

Up against the American state

Life during wartime

Resisting counterinsurgency

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Titles shouldn't matter – but they do, a bit. This 440 page book is a lot more than the title suggests: fewer than half of the essays are about counterinsurgency. But life during *wartime*? There is material on Mexico and the....well, what *is* going on there? Some reports say 80,000 dead – it must be called a war. Between which states? There is only one state involved. A civil war? A state versus criminal gangs? Or do we now have narco-states forming, like the city states of 500 years ago? But in the USA, the subject of 95% of this book, there is no war. There is conflict and oppression and mass surveillance and Red Squads in-all-but-name in all the cities, with computers up the wazoo and big budgets. But the US cities are not yet in *a state of war*; the non-white groups feeling the brunt of the US state are not yet *at war* with that state. This kind of hyperbole does no-one any good.

This is, in effect, a kind of guide to what you will face if you try to mount a radical challenge to the American powers-that-be. From the accounts here it's mostly, as David Byrne put it, the same as it ever was: surveillance, informants, *agents provocateurs*. (Trying to detect and exclude the state's undercover agents is a recurring theme.) Almost all, maybe *all* of the 'Muslim' conspiracies which the US state claims to have detected since 2001 have been organised by the state's employee in the group. Protest is redefined as 'terrorism' and a 'domestic terrorist threat', comprising eco-sabotage, anti-corporate demos and suspected Jihadis has been created from the whole cloth. It *is* the same as it ever was, with one new wrinkle: preventive detention used before planned demos. But the radicals are being put in prison; they are not yet being killed, as were some of the Black Panthers.

The basis of this collection was a conference on counterinsurgency and policing: to the proceedings of which have been added activists' accounts of facing this repressive mechanism. (There is also a paper on US military translators which seems to have wandered into the wrong conference.) Unfortunately the book was put together before the NSA-Snowden events and doesn't directly address the largely unspoken subtext of the NSA story: how do you organise for change when the state can intercept all electronic and paper communications? Send hand-carried messages? Use pigeons?

Because counterinsurgency (CI) theory starts by telling the state to address the causes of discontent, the growing adoption of CI tactics by the US domestic state is peculiarly repellent and threatening for some of these authors. One account makes a police initiative in a city to reduce gang activity appear sinister. The author prefers gang activity? Apparently so – at any rate it is preferable to police CI do-gooders.

Many of the activists' accounts come from the deep green end, Earth First and its ilk, who have had the state on their backs (and its spies in their groups). There is nothing here about unions, for example, or political parties or other less radical forms of organisation. From where I'm sitting the *withdrawal* of the state from large areas of British life is the central problem. Several of these authors are simply anti-state in any of its current forms. (But then the publisher, AK, is an anarchist press.)

And it says something about the perspective of these papers that the editors thought it worthwhile to get Chip Berlet¹ to discuss whether or not those on the right have rights. Even discussing the idea that people with different views from yours might *not* have the same rights does suggest that the tanky impulse is still alive and well in bits of the American left.

This survey of where the American police state is at makes pretty grim reading for the most part. Without intending to do so, these essays might put off all but the most

1 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chip_Berlet>.

determined or battle-hardened.

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