twentieth century, the fear of latent revolutionary passions was ever-present in the mind of the ruling class

steps' when threatened from below. Leaders are noted, political divisions recorded, organisational forms studied. If the state has to act against these organisations in future, years of intelligence gathering can be drawn upon in the struggle.

Active disruption

Where the movement exceeds the bounds it will bite iron.

Johan Paul van Limburg Stirum, Governor General of the Dutch East Indies, 1919⁸⁹

The police know what they are doing, they know how to tackle these demonstrations, they do it very effectively.

Alan Johnson, UK Home Secretary, 2009⁹⁰

Some secret state operations are undertaken in a clear attempt to disrupt, and even destroy, organisations and campaigns. Firstly, localised campaigns can be undermined and defanged in the interest of a particular power centre: a campaign against police racism,⁹¹ an attempt to shut down a corporate animal research laboratory,⁹² or a battle against the expansion of fracking.⁹³

Some secret state operations are undertaken in a clear attempt to disrupt, and even destroy, organisations and campaigns

Secondly, the state can manoeuvre itself into a position to crush groups which might be able to bring about what MI5 described in 1948 as 'the revolutionary situation'.⁹⁴ Having extensive records on all would-be revolutionaries allows the state to take effective pre-emptive action, disrupting individuals and groups before they gain success.

Basil Thomson, the former Special Branch head, again represents a prime example of how intelligence feeds into operations to undermine threats to the established order. During the First World War, as Christopher Andrew records, 'One of his favourite weapons against pacifists, strikers and all varieties of labour militant was carefully cultivated rumour' designed to get striking workers to return to work.⁹⁵ As detailed in the *Spycops in context* companion paper, the state removed trade unions leaders from Clydeside in 1916-1917 in order to crush the wave of militancy which had developed there among munitions workers.⁹⁶ Thomson himself firmly believed that, 'a timely prosecution and conviction of one or two persons has a very sobering effect on the rest, and that when an agitator is sent to prison for two or three months he never regains his old ascendancy'.⁹⁷ The interconnected nature of the coercive institutions of repression – intelligence agencies, police, courts and prison – is rarely as openly articulated by those in power.

There are countless examples of the secret state's apparatus being turned towards active intervention against political dissent, from scuppering minor direct actions to destroying entire mass organisations. SDS officers, for example, are suspected to have occasionally subtly sabotaged political actions when doing so would not jeopardise their cover. Mike Ferguson, an early SDS officer who penetrated the Anti-Apartheid Movement at the end of the 1960s, 'foiled at least one demonstration by the anti-apartheid campaigners', according to Ferguson's Special Branch handler.⁹⁸ Jim Boyling, who became a 'key organiser' in Reclaim the Streets, delicately undermined the Carnival Against Capital in 1999.⁹⁹ Peter Francis, an SDS officer in the 1990s, has confirmed that his deployment in anti-racist organisations was designed to help him gather dirt on opponents of the police, including the family campaign of murdered Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence.¹⁰⁰ Whilst Mark Jenner was deployed within the Colin Roach Social Centre, which gathered evidence of police corruption and brutality in north London, the Centre suffered numerous suspicious robberies and Jenner was 'privy to confidential information on hundreds of people's policing cases'.¹⁰¹ It is highly probable that this sensitive information was handed back to Jenner's police handlers. Similarly, the NPOIU was influenced by the doctrine of 'intelligence-led policing', which unambiguously advocates 'disrupting' the activity of those groups, whether organised gangs or political collectives, which fall under its remit.¹⁰²

There are countless examples of the secret state's apparatus being turned towards active intervention against political dissent

Having extensive records on all would-be revolutionaries allows the state to take effective pre-emptive action

Other branches of the secret state have been even more explicitly concerned with counter-operations. The Foreign Office's Information Research Department (IRD) was oriented towards spreading anti-Communist propaganda, utilising the press and trade unions to undermine opponents of the British state. Officials in the late-1960s Labour government plotted to use the IRD

to smear, discredit and overthrow left-leaning trade union leaders like Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers Union and Hugh Scanlon of the Amalgamated Engineering Union.¹⁰³

Active counter-operations are even more well-documented in the US. Then-FBI Director J Edgar Hoover's instructions regarding Cointelpro lay out with stark clarity the explicit aims underlying the Bureau's surveillance, infiltration, burglary and provocation missions. Some of the 'long-range goals' listed by Hoover included 'prevent[ing] [the] rise of [a] "messiah" who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement', 'prevent[ing] the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations',¹⁰⁴ and 'to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralise' civil rights and Black Power groups.¹⁰⁵

Officials in the late-1960s Labour government plotted to use the IRD to smear, discredit and overthrow left-leaning trade union leaders

During periods of intense unrest, the establishment needs a pre-existing apparatus to enable the 'very strong steps' suggested by Lord Milner. A liberal commitment to freedom of opinion and due process can be swiftly sacrificed at the altar of the *status quo* when crisis beckons. As two legal academics, Keith D Ewing, C A Gearty put it, 'The First World War offers a fascinating study of a state in crisis and of the ease with which liberal values may be surrendered in times of emergency', with 'far-reaching restrictions on freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression'.¹⁰⁶ During the War, the German threat generally loomed largest, but as the menace of domestic unrest gathered pace, domestic subversion became the top priority, 'the most important part' of Special Branch's work, according to Sir Wyndham Childs, Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 1921-1928.¹⁰⁷

A liberal commitment to freedom of opinion and due process can be swiftly sacrificed at the altar of the status quo when crisis beckons

During the General Strike and Miners' Strike of 1926, the most significant mass threat to the British state and capital, 'emergency powers were used in peacetime to deal with large-scale labour unrest'. 'Virtually unlimited discretion was all-pervasive', and the conduct of the courts demonstrated how they will 'unquestioningly fall into line behind the

administration in times of national stress'.¹⁰⁹ This state of exception was swiftly normalised, as most of the emergency measures 'made their way into the regular law in the 1930s and thereafter'.¹¹⁰

The state's operations against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the 1980s and 1990s – which included seizing the union's assets, infiltrating its upper echelons and launching black propaganda against its leaders – similarly demonstrate the extent to which the secret state works not just to watch, but to contain and even destroy sub-altern power centres. The NUM was a bastion of working-class power, helping bring down a Conservative government in 1974. The ferocity of the state's attacks on the union – which, according to a leading authority on the issue, did 'corrosive damage [...] at the heart of the union over a long and crucial period' – can only make sense in this light.¹¹¹

This disruptive function of the secret state, however, is in tension with its monitoring function. Taking pro-active steps to scupper a particular action, or arresting key organisers and leaders, can threaten the state's sources of information. Indeed, former undercover drug officer Neil Woods has argued that the SDS and NPOIU could ride roughshod over the state's own rules and guidelines on undercover deployments because it was unlikely their operations would ever end in an attempted prosecution. Successfully convicting an organiser will often require the undercover officer to testify in court, ending his cover and deployment for good. Thus, as the 1980 Walker Report decreed for British state operations in Northern Ireland, it is usually preferable to preserve sources of information rather than take active disruptive steps, particularly when groups are small and pose relatively little threat. Disruption is most likely to be used in a situation of major ferment, or in a particularly intense battle between the state and an opposing force (during the 1984/1985 Miners' Strike, for example). As Victor Serge put it in his classic 1926 study of the logic of state repression, 'the immediate aim of the police is more to know than to repress. To know in order to repress at the appointed hour, to the extent desired – if not altogether'.¹¹²

The disruptive function of the secret state, however, is in tension with its monitoring function

In short, political policing does not merely violate individual rights to privacy and free speech: it enables the state, when it needs, to take vigorous action against the emergence of bottom-up influence and deep dissent.

The chilling effect

The movement can't function if trust between activists is eroded. When a network is riven by accusations and suspicions, organisation and practical actions become an impossibility.

Laura Oldfield Ford, spied on by an undercover NPOIU officer, 2013¹¹³

In some respects, you know, the police have had a result by me being exposed [...] the paranoia levels I would imagine within the activist community have probably gone through the roof.

Mark Kennedy, former NPOIU undercover officer (2003-2009), 2011¹¹⁴

Even when monitoring does not develop into counter-operations, the existence of the monitoring itself can have a chilling effect on dissidents, whereby individuals and organisations conscious of state surveillance self-limit their political activity.

The existence of the monitoring itself can have a chilling effect on dissidents

Whether or not the chilling effect is consciously intended by state planners, or is just a welcome by-product of their operations, is unclear. Intelligence officials do, on occasion, specifically state it as an objective or celebrate its appearance.

According to Tim Weiner, who studied the documentary record

of the FBI's 1960s Counter-intelligence Programme, the Bureau's instructions were explicitly designed to '[c]reate the false impression that an FBI agent stood behind every mailbox, that informants riddled their ranks'.¹¹⁵ Edward Jenkinson, who was integral to crafting the early Special Branch in London, noted with satisfaction in 1884 that his activity among the anti-colonial Irish Fenians had resulted in them 'working much more secretly than they did before' which made them 'distrustful of one another. No man feels sure that his most intimate friend is not a traitor, and they find it exceedingly difficult to get workers'.¹¹⁶

Examples abound of paranoia and suspicion scorching the core of an organisation. The London Corresponding Society (LCS), a reformist group inspired by the French Revolution, became thick with mistrust after state agents were sent to penetrate it in the 1790s. In response, the LCS's new constitution stated that, 'Persons attempting to trespass on order, under pretence of showing zeal, courage, or any other motive, are to be suspected. A noisy disposition is seldom a sign of courage, and extreme zeal is often a cloak of treachery'.¹¹⁷ In this way, the presence of state infiltration can inculcate a curious form of self-limiting politics in organisations subject to it. In the 1980s, to take another example, the editor of the National Union of Mineworkers' paper, Maurice Jones, was convinced that a close confidant to the Union's president was a CIA plant, helping foster acrimony and division.¹¹⁸ More recently, a study of the impact of the undercover policing scandal on the UK climate movement found that the revelations 'isolate[d] activists from the wider public. Inner circles tightened, as activists began to enquire into the backgrounds of those they took action with'.¹¹⁹ Even prior to the exposure of the undercover policing units, Lord Collins in the Court of Appeal recognised the 'chilling effect' the deployment of surveillance teams could have on 'the exercise of lawful rights' in 2009.¹²⁰

The presence of state infiltration can inculcate a curious form of self-limiting politics in organisations subject to it

Whether or not this chilling effect is always intended by state planners, the outcome often remains. As Michael Loadenthal puts it, reviewing the use of intimate sexual relations by undercover British police officers: 'The deployment of undercover police, informants, provocateurs and other clandestine, activist-appearing agents constitute a disciplinary power encouraging a placid populace of self-regulating, inactive individuals'.¹²¹

What about the Labour Party?

I pay tribute to all the individuals who work for the [intelligence] agencies for their esprit de corps and courage.

Jack Straw, Labour Home Secretary, 2002¹²²

One response to the analysis above is to point out that the Labour Party has historically been at the forefront of efforts to expand the surveillance infrastructure. If political policing is about containing deep dissent, often in the form of left-wing activism, then why has Britain's historic party of the Left been one of the secret state's most enthusiastic supporters?

On the flip-side, some have argued that Labour and the security services are in opposition. Elements of the Parliamentary Labour Party have been subject to and at logger-heads with the counter-subversion apparatus, and the Zinoviev Letter and Wilson Plot suggest a mutually-antagonistic relationship.

Breaking down the different component parts of the Labour Party and their relation to the secret state, however, reveals a more complex reality. It is true, as Aldrich and Cormac put it, that there has long been 'considerable cross-party consultation behind the scenes on security matters and counter-espionage about which the public did not know'.¹²³ It is equally true that sections of the British elite, including the intelligence services, have fretted over Labour's potential as a vehicle for political tendencies hostile to the parliamentary system or capitalism. As Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George put it in 1920, 'The danger of a Labour Government is that they would not take effective action against extremists'.¹²⁴ The first Labour prime minister in 1924, Ramsay MacDonald, 'feared that MI5 was working against him',¹²⁵ and faced 'right-wing sections of the establishment, eager to smear' him and 'destabilise his nascent Labour government'.¹²⁶

If political policing is about containing deep dissent why has Britain's historic party of the Left been one of the secret state's most enthusiastic supporters?

Whilst the intelligence agencies and wider establishment milieu have watched Labour with concern, the Centrist and right-wing Labour leadership has equally utilised the intelligence agencies to repress and contain Labour's radical Left. To understand this, we have to comprehend the composition of power within the Labour Party. As Robin Blackburn describes, 'Within the party's *sui generis* structures, the Left's base has been the membership, the unions controlled the apparatus, conference and the National Executive Committee, and the Labour Right held sway in Parliament'.¹²⁷ The Labour Right has collaborated with the intelligence agencies to maintain the political purity of Labour's parliamentary section, to co-opt the unions, and to freeze out the Labour Left and the radical membership from effective influence. MI5's vetting of Labour parliamentary candidates and cabinet appointees, and the joint Labour-secret state effort to undermine the Left within unions and replace them with Centrist and Right-leaning leadership, illustrate this.

Sections of the British elite have fretted over Labour's potential as a vehicle for political tendencies hostile to the parliamentary system or capitalism

As early as 1949, Herbert Morrison, a Labour Home Secretary, was asking MI5 for information on Communist sympathisers – rather than just members – in order to 'smoke them out' of Labour.¹²⁸ Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee even demanded MI5 pass him information on 'signs of subversion amongst ministers' families',¹²⁹ and on Labour MPs who were members of 'subversive organisations', in order to prevent their

governmental ascent.¹³⁰ At the turn of the 1950s, Labour's National Executive Committee expelled hundreds of members from Labour based, in large part, on information from MI5 and MI6, channelled through the Foreign Office's Information Research Department.¹³¹ Later on in the century, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan would subject the Militant Tendency – a Trotskyist group working with the Labour Party – to 'a substantial programme of telephone-tapping, audio surveillance and agent penetration by MI5'.¹³² Whilst he was Home Secretary in the 1960s, Callaghan conspired to spread smears about the Communist leaders of the Transport and General Workers Union and the Amalgamated Engineering Union in order to bring them down and replace them with more right-wing figures.¹³³ Whilst there is fear within the secret state over Labour's history and intentions, there

has been, in essence, a shared interest and tactical alliance between the Labour Right, the secret state, and the leadership of the unions in freezing out deep dissent.

The Wilson Doctrine and the road to New Labour

Harold Wilson, Labour prime minister from 1964-1970 and 1974-1976, exemplifies this ambiguity. On the one hand, right-wing elements within MI5 and the army despised Wilson's Labour governments, and the latest scholarly assessments suggest that they conspired to undermine and even overthrow the prime minister.¹³⁴ On the other, Wilson 'was more security-minded than MI5 on union politics and left-wing entryism',¹³⁵ and once boasted to the captains of industry at a CBI meeting about 'the extent to which trade union leaders were "tapped or bugged"'.¹³⁶ The 1966 Wilson Doctrine, which barred the intelligence services from surveilling parliamentarians' phones, was a codification of this *quid pro quo*: leave the Centrist Labour leadership alone, in return for collaboration with MI5 and others to contain the extra-parliamentary and Labour hard-Left, and defang radical tendencies within the unions.

Wilson 'was more security-minded than MI5 on union politics and left-wing entryism'

This analysis helps explain why the 1945-1951 Attlee government expanded the UK's counter-subversion measures, and renders the closeness of New Labour to the security services less of a historical aberration. As Guy Liddell, once head of MI5's B Division, wrote in his diary in 1945, the Labour leadership has

often been 'more interested' in utilising MI5 than the Conservative Party.¹³⁷ By the 1970s, 'Labour prime ministers were inspecting MI5 files on their own MPs and wondering what level of risk was involved in appointing them to government'.¹³⁸ It is standard practice for MI5 to examine all parliamentary candidates for potentially subversive associations and histories. As revealed by former MI5 agent David Shayler in the 1990s, MI5 draws on files with 'edited transcripts of tapped telephone conversations, minutes of private meetings and source reports from agents attending political gatherings' to vet these potential national leaders.¹³⁹ In a meeting with the new prime minister, the head of MI5 issues its assessment of newly proposed cabinet ministers, giving it the astonishing power to police the boundaries of acceptable views within the UK executive. MI5 has admitted that nine prominent politicians' names were passed to John Major and Tony Blair after the 1992 and 1997 elections.¹⁴⁰

With a Labour Party now headed by several left-wing figures frozen out of the leadership and monitored by MI5 for years, it is unclear whether this relationship will continue. How can MI5 brief a prime minister on his new ministers' political affiliations when that very prime minister has and would probably continue to come under the secret state's remit himself? MI5 is already reportedly withholding more intelligence from Jeremy Corbyn and his team than it did from previous Labour leader, Ed Miliband.¹⁴¹ We may be about to witness a major breakdown in the careful alliance between Labour and the secret state – and perhaps a reversion to the conflictual relationship between the two which characterised Labour's early decades.

The Labour leadership has often been 'more interested' in utilising MI5 than the Conservative Party

Capitalism and the secret state

In any sort of war there are always going to be casualties.

Tony Robinson, Lancashire Special Branch Officer (1965-1981) describing state vetting of industrial workforces, 2003¹⁴²

Finally, the secret state's role and function cannot be divorced from the wider capitalist economic system. The sort of deep dissent which the secret state protects against is often, explicitly or implicitly, anti-capitalist dissent, opposition to capitalist social and property relations underlying British class society. The state counter-subversion system is itself structured by capitalism in various respects.

Direct connections between secret state and industry

At the most straightforward level, secret state operations and units can be set up in direct response to the needs of sections of industry. In the 1970s, MI5 and Special Branch made a deal with the Ford Motor Company whereby the corporation would establish a new plant near Liverpool in return for secret political vetting of the entire workforce – probably part of the work of MI5's dedicated Industrial Intelligence Section.¹⁴³ Two informed authors, Aldrich and Cormac, write that, 'The majority of large companies worked either with Special Branch or with private security companies, which performed much the same task'.¹⁴⁴ In 2004, the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit was, according to former head of the Unit, Superintendent Pearl, set up because the Home Office was 'getting really pressurised by big business – pharmaceuticals in particular, and the banks – that they were not able to go about their lawful business because of the extreme criminal behaviour of some people within the

There is an interpenetration and interaction between the secret state and a range of private capitalist actors

animal rights movement'.¹⁴⁵ In 2018, the Metropolitan Police finally admitted that Special Branch passed information on political organisers to the Consulting Association, which ran a blacklist of thousands of construction workers who were excluded from work for years as a result of their union organising and political affiliations.¹⁴⁶

There is also an interpenetration and interaction between the secret state and a range of private capitalist actors, whether the security departments of multi-national corporations or pro-business propaganda organisations. Two former Special Branch officers, in a largely glowing history of the Branch published in 2015, record deep links and information sharing during the 1920s between the hard-Right British Empire Union (BEU), conservative *Morning Post*, and the Industrial Intelligence Bureau (IIB), a private organisation which monitored the British Left and unions. Maxwell Knight, MI5's key agent-runner of the 1930s, for example, had previously worked for both the IIB and BEU.¹⁴⁷ 'There was', the former officers admit, 'a common interest shared by such agencies, by right-wing newspapers and official intelligence organisations (including Special Branch) and there is little doubt that information was exchanged between them'.¹⁴⁸

Under Harold MacMillan in the early 1960s, the government, along with large corporations like Ford and Shell, helped fund the creation of the Industrial Research and Information Service. The Service planted anti-Left propaganda stories in the press and infiltrated trade unions, creating 'anti-communist cells' willing to take on the Left in union elections.¹⁴⁹ In the 1980s, the Home Office reportedly hired private companies like Contingency Services to conduct deniable 'dirty work' which it did not want, or trust, the security services to do.¹⁵⁰ Margaret Thatcher was particularly willing to use 'her own band of privatised secret agents' to hound the 'enemies within'.¹⁵¹

Margaret Thatcher was particularly willing to use 'her own band of privatised secret agents' to hound the 'enemies within'

More recently, secret state officials have moved seamlessly between public work and the ever-expanding sphere of private corporate surveillance, as detailed by Eveline Lubbers.¹⁵² Former Special Branch officers would regularly take up posts as

Branch officers would regularly take up posts as industrial-relations managers in private companies

the former National Coordinator for Domestic Extremism, became head of global security at Laing O'Rourke, a construction company which was implicated in the running of an illegal blacklist.¹⁵⁵ A former head of the Special Branch Animal Rights National Index, Rod Leeming, later founded Global Open,¹⁵⁶ a private surveillance firm which former NPOIU undercover officer Mark Kennedy joined once his police deployment was terminated.¹⁵⁷ The NPOIU also reportedly received information from private security firms which infiltrated political groups.¹⁵⁸ An official publication from HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in 2012 reported that:

A close relationship was built up over a number of years between the NDEU [National Domestic Extremism Unit] and those industries which found themselves the target of protests [...] A number of police officers have retired from NDEU's precursor units and continued their careers in the security industry, using their skills and experience for commercial purposes.¹⁵⁹

industrial-relations managers in private companies.¹⁵³ The head of the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit, Superintendent Pearl, which advised 'thousands of companies on how to manage political campaigns', later became a non-executive director at Agenda Security Services, 'which provides employment-vetting services' for corporations.¹⁵⁴ Anton Setchell,

The coercive state and capitalist profitability

More fundamentally, however, protecting capitalist stability both at home and abroad is encoded within the DNA of the secret state. Maintaining the conditions for profit accumulation in general — rather than purely acting in the interests of particular sections of capital — motivates much of the secret state's operations, the targets selected, the side of conflicts chosen. This holds true for the police more broadly. In 1839, as the modern professional police was being rolled out across provincial England, the Royal Commission on Constabulary Force stated that the new police could be used to stop attempts 'to deprive the capitalist of his free choice of agents for the employment of capital'. In other words, the new police force could operate as a coercive force protecting strike-breaking efforts.¹⁶⁰

Indeed, historian Bernard Porter reported in 2009 that 'the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism' is on MI5's list of targets to protect from subversion.¹⁶¹ Similarly, HM Revenue & Customs and the Association of Chief Police Officers' created guidelines in 2003 which allowed the deployment of undercover police officers 'in the interests of the economic well-being of the UK'.¹⁶²

Protecting capitalist stability both at home and abroad is encoded within the DNA of the secret state

Although the UK's 'economic well-being' is rhetorically presented as the common interests of all, it is a coded reference to the maintenance and expansion of capital, and the class which controls and consumes it. That is, 'economic well-being' is a way of presenting as universal the particular interests the phrase serves. Similarly, the intelligence agencies' attempts to present their activity as neutrally preserving the interests of all — or of 'national security' — conceal how, as the *Spycops in context* papers have demonstrated, their actions systematically bolster a particular constellation of power within British society. This is why the security services routinely and systematically monitor unions and workers during an industrial dispute, rather than managers and shareholders. As the MI5 whistleblower David Shayler revealed, in the 1990s MI5 'continued to target and devote serious resources to industrial disputes and demonstrations [...] Using undercover agents, F Branch obtained a mass of detail about the demonstrators, picket lines, numbers of coaches, their travel plans and the leaders'.¹⁶³ Another MI5 officer who defected at the same time, Annie Machon, reported that she was placed under pressure to beef up her investigations into the Socialist Workers Party 'particularly after its (legitimate) support for a number of industrial disputes in the early nineties'.¹⁶⁴ In a class conflict, the secret state acts as a force multiplier for the owners of business, property and social power.

Capitalism, the police and class society

On occasion, elite writers candidly admit that 'subversion' is a politically correct way of describing activity opposed to the capitalist *status quo*. Lord Chalfont, a liberal former colonial army officer writing in 1974, warned of the 'subtle internal threat to political freedom' presented by 'the wide spectrum of political forces which seek, by methods ranging from outright subversion to legitimate political activity, to change fundamentally and irreversibly our existing political system'.¹⁶⁵ This was, for Chalfont,

'part of a generalised attack on the political system of the free world – a system of which Britain is an integral if increasingly fragile part'.¹⁶⁶ Chalfont's words mirror those of Lewis Powell shortly before his appointment to the US Supreme Court in 1971, who bemoaned the 'broadly based and consistently pursued' attack on the 'American economic system' by those whose objective was to 'subvert or destroy'. Throughout the memo, Powell calls on 'top management' of 'American business' to be 'concerned with protecting and preserving the system itself'.¹⁶⁷ For Chalfont and Powell, the wave of 1960s and 1970s social movements and struggles – or, subversion – threatened US and UK capitalism and industry, and required elite counter-struggle to turn back the tide. Calls for class war by the business class are seldom made so explicit, and rarely has the political and economic ideology inherent in the concept of 'subversion' been so flagrantly displayed.

In fact, the police as a whole, and not just the units focused on explicit political dissent, emerged as a means of maintaining the stratifications of capitalist society. As David Bayley puts it, 'The police do not prevent crime. This is one of the best kept secrets of modern life. Experts know it, the police know it, but the public does not know it'.¹⁶⁸ Numerous police scholars recognise, as Alex Vitale does, that 'the police exist primarily as a system for managing and even producing inequality by suppressing social movements and tightly managing the behaviours of poor and non-white people'.¹⁶⁹ Gary T Marx, the leading authority on undercover policing in the US, concludes that, '[t]he latent reason (or at least consequence) for using [undercover] agents may be to harass, control, and combat those who, while not technically violating any laws, hold political views and have life-styles that are at odds with the dominant society. It is difficult to give any other interpretation'.¹⁷⁰ Robert Reiner writes that, 'Specialist police forces develop hand in hand with social inequality and hierarchy. They are means for the emergence and protection of more centralised and dominant class and state systems'.¹⁷¹ The SDS and NPOIU are no exception, and may even be some of the most explicit examples of this fact.

On occasion, elite writers candidly admit that 'subversion' is a politically correct way of describing activity opposed to the capitalist status quo

Conclusion

It is vital, we say, that no rose-tinted spectacles are allowed to obscure the importance of what the police were doing.

Metropolitan Police lawyer at the Undercover Policing Inquiry, March 22, 2016¹⁷²

So little threat is posed by the vast majority of the targets: the rhetoric of necessity is used to cloak the essential triviality of the whole endeavour.

Katrina Forrester, London Review of Books, 2013¹⁷³

One response to the undercover policing scandal – and to the accusation that a particular organisation or individual is subversive – is to greet it with derision or ridicule. As Ian Birrell put it in the *Daily Mail*, ‘The protesters under scrutiny posed no serious threat either to the State or national security. Whatever your view of scruffy eco-warriors, few of them genuinely seek to destroy our society’.¹⁷⁴ Jenni Russell in *The Sunday Times* concurred, arguing that the most striking feature of the affair was, ‘what a waste of time much of this spying was, and how little it achieved’.¹⁷⁵

The huge anti-subversion apparatus of which undercover policing formed one part cannot be written off as ‘essentially trivial’

Power Desk, the National Domestic Extremism and Disorder Intelligence Unit, Animal Rights National Index and DS19 – cannot be written off as ‘essentially trivial’.¹⁷⁶ This apparatus has a clear function: to protect the existing distribution of wealth and power from deep dissent.

It is surprising how often academics and writers on the secret state resist this conclusion. John Prados, who studied the domestic political operations of the CIA in detail in his 2013 book, *The Family Jewels*, is at pains to paint a picture of bureaucratic ‘mission creep’, a state apparatus which expands its power and influence through its own internal momentum. This style of explanation, however, fails to account for why the bureaucratic expansion of the secret state systematically and consistently targets particular populations: those which challenge the major social cleavages ordering the capitalist polity. In one throw-away line, Prados writes that, ‘Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of all is that Family Jewels [political intelligence scandals] seem to have a tendency to replicate, suggesting that abuse fulfils some functional purpose’.¹⁷⁷

This ‘functional purpose’, or political logic, of the secret state’s domestic operations is what the *Spycops in context* publications have attempted to uncover. The state gains a detailed picture of the extant and nascent threats arrayed against it. In times of social crisis and upheaval, the police and intelligence agencies are in a prime position to move swiftly against the movement, taking out key leaders and containing any disruptive public disorder situations which might spiral into a significant uprising. During more tranquil eras, the secret state can help lubricate the accumulation of profit by delimiting those campaigns which threaten particular sections of British capital, and subtly undermine those who seek to radically challenge social relations of race, gender and class. The political policing system, indeed, is an inextricable part of the maintenance, protection and enforcement of those hierarchical social relations, an element of the state’s role in perpetuating racial stratification, the gender division of labour, and class society.

The political policing system is an inextricable element of the state’s role in perpetuating racial stratification, the gender division of labour, and class society

Thus, although Special Branch has been collapsed into the Metropolitan Police’s Counter-Terrorism Command, and MI5 has downgraded the importance of counter-subversion work, this merely reflects the lack of radical political mobilisation during the docile 1990s and 2000s. If substantial bottom-up challenges to the UK’s hierarchical social relations re-emerge, we can be

assured that the secret state's apparatus will refocus once more on the movements of resistance. The 2010 student demonstrations, 2011 riots, anti-austerity campaigns and leftist upsurge in Labour suggest this may well be on the horizon. MI5 states on its website that it would upgrade counter-subversion work 'if our monitoring of emerging threats suggested an increase in the subversive threat'.¹⁷⁸ Over a century of British history suggests this is likely to occur.

Progressive and left-wing movements in Britain have been systematically surveilled and infiltrated for decades. How successful these agencies have been in containing and restricting these movements is difficult to assess. What is certain is that the status quo has been bolstered by the secret state at various points; what is equally true is that resistance has and will continue as long as that *status quo* rests on class inequality and injustice.

The police's defence of its activity is more reflective of reality than liberal commentators' ridicule of undercover policing

society. Whether anti-militarist organisers confronting imperialism in the early twentieth century, or Black justice campaigners chaffing up against state racism in the 1990s, campaigns often threaten to flatten a particular set of hierarchical social relations. When they do, the intelligence services and police can be called to keep the problem within bounds, cloaked in the ideological dress-ware of counter-subversion and anti-domestic extremism. Public order – an order based on patriarchy, racism and massive inequality of wealth and power – is maintained in the face of demonstrations; the sanctity of parliamentarism is conserved, even from its own practitioners. The existence of the SDS and NPOIU only becomes explicable against this background.

If substantial bottom-up challenges re-emerge, we can be assured that the secret state's apparatus will refocus once more on the movements of resistance

In this sense, the police's defence of its activity is more reflective of reality than liberal commentators' ridicule of undercover policing. From the perspective of Britain's rulers, the secret state's political operations fulfil a useful function, keeping tabs on potential threats to current social relations and presenting a fully-formed apparatus for crushing any movements which develop roots and momentum across

The companion paper, *Spycops in context: A brief history of political policing in Britain*, provides a chronological sweep of how the British state has monitored and combatted political dissent since the 1800s. See www.crimeandjustice.org.uk.

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