The Surveillance State and the Color Line

written by John Clarke | February 23, 2024

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A global system of domination and economic exploitation must develop strategies and tactics. Its political leaders need information and analysis to do so. Given the interests they serve, we shouldn't be surprised to find that the intelligence agencies that provide these resources aren't exactly impartial seekers of the truth.

Oliver Kearns states at the outset of *The Covert Colour Line*, his new book published by Pluto Press, that "(t)he point of this book is to demonstrate that the intellectual tools used by practitioners to measure good or bad intelligence are most certainly biased, have been shaped by U.S. and British imperial history, and prevent us from understanding how intelligence makes global inequalities and state violence appear plausible and legitimate" (1).

To explore these biases, Kearns feels it necessary to "examine what kind of social ideas were reflected in intelligence assessments, and how those assessments might then have made certain policies seem possible to policy-makers" (13). Modern British and U.S. intelligence agencies developed in the context of the break-up of the old empires and intelligence analysis played the role of "an emergency intellectual response to decolonization, where they provided policy-makers with ideas and arguments about what was happening in the world and how they could respond to it" (16).

As he considers the role of intelligence agencies, Kearns argues that the assumptions that have guided them have been fundamentally racist all along. Their perspective always "treats people beyond the West's imagined borders as being unable to think and act well in world affairs due to their inferior cultures." Intelligence analysts' "sense of unfamiliar forms of governance" assumes that "this difference reflects others' lack of properly-functioning state structures, ones which the West is presumed to have" (21).

The Role of Intelligence

The first chapter provides "a sketch of an intellectual biography of Anglosphere intelligence during decolonization" (35). The assumption was that "an Anglo-American presence in the Middle East benefited 'political stability' in the region" (35-6). Anti-colonial politics and nationalist sentiment were seen as disrupting an equilibrium that flowed from the self-contained politics of the region.

This notion of a destabilizing "nationalism (that) was here to stay…laid a foundation for understanding post-colonial governments and their interactions with the Anglosphere" (36). In the post-war context, moreover, an agenda of U.S. and British regional domination had to contend with the role of the Soviet Union; suitable interpretations of Soviet society and its leadership were

pressed into service.

The same concepts of irrationality and inferiority that would consistently be applied to political leaderships in the Global South were directed at the Soviet political structure, with their "immense Asiatic element" and "an oriental regard for the maintenance of their dignity" (39) that might render them volatile and unpredictable for those in Washington and London, who supposedly functioned at the level of fair-minded rationality.

In this challenging period, intelligence agencies could only think and function within a framework that accepted the agenda of domination they served. They asked themselves "how, if at all possible, could these movements for self-determination be satisfied or controlled while maintaining U.S./British political command, without the cost outweighing these movements' potential damage?" It was simply inconceivable that nationalist forces were inevitable without "a reduction in the presence and political power of a receding empire and an ascendant superpower" (43).

Kearns shows how intelligence agencies decided that those challenging colonialism were motivated by "a deep-seated racial hostility" and resentment at "white superiority" that led them to overlook the reality "(t)hat backwardness, that lack of political capacity, means that anti-colonialism's success against empire can only produce 'a political vacuum' in the region which the Soviet Union might enter into" (48).

In the second chapter, we are introduced to the notion of "the mirror-image problem" (67). In 1958, a senior CIA staff officer pondered "how to think your way into the mind of people outside the West" (68). Though CIA recruits conformed to "American moral standards, social mores, and conventionalities of behavior," they needed to "endure the discomfort" involved in properly understanding "backward and unwesternised people throughout the world" (68). Analysts developed "a confident description of other populations' internal qualities: their obtuseness, their secrecy, and their irrationality" (70). They believed "that Westerners are so civilized and reasonable in global affairs that they often cannot imagine a different strategic outlook, one that is irrational and unreasonable." Taking this different cultural and racial level properly into account, it was necessary to avoid "the mirror-image fallacy" (70).

Kearns shows how this view played out in various settings where liberation struggles were being confronted. In 1968, for instance, British intelligence operatives warned against "emotional nationalism, extremism and arrogance, 'latent' in the Middle East." Interestingly, "British objectives … are all stated explicitly—oil investment benefits, economic power via sterling, military bases—but are denied a place in analysts' account of what helps or hampers 'stability' in the Gulf" (85).

In the 1970s, CIA consultant Richard Pipes went further in exploring the dangers of the mirror image approach. He argued that the concept had to be upheld in the face of liberal attempts to deny the "meaningful differences among human beings, whether genetic, ethnic, racial, or other" that made global inequality inevitable (89). Kearns characterizes the intellectual and political functions of this form of racist rationalization with the observation that "(g)oing on about the danger of mirroring is a way of reasserting racial belonging: some people have shared objectivity, whereas those who live over there cannot surpass their cultural limits" (98).

Constructing an Enemy

The third chapter explores how intelligence assessments of Saddam Hussein developed, as the imperialist powers worked to contain and eventually defeat him. For all the time and effort expended on this undertaking, Kearns points out that "(w)hen it comes to intelligence, it seems, only certain lessons are allowed to be learned" (104). In Iraq, a "narrative of intelligence failure as a failure to

measure the true awesome power of deceptive Middle Eastern regimes found its apotheosis in the figure of Saddam" (104). An evaluation of Saddam developed that was in line with the needs of imperialist aggression and domination. A picture was created of "psychological and cultural irrationality" justifying the conclusion that "a man like him was inherently incapable of reading international relations intelligently in the way that Anglosphere analysts could" (106). A view of Saddam was constructed that "by the early 2000s, hemmed analysts into the judgement that political brokerage with Iraq's head of state was impossible and that force was a valid, indeed the only viable, policy towards him" (106). This image of the Iraqi ruler as volatile and treacherous developed in a cultural and racial context. "Race—specifically, an assumption of engrained limits to Ba'athist clear thinking and emotional control—lies as the unspoken foundation for this distinction between Iraq and Anglosphere politics" (113).

When Kuwait was invaded in 1990, failure to foresee this was presented in terms of an underestimation of Saddam Hussein's tendency to deviate from the standards of Western decency and fair dealing. Shortly before coalition forces began bombing Iraqi troops, "Jerrold Post, the former director and founder of the CIA's own psychological-personality center, painted a picture of Saddam as a "malignant narcissist with dreams of historical grandeur" (127).

Even a readiness to compromise on Saddam's part couldn't win him any reprieve:

> The issue, then, is not whether Saddam now complies with coalition demands; it is that he is by definition dishonourable in his objective of disrupting the Anglosphere's transparent, honest policing of the Middle East. How he acts in the future, including backing down, cannot change this assessment of his character and its essential threat (131-32).

British intelligence was clear that Saddam Hussein must be denied any opportunity to compromise and it was "essential to deny him any face-savers or diplomatic prizes." As Margaret Thatcher put it, Saddam had "to face his people as a beaten leader" (133). Military intervention was justified in terms of containing the racialized concept of the dangerous despot.

In the fourth chapter, Kearns looks at the Chilcot Inquiry, established in 2009 at the behest of Tony Blair. In his view, "(i)t is worth paying attention when former spies talk about how they themselves understand their role in the world" (140).

False claims as to the weapons of mass destruction at Saddam's disposal were entirely linked to the intelligence view of the Iraqi leader as a volatile and treacherous foe. Minutes of a meeting of British analysts tell us that "(r)eaders of the paper needed to be reminded of Saddam's unpredictability, and of the fact that his thought processes did not work in a recognizably Western, rational and logical way" (156).

Kearns solidifies his case that intelligence agencies are suppliers of the distorted notions that justify an agenda of domination. The responsibility for any failure to properly assess Saddam's destructive capacities was deftly turned back on him and his rule. To the British intelligence operative, "this was a highly autocratic state, where almost everybody revolved around the person, the thinking, the behavior and whims of the leader." This meant "what was going on in his mind […] was critical, and that was very difficult to fathom" (163). Everything the analysts fed to "British decision-makers" was crafted to bolster "pre-conceptions about Saddam's inherent threat (and) the wisdom of a coalition invasion in terms of producing 'stability' in the Middle East" (176).

Libyan Redux

In the final chapter, Kearns decides that "(a) good place to look after Saddam's downfall for the

continuing role of intelligence's post-colonial racial thinking is in the 2011 Libyan intervention" (177). As with Saddam, whether Muammar Gaddafi took a confrontational or more conciliatory approach, he was doomed to be assessed in a damning light. Thus, despite his efforts to improve relations with Western governments, the "U.S. embassy in Tripoli…stuck to the intelligence script for the Arab world, characterizing Gaddafi as incoherent and lacking real politics, and Libyans themselves as easily manipulated and ignorant" (178). Kearns shows how "Gaddafi was being analyzed through an anti-mirroring logic, whereby his behavior and policy actions stemmed from something radically different to professed Anglosphere norms of geopolitics and rationality." Thus, "(w)hen the 2011 uprising began, the Libyan leader's intentions were assessed through this historical analysis" (180).

The NATO intervention that so shattered Libya was justified (however dishonestly) on the grounds of the need to save Libyans from the repressive bloodbath that would otherwise be unleashed by Gaddafi. Intelligence assessments of the Libyan leader were pressed into service to this end. Jerrold Post, of the CIA's personality analysis center, captured this view of Gaddafi starkly, attributing to him "'a borderline personality' that 'swings from intense anger to euphoria' and reacts to pressure by clinging to distorted beliefs" (182). As he moves to a conclusion, Kearns points out that "(c)ritical debate over what to do about intelligence nearly always rests on the assumption that agencies' danger lies in their autonomous excess. They have grown too large; they do things far beyond their intended function—they are out of control" (197).

However, for Kearns, even a drastic reorganization of the intelligence role doesn't get to the heart of the matter. He asserts that "(i)ntelligence analysis has provided policy-makers with a way of understanding the revolutionary changes of the post-war, post-colonial world in a way that preserved the legitimacy of the few states that still dominated the rest" (198). With a distorted and deluded "combination of political focus and racial assumptions, geopolitics started to look like it needed the Anglosphere to remain supreme, in order to secure something called stability. Analysis made certain ways of holding on to supremacy seem possible, and acceptable" (198).

For Kearns, the real debate around intelligence failure isn't shaped by this or that missed development or factual inaccuracy, but rather by the need to supply those in power with a view of international developments that will justify and enable their agenda of domination. This means that "(d)issenting from Anglosphere foreign policy aims means asking what role intelligence analysis plays in allowing statespersons to think that those aims are possible and justifiable" (199).

Kearns ends the book with the well supported contention that "(t)he answer is challenging the wider shared political assumptions that undergird agencies' analysis, which ultimately means challenging the right of some states to retain their inherited advantage and to use it to dictate the destinies of others" (203).

With *The Covert Colour Line*, Kearns provides an enormously well informed and meticulously researched look at the role of Western intelligence agencies. The impacts of their ugly trade are considered, over a period stretching from the post-war years, through the war on terror and up to present intensification of global rivalry.

Kearns argues very convincingly that the interests of U.S.-led Western imperialism are furthered by the selective analysis that intelligence agencies dutifully provide. The oppressive world order they defend is written out of the picture and resistance to it is constructed as a racialized resentment in the hearts of those who are incapable of attaining Western standards of sensible and civilized conduct.

In reading this book, it struck me that the false view that intelligence agencies have constructed is

part of something much bigger and more fundamental. Just as an honest and accurate picture of the relationship between the West and the countries it dominates would be the ultimate “intelligence failure,” so too any exploitative social order can only accept partial truth and comforting falsehood.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács argued that “(a)t this point bourgeois thought must come up against an insuperable obstacle, for its starting-point and its goal are always, if not always consciously, an apologia for the existing order of things or at least the proof of their immutability.” The delusions of intelligence agencies are ultimately those of the social and economic systems they serve. Coming at things from the opposite end, Malcolm X told a crowd in Harlem in 1964 that “truth is on the side of the oppressed.” If an accurate understanding of capitalism and imperialism is neither useful nor possible for those who seek to defend and justify those systems, it is most certainly in the interests of those who challenge them.

Kearns has undertaken a painstaking and diligent study of the role of U.S. and British intelligence agencies, but he could only reach the conclusions he did from an oppositional point of view. On that basis, he’s written a very valuable book for those who can handle the truth.