

Undercover, The True Story of Britain's Secret Police

***Undercover* (Guardian Books, 2013) tells the story of the London Metropolitan Police Special Demonstration Squad and its mission to monitor activists and protest movements. Authors Rob Evans and Paul Lewis present an enthralling and disturbing account of police infiltrations in the UK by chronicling nine people who worked as undercover agents in the activist scene from 1983 through 2010. These police spies took on false identities in order to live among activists for years at a time. They did not only keep tabs on activists, they were active participants in groups and often incited others to take radical – and at times illegal – action. Additional police spies have been unmasked since the book was published, yet the practice of surveillance of activist groups continues.**

As [current debates](#) weigh the merits and rights-infringements of widespread surveillance to combat terrorism, *Undercover* reminds readers that spying on people who are considered to be subversive is a centuries-old state policy, even when the definition of “subversion” has always been nebulous. “Over the years, Special Branch had spied on suffragettes, pacifists, unemployed workers, striking trade unionists, anti-nuclear activists, anti-war campaigners, fascists, anarchists, and communists.” (p.22) The Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) at the centre of the book was created in 1968 with the stated purpose of providing intelligence in order to prepare an “appropriate” police response to public demonstrations, yet its mission quickly drifted into building files on activists in case they have contact with “individuals police deem to be extremists – or even, perhaps, one day become extremists themselves.” (p.205) Similar tactics have been documented in the United States, where [“virtually every movement has been the target of police surveillance and disruption activities.”](#)

Evans and Lewis expose the policies and behaviours of police infiltrators that violate civil rights, are often illegal, and demonstrate patterns of targeting and exploiting women activists. Reading the book from the perspective of a long-time activist has raised several questions about how I view my own activism and contact with the state. While I have been increasingly troubled by the possibility that my email and social media are being tracked by the state, it is much more confronting to consider that I might have direct contact with a police spy. Although Evans and Lewis focus on the UK's SDS, [infiltrations by the police and](#)

[secret services are common throughout the world](#). Many organizations and movements in the US have been infiltrated and seeded with informants, and in fact one of the main spies profiled in *Undercover*, Mark Kennedy, was sent to [11 countries on 40 occasions](#) (including the US), coordinating with secret services and police forces while “infiltrating almost every major anti-capitalist and environmental protest” in Europe (p.4) For this reason, *Undercover* is essential reading for activists worldwide; learning how infiltrators operate and how they have been unmasked can be helpful in protecting our sisters and brothers, our organizations, and our movements.

Gateway activists and organizations

What struck me most from reading *Undercover* was the infiltrators’ use of non-threatening groups as entry points to get closer to those they consider to be more radical targets. For example, in order to infiltrate the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) in the mid-1980s, police spy Bob Lambert first infiltrated groups and joined protests that were not particularly hard-core. “After establishing himself among more moderate activists, Lambert set out befriending campaigners suspected of being in the ALF.” (p.34) This tactic was used by most of the agents described in the book and has been similarly used by infiltrators in the United States. [FBI informant “Anna”](#) made her way into the Earth Liberation Front by attending mass public demonstrations during a 2004 G8 meeting in Atlanta and was eventually responsible for the [2007 conviction of activist Eric McDavid, who was sentenced to almost 20 years on domestic terrorism charges](#).

I have always assumed that my activism would not be very interesting to the police or the secret service, and I have at times dismissed fellow activists who raised questions about possible infiltrations. It felt like over-stating the significance of our actions to consider the possibility of having police spies in our midst. Now, however, I am re-thinking my attitudes – that I have nothing to hide, that what I do is harmless anyway, and that anyone who shows up for the cause is worthy of trust. Not so much because I believe I am a target for my activism but rather that I can be a target for my contacts, that I can be a pawn in the spy game. I’ve had a similar change of heart about social media, its potential for [mapping relationships](#) and the possibility that my posts can put my contacts at risk. While I could not imagine that mapping my moves could be at all of interest to the police, I now wonder whether mapping my friends through my moves (in combination with other maps) could put them in danger. The current concerns about mass surveillance have much in common with the SDS mission exposed in *Undercover*: the state

seeks to gather information about as many activists as possible, map out who's connected to whom, and identify the weak links that can be manipulated. All this in the name of uncovering extremists, even though the results are highly questionable, particularly when infiltrators are agitating (entrapping?) seemingly moderate activists into taking radical action.

Exploiting romantic relationships with activists

A key chapter in *Undercover* begins with this sentence: "If there was one tactic that was the signature of the Special Demonstration Squad, it was the use of long-term relationships with women activists who could help give undercover operatives the credibility they needed." (p. 176) Most of the police spies profiled in the book became romantically involved with women activists. Mark Kennedy, whose unmasking in 2010 caused the scandal that led to the book, had multiple sexual encounters as well as 2 long-term relationships with women activists, one of which lasted 6 years. Bob Lambert had four sexual relationships while undercover; he fathered a baby with one woman and used another as his exit strategy to abandon mother and child.

"Alison", described in *Undercover* as a "peaceful anti-racist campaigner", spent years searching for her boyfriend who had disappeared. She eventually concluded that he was an undercover agent, receiving confirmation 10 years later by Evans and Lewis. When thinking about the police spy's motives, "Alison" felt that she had "inadvertently provided him with 'an excellent cover story... The level to which he was integrated into my family life meant that people trusted me, people knew that I was who I said I was, and people believed, therefore, that he must be who he said he was...'" (p. 186) She and other women who were caught up in these situations have justifiably suffered greatly from the emotional toll of learning that their intimate relationships were a lie, and that they had been used as a prop in the make-believe activist play.

Although the only woman police spy profiled in *Undercover* did not become romantically involved with any of the activists, it is not a method used exclusively by men. As was recently [reported by The Guardian](#), "Anna" in the United States seduced her target Eric McDavid and "might have entrapped her prey by encouraging him to behave conspiratorially in the hope of romantic fulfilment."

The actions of the SDS agents, however, went beyond flirting with women activists. Most concerning is the long-term nature of the relationships they engaged in, the level of intimacy and the depth of the

lies. There are 2 cases of police spies having children with women activists named in *Undercover*. The men did not legally recognize the babies, and indeed they could not since they were living under false identities and had wives and children in their real lives. Neither spy faced any consequences for their actions, and in fact both officers were promoted and continued highly praised careers in the police. In a chapter called "Fatherhood" Evans and Lewis detail how Bob Lambert abandoned his 3-year old son and his activist girlfriend, who only learned the real identity of her son's father 25 years later. The police spy that seduced "Alison" was simultaneously going to couples' therapy with his wife to resolve marital problems while at the same time his undercover persona was going to couples' therapy with "Alison" to reconcile their disagreement about wanting children (he didn't want them, she did). "The SDS officer had two separate, and totally different lives, with two strained relationships, and two counsellors." (p. 184)

The police spies' exit strategy of suddenly disappearing and never being heard from again was heart-breaking for the women with whom they had become involved. Helen Steel describes her reaction to finding out the man she had been in love with did not actually exist: "This was a man I had known for five years, who I had lived with for two years. How could I trust anybody again? I don't even know the name of the person I had been in a relationship with." (p. 179) In 2011, eight women [deceived into long term intimate relationships with undercover police officers who were infiltrating environmental and social justice campaign groups](#) took legal action against the Metropolitan Police and the Association of Chief Police Officers, "[assert\[ing\] that the actions of the undercover officers breached their rights as protected by the European Convention on Human Rights...](#)"

The pattern of using women activists that is exposed in *Undercover* shows a systemic misogynist attitude by the police. It is part of the macho personas that the infiltrators take on as a way of demonstrating they are "serious" about hard-core action, in order to gain entry into the supposedly radical scene or, as has been demonstrated, to agitate activists towards radical (illegal) action. An example from the US is FBI informant [Brandon Darby](#), who is responsible for the conviction of David McKay and Bradley Crowder, two activists accused of being in possession of Molotov cocktails at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Darby had made contact with the activists in Texas months prior to traveling with them to Minnesota for the Convention. During early encounters, Darby met the activists to discuss actions at the Convention and later reported to his FBI handlers: "[I stated that they all looked like they ate too much tofu and that they should eat beef so that they could put on](#)

[muscle mass. I stated that they weren't going to be able to fight anybody until they did so.](#)" The film [Better This World](#) presents court transcripts and FBI documents including Darby's emails to make the case for Darby's role as an agitator who goaded the activists into acts that would be considered as domestic terrorism. This was Darby's response when questioned about the incident during a [Mother Jones interview](#): "Entrapment? Darby scoffs at the suggestion. He pulls up his shirt, showing me his chest hair and tattoos, as though his macho physique had somehow seduced Crowder and McKay into mixing their firebombs."

An [essay published by Make/Shift magazine](#) in the US uses the example of Darby to explore the link between gender violence and police infiltration. Author Courtney Desiree Morris discusses the surprise among long-time activists to learn that Darby was an informant, particularly since he was a well-known and trusted activist in Austin Texas and New Orleans. However, Darby was also well-known for his aggressive organizing style that drove away women activists. "There were even claims of Darby sexually assaulting female organizers at Common Ground [in New Orleans] and in general being dismissive of women working in the organization." The argument made in the *Make/Shift* article centres on infiltrators' conscious use of power dynamics to destabilize radical movements, proposing that "[m]aybe if organizers made collective accountability around gender violence a central part of our practices we could neutralize people who are working on behalf of the state to undermine our struggles." This certainly sounds applicable for several of the police spies featured in *Undercover*.

Coordination and collusion with corporate targets

Another troubling and important issue raised in *Undercover* is the coordination between the police and the corporations against which activists campaign. Many of the undercover agents profiled by Evans and Lewis infiltrated groups denouncing corporate power – from the military industrial complex to corporate-led globalization. This raises the question of which interests were the police truly protecting – those of public safety or corporate control? Most notably, the [McLibel](#) case demonstrates the unified interests between corporations and the state, particularly when it came to surveillance of activists.

The McLibel case was a legal battle between McDonald's and activists in the UK that began in the mid-1980's when an activist group named London Greenpeace produced a flyer exposing McDonald's practices in relation to the environment, worker justice, and animal rights. The company took legal action claiming libel; under the UK's defamation laws

it was up to the defendants to prove that they had not committed libel. Several groups and media outlets decided to settle out of court, apologizing for having criticized McDonalds. Five activists from London Greenpeace were singled out in 1990; three eventually apologized but two refused to give in. A court case lasted from 1994 to 1996, with McDonalds spending £10 million on lawyers while the activists sold t-shirts and took up donations to cover their legal costs, raising £35,000. I've had my red "McLibel" t-shirt for 20 years, the yellow letters fading but still clearly read "*McHunger, McMurder, McGarbage...*" Although I was familiar with the campaign, it was only when reading *Undercover* that I learned how deeply infiltrated the group responsible for the "libellous" flyer was.

As described in *Undercover*, London Greenpeace "was one of the most spied-upon political groups in modern history." (p. 66) State infiltrators met agents from 2 different detective agencies hired by McDonald's (who, by the way, didn't know about each other). "On at least two occasions, there were as many corporate spies at meetings for the small group as genuine activists." (p. 71) On the SDS front, Bob Lambert had infiltrated the group in the 1980s and was photographed handing out flyers in front of a McDonald's store. It is plausible that he would have been involved in drafting the infamous flyer. Later on, John Dines infiltrated the group, becoming its treasurer and engaging in a romantic relationship with Helen Steel. When Helen Steel was named as a co-defendant in the McLibel case, John Dines was perfectly positioned to gather intelligence on the activists' legal strategy. "It is not known whether intelligence picked up by Dines... was passed on to McDonald's. However, that seems highly probable. The McLibel trial revealed that Special Branch and McDonald's were at various points colluding and exchanging information about London Greenpeace." (p. 76)

While police infiltration and surveillance of activist groups is already alarming, sharing information with corporations (in effect going way beyond their stated mandate to ensure public safety) is even more concerning. Unfortunately the McLibel case is far from an isolated incident, but rather one example in a long history of collaboration between state policing and intelligence agencies and private companies. Current debates about mass surveillance conducted by the US National Security Agency has included concerns about [the state agency's relationship with private companies like Google](#). While these concerns relate to companies giving state spies access to users' information, surveillance of the Occupy movement show that it is a two-way relationship; here the state was providing information to private companies in order to help them prepare for the demonstrations against

them.

In December 2012, the US-based [Partnership for Civil Justice Fund \(PCJF\)](#) [exposed the surveillance of Occupy Wall Street by the FBI, Homeland Security, and other US government agencies](#). The documents released as a result of a Freedom Of Information request expose the coordination between government agencies and private companies, including proof that the FBI was meeting with the New York Stock Exchange to discuss the Occupy protests as early as August 2011, one month prior to the initial action.

Among the documents released by the FBI was report by the [Domestic Security Alliance Council](#) – self-described as a “strategic partnership between the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the private sector” – that examined the Occupy protests at the West Coast ports. As [summarized by PCJF](#), the “DSAC report shows the nature of secret collaboration between American intelligence agencies and their corporate clients – the document contains a ‘handling notice’ that the information is ‘meant for use primarily within the corporate security community. Such messages shall not be released in either written or oral form to the media, the general public or other personnel...”

PCJF Executive director Mara Verheyden-Hilliard was [quoted on Democracy Now!](#) that “throughout the materials [released by the FBI], there is repeated evidence of the FBI and Department of Homeland Security, American intelligence agencies really working as a private intelligence arm for corporations, for Wall Street, for the banks, for the very entities that people were rising up to protest against.” In that same interview, it is remarked that “you can see the FBI using at least private entities as a proxy force for what appears to be infiltration. ... [T]he Federal Reserve in Richmond was reporting to the FBI, working with the Capitol Police in Virginia, and reporting and giving updates on planning meetings and discussions within the Occupy movement. That would appear, minimally, that they were sending undercovers, if not infiltrators, into those meetings.”

Despite acknowledgment that Occupy was a non-violent movement, FBI field offices tracked the protests as they spread through the US and shared information with the protester’s targets. [Further research by DBA Press and the Center for Media and Democracy](#) “demonstrate that law enforcement agencies may be attempting to criminalize thousands of American citizens for simply voicing their disapproval of corporate dominance over our economic and political system.” [Writing in the Progressive](#), Matthew Rothschild states that “the work [the US

government's anti-terrorist apparatus does] in the name of national security advances the interests of some of the largest corporations in America rather than focusing on protecting the United States from actual threats or attacks..." In Arizona, police conducted coordinated online surveillance and infiltration of activist groups including Occupy Phoenix in order to provide intelligence to JP Morgan Chase and other corporations targeted by the activists. [One police spy was seen at activists' meeting spaces as early as July 2011, well before Occupy Phoenix was launched.](#)

Back in the UK, the SDS continued to run into corporate spies long after the McLibel case was over. The landmark case that broke open the story of police infiltrators involved not only SDS officer Mark Kennedy but also [private security companies hired by energy company E.ON](#) in order to thwart planned protests at Britain's biggest coal-fired power stations at Ratcliffe-on-Soar. As reported in *The Guardian*, leaked documents regarding private surveillance of climate justice activists "come as police chiefs, on the defensive over damaging revelations of undercover police officers in the protest movement, privately claim that there are more corporate spies in protest groups than undercover police officers."

In conclusion

"They steal identities. They break the law. They sleep with the enemy." These are the police spies and their systematic violations of rights as documented by Evans and Lewis in *Undercover*. The book is written by two journalists with great skill at presenting information to the general public. Importantly, it breaks the false dichotomy between "us" and "them" – us activists who are not of interest to the intelligence apparatus and them whose "hard-core behaviour" placed them on police radars. We are all at risk of surveillance for multiple motives: to gain entry into the activist scene, to legitimize their mission, to build as comprehensive a map as possible in order to provide corporations intelligence on the breadth and depth of their adversaries.

While the SDS formally disbanded, [state monitoring of activists continues through agencies such as the National Domestic Extremism Unit](#). As in the US, [intelligence-gathering of activists in the UK has evolved into a hybrid of online and offline surveillance](#). The stories documented in *Undercover* peaked with Mark Kennedy's 2010 revelations and the book's publishing in 2013. However, they remain relevant not only for the repercussions on the people and groups that the SDS manipulated but also because the policy of treating dissent like a crime – and increasingly like terrorism – continues in present day. In order to protect ourselves from police spies, we must understand how they

operate and where they come from. This is crucial for all activists, regardless of whether we consider our beliefs and actions to be of interest to the state. For myself, I will be paying closer attention to avoid being a weak link in the surveillance and information chain – to protect myself and those with whom I have contact.

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