Dialogue

Introduction: Domestic Terrorism, White Supremacy, and State Surveillance

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On January 6, 2021, the world watched in shock as domestic right-wing extremists launched a violent attack on the United States' Capitol Building in Washington, DC. Many recorded and live-streamed their invasion, documenting the violent assault on the capitol as they broke through barriers and Capitol Police forces, breaching the building and taking up residence inside congressional chambers and the offices of congressional representatives. The insurrection was triggered by Donald Trump's inflammatory call to action and the mob's desire to halt the certification of electors and overturn the 2020 presidential election.

Figure 1: Domestic extremists storm the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. Source: [Blink O'fanaye](#) (flickr). Licensed under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC 2.0) license.

Newell, Bryce Clayton. 2021. Introduction: Domestic Terrorism, White Supremacy, and State Surveillance. *Surveillance & Society* 19(3): 338-344.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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In the aftermath of the January 6th assault on the Capitol (and US democracy), public focus quickly turned to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) response and the ensuing investigation as well as to questions about what information law enforcement and intelligence agencies had prior to the attack and how they should have responded to that information prior to the Capitol invasion. Over the succeeding months, the FBI's investigation has shed greater light on the US federal government's surveillance and classification of domestic extremists and domestic terrorism. In June 2021, FBI Director Christopher Wray called the insurrectionists "violent extremists" who had "betray[ed] the values of our democracy" (Wray 2021); he had previously called their actions "domestic terrorism" (Naylor and Lucas 2021). Wray (2021) reaffirmed the FBI's position that "the greatest terrorism threat" to the US was from "domestic violent extremists (DVEs) and homegrown violent extremists (HVEs)." He defined DVEs as "Individuals who commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of social or political goals stemming from domestic influences—some of which include racial or ethnic bias, or anti-government or anti-authority sentiments" (Wray 2021).

Wray's statements confirmed that federal law enforcement had been conducting extensive surveillance of domestic extremists in the year prior to the attack on the Capitol (see, e.g., Wray 2021). In the aftermath of the attack, the FBI examined hundreds of thousands of digital tips, photographs, and videos collected through crowdsourcing calls for evidence and open-source intelligence gathering practices (Wray 2021; Ward 2021). The surveillance and scope of the investigation is tremendous, but its reliance on freely shared or publicly posted visual-media content is not without some comparison. In this case, the FBI relied on techniques used in the past to investigate violent public protests, such as those deployed by police after the 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (Vancouver Police Department 2011: 14, 71, 75, 92), and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing (Ackerman 2013; Wadhwa 2013; see also Newell 2014). And, of course, domestic extremism in the US is not just a recent phenomenon: the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995 remains the deadliest act of homegrown terrorism in US history (O'Harrow, Tran, and Hawkins 2021; Federal Bureau of Investigation n.d.) and, according the Heritage Foundation's analysis of RAND data, there were ninety-one "homegrown terrorist attacks" against the US between 2001 and 2009 (Muhlhausen and McNeill 2011). *The Washington Post* has reported that right- and left-wing extremists have been involved in more than 330 plots of attacks since 2015 (O'Harrow, Tran, and Hawkins 2021).

Since the January 6th attack on the US Capitol, the FBI has arrested hundreds of individuals involved in that insurrection (US Department of Justice 2021c). In recent years, they have also investigated and arrested others involved in domestic terrorism cases. For example, in recent months, the FBI has announced guilty pleas by multiple defendants who had been part of "The Base," a "racially motivated violent extremist group" motivated by white supremacist ideologies (US Department of Justice 2021d; US Department of Justice 2020b); an individual who communicated violent intent during communications with members of the "white supremacist extremist group Feuerkrieg Division" (US Department of Justice 2020a); a former law enforcement officer who had purchased illegal weapons and espoused "viewpoints consistent with racially motivated violent extremism" (US Department of Justice 2021b); and a man who adhered to the "Boogaloo Movement"—described by the FBI as an extremist militia movement (US Department of Justice 2021a).

Of course, the recent US experience with domestic terrorism is only one example of many—both around the world and throughout history (see, e.g., Jongman 1992). The recent attack on the US Capitol Building is a jarring reminder, but it is only one incident in the global context. Incidents of domestic terrorism and white supremacist movements have been on the rise around the world in recent years (see, e.g., Johnson 2021; O'Harrow, Tran, and Hawkins 2021). The purpose of this Dialogue is to provide space for surveillance studies scholars to reflect on the interconnections between white supremacy, domestic terrorism, and state surveillance of domestic extremists. Several of the contributions to this Dialogue reflect on the January 6th insurrection and other aspects of domestic terrorism in the US (Parker 2021; Tynes 2021; Ward 2021), but others examine these issues within other countries and contexts, including commentary on surveillance and policing of right-wing extremism in Canada (Crosby 2021; Millet and Swiffen 2021), the colonial and racist history of state surveillance in Spain (Jiménez and Cancela 2021), violent extremism and white supremacist violence in Sweden (Rostami and Askanius 2021), white supremacy and nationalism in the context of Hong

Kong's recent political turmoil (Zhao 2021), and a critique of surveillance-as-method in digital research into far-right extremist groups online (Finlayson, Osborne-Carey, and Topinka 2021).

Within the context of the January 6th attack, Ward (2021) frames citizen engagement with the FBI's requests for crowdsourced tips as a form of citizen participation in state surveillance, motivated by the punitive goal of bringing wrongdoers to justice. The federal government leveraged participatory surveillance practices and a public desire for justice in efforts to further its own punitive investigation and, in some cases, tapped into an online culture that encourages what Trottier (2016) has called "digital vigilantism" and Spiller and L'Hoiry (2019) refer to as "DIYism" or do-it-yourself culture. In essence, according to Ward, the state has learned how to "prime its citizens to accept otherwise unpopular surveillance infrastructures." In conclusion, Ward argues that: "By allowing citizens not only a means to participate in the surveillance and policing they themselves are subject to but also enact these surveillance procedures in ways that benefit their own ideological aims and goals, the state enrolls the public as both subject and actor in a deputization process which may create consensus for these surveillance practices." And this argument seems to align with earlier work in which Nguyen (2019: 334) examined the US Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism initiatives under the Obama administration, finding that the program worked to "conscript[] US Muslims into policing their own communities" by incentivizing such work with financial and other resources. These analyses of citizen participation in state investigations are also linked closely to the long history of American institutions "work[ing] together to regulate the conduct of American citizens by activating their capacities for surveillance and communication" that is, turning them into *citizen spies* (Reeves 2017: 3). We might also question whether this citizen participation in punitive surveillance practices offers the "opportunity to participate in the synergy of real-world collective political activity" or whether it simply reproduces the aims of surveillance capitalism and the continuing "spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance" in modern society (Borradaile and Reeves 2020: 274–275).

In this vein, Tynes (2021) questions whether this state-led campaign to recruit citizen spies is working for or against democratic interests. However, rather than viewing all citizen-surveillance in the January 6th investigation as participation in a state-led initiative, Tynes argues that "Citizen surveillance had stepped in to fill a failure of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other law enforcement agencies." Focusing on the practices of doxing—that is, the practice of "publicly identify[ing] or publish[ing] private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge" (Merriam-Webster n.d.)—Tynes argues that these online vigilantes were reacting to a manufactured "phenomenal illusion" and that their actions "destroy[ed] the illusion" of legitimacy the rioters sought to bring to their violent cause. Rather than framing this instance of peer surveillance as the "the pinnacle... of America's surveillance society" described by Reeves (2017), Tynes argues that "the doxxers had turned surveillance back on itself and reinstated morality into the system, without which democracy might not survive."

Next, Parker (2021) takes a different approach to examining the January 6th attack—that is, by digging into the "legal architecture of counterterrorism in the United States," specifically how provisions of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA) have been applied in prosecutions for "providing material support for terrorism" and reflect "racialized surveillance practices." Parker examines how surveillance and investigation of domestic terrorists has a racialized bias, and argues that, "should policing indeed prove to be the best course of action for countering terrorism, preexisting statutes (and the racialized constraints under which they are enforced) merit further review in the struggle against white supremacist violence."

Moving north, to Canada, Crosby (2021) discusses how Canadian security and intelligence agencies have recently begun to focus more intently on right-wing nationalists and white supremacists as part of their counter-terrorism efforts, especially as right-wing extremist activity has increased in that country. Focusing on analysis of documents released under access-to-information requests, Crosby examines how Canadian security agencies gain knowledge, understand, and define right-wing extremism in Canada. In one of its most recent moves, and in response to the January 6th attack in Washington, DC, the Canadian government designated the Proud Boys and twelve other groups as terrorist entities under Canadian law, four of which

were defined as “ideologically motivated, violent extremist groups.” However, Crosby exposes concerns about how state surveillance and counter-terrorism practices might actually further intensify racism and division within Canadian society rather than stamping out hate and bridging racial divides. Looking to Canada’s status as a settler-colonial state, Crosby argues that, “the proliferation of hate groups is inevitable in societies built upon racist institutions of white supremacy and settler colonialism.”

Also focused on Canada, Millett and Swiffen (2021) similarly examine the Canadian government’s move to include “right-wing extremism” as a specific category of national security concern. Like in the US, Canada has focused on “homegrown terrorism” for decades, especially after the September 11th attacks in the US, a designation that has carried implicit links to Muslim communities in Canada and elsewhere. (Similarly, in the US, homegrown violent extremists [HVEs] are still defined as “individuals who are inspired primarily by global jihad, but not receiving individualized direction from foreign terrorist organizations” [Wray 2021]). Millett and Swiffen engage criticisms of the recent government response and framing of right-wing terrorism, placing them within a historical context in which state anti-terror surveillance has “disproportionately target[ed] Muslim communities.” Such concerns are also echoed in earlier work by Monaghan (2014: 487) identifying how Canadian security and intelligence agencies have long operated within the context of a “pre-occupation with Islamic terrorism.” Inspired by these criticisms, Millett and Swiffen draw on Walter Benjamin’s (1978) theory of law to gain insight into the relationship between law and violence within the Canadian anti-terrorism context. Ultimately, they argue that Benjamin’s concept of law as a relation of violence can help reconcile opposing views that, on one hand, the recent push to address right-wing extremism as domestic terrorism is a positive step away from a singular focus on Muslim communities and, on the other hand, that “treating white supremacist violence as terrorism does not address” the racist nature of the state (Millett and Swiffen 2021).

Moving across the Atlantic Ocean, Rostami and Askanius (2021) describe and trace Sweden’s troubled history with violent right- and left-wing extremism and associated rise in domestic state surveillance. Indeed, as they note, Sweden has become the “Nordic hub for the extreme far-right movement,” maintaining a “markedly stronger and more resilient extreme-right movement compared to its Nordic neighbors” and situated as an outlier in international comparisons of far-right violence. As in Canada and the US, Sweden’s primary security focus since 2001 “has been on international Islamic terrorism and the rise of domestic violent Islamic extremism and, later, the steady flow of foreign fighters to Daesh.” And, this “focus... has persisted even though Sweden, alongside Germany, the UK, and Spain, stands out as having far more far-right terrorism violence per capita than any other Western European country.” However, as Rostami and Askanius explain, this has begun to change. For example, in 2019, the Swedish Security Service named far-right extremism as the greatest terrorist threat to the country, a shift from its prior focus on Islamic extremism. Ultimately, though, Rostami and Askanius argue that “It remains to be seen... whether the decision to highlight far-right extremism as a primary national security threat and to direct resources toward the critical scrutiny and surveillance of these actors will persist beyond the present moment.”

Moving south, to Spain, Jiménez and Cancela (2021) trace the “long history of colonialism, racism, and state terrorism on the Iberian peninsula.” They argue that this history evinces what they refer to as *surveillance punitivism*—that is, “the continuum of data-gathering practises deployed against dominated populations by public and private actors for the purpose of reinforcing a colonial, racist, classist, and patriarchal social structure of capitalist exploitation.” Rather than focus directly on the threat of domestic extremism emanating from Spanish citizens, Jiménez and Cancela frame the Spanish state’s colonial and empire-building practices as its own form of domestic terrorism. From the Spanish black codes and associated racialized policing—“designed to structure and institutionalise a system of white supremacy”—to the deployment of border surveillance technologies in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla situated on mainland Africa, Jiménez and Cancela identify how state surveillance and control of minorities and immigrants continue to work as “mechanisms for drawing the twenty-first century colour lines.” That is, forms of *surveillance punitivism* that “can be traced back to [Spain’s] (not yet ended) colonial period.”

Moving further east, to the Pearl River Delta in south China, Zhao (2021) argues that white supremacy has, at least in part, motivated recent pro-democracy movements and protests in Hong Kong throughout 2019. This recent political struggle has often been framed as a popular movement to preserve Western-style democracy in Hong Kong, in which protestors prefer the democratic form of government imposed under British rule to China's totalitarian, communist regime. However, Zhao argues, "the two are unfortunately anchored in conflicting racial identities (i.e., Hongkongers vs. Chinese)" and the conflict has led to increased state surveillance and security enforcement within Hong Kong. Zhao links British occupation and its colonial legacy to white supremacy (including white worship and white privilege) in Hong Kong society and links a combination of these factors to continuing "open dislike or hatred of mainlanders" amongst a majority of the residents of Hong Kong. He also locates these white supremacist mentalities in the varied treatment of white and Chinese residents of Hong Kong during the protests in 2019. In the end, Zhao argues, this confluence of factors has resulted in an "escalating political control of Hong Kong by the Chinese government" that relies directly on enhanced surveillance and other tools of social control. As such, China's security crackdown attempts to "forge Chinese identity in the long run" and root out any place for white supremacist ideologies in Hong Kong's political rule—a shift that, according to Zhao, "marks the beginning of the end of white supremacy in Hong Kong (at least in politics)."

Finally, Topinka, Finlayson, and Osborne-Carey (2021) remove us from an explicit focus on physical geography and national boundaries to, instead, examine forms of computational research methods that reproduce surveillant methods. They examine and critique what they refer to as *surveillance-as-method*—that is, "the use of computational methods to gather data on far-right activities on digital media platforms, typically in order to track keywords or phrases or to map network connections." On one hand, they argue that "surveillance-as-method reinforces an assumption that digital extremism needs only to be seen to be understood and addressed; that once it is revealed as extreme it will be seen for what it is and wither." Rather, such methods might only feed into far-right narratives and amplify their message. (Notably, this argument is also directly linked to broader critiques of the "marketplace of ideas" and "truth discovery" theories of free speech that undergird many liberal approaches to freedom of expression and that provide legal cover for forms of harmful speech, especially in jurisdictions like the US that have strong constitutional protections for expression [see, e.g., Ingber 1984; Wonnell 1986; Joo 2014; Hassan 2015]). On the other hand, when scholars conflate surveillance-as-method with surveillance-as-critique, they may also feed into extremist narratives. The authors argue, in conclusion, that scholars "need strategies for moving beyond surveillance, integrating findings with theoretically and historically informed analysis of ideologies of the far right."

As these contributions demonstrate, the overlapping issues of domestic extremism, terrorist violence, white supremacy, and state surveillance manifest in numerous ways and in nations and communities around the world. These issues are not merely issues located within specific nations or bounded by geography and political borders. However, these concerns are both very local and global at the same time. Additionally, as I hope this collection demonstrates, reasonable minds can differ in their interpretation and analysis of state and private (peer) surveillance practices; the role, meaning, and evolution of social movements and protests; and normative answers to the question of where do we go from here? Ideally, this collection can serve as a useful resource to surveillance scholars addressing these issues in future research.

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