Book Review

Review of Choudry, Aziz, ed. 2019. *Activists and the Surveillance State: Learning from Repression*. London: Pluto.

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The surveillance of activists has been a central feature of liberal democratic governance throughout the history of capitalism—from the formation of modern police to control urban “mobs,” through slave patrols, through Indian agents, to the policing of labor, to the range of present day movements against extractives, for Indigenous sovereignty, against borders, etc. Repression of (anti-systemic) activism reveals the lie behind liberal democratic claims of openness, inclusion, and non-authoritarianism.

The editor of *Activists and the Surveillance State* is correct in claiming that histories of resistance to state security apparatuses do not get passed along fully and there is much forgetting of both practices of political resistance and political policing. This forgetting is perhaps more extensive in liberal democracies that do a good job of papering over their repressive practices or posing them as exceptions. Even recognizing them is used as a sign of openness and democratic responsiveness.

There remains a real social need to develop detailed analysis of political policy, state security surveillance, and repression of community groups under liberal democratic regimes that pose as being open and respectful of civil liberties and free association. These repressive activities are not exceptions or occasional detours or diversions of liberal democratic states. They are ongoing and repeated facets of liberal democratic governance practice.

As the chapters in *Activists and the Surveillance State* make clear and demonstrate in some detail, liberal democratic policing practices and state security policies and programs are rooted in longstanding counter-insurgency regimes carried out against resistance struggles—from early struggles against colonialism and slavery up to current struggles for Black lives and Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (which includes land defense and struggles against extractives industries).

A strength of *Activists and the Surveillance State* is its attention to and inclusion of situations, discussions, and analyses from diverse global and national contexts. Chapters cover repression and surveillance in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Mauritius, South Africa, Timor-Leste, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This allows, on one hand, for a sharing of knowledge about the circulation of state practices and the learning that is being done and disseminated by states in their efforts to contain and put down resistance, and, in dialectical fashion, by resistance movements in eliding or opposing states.

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Activists need to see these state practices because the cops certainly share their practices, learn from each other, and put that learning into action (even if this collection could have offered more explicit and integrated analysis of these matters). If it works in one context, chances are it will be used in others soon enough. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, it allows activists to learn from and circulate our own practices and responses to state repressive activities as they are deployed and developed in different contexts.

I remain less convinced of the editor's claims that *Activists and the Surveillance State* engages intimately with and will be accessible to activist understandings of and resistance to state security regimes, surveillance, and repression. It remains a largely academic work, distant in style and orientation. All of that is fine—there is a need for academic analysis of social structures of inequality to be sure—it is merely to make clear that this is the nature of the material.

At the same time there is a striking disjuncture or gap in the text that renders it a bit detached and abstract. That is the absence of any real discussion of state surveillance *on campus*—of activist faculty, students, and even programs. This is the site where most of the contributors are employed. There is an odd split between activists (supposedly off campus) and faculty, staff, and students (on campus) and of activists and faculty on campus and their surveillance by police—often within their own departments.

There is no identification of the shift in programs like Criminology and Psychology toward recruitment and training of state forces, rather than scholarship or critical thinking. This is what I have termed the Nightstickology turn on campus. The reader is left with a sense of activism and repression as events at arms length from faculty, staff, and students. As a struggle out there—to be studied or maybe even participated in—but elsewhere. This absence is curious for a collection with a majority of contributors who have academic backgrounds and who are, or were, university faculty. It also leaves the work feeling a bit detached for a volume by “critically engaged academics” as the editor describes it.

One limitation of *Activists and the Surveillance State* is the lack of an integrated, informing analysis of surveillance, especially of Indigenous and colonized people and communities. There are certainly excellent discussions, as in the chapters by Gary Kinsman and Valerie Morse (both important analyses), but these discussions stand alone. This is particularly unsatisfying in the context of a book situated in many ways within the colonial Canadian state. It is especially so given the ongoing settler state project, surveillance of Indigenous communities, and Indigenous resistance and movements for sovereignty and self-determination in the Canadian state context. While I recognize and appreciate the work that is included within the collection, it seems more could have been done in the introductory or framing chapters to center these practices of state surveillance of activism. Particularly given that issues of land struggles underlie activist contexts in settler colonial states and because land struggles, struggles for sovereignty and self-determination *connect* so many struggles within settler colonial state contexts (extractives and ecology, borders, democratic participation, education, human rights, racism and anti-racism, etc.).

On the whole, *Activists and the Surveillance State* is useful in showing the integration and cooperation of police and military (and both with private businesses) in state security operations against social movements and activists and communities in struggle and resistance. This repressive integration can include university administrators and staff and municipal authorities as well as immigration authorities and business lobby groups.

Works like those included here, especially chapters by Radha D'Souza, Sunaina Maira, Gary Kinsman, and Valerie Morse and the interview with activist David Austin can help to contextualize surveillance and repression as crucial aspects of maintaining and reproducing capitalist social relations. Public police have always worked to protect business interests, maintain formal capitalist markets (including in labor) and regulate the classes “dangerous” to accumulation by and for capital. This is the history of policing as a weapon in social containment (in social war). At the same time, private police, which pre-date public police, work to maintain state policies (vagrancy, migration, housing). The collection is also effective in

showing how the selective targeting and deployment of security mechanisms against racialized groups allows liberal democracies to operate a totalitarianism that maintains the trappings of democracy for a majority. This is the significance of the deployment of social phobias and construction of phobic targets. As emerging groups like Anti-Police Power Surrey have pointed out, the expansion of political policing in various forms (and the excuses provided under “terror” panics, etc.) also provides policing agencies with new and growing venues for funding and resource increases in a context of declining crime rates over decades.