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## **Chapter 11. Violence Performed in Secret by State Agents: For an Alternative Problematisation of Intelligence Studies**

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I would like to address the conditions under which information and intelligence are constructed and used today by secret services, considering the effects of three interdependent dynamics reinforcing each other: transnational sharing of information by coalitions of secret services of the same kind, digitisation allowing a large scale surveillance of foreigners and citizen suspected to be “a danger”, and a restructuration of the prominent organisations doing intrusive surveillance and violent actions as a public-private assemblage based in the global North but having its main lethal consequences on the South. My main question lies on how to investigate the practices of state violence performed in secret and their modalities of legitimation when the scale of their activities has changed so fast and affect so many individuals in the world. From the secret games of the Cold War between professionals spies interested to evaluate the defence systems of the opposite block to now, we have seen an expansion of the groups to put under surveillance including terrorism, crime, economic espionage, and even nudging of public opinion and votes. The number of professionals of intelligence has multiplied, and their enrolment of “adjuncts” in other public organisations and private companies has pushed many other actors to act as “intelligence” providers. The technologies employed have become sufficiently advanced to be considered economically “profitable” and have tied contacts beyond national security. The targets are so numerous that it is difficult for anyone to believe they can live in a bubble fully protected from intrusions of “intelligence” actors.

In the first part, I want to show that this change of scale has not yet been fully considered by the specialists of “Intelligence Studies” in their investigations of professional actors beyond the

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small anglophone club of secret services, despite considerable advances in interdisciplinary methods. I will briefly describe the main contributions of “Intelligence Studies”, already discussed by Hager Ben Jaffel and Sebastian Larsson in the introduction of this book, insisting on the ways by which this crossroad of research around secret services has evolved and crystallised for good reasons around the idea of intelligence, but has left out the questions of violence and legitimisation by focusing almost exclusively on secret information. This needs in my view to be corrected and reshaped through the contributions coming from another nexus of recent research in International Political Sociology, insisting on the socio-genesis of violence historically and state transformations, on the transnational dimension of the field of intelligence and its impact on the quality of political regimes in relation to their own population and their attitude towards their allies, as well as their posture considering others as foreign citizens and not objects to be under surveillance.

As we will see, if transformations are important today, they are not just the product of technical changes or of a movement of globalisation. The field of intelligence has evolved historically and has its own history in relation to the state, to the capital and to the people (Tilly 2003). The differentiation of specific “secret” activities from other coercive forces has been a long process, far from some essentialist narratives naturalising their function to all states and societies. The differentiation of a social universe of civil servants working in secret has been stronger in the states who wanted to have a regional or a world influence, and who have participated in colonial projects. It has also been by far more discussed in democratic societies than authoritarian ones, as the modalities of legitimation of their existence have generated controversies and sometimes scandals asking for the suppression of a specific service. Consequently, the fragility of these modes of legitimation and of their transformations is not a problem but, on the contrary, the sign of the vitality of democracy and the importance of this subject. The idea of a universe existing forever outside of the norms and institutions regulating the world, in the name of a permanent exception and naturality of an unending war, declared or not, against enemies, traitors, adversaries, or even opponents, is not sustainable academically and democratically speaking.

A certain idea of the king’s privilege as a “despotic right” cannot continue, despite the efforts to justify this lineage. Until the end of the 1960s, the first realist-cynical tradition of geopolitics was tempted to consider the secret services as shadow soldiers obeying almost blindly the executive power in charge, in order to avoid the tension between accountability in democratic

regimes and secrecy as the site of potential impunity, even in the case of gross violations of human rights or betrayal of the nation. However, the post-Cold War transformations of the game of spying and counter-spying has shown that it was an unrealistic legitimisation to create a full veil of ignorance around the actors enacting secret actions. It became even more clear than before that each secret service has a life of its own, with missions sometimes loosely connected with the national political scene and diplomatic life yet organised around transnational activities of different regional alliances. The ideological restriction of the role of secret services to a nationalist frame and a national security community has rendered intelligence scholarship incapable of discussing the most interesting transformations concerning the privatisation, digitisation, and transnationalisation of the services, as well as the expansion of their activities. Refusing to look in detail on the practices, these so-called realists have, by ignorance or facility, taken for granted the projection of a certain type of folk-theory of the insiders, insisting on their neutrality and technicity. The difficulties to enter a universe characterised by secrecy, and the will to respect it, has been crucial for this academic attitude.

Fortunately, as we will see in the second part of this chapter, post-1990s intelligence scholarship is born from a somewhat more reflexive posture, both intellectually and methodologically. The historians who populated the academic field were predominant since they were in a methodological position where they could study released official secrets that had previously been restricted by secrecy laws, as long as they had access to more or less unfiltered documents and were attentive to the quality of the archives. They were crucial to give back a sense of real life of the secret agents and their organisations, their alliances and conflicts, and their partial autonomy from politicians. But the obvious cost was the delay of the releases of official secrets, from ten years in the most optimistic cases, to more than fifty years in the most complex ones. To fill the “gap” created by the secrecy of today’s practices, that political scientists and sociologists were not ready to engage with, we saw instead the development of semi-fictional narratives coming from media and popular culture narratives. These do not have to be neglected as unscientific. Their impact on the modalities of legitimation in relation to the public has been by far more important than any work of the social sciences. For decades, the image of James Bond has framed the idea of the glamorous dimension of everyday life in the secret services. This continues to be one of the main resources of the strategy of communication of the services concerning their role and mission, even if they have added to fiction an assemblage of truth regimes based on their interest, in universities, teaching, and memoirs of previous top state agents.

In academia, organisational sociologists and political scientists have tried to construct a narrative and a synthesis by framing their research on secret services as a specific sub-discipline, different from War Studies and Security Studies, and concentrating on “Intelligence Studies”. Under this specific “label” of Intelligence Studies, different journals have accepted works based on archives to open their columns to former practitioners turned professors, who have provided a gist of their past workplace and routines, as well as some professionals of the sociology of organisations who have tried to translate, despite the official secrets, what have been the different challenges met by the professionals to do their job. For the last thirty years, these researchers have developed a more in-depth knowledge about the routines and everyday life of the services during key moments in history, and they have set up a framework with concepts like “intelligence community”, “national security”, and “intelligence cycle”; a frame which has its merits, but also its deficits. Certainly, the merits come from complexifying and deepening our knowledge on secret services by trying to open the “black box” of their human internal relations and the logic of their organisation and roles. It has allowed to answer better the very different “crafts” that each service has tried to develop within the intelligence community. This was an important insight, however, intelligence research has often been done to the price of a hyper-specialisation (i.e. a description of one service in one country) and sometimes an ethical position-shifting from the necessary doubt of academic reasoning to conducting research to get a kind of Salomon judgement in the name of “neutrality” – meaning that instead of looking to the truth covered by secrets, they were deciding to have a “balanced” judgement based on respecting the diverse viewpoints of the services and their contenders. I will come back to this attitude.

Among other deficits in intelligence scholarship signalled in the introduction of this book, I will also insist on the original framing of the practices of secret services in terms of “intelligence” studies, a terminology which I consider inadequate for an analysis of the practices of different forms of violence which occur at the intersection between the field of politics, especially in democratic regime, and the field of violent use of power by dominant actors<sup>1</sup>. By discussing more and more the modalities of secrets, and less and less the frame of violence of these “secret” activities, the research has decided, quite logically, to call itself “intelligence studies”, especially in publications in the anglosphere (contrary to Latin-American and some continental European publications). This move, that I will detail below, has focused on geopolitics and counter-terrorist public policies, and has concerned firstly the

signals intelligence services. It has therefore taken part in the symbolic struggles about the very justification of some of the secret services, opposing the traditional military ones and those who wanted to be considered less violent and less secret. They have presented themselves as almost a normal bureaucratic activity in a society of surveillance where the state surveillance is supposedly less intrusive and extensive than the one of private digital companies.

Undoubtedly, some analysts consider that the trend of the diminution of violence by the executive powers in place, and its replacement by a politics of management based on anticipation of the future and prevention, justify putting the emphasis on intelligence only. At first sight, it is certainly possible to agree with this potential trend. Nevertheless, as we will see in the third part of this chapter, this argument of a minimisation of the use of violence cannot be overestimated. The intensity and visibility of violence may seem to decrease in open conflicts, but as soon as the changes of forms of violence are taken into consideration, as well as the size of their targets and the implications for everyone, it is clear that violence performed by secret services in less visible ways than before continues and extends, nevertheless. The main change is therefore for them to boost a reinforcement of their strategies of legitimation in order to avoid scandals and to preserve a sort of structural impunity. As we will see, these narratives of refocusing from direct to indirect violence are framed around “proactivity”, “prevention”, “anticipation of risk”, and “prediction”. Part of academia has been fascinated by these discourses but has not explored the practices. The result has been that some scholars have taken them for granted and believed in their efficiency, even when they had doubts about their legitimacy and contested them in the name of privacy. But the so-called balance between security and privacy has ended up naturalising the narratives of the validity of prevention and its techniques, as if they were the routines of a new technological digital society not related with the extension of certain political practices. The overall strategy has been to present themselves as clever technicians anticipating the worst-case scenario and providing solutions to escape this fate. But the long chain of consequences of their actions and the reactions they generate (intentionally or not) push on the contrary to question their legitimacy almost permanently.

I will finish the chapter by suggesting that these central elements and their relations, which have not been clearly identify by the different strands of research of Intelligence Studies, can strongly benefit from the reading of key sociologists belonging to an international political relational sociology, discussing violence and legitimation against the canons of the US political science

of the 1970s that are still in use in intelligence scholarship. To quote just a few names, Norbert Elias, Anthony Giddens, and Pierre Bourdieu can give us answers about the practices of secret services over time, the links they have with politics, and also their international role today. Of course, these important sociologists are not specialists of secret services and they have rarely written about the roles of these services. Nevertheless, their framing of the state and its relations to society in terms of power relations and processes, insisting on the dispositions (*habitus*), professional fields, and logics of interdependence among all these actors, explain far better what is at stake today in the management of secret violence of state agents and their private counterparts, and on the conditions of possibilities of a reflexive social science research. Their common insistence to analyse all forms of violence, from the most brutal to the most subtle, can act as Ariadne's thread to reframe the understanding of the role of secret services over the world, at least in the global North. I propose therefore to develop a research programme concerning, first, a socio-analysis of historical trajectories of the different configurations between the different secret services, second, to have a reflexive stance about academic research in regard to these reconfigurations and permanent struggles for controlling why and how violence performed in secret is still possible (even if other strategies of justifications are needed), and third, to have a closer look at the secret services in the anglosphere and their relations with other liberal representative democratic regimes in order to see them as different social universes in interaction and competition, which are certainly not one "community".

### **Violence performed in secret by state authorities: The other face of the social contacts**

There are many ways of looking at the role of the secret services in political life. Violence performed in secret by a group of persons around the prince pre-dates Machiavelli. This does not mean that secret services are eternal or consubstantial to humankind in society, even if many books evoke these origins with the joke about the "second oldest profession of the world" which has the function to essentialise the existence of the service and ignore its lineage with mercenaries and privateers.<sup>ii</sup> James Der Derian (1992) has explained how modern states have accepted immunity for embassies and how they have been the birthplace for institutional spying and counter-spying, in order to organise impunity for those executing the "orders of the prince". From there, a profession has emerged (Horn 2011).<sup>iii</sup> Secrecy has been a "pact" of silence between complicit agents using violence, but the novelty has been to immunise them from normal punishment via a regime of justification changing the very status of their actions (Warner 2014; Krulic 2010).

Secret agents were acting in the name of the prince as a head of state, for something beyond his own goodwill. With the emergence of democratic conditions desacralizing the prince's privileges, however, the people's representatives asked for "reasons", and even considered the former King of France Louis XVI to be a traitor to the nation. Nevertheless, governments, beginning with Robespierre, have tried to preserve a kind of sanctity of secrecy by transforming the notion of security from a king's privilege into a necessity to protect the people, to protect the "nation". Specialised committees of deputies or specific branches of the army were entitled to act under the direct orders of the head of state. It is not before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the logic of political secrecy became connected with arguments about survival and national security and that specific services, different often from the army, emerged (Gros 2012). If the official existence of some of these services was recognised during the First World War, until recently some countries, like the Netherlands, denied the existence of secret services belonging officially to the state, even against evidence of the contrary.<sup>iv</sup> So, instead of artificially creating by nominalism a natural history of spying (and performing violence in secret), we have to remember the structural differences that have existed, from mercenaries to an institutionalisation of "public servants" specialised in these domains of violent action, anti-diplomacy, and surveillance of populations. Many countries over the world maintain this policy and often specialise a branch of their army to do these tasks, instead of creating institutions more dependent on civilian power and the head of state (Jones 2014). The fragility of the justification explains the strength of the dogma that, "by essence", the secret services are necessary instruments for the survival of democracies in a world where they are a minority, and that any form of control of their actions is limiting their efficiency. This permanent necessity to assert the legitimacy of the services fighting against new and bigger threats against the doubt of many citizens, especially during scandals, is something which haunts the establishment and perpetuation of "intelligence services". This quest for legitimacy explains the shift from spectacular violent action to surveillance and strategic information in liberal regimes. The agents and the future candidates to these functions are nowadays sensitive to the ethos of performing a noble task, almost immaterial and dealing mostly with accuracy and timely information in order to inform decision making.

Nevertheless, death itself cannot be buried under the other goals of secret "intelligence". The consequences for human beings of being the targets of secret services are not benign. Extraction of information can be done by intrusive techniques against privacy in the digital realm or by interrogations under torture of groups of people who are denounced as potential allies of

clandestine organisations. These practices, justified under the necessity to prevent future acts, are not identical to the consequences of being searched by criminal justice and police, even if many recent justifications try, under the term of “counter-terrorism”, to convince us that secret services are performing the “justice” of their countries abroad by “executing” the tasks to eliminate some “targets”. The legitimization of the services to perform violence secretly is a normal project for an institution always in danger of being accused of doing these actions for their own purposes or against basic fundamental rights in democracies. What is more of a problem, however, is that most intelligence researchers do not question the modalities of legitimization but rather escape this question by considering the activities of secret services as “normal” bureaucracy. Secrecy replaces the question of violence. The tragic dimension of the intelligence task is transformed into a “banal” event, a bureaucratic routine of collecting information, elaborating intelligence information, and creating options of probable futures to influence one future in particular to advent.

*Intelligence Studies: an approach focused on the mediation between secrets and public information?*

By the very name of Intelligence Studies, the core part of the objectives of secret services – which is called in other contexts, ‘murders’, ‘extra-judicial killings’, ‘extortion’, or ‘manipulation’ – is therefore invisibilised, and the services are conceived exclusively as a bureaucratic “community” of collection of information by secret means.

The will of abstraction and the turn to design models for the management of a so-called ‘intelligence community’ made up of all the services (be they external-military-diplomatic or internal-police-border guards) has allowed intelligence scholars to present a “clean face” of the services by focusing on their expertise concerning “information” and “intelligence”, a face which do not consider the details of the violence covered by their secrets. Current research has the tendency to avoid the questions of the legitimization of the objectives and the justification of impunity for all those working for a state that allow the possibility to shield these actions abroad and at home (McCoy 2012). As we will see later, we cannot agree with this framing of the functioning of the secret services in everyday situations which fails to consider their impact on politics and their choices concerning the “grievable” and “non-grievable” lives that they are making with their watchlists, statistics, and algorithms (Butler 2009). Taking intelligence seriously is about transforming the question of secrecy as a means to use violence into a question of access to information for the public and researchers. This is certainly better than to

pretend that secrets are unquestionable, but it is not a sufficient step. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the most common attitude of political scientists has been to transform the de facto problem of access to documentation and detailed information into a “tactical advantage” justifying their rational choice theory of the unicity of the “voice” of the state and reviving the old argument of the alliances around national security and national interest. Through this preference for geopolitics, political scientists succeeded in constructing a global narrative reducing the intelligence services to national “instruments” obeying the politicians in place, opening therefore the possibility that these instruments were “neutral”.

Intelligence services were the “obedient soldiers of the shadow wars” and were living with specific rules outside of criminal laws and the laws of war (Todd & Bloch 2003). They had all their own special universe unregulated by law, but not anarchical. The Cold War confrontation promoted this upscaling of the discussion in intelligence scholarship ignoring the details of the different cases, but it became less and less sustainable after the 1980s when it became obvious that spying and counter-spying was not at all the core part of their work, but that they were involved in many other activities such as subversion and counter-subversion, economic intelligence, and actions in favour of big national private companies (Demarest 1995; Grey 2015). International laws tried to regulate the questions of mercenaries, and also the activities of the secret services. The 1981 Council of Europe Convention 108 for the “Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data” was clearly opposing this notion of the right for the services to be outside national and international laws. They may continue to exist as a derogation inside a specific frame of laws, but not as a permanent exception untouchable by law and obeying only the “raison d’ État” and its antidemocratic space.<sup>v</sup>

This geopolitical framing of a cynical *raison d’ État*, ignoring on purpose the details of the lives of the agents of the services, has created a difficulty for social science to research “intelligence” services. Respecting absolutely the secrecy of practices has led these authors to ignore the actual power relations between the rulers and their secret administrations, with the belief in the latter’s unflinching subordination, and unconditional sense of patriotism. It has functioned as a way to dismiss the practices of violence and manipulation and to focus on the construction of intelligence through data collection and extraction of information. Secret services became a kind of ordinary administration managing exceptional situations and obliged to be covered by secrecy for good reasons. The men in the shadows were therefore conscientious, like any other

citizens, and very concerned with rules and ethics. They were “civil servants”, and among the most dedicated to the nation. This sanitised vision had a lot of advantages for both the analysts and the services themselves, but it was so well diffused that it was also “unattractive” for recruitment, since the banal and the boring are often correlated in the social imaginary. Nevertheless, to show the real life of the services by opening up the archives after a “sanitation period” has been a way to maintain the flame of the mission, and books by historians on secret services have been sometimes transformed into a tool of promotion for recruitment, evoking the sense of sacrifice of the shadow soldiers.

### **Legitimate research? Waiting for disclosure and the role of historians**

Taking seriously the living dimension and the organisation of the different secret services and having, in most liberal countries, the possibility to access archives, it is no surprise that historians have strongly populated the field of research on intelligence services. Clearly, historians have succeeded in doing in-depth research, and they have given more accurate pictures of the activities of these services than the popular stories of novels or memoirs by some insiders. The history of the First and Second World Wars is not the same anymore, now that we have the archives of these services. In the USA, the role of CIA in Latin America in the 1970s is now even more well known than before, but clearly it does not help the service; rather, it justifies the strong critique they received at the time by NGO coalitions and in parliamentary enquiries, which put constraints on some of their more violent actions.

Former secrets, even if considered irrelevant for the present, still attract attention, not only for the specialists, but for a larger audience. Some historians of the present have not only given us a gist of the routines of the actions of services by reporting empirically on the archives to which they obtained specific limited access, but they have also shed light on some of the reasons, previously unknown to the public, explaining their actions. They have also theorised the day-to-day routines and understood better the constraints and freedoms given by secrecy, the impact on the personnel of some illegitimate actions and their associated trauma, as well as the specificities of these bureaucracies which cannot be assimilated to others. This empathy with the persons living at the time is central to understand the effects of the decisions made by the services themselves. Historians are, in this regard, far from the rational choice theory and the false neutrality presented in political science.<sup>vi</sup>

In order to fill the gap between historical research and testimonies of the present day, however, it was through “fictional” novels and movies that the narratives of the services’ secret violence were evoked. Hollywood movies have set up a tradition of popular culture which is still the first source of “information” when people are asked about their visions of secret services (Taylor 2008; Willmetts 2019; Boyd Barrett 2011). The “license to kill” narrative has ignited the imagination of millions and millions of people, and still continues to do so.

The context of opposite ideologies during the Cold War has framed the actions of espionage and counterespionage between governments as the main activity of the “secret” services. Hence, the aesthetisation of the Cold War professionals of violence coming from the state has followed the plots of murder stories but with a sense of heroization and a zest of international politics. Mediatic fictions have thus given back to the actors of the services this extra “soul” that the geopolitical narratives obscured by neglecting their lives and by reducing them to instruments of the state. They have given to the services a more autonomous character and even a status of “heroes”, free from bureaucratic rules and led only by their conscience of the “art” of their task sanctioned by the recognition of their peers (and even their adversaries). They have been seen as heroes beyond normal rules, as exceptional men and women. Narratives of novels and movies have certainly evolved, and are now less caricatural, but they forged “legends” of their own, often in partnership with the strategic communication of the services themselves, especially when they needed to recruit personnel for enhancing diversity (Blistène 2018).

The two opposite images given by political science and popular culture, in fact, reinforce each other by their very distinction between, on the one hand, the insistence on the ordinary world of a bureaucracy of information done by intelligence professionals and, on the other hand, the exceptional world of an elite of state secrets always in action. This division of tasks has not been genuine, it has helped to maintain the fascination of secret violence, which attracts the imagination of populations and candidates, while describing a mode of legitimacy based on the sacrifice of doing an obscure job of adviser and enforcer of the prince, with no real margin of manoeuvre, where secrecy is never a mark of autonomy, but of “duty”.

### **Intelligence studies and the sociology of the “secret” organisation**

The narratives of the sociology of organisations in intelligence scholarship considered therefore that the different services abroad and on the inside were de facto an “intelligence community” assigned to different functions and missions that all concurred to “national security”.<sup>vii</sup> They

did not refuse the geopolitical frame but insisted that the intelligence services had their own decision-making process and were not just obedient soldiers. They were fundamentally important for the decision-making process, and this process had to be analysed as such to show their roles and to make them different from mercenaries and black squadrons. The notion of an “intelligence community” based on an intelligence cycle was describing their roles as neutral “experts”, as “masters” of strategic information both on the inside and outside of the border. Despite being divided between mainly military and external intelligence services focused on threats from abroad, and police and internal intelligence services centred on internal “disturbances” of the political order, they were, according to this narrative, nevertheless in “good intelligence” and met regularly to exchange information. They succeeded in building “trust” and a sense of duty among all the participants.

The thesis of an intelligence cycle, even if more subtle than others, by its interest in the design of the circuit of information, has certainly helped to get a grip on who is doing what, and has allowed to do a “sequencing” of the routines as a sort of DNA of the secret services, without breaking (or trying to uncover) secrets. This can be considered as a smart move, and the contacts between intelligence scholars and the different services have been facilitated through this approach. This nevertheless comes with the issue that they continue to believe, and perpetuate, the discourse of a “community” working solely on “information” and “producing documents for intelligence”, invisibilising the use of secret violence and manipulation. In addition, by considering that the different secret services have a similar involvement concerning the participation into the national intelligence cycle, they have reinforced the previous doxa of the national interest.

The notion of intelligence cycle has therefore, in some ways, tried to cope with the paradox of speaking about secret organisations in the same way as other bureaucracies, and the focus on secrecy and not coercion has minimised the structural differences between the missions of the services. This has led scholars to accept too quickly that the military, police and SIGINT-Internet services were effectively one unique field organised around the national boundaries of secrecy and that from the 2000s the struggle against terrorism has become the main mission for all of them (Hulnick 2006; Phythian 2013).

These assumptions are only partially true. Many excellent monographies on some services inside the anglosphere countries exist, and they have shown how routines are organised inside

a service to combat the unease and doubt about the real purposes of some tasks of surveillance asked by politicians in the name of national security and the competitions that politicians entertained between services to follow their own interests.<sup>viii</sup> We are far from the experience of trust between services that would create “one intelligence community”. This is also the same illusion concerning the sacred union against terrorism. If the discourse on global counter-terrorism has been widespread, and has organised a large part of the literature, careful research shows on the contrary that it is not a strong vector of cooperation but rather more of a catchword to continue other activities (Donohue 2008; Bigo et al. 2011; Pomarède 2020). Even, in the rare cases where the different services accept the necessary existence of a structure of coordination, more or less centralised, often due to the pressure of the politicians, they often refuse that these coordination structures have any hierarchical role. The coordination structures, as well as the different oversight organisations do not succeed in effectively creating a form of subordination of the services. They all depend too much on the “good will” of the latter who want absolute control over the dissemination of their “results”. The paradox is therefore a reversed hierarchy and a weakness of the upper structures of coordination, even when they include some politicians inside their meetings to give them more symbolic power, like in the UK. This is not to say that coordination and oversight structures are irrelevant, but they are put in a situation in terms of power, personnel, and budgets where they cannot be effective in terms of action. Coordination structures often reinforce the competition around the hierarchy of priorities, and if they frame a general language which constrains intelligence actors, they are not controllers and do not “fusion” the intelligence at all. Coordination structures are like tokens by which the symbol of a community exists, and they can be presented to the services as a proof of their neutral expertise, and to the politicians as proof that they are always in charge.

In practice the distribution of alliances is more ideological and partisan than it is accepted in the literature. Politicians and some services often act together against other politicians and services, even if they are in the same government. The history and pre-existence of a collaboration may play against a new government whose members (especially in case of political coalitions) can be under surveillance of their own services like in Switzerland, or in other cases when each ministry will align first with their own secret services, like in the post-2001 situation in the USA. Coordination is not the proof of a community; it is a political display of importance. For the services excluded from the coordination, it is a proof of marginalisation and danger for their budgets and missions. For the services who are represented in the structure, it is the place where it is necessary to be in order to access resources (budget, specific

technologies or personnel) and, even more importantly, the place to legitimise their discourses via the institutional competition concerning the hierarchy of dangers. In some ways intelligence coordination structures are the equivalent of a stock exchange, but a stock exchange of fears, risk, dangers, and visions of the worst-case scenarios.

When a common agreement on the primacy of a given threat emerges, it is usually the result of a very specific convergence between some actors populating the world of politics and the world of secret services. Instead of presenting the different cases as if politicians and secret services operate in different worlds and at different levels, it is necessary to see the interdependencies between them as well as the role of multi-positioned actors. As I will explain, this sociology of professional guilds and centrifugal transnational dynamics give a more profound description but obliges in each case to enter into the details of the connections, disconnections, and double games that actors play, especially during periods of de-sectorisation of the inner struggles and new alliances connected with political fights (see also Bigo 2016).

The sociology of secret organisations is at an end if it reduces “intelligence” to the activities of the services alone and believes that the formal flowchart effectively represents the practices, and accepts, by the same token, the narratives which are the most common inside the services as expressions of truth. Accepting this truth regime based on “trust” that the insiders develop to speak about their task of information and intelligence-making, is a serious problem. What can be said is that information processing is certainly the lowest common denominator of the activity of (some) secret services but is not able to offer a synthetic view of their arrangements and competitions. This vision forgets the goals and consequences of these activities dealing with violence performed in secret.

Despite its descriptive interest, this reasoning of the intelligence cycle, which describes the mundane routines quite adequately when looking at a singular service, is unable to understand the relations between the services, and the strength of their transnational links. In total, the cost of the intelligence cycle approach has been higher than its success in deciphering the activities of secret services.

The “cycle” has de facto masked key transformations of the 1990s and 2000s. Firstly, the acceptance of a model of streamlining information into intelligence, by drawing implicitly the boundaries around the national states, has put into shadow the transnational dynamics at work

with the reinforcement of interdependencies and the role of digital information. Secondly, the framing of threats and the categorisations that services use to describe the same phenomenon, are tremendously different when it comes to justifying their missions and budgets. Symbolic struggles are framing the understanding of data, and therefore of their intelligence product. It is not by chance that police intelligence services are insisting on the role of minorities inside their own country and on radicalisation, while military intelligence services frame the struggle on terrorism like an asymmetrical war.

Critique of secrecy is certainly useful and recent works have allowed us to compare the weight of secret rules in different social universes and in political processes. But to the extent this research considers power relations, they are circumscribed to the insiders of secrecy. When the central question is about the interdependence and mediations that link all the actors involved into the use of violence performed in secret, and its (il)legitimacy, an international political sociology of secret services is first obliged to recognise its own limitations and to admit that the inner knowledge cannot be obtained directly. But the option is not to negate the role and autonomy of the actors of secret services like in geopolitics, or to focus on the main routines like Intelligence Studies, or to wait twenty to fifty years – or more – to have access to documents like the historians. Therefore, what to do?

### **An interpretation of contemporary configurations of secret service practices based on an international relational sociology**

I propose in this last part to have a more reflexive approach and to reconcile the study of secret services with the sociology of state construction and its modes of legitimation. This suggests analysing the structural evolution of the use of violence by actors of the state, performed in secret, internationally and nationally. This relational sociology of secret services and their different transnational fields will question differently the relations between the services and their politicians, their forms of asymmetrical collaboration, their social use of technologies, and their *habitus* developed by living in a sphere of opacity and putting at a distance the rules of democracy and rule of law. This international political sociology may be, in that case, a way to address the key questions of impunity, democratic boundaries of the use of violence, relations with the rule of law and accountability, and the possibility of independent bodies of controls beyond the idea of a simple oversight, considering that they are not the margins but the core of what needs to be studied.

The analysis of interdependence has been done through relational sociology for a while, but it is even more important nowadays. As long as the interdependence between the actors in the different secret services dealing with military affairs, anti-diplomatic practices and spying, surveillance of (violent) clandestine actors was organised in “stove pipe”, i.e., compartmented and with limited shared information, the consequences of some violent, manipulative or intrusive actions had almost no impact on the other services (Nicander 2011). Scandals were focusing on one service and some politicians, and were contained nationally, even if the “stay behind” affairs already show that a scandal in Italy may have repercussions in Switzerland, Belgium, and backfire far beyond (Ganser 2006).

The “Echelon” affair, through its scale and because of the nature of the electro-magnetic signals and satellites involved, already demonstrated that interdependence between secret services in networks, even if asymmetrical, can affect the perpetrators and even the principals, obliging the latter to become a public voice and to justify their strategies internationally (Campbell 2000). Some governments realised after these kinds of affairs that they did not really know what their own secret services were doing practically and that they have been “inspired” (activated) by their allies’ counterparts abroad via transnational links more or less regulated. Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, and even Germany became more and more aware politically of the weight of the alliances between secret services acting as “satellites” of different US agencies, themselves in competition and organising their own “corridors of information” (Rayner & Voutat 2019). Long before the advice of the 9/11 Commission to replace the stove pipe-system with increased interoperability of data (including so-called “fusion centres”), the configuration of the social spaces of secret services had expanded far beyond the well-known Five Eyes and affected all the countries in the world in regional zones more or less related with Western alliances’ interests. The scale of surveillance, even before the Internet, has created a routine for exchange of data between the different services having the same occupations, while creating more autonomy and tensions between the agencies at the national level (Bigo 2019). The configuration of the bureaucratic practices of the services along the lines of their professional crafts have reinforced their transnational dimensions, uncontrolled by the national political leaders, who, faced with a *fait accompli*, preferred, at least for some of them, to cover up their services rather than to acknowledge their ignorance or at least the relative autonomy and room for manoeuvre that the coalitions of services have among themselves (Möller & Mollen 2017; Chadwick & Collister 2014). The enlargement of interdependencies has created new constraints for the actors, which have to play different (double) games, and especially the

leaders of democratic governments are obliged to declare their indignation towards measures done by other states while reduplicating them abroad. This is not hypocrisy in the psychological sense of the term, but an effect of the structure of the configuration of relations. The enlarged exercise of power does not bring more autonomy but more interdependence.

I would like therefore to suggest we insert and reframe Intelligence Studies as a specific case of the sociology of states along the lines drawn by Norbert Elias and those who followed him. It is here important to explain in a nutshell some of the basic arguments of Norbert Elias to see why we should make such a connection. Beyond the work of Ben Jaffel (2019), Norbert Elias is almost unknown in the literature on secret services. Elias insisted a lot on the mechanisms of enlarged interdependence which means that a society of individuals can in no way be explained by an individualistic perspective which would reduce the society to the sum of the interactions between these individuals. He confronted all the proponents of methodological individualism by showing the untenable contradictions of their position, be it Gabriel Tarde, Schumpeter, Watkins, Parsons, Boudon, or Bruno Latour. The foundations of a certain anglophone political science are then irreparably questioned, and with them part of the logic of geopolitics and grand strategy based upon the rational action theory allowing the emergence of a single voice for a state actor. By the same move, Elias pointed out that the methodological holism giving society, or the state, or the international, a personified essence is also erroneous insofar as it wrongly sanctifies a fictitious and transhistorical identity transforming into “actors” what are in fact collective representations of conflicting social spaces in permanent change (Elias 1983).

Beliefs in a certain strategic national culture or the stability of geographical structures in politics are then also disputable. Norbert Elias and most of the authors of relational sociology challenged the position of Emile Durkheim, Ernest Gellner, Roy Bhaskar, and Alan Garfinkel, who have argued to varying degrees that social entities like nations and societies have causal powers that are independent of, and override, the causal powers of the individuals who comprise these entities. For Elias, Emirbayer, as for Pierre Bourdieu and even Charles Tilly, the state does not act, other than metaphorically. It is summoned by its agents, its spokespersons, as a *prosopopeia*, which allows them to legitimise their actions. What is essential, therefore, is to understand the dynamics of the interdependent relationships that determine the boundaries of a certain social space, its historicity and the conflicts of positions that take place between actors and often within themselves concerning their changing identity with age and the social trajectory of their lives.

Only the relations of mimetism and distantiation between these groups explain how spokespersons can emerge and claim to embody them in public. Their authority depends on the symbolic power based on the recognised ability to represent more than themselves, and the field of the state is, in most of cases, the space where the conversion of other forms of power coming from economic, cultural, bureaucratic, political positions, meet and fight for the control of the hierarchy of the social order. But this public representation, which claims to unify the “social body” and give it meaning, does not exhaust the resources of violence and circulation of power of the dominant actors of the configuration, and it generates the possibility of using the spectacular violence of punishment, from public killing to imprisonment and loss of nationality, or, on the contrary, of reserving it for occasions that must remain secret, so as not to compromise the idea of representation of the people as such.<sup>ix</sup> The strength of the state, as a form of symbolic power, lies in the fact that the boundaries of the political field occupied by professional politicians never really coincide with the resources of the secret violence delivered by the state’s representatives. The configuration that allows secret services to exist is then particularly important as the legitimacy of power depends on a system of representation and elections, banning in a democracy the use of force for the private interests of those in power. The interstitial space of the secret services is therefore even more significant in a representative democracy than in authoritarian regimes, which are more willing to display their own violence.

If one wants to analyse the specificity of this configuration of the use of secret services in democracy nowadays, then one has to analyse the dynamics of the transformations of the field of politics and the internal relations between government and political parties’ lives, as well as the capacity for the legislative and the judiciary to have effective functions of control. The relations between the field of politics and the field of power involves analysing the capacities of spokespersons to personify or not their institutions, and to analyse both the structures of the capital under which each actor has the capacity to intervene into the use of violence performed by state agents. This means to assess in each case the transformations of power relations affecting the public and private actors and the emergence of assemblages where the very distinction of public and private disappears and is replaced by a (co-)constituted space where multi-positioned actors straddling this boundary are in position to frame the decision-making process of the use of violence. In the construction of profiles of “useful” data for watchlists of suspects, as well as for their interception, collection, and retention, private companies are crucial, and often employ former secret service agents. This is key to understand some of the

delinking of the actions of the services with the politician circles. It also explains why some actors, socialised differently, develop a fragmented *habitus* and dare to become whistle-blowers, despite the fact that they were highly paid and respected in their inner circles. They are not traitors, they are more the symptoms of the symbolic struggles for having the last word at the highest levels of decision making and in transnational networks (in informal clubs, organised professional guilds, regional and international bureaucracies) connecting intimately the public and private actors.

The digitisation of data has exponentially multiplied the capacity to retrieve traces from a very large number of individuals. It has changed the scope and speed of the treatment of information, and the data politics in so many domains of lives which directly affects citizens' expressions of opinions, public behaviours, and relations with banks and commercial entities. Spying activity is almost residual even if some professionals recycle their knowledge through cyberattacks. As the Snowden disclosures showed, the ease with which intelligence services could target suspects of potential crime or illegalities has radically changed the ratio between the people watching and the people under watch. This large-scale surveillance of citizens and foreigners is a common practice that the non-SIGINT services have now also integrated in their routines, even if it creates more resistance in some secret services who prefer the selection of a small number of "priority" targets with effective monitoring and infiltration, instead of centralised recourses of electronic surveillance via the use of artificial intelligence.

Privatisation and digitisation have also enlarged the scope of the use of violence in terms of personnel assigned to surveillance, and in terms of technologies built to target more people than before and to construct profiles of suspicion in the name of prevention and prediction. Nevertheless, the interactions between the different actors have been possible to organise, supervise and even oversee as long as their ambition was to control local or national events, specific to the missions of one service. What has changed is the scope of interdependencies through the transnational sharing of information between secret services of various countries. Even if the sharing of information is highly asymmetrical within these networks, with a huge advantage for the central nodes – often the US agencies – this sharing has become routine. Interoperability of databases, through a change in the legislations favouring permanently an easier access of the secret services to the information gathered by the police, border guards, and welfare institutions, have rendered intelligence completely dependent on the "assemblage" by of information coming from each "user". The old vision of personal and mutual trust cannot

resist the objectivisation of rumours, errors, junk news in the profiles generated by “machine learning” algorithms, nor the belief by some managers that a technology supposedly capable of sorting in information and automatically building indexes of correlations could serve as a substitute to conventional truth regimes.

### **Concluding thoughts**

As everybody are becoming a part of the assemblage of watchers, so are they, at the same time, becoming a part of the assemblage of potential targets. And this second group is by far larger than the first one, as many people ignore that they are under watch, at least potentially, by the association of one of their attributes with a pattern of suspicion and independently of their full personality and identity. The “dissociated” man and woman are no longer a science fiction novel. It is the fate of the data points produced from our personal data, then often anonymised, globalised, and profiled to find potential criminal behaviour by association of weak correlations.

Thousands of people, if not millions, end up at a local checkpoint or on a specific watchlist of suspects – be it at the airport, at their social services provider, or their bank. They may not be arrested, they may not be excluded from some “privileges”, they may not even be under a procedure of permanent surveillance, but the knowledge that they are not anymore innocent, yet potentially suspect without evidence, is transforming the sense of intimacy, privacy, and public space. In addition, this is not distributed equally. Traditional stereotypes do not disappear from past data, foreigners do not have the same safeguards as citizens: class, race, location, and gender continue to structure the patterns of big data and are not eliminated through technology. The sense of not living anymore in “open democracies” and to have depreciated conditions of life is the result of these different assemblages which are not anymore controlled by the core group establishing these tools of suspicion. The dissemination of suspicion and unease, as well as the feeling to be complicit with it, generates both resignation and anger against authorities. The brutality of violence may have diminished, but the symbolic violence has put everyone in the mind of suspicion, without the reflexive capacities of (some) professionals of security. The effects of the structural extension of interdependencies beyond any recognisable network, as exemplified through the logics of contemporary intelligence, are changing the practical conditions of democracies.

We cannot forget either that some potential targets are “actualised”, that they still suffer from physical violence, but often delivered at a distance. If justified by certain evidence, they are part of the violence inherent to the discourses of “eradication” of all the enemies. But some targets are tangential, some are considered as side-effects. These collateral victims enter into a calculus between the importance of the identified “target of importance” and the chance to eliminate it again, and if this chance is considered critical, then drone strikes are supposedly justified. The Guantanamo files have also demonstrated this logic of suspicion-by-association and proved that individuals have been captured and detained. They may be not the intentional targets of this violence performed in secret, but they are the result of a process. Studying this process needs to be the goal of a renewed study of intelligence and secret violence.

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<sup>i</sup> For a distinction between field of power and the political field see Pierre Bourdieu, John B. Thompson, and Gino Raymond's, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), and Pierre Bourdieu's *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989 - 1992*, (2014).

<sup>ii</sup> This joke-like expression says a lot about gender inside some secret services. It shows the kind of prejudice of this universe to women. It also essentializes a specific ontology about human nature, spying and violence in secret. It creates a kind of male complicity with sectors of journalism (see e.g. Knightley 1988; Dover 2014).

<sup>iii</sup> Horn's paper stands out as highly insightful on the distinctions between arcanum, secrecy, and political theory; however, it is structurally reactionary. While I disagree with the conclusions regarding the justification of today's practices, it is a paper which addresses the questions lacking so often in IS.

<sup>iv</sup> In 1987, the Netherlands accepted officially that they have secret services, after a long period of full denial. For a detailed analysis, see Gerhard Schmid's 'Temporary Committee on the ECHELON Interception System' (2001, 194).

<sup>v</sup> Clearly the Nordic and the anglosphere services were the first to adjust to these changes, but in the Southern countries of Europe, including France, some services, still now, have spokespersons who want to continue with this fantasy of a world, outside the normative world of human beings, that they call, in some ways ironically, the "real" world.

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<sup>vi</sup> Resonating with the accounts collected by historians, it is sometimes possible for sociologists to show some elements of this “moral suffering”. For example, one practitioner said at the end of an interview with me: “No one comes out unscathed from life in the secret service, not only because of the daily secrecy towards loved ones, but because of the actions, or knowledge of special actions, that cannot be told to anyone, and which come back in nightmares. I am not a hero, but I am not just a civil servant like any other one. I have been through such experiences that people who have not lived through them cannot understand our world, and politicians even less than others. The same goes for those who have other tasks in the services and who see less of the results of what it means to write a file on someone”.

<sup>vii</sup> Many journals have used the terminology of “intelligence community” as an undiscussed label. To consider only one of the most famous, *Intelligence and National Security*, 932 articles have used the terminology of “intelligence community” when discussing profoundly different types of services and regimes. Governments have co-produced the terminology with academics and used it for their reports and sometimes in their laws. Among many documents, and to avoid the illusion of a supposed novelty of the post 9/11-era, see e.g. ‘The Intelligence Community: Investigation and Reorganization’, Volume XXXVIII, Part 2, Organization and Management of Foreign Policy; Public Diplomacy, 1973–1976 (Secretary of State - Office of the Historian), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v38p2/ch1>.

<sup>viii</sup> Among so many examples, see, for France, the existence of a special service organising the surveillance of the persons knowing the existence of François Mitterrand’s daughter. Each country has regular scandals around the intermingling of the personal interests of the government or key politicians and the national interest.

<sup>ix</sup> See on this topic, François Hollande’s *Les leçons du pouvoir* from 2018.