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The Place of Intelligence in Political Narratives

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All and any comments welcome on this paper, for future use. All comments used will be acknowledged in the final version. This paper has not been written in a strictly academic style, it is more a 'think-piece', a play with a series of connected ideas.

1) Some opening remarks

The study of politics and international relations is fundamentally about observing a complex world, trying to distil the crucial elements within it, labelling and providing qualities to those elements and then trying to draw generalizable lessons. That is the essence of our practice, in my view. Thus, a set of social practices and organisations that set out to shape narratives that are 'acceptable' or 'permissible' should be one of the central concerns of all those who seek to study politics or international relations. It is my view that not only are intelligence agencies and practices the so-called missing dimension in international relations, but they are the founding elements and sticky glue that binds states together. Within international history intelligencers provide a partially hidden but parallel account of diplomacy and diplomatic interplay that would cause a radical rehistoricisation of all that we understand to be the received wisdom of international relations.

Those engaged in the practice and political control of intelligence agencies continually make the claim that these actors are impartial enforcers of rules and are impartial arbiters of risk avoidance and threat minimisation. Fine. But even the simplest application of reflexive thinking would surely illuminate the political role that intelligence agencies and officers must play on our political landscape: how can they be 'apolitical' or 'objective' when they make judgements about the behaviour of individuals, or the relative behaviours of other diplomats or states actors?

We can bundle all of this mass of constructed identity and mutually constituted knowledge creation up into a set of practices and some obvious follow-on points: officers recruit like-minded officers (partly because recruitment is always about recruiting like with like, partly for security and 'faith' reasons, and partly for organisational efficiency). There should be nothing surprising about this, in terms of organisational practice, but also in the disabusing sense that intelligence is like the justice system. We like to think of natural justice, but in reality the justice system is about being able to say some rules were followed and an outcome was procedurally sound. The individual caught up in the justice system therefore feels massively aggrieved about the critical distance between natural justice and the emphasis on procedure, both positions are 'correct', but only one carries the weight of state power. Tough on you, the individual with romantic and quaint views. The same can be said of intelligence. It is not about pure knowledge or correct knowledge (whatever that means), it's about 'best truth' (a relative and structurally conditioned term) and 'truth to power' (an endstate that conditions all that goes before it). For those who continually find the decision of governments to go to war on 'intelligence grounds' a grave miscarriage of all that is right, they need to remember that it is not about having 'pure and correct information' (in the philosophical sense), it is about having

information that can be used for policy action and which sticks up as being sound, in the procedural sense: assessments and analysis are fluid and temporally determined. The correctness of a policy decision is determined historically, when more of the wider picture is known. We all feel that this was 'wrong', but in intelligence terms it is likely to have been 'sound'. So, more fool you, the people who think that this is a higher-order intellectual endeavour – it is no more infallible than you or I making decisions based on partial or incomplete information. It is just that their judgements are about more important issues, or issues that have a wider and/or more dramatic impact.

Making the argument that intelligence is highly political is in and of itself highly controversial. Some of the tensions it brings out include:

- There will be an inevitable conflation between the act of shaping or controlling a narrative move and a 'conspiracy' to do so amongst detractors. 'Are you saying that these people are deliberately trying to control our minds?' &c &c.

The answer to this tension is both yes and no. The reason that a yes can be posited here is because this is partly the role of intelligence officers and agencies. The counterterrorism efforts that followed the July 2005 bombings in London have been about challenging the spectrum of ideologies that sit behind the Islamic terrorist groups who target the UK. In doing so, there is an attempt to control the ideologies available to target communities, but also to try and bond society in general to a position of opposition to jihadists. This is to secure the interests of the majority, obviously. But it is still the deliberate attempt to control and shape a narrative, even if it is one that the vast majority of the population oppose. So, counterterrorism provides us with an obvious and stark example. We find less clear cut examples in the sphere of economic protest, for example. Here, those seeking radical alternative economic models often find themselves in the sights of government and private intelligence efforts: their narratives are curtailed partly as a side-issue of curtailing their activities (which do not comply with various legal, political or social norms) but also as a direct effort to marginalise their messages. It has to be said that these movements mostly act to their own detriment too.

The control of narratives does, in the end, come as an only partially intended consequence of the discharge of a particular set of functions within government. This explains why the accusation of controlling political discourse or being 'the thought police' is so vehemently rejected by intelligence and police officers. It is more complicated than just discharging a role, there is a lot of bounded political and normative adherence too, but this complexity or nuance is often lost in the noise of the debate.

- There will be a conflation between 'narrative' and 'stories'

Intelligence is partly about telling stories. Or certainly contributing to the construction of stories. And this is obviously different to tracking narratives. A short-hand might be to think of the stories that are spun by intelligence officers/agencies/handlers as being part of the mix that contributes to narrative. We should not underplay the value of looking at intelligence stories; however, they are an untapped reserve of value. The stories intelligence officers told about Saddam's state of mind and intentions were a key plank in the case for war. Similarly, observations about the behaviour and banter within a target organisation becomes part of the story surrounding that group; they do not own the story, they are just impacted by it. Consequently if any of these stories bubble through into

the public sphere via courts or politicians it is quality and nature of the story that can condition what happens to those individuals or groupings, and ultimately the meta-narrative of what we believe in as a body politic or what we are willing to allow our elites to do.

Within a more academic frame of reference, there are a number of intelligence scholars who have sought to connect up real-world intelligence with cultural depictions of intelligence practice. The most eminent is Toby Miller in his book 'Spyscreen' (2003), then a rash of books on James Bond (eg Black, Lindner 2003), some on Hitchcock and Le Carré (Aronoff 1998, Cohen 2005) and more general treatments, including my own (Dover 2009, Britton 2004, Biderman & Wallace 2004 and the excellent PhD thesis at King's College London by Pierre Lethier 2011). The connection all of these scholars make is twofold: the first is the connection between the 'real world' and the fictional world, something which I argue is bound and fluid – cultural depictions and 'reality' continually learn and re-learn new understandings and interpretations. The second connection is the extent to which cultural depictions are closely related to real world events and provide, to a limited degree, a public information service function. This is further evidenced by the close liaison between the CIA, FBI and cinematic and television portrayals of their activities and, similarly, the advice that has been provided by British intelligence agencies to certain television and cinema projects. Cultural depictions of intelligence activity provide the public with easy to consume binaries: of heroes and villains, of moral codes to follow, of who to hate, and what to value. It is a powerful node of influence, and one that seems to be well understood by those in the community.

The pejorative use of 'political'

For those who study the political world, the idea that an organ of state is political should be uncontroversial, and yet within intelligence studies 'political' equates to a pejorative labelling. If one describes intelligence as political, one is obviously on the side of damned. And yet, there is no obvious reason why this should be. To understand intelligence as a rounded social practice I think it is necessary to understand its function as a guardian and entrepreneur of certain norms: that is just how it operates in practice. It is not pejorative, just an observation, much as one might observe organisms multiplying in a petri dish. A shift in the field to discussing the impact intelligence has on the political sphere, would be a welcome development.

2) Intelligence as gatekeeper: the 'official' keepers of the record

Two points: Very few people know that the Security Service archives are, in effect, the official archive of the British Communist Party, certainly from the 1920s and 30s. For without the government records, there would be no trace of the communist party members who travelled to the Soviet Union (out of their love of the 'socialist utopia') and who were then caught up and killed in one of Stalin's purges. Paradoxically, therefore, the surveillance function of the then youthful Secret Service has served to make permanent a niche part of British political history and to give those on the margins of mainstream politics an enduring voice. As the tracking of social media becomes more prevalent, a scholar writing in a hundred years' time about the political and social machinations of today might well point to the government archives of these records as an alternative moment of mass observation surveys.

The second point is a simple thought experiment. If one wanted to influence public understanding of an event, what would one have to do? Lord Leveson's inquiry is covering one spread of possibilities for how politics and the media became proximate and mutually reinforcing. From the academic and intelligence perspective there is a slightly different dynamic at work. To gain academic credibility one has to publish in peer review journals and academic or trade press. That is the work which counts. The other more fun stuff, like blogging or conference papers does not count. And the bar for peer review or academic press is engagement with the literature and/or the production and analysis of new (often empirical) material. So, to throttle off new understandings of intelligence, one merely needs to throttle off the supply of empirical material that can be trusted, which in turn restricts the material that can be cited. One could also restrict access or opportunities to engage with sober and informed audiences, a key part of working in intelligence studies. And as a field, intelligence studies has relatively few, but quite stark branches: there are those who work on organisations (literally how bureaucracies work), those who produce diplomatic histories (in more or less of a novella style), those who are interested in the technical side of collection (widgets, gadgets and methods) those who talk of the politics of intelligence and those who are implacably opposed to all intelligence activity. Each of these areas lends itself to a particular kind of academic collection method and output, but for those who wish to be proximate to the actualité, there are serious penalties for being seen to have transgressed or to have dissented. You choose which side of history you are on, and you take the professional consequences of your choice. But via this short stream of consciousness, it is very possible to see how are collective printed and audio-visual knowledge of some key events can be shaped by a dynamic relationship between 'authority' and 'scholarship', and temporal factors – distance in time from the event can make evidence easier to come by, but key information may be permanently erased by that point.

3. Shaping the story through shaping people.

As with all areas of the study of intelligence this is an area loaded with controversy and can easily be misread, but I think this short analysis does stand up to some scrutiny.

One of the jobs of field officers is to convince (at its starkest) individuals to become agents: that is, to betray their country, the organisation they are associated with, or people that they are close to or have a close working knowledge about. There is nothing particularly pretty about this task. What makes it pretty is that it is sanctioned by the particular state, and in the belief that in being sanctioned by the state it carries a legitimacy (either technical or by implicit popular support). And that is the basis on which most human intelligence efforts are conducted. The impact of such activity on the target individual can be profound. In extremis, a voice might literally be lost, and the viability of target groups (and their messages) may also be lost to history. Let us not necessarily mourn that loss, as of right, but we should note it. An echo from history might provide us with some insight into the impact on individuals and collectively too: the frequent misapplication of the title 'communist sympathiser' on members of the artistic and media fraternity during the early to mid-Cold War, excluded a generation of people deemed to be politically unacceptable (whether proven or not). The ideological lines are as neatly drawn now as they were in the Cold War (and adherents to the prevailing politics around the Westminster village can be mostly found in Westminster, so it is very tightly drawn debate indeed). The ubiquity of social media monitoring and the permanent smears of

social media detritus mean that our teenage radicals will never be free of their fleeting moments of political experimentation, whereas those with colourful political pasts in our recent political elites like Jack Straw, Peter Hain, Peter Mandelson and John Reid were able to transcend theirs. Vetting, in its loosest sense, might have to catch up with the changing realities on the ground: those who have never uttered a dozy thought might be thin-on-the-ground once the triopoly of Google, Facebook and Twitter have been trawled through thoroughly.

4. Avoiding conspiracy theory, but acknowledging competition.

Conspiracy theories are dogmatic beliefs in positions that are only tenuously supported by empirical discovery, or – even more frustratingly – the absence of empirical discovery. And whilst allocating a political role and function to intelligence attracts, amongst sober audiences, a sniff of ‘that’s just conspiracy theory nonsense’ there seems no reason to me why this set of organs of state should be any less political than the Treasury, or the Home Office. All of them, to varying degrees of transparency, seek to shape our understanding of the world, and to convince us of the need to support certain sorts of government initiatives. But I also think that part of the queasiness around this subject is wrapped up in the failure of the British state and British public (as particular examples) to understand competition, in a way that other states clearly have understood it. The shift from hard-power competition (a’la Cold War) to soft-power competition and influence (and the recent investigations into the exceptional funding arrangements of certain educational establishments give a clue to one sort of soft or influential power, the highly developed techniques of open source intelligence and intellectual property capture another, and the use of human resource, and positioning of people globally, yet another, and the soft funding of media and research, another). Competitor states and certain fractional interests in the international system seem (and one can only put it that strongly) to understand the use to which they put their intelligence agencies within a competitive stance: whilst in the UK we shy away from even acknowledging they might be political, or projecting certain kinds of norms. The shorthand here is that the British intelligence system plays one variation of the game, and projects certain norms into it, but it might well be playing the wrong game, or looking the wrong way. As I noted on the blog-site I contribute to, Kings of War, how do we track and trace the influences being projected into the country? And how do we assess them against our own core interests? There are many divergent paths that future research into the use of intelligence in political narratives could go.

Of elephants and religion: a conclusion.

My central argument is that intelligence has a great deal of sway over the creation, maintenance and enforcement of key political narratives (and indeed the British state), and the destruction of political narratives deemed to be unpalatable by the agencies, their officers and their political masters, in varying mixes depending on the time and issue. I therefore think this work should be more prominently highlighted by those who study political narrative, and by those who think about international relations. Intelligence is like religion and large, room-based elephants: it is all around, and yet for the most part hidden.