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 Surveillance and Social Movements:  
 Lenses on the Repression-Mobilization Nexus
 

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Police monitoring of law-abiding activists at protest events. A CIA-sponsored program dedicated to investigating financial transactions. An NSA initiative to collect data from massive numbers of domestic phone calls. The Pentagon's aborted Terrorism Information and Prevention System, TIPS, and Total Information Awareness programs. The USA Patriot Act. Over the last half-decade, American citizens have been bombarded with a dizzying array of issues and controversies related to state surveillance initiatives. While the potential impact of surveillance activities is widespread—some claim, for instance, that the recent NSA program sought to obtain data from *every* call placed in the U.S.—its effects are most squarely centered on settings that pose a challenge to the institutional political status quo.

It is clear that such efforts have enormous potential effects on the shape of political contention, and that these effects emerge in multifaceted ways. Rich historical accounts offer a window into these complexities. Take Jeremy Varon's *Bringing the War Home*, a compelling and nuanced chronicle of New Leftist militancy in the U.S. and Germany during the 1960s and 1970s. Varon focuses on two organizations in particular: the Weather Underground (WU) in America and the West German Red Army Faction (RAF). While not a comparative study per se, he uses these two juxtaposed cases to develop a layered analysis of how activists in both countries came to embrace violent revolutionary action, and how varied interactions with the state and civil society shaped their distinct trajectories.

Policing agencies in both nations employed a variety of means to actively monitor and disrupt the WU and RAF. Surveillance—through wiretaps, agent observation of public events, illegal break-ins, and infiltration by informants and provocateurs—constituted the meat of the state's repressive efforts, at least in the U.S. Varon notes that, even before the Weatherman organization went un-

*The Suppression of Dissent: How the State and Mass Media Squelch US American Social Movements*, by **Jules Boykoff**. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006. 288 pp. \$80.00 cloth. ISBN: 0415978106.

*Repression and Mobilization*, edited by **Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston**, and **Carol Mueller**. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 328 pp. \$75.00. cloth. ISBN: 081664425X.

*Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, by **Jeremy Varon**. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. 407 pp. \$21.95 paper. ISBN: 0520241190.

derground, the FBI had identified at least 270 of its members, nearly a third of whom were marked on the Bureau's "Security Index" for detainment in the case of national emergency. Agents and informants also "diligently recorded the identities of the 300 or so people in attendance" at a Weatherman-sponsored conference in 1969 (p. 158). Despite considerable safeguards in place to prevent infiltration, in at least three cases informants successfully gained access to radical collectives. In such instances, informants typically operated as provocateurs, encouraging violent activities for which participants were then arrested. After their move underground in 1970, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover designated the Weather leadership subjects of "intensive investigation," and three Bureau officials were later indicted for their resulting authorization of a series of break-ins (known as "black-bag jobs") designed to gather information about suspects' whereabouts.

Varon reaches a number of conclusions about how such state action impacted the trajectories of each group. State repression, he suggests, "caused those skeptical about vio-

lence to seriously contemplate it and those persuaded of the need for violence to take the radical leap into action" (p. 3). In Germany, "[h]ad the state's reaction been less severe, the RAF's armed struggle might neither have endured so long nor become so brutal" (p. 254). In the U.S., the "traumatic effect" of state violence provided a motive for Weather adherents' increased militancy during the late 1960s (p. 162). The move by the Weather Underground toward "symbolic damage" and away from violence against human targets prevented the sort of massive program of state repression witnessed in Germany (p. 174).

We can also infer dynamics more closely tied to surveillance: that Weatherman's move underground was in part to escape monitoring by police and FBI, and that this move did in fact significantly reduce the latter's ability to surveil the group. Paradoxically, however, this shift expanded the overall scope of the state's surveillance activities as agents increasingly relied on less fine-tuned metrics to locate Weather adherents, focusing on broad networks of above-ground family and friends as well as a wide range of locales (communes, countercultural centers, etc.) deemed likely to shelter underground suspects.

All are provocative conclusions, and not inconsistent with the specific evidence presented in *Bringing the War Home*. But how do we know whether such findings are systematically valid, or whether similar dynamics hold in other cases? Such model-building is not Varon's goal; he is squarely focused on the specific contexts surrounding the WU and RAF, and in the book's introduction he clarifies that, while engaging with some of the social movement literature, he "does not speak its distinctly sociological causal language" (p. 18). Indeed, his use of oral historical accounts is intended to provide "representations of the past generated through the subjective work of memory . . . and not the 'objective' reconstruction of the past" (p. 16). When confronted with the thorny issue of specifying the impact of the antiwar movement on U.S. policy, he "doubts whether a method could even be devised for rendering such a judgment" (p. 147) and instead employs the biographical account of a single activist to represent his sense of the role played by militants in such outcomes.

Fair enough, as his methodology yields a nicely textured portrait of the WU and RAF. His detailed account of activist experiences also provides a window into the multivalent interactive nature of political contention. But it is difficult to have it both ways, to focus on close readings of subjective experiences while also drawing out general conclusions that beg for more systematized analysis. This latter task, of course, has traditionally fallen to sociologists and political scientists. Have they fared any better in their efforts to develop general explanations for the impacts of surveillance against political challengers?

The issue of surveillance and its effects has long been subsumed by a broader concern with the bidirectional relationship between state action and dissident mobilization: the so-called "repression-mobilization nexus." For at least the past decade, the real action in this literature has been primarily in journals, with few attempts to integrate and extend existing insights within book-length analyses (though exceptions include Cunningham, 2004; della Porta and Reiter, 1998; Stanley, 1996). Further, findings have lacked consistency, with surprisingly little cross-disciplinary conversation. *Repression and Mobilization*, a recent volume edited by Christian Davenport, Hank Johnston, and Carol Mueller, is a welcome corrective to this trend. The volume is a product of a 2001 conference at the University of Maryland that brought together many influential thinkers in several social science disciplines, and its contents represent the most significant advance in collective knowledge on the topic in some time.

In his introduction, Davenport astutely assesses the field and suggests possibilities for its advancement. Most importantly for our purposes, his essay identifies a key dynamic that has steered past research away from detailed analysis of surveillance: the move toward aggregated, multi-form indicators of "repression" as the object of analysis. To the extent that this approach has predominated over close study of specific repressive forms (including surveillance) as bounded phenomena, its implicit foundation has been what contributor Charles Tilly labels the "classic cost-benefit conception" of the impact of repression on mobilization and vice versa (p. 224). Within such a framework, repression is viewed as a cost imposed by au-

thorities on dissidents, leading to invariant conceptions that the allocation of repression decreases mobilization and, conversely, that mobilization predictably generates a repressive response from authorities. Davenport shows that exploration of the second relationship (i.e., mobilization causes repression) has yielded the expected finding, while studies of the impact of repression on subsequent mobilization have produced less consistent results.

In his view, these empirical regularities/irregularities are problematic, as both have been produced in the presence of significant analytic blind spots: an overly-narrow conception of repressive and dissident forms, reliance on a small number of fixed cases and data sets, and a simplistic view of the role played by media coverage. What to do? If the volume's take-away lesson can be boiled down to a single idea, it would be to *disaggregate* analyses to recognize the unique as well as recurrent features of varied political environments, dissident repertoires, repressive forms, and path-dependent temporal and spatial dynamics. Davenport argues that analysts should view the repression-mobilization nexus interactively, employing explanatory concepts derived from the social movement literature's political process tradition—i.e., political opportunities and threats, mobilizing structures, and cultural frames (see McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998).

The remainder of the volume is effectively an argument for complicating this baseline model. Insights explicitly or implicitly tied to surveillance dynamics abound. Clark McPhail and John McCarthy highlight the fact that surveillance operations and other repressive tactics are not static or uniform—they in fact vary by, and diffuse across, local policing jurisdictions in predictable ways. Gilda Zverman and Patricia Steinhoff recognize that multiple, often divergent, outcomes result from the imposition of surveillance and other repressive action, as “micro-cohorts” enter movements at differing points in the protest cycle and exhibit differing reactions to state action. Myra Marx Ferree develops the concept of “soft” repression, which emerges within civil society and hinders opposition through ridicule, stigma, and silencing—processes that often require the monitoring and labeling of dissident behavior.

But perhaps the most telling signal of the current state of the field is the fact that the two distinguished senior theorists given the “final word” in the volume—Charles Tilly and Mark Lichbach—barely mention the contributions of the preceding chapters. Instead, they concern themselves with broader issues of analysts' general orientation to the study of political conflict. Tilly suggests that students of repression and mobilization “shift their angles of vision” (Tilly, 2005: 225) to align with the mechanism-based approach he has advanced, with Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, in the 2001 book *Dynamics of Contention*. The “DOC” approach recognizes that repression and mobilization are relational phenomena, both involving exchanges between dissidents and authorities. As such, it sees meaning as rooted in interactions within and between social sites, and centers analyses on episodes, or “continuous streams of contention including collective claim making that bears on other parties' interests” (McAdam *et al.*, 2001: 23–4). Its empirical program calls for “decomposing those episodes into combinations of recognizable, recurrent processes, then identifying the invariant causal mechanisms that enter those processes” (Tilly, 2005: 211–2). The goal is not to identify regularities across classes of episodes, but instead to find robust constituent mechanisms and processes that combine in varying ways to yield distinct outcomes. In short, the program “aims at explaining change and variation, not in discovering uniformity” among whole classes of episodes (Tilly, 2005: 212).

To illustrate what a DOC-style analysis might look like, Tilly concludes with a discussion of the mechanisms that constitute two varieties of collective violence, which he refers to as “scattered attacks” and “broken negotiations.” Using these examples, he demonstrates that a single type of state action—e.g., the imposition of surveillance against challengers—can yield divergent effects across contentious forms. The general point is that it is likely misplaced to suggest that “a single law govern[s] the relationship of mobilization to repression” when both sides of the nexus are really shorthand for diverse sets of relational configurations (Tilly, 2005: 222). We would be better served, Tilly instructs, to break specific configurations (i.e., episodes of contention) into their constituent

processes and mechanisms, which become the sites through which particular types of outcomes emerge.

Jules Boykoff's *The Suppression of Dissent* represents a book-length treatment of a DOC-style mechanism-based approach. Drawing on a range of cases familiar to students of social movements in the U.S. (and relying, unfortunately, almost exclusively on existing secondary sources as evidence), Boykoff explains how it is that state efforts to suppress political challenges result in the demobilization of social movements in the U.S. Like Tilly, he argues that such an explanation requires the identification of distinct mechanisms through which actions contribute to the process of demobilization.

The bulk of the book is taken up by descriptive case studies involving Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panther Party, the Hollywood Ten, the American Indian Movement, and other activists from his self-described "deep, broad survey of suppression in twentieth and twenty-first century U.S. history" (p. 303). From these accounts he inductively identifies a set of twelve actions, or "Modes of Suppression." These Modes, in turn, lead to the demobilization of social movements through the work of five causal mechanisms: resource depletion, stigmatization, divisive disruption, intimidation, and emulation.

Curiously, Boykoff's product doesn't look much like Tilly's. While Boykoff does inductively identify his population of Modes by examining specific cases that can plausibly be conceived as episodes, he does not extend his discussion of mechanisms to explain the trajectory of particular cases of state-dissident interaction. This makes it difficult to understand how constellations of mechanisms might combine to yield change and variation in outcomes, or how the context-laden character of both sides of the struggle might interact to shape the arc of contention. While Tilly examines how particular combinations of mechanisms can explain variation, rather than uniformity, in outcomes, Boykoff asks "why do seemingly different acts produce a common effect: the suppression of dissent?" (p. 264).

So where does this leave us? Given the varied and inconsistent strains reviewed here, in what direction might future studies of surveillance in contentious politics productively move? First, if a common theme exists in

these works, it is that we need to disaggregate concepts such as "mobilization" and "repression," and to pay closer attention to the particular ways in which surveillance as a repressive form impacts contentious episodes. Taking this recommendation seriously requires that we make explicit the features that distinguish surveillance from other modes of repression. Two recent efforts may be instructive. Earl (2003) has constructed a typology of repression, within which we can understand surveillance as fitting within classes of action that are: 1) coercive, 2) unobserved by targets and the general public, and 3) perpetrated either by private or state-based agents. Davenport (2005), in a recent journal article, has alternately focused on a single analytic dimension: the distinction between overt and covert repressive action. While surveillance of dissident targets is sometimes employed overtly, to chill or otherwise alter the behavior of challengers (Marx, 1979), monitoring more often functions covertly as a means to collect information that can later be used in a variety of ways against targets.

This emphasis on covert state action harks back to Gary Marx's (1974, 1988) seminal research on informants, *agents provocateurs*, and undercover policing, and links to an emerging concern with the patterning of surveillance-based acts, in particular the ways in which authorities allocate resources to monitor targets. Recent work has highlighted how state agencies identify targets by constructing them as such, and has shown that such constructions are shaped not only by ethnic, class, religious, etc. characteristics of potential candidates, but also by the organizational structure of policing agencies (Cunningham, 2004) and the characteristics of neighborhoods where potential targets reside (Davenport, 2005). A related concern is the impact of state surveillance—*how* such action affects activists and sympathetic publics. Boykoff argues that the presence of surveillance—whether perceived or real—can contribute to a process of demobilization through the intimidation of targets, often characterized by a feeling of paranoia. Such efforts, he asserts, also yield a body of information that can be used by state agencies to disrupt the functioning of targeted groups (pp. 281–4).

While such unique effects speak to the inappropriateness of lumping together hetero-

geneous categories of action as “repression,” it is important to recognize that state agencies often simultaneously employ a *combination* of tactics to minimize dissent—e.g. aggressively policing public space, gathering extensive intelligence through covert surveillance efforts, empowering community leaders to exert social control on local residents, and so on (Caldwell, 2006). Research that brackets “surveillance” as its object of study would almost certainly miss indirect or emergent effects visible only through the contextualization of individual tactics within broader suppressive programs. In certain cases, such as with the FBI’s counterintelligence programs (COINTELPROs) in operation between 1956 and 1971, state agencies have formalized the use of a diverse repertoire of tactics, self-consciously employed in concert (Cunningham, 2003, 2004). Therefore, alongside efforts to disaggregate analytic categories, we need to find ways to comprehend how tactical combinations interact to yield predictable outcomes.

Is a mechanism-based approach the best way to do so? The question is at the core of current debate in the field of contentious politics as a whole, reflected by the seeming gulf between Tilly’s approach and the contextualized political process agenda advanced by the other contributors to the Davenport *et al.* volume. In that book’s concluding chapter, Mark Lichbach promotes a strategy to bridge these perspectives. Lichbach is not troubled by the use of mechanisms to generate dynamic causal accounts that demonstrate how relationships between inputs and outcomes operate. He is, however, wary of research programs organized around the identification of salient mechanisms, as the exhaustive listing of these mechanisms can easily expand indefinitely, creating “an interminable make-work project” (Lichbach, 2005: 233).

To prevent such chaotic proliferation, Lichbach suggests that researchers should embed their mechanisms within larger organized systems of knowledge (i.e., logically-consistent combinations of mechanisms) and employ “stylized facts” and “historical narratives” to evaluate them empirically. Such an agenda may be one way to take the DOC challenge seriously—i.e., to give attention to the largely unexamined relational transactions lodged within the causal arrows of social science models—without discarding the

underlying political process approach that has guided the field for the past two decades.

Such an effort can have broader-reaching effects as well, moving theoretically-inclined social scientists toward the center of policy-based dialogue surrounding the varied impacts of surveillance initiatives. These debates are of course pivotal to understanding how states can preserve the security of their citizens. Equally important, sophisticated analyses can also demonstrate how surveillance efforts can chill citizens’ ability to lawfully express dissent, posing a threat to acts vital to the practice of democracy.

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## Desperately Seeking Surveillance Studies: Players in Search of a Field

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*We are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate.*

—Georg Simmel

In its current state, the sociological subfield of surveillance studies reminds me of the joke that began an editorial letter of rejection I received as a beginning scholar:

A poor man saves and saves and is finally able to buy his first suit. A rich relative seeing him in it says, "that's nice material, have you thought of having a suit made from it?"

The previous reviews suggest the richness and variety of this budding field. There is indeed something happening here! In calling for better conceptualization, the reviewers would no doubt agree with songwriter Stephen Sills who wrote, "what it is ain't exactly clear." I will elaborate a bit on the field's needs and, consistent with brother Georg's observation above, suggest some ways of hopefully making it clearer.<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago, one could fit all of those interested in social studies of surveillance into a phone booth. That possibility is gone (along with the phone booth). David Lyon (forthcoming), in a comprehensive overview, observes, ". . . surveillance studies started to emerge as a coherent sub-disciplinary field towards the end of the twentieth century." As

both scholar and organizer, Lyon has played a major role in this beginning.

Now there is a vibrant and growing international network of scholars interested in surveillance questions. There are new journals, special issues of, and many articles in, traditional journals and frequent conferences. Between 1960–69, *Sociological Abstracts* listed just six articles with the word "surveillance." From 1990–99, 563 articles were listed and if current trends continue, there will be well over 1000 articles for the decade ending 2009. In 2005–06 alone, five significant edited sociological books were published with scores of contributors and many more monographs and edited volumes are on the way. Major public policy commission reports appeared in Britain and the U.S. (Surveillance Studies Network 2006; National Research Council 2007). However, a boom in research does not necessarily mean an equivalent boon.

As in that other famous case, it is premature to conclude "mission accomplished," let alone even consensually identified. The field is strongest in its historical and macro accounts of the emergence and changes of surveillance in modern institutions and in offering an abundance of nominal (if rarely operationalized) concepts. Terms such as surveillance, social control, privacy, anonymity, secrecy, and confidentiality tend to be used without precise (or any) definition and are generally, not logically, linked. There are also case studies, usually at one place and time, involving only one research method and one technology, such as CCTV. Worse, as Torpey notes in his review, there is no

<sup>1</sup> Space limitations require a minimalist treatment here. A fuller annotated version of this review and various articles developing the argument are at garymarx.net.