The Women's Liberation Movement and the Gendering of Undercover Police Surveillance in 1970s Britain: the Public Inquiry as (Un)Ethical archive

by Sarah Crook

In November 2020 the Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI), established in 2015, heard evidence from a female police officer who had infiltrated a small group that was a part of the nascent Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in the early 1970s. The officer was a member of the secret Special Operations Squad (SOS – renamed the Special Demonstration Squad, SDS, in 1972), founded in 1968, and, like her colleagues, she assumed a false identity to report on the plans, ideas and activities of political groups. The undercover officer, HN348, joined the Special Branch in early 1971, and soon joined the SOS where she was one of just two female officers. Taking the cover identity of 'Sandra Davies', a Goldsmiths College student who lived in a house share in Paddington, the officer attended the meetings of the Women's Liberation Front (WLF). This was a small, north London-based, Maoist-leaning, and relatively marginal group involved with the broader women's liberation movement which had emerged in part from the global tumult of the 1960s, and was connected to other social movements, including anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and peace campaigns. The WLM came together in national conferences but was predominantly organized in local groups. Like the wider feminist movement, the infiltrated group critiqued the structures of patriarchy and campaigned around causes that affected women, not least around work, childcare, and education. HN348 duly sent detailed reports to her superiors, providing the state with information about feminist plans for things as diverse as jumble sales, local protests, and national conferences. She supplied a commentary on shifting friendships and ideological allegiances, and included sensitive, personal information about activists in her reports.[1]

HN348's infiltration of the WLM was protracted. She attended the meetings of WLF – which was chosen by chance rather than by design – almost every week between February 1971 and February 1972, eventually becoming its treasurer.[2] She also attended large feminist gatherings, sending reports back to Special Branch about conferences held in March, September, and November 1972, and reported on smaller events that centred on specific feminist issues. But despite spending two years deployed within the women's movement, HN348 did not prevent any crimes or learn about any threats to public order.[3] By the state's

Swansea University *s.r.e.crook@swansea.ac.uk*

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measures – and, indeed, by her own admission to the UCPI – her infiltration was not productive. She did not prevent any disruption to national security; there was none to prevent. However, the duration of her infiltration and the depth of information extracted suggests that the undercover surveillance of the feminist movement went beyond investigation of the risk its members posed to national security. Looking to HN348's experience within the feminist movement and the SDS reveals the capaciousness of the category of 'subversion' in the 1970s and complicates the gendering of the surveillance state in this period.

The UCPI has fifty-seven years of undercover policing of political groups in England and Wales under its remit. It has thus far shared seventy-two officers' cover names, and has published 7,634 evidential documents and files. It has 249 core participants and has, at the time of writing, received witness statements from 200 officers and 129 civilians, as well as four from government sources, as part of its substantive investigations.[4] These numbers reflect the scale of the undercover operation. Overall, around 150 undercover police officers infiltrated more than 1,000 political groups between 1968 and 2011. The SDS itself operated until 2008.[5] As investigative journalists Paul Lewis and Rob Evans have detailed, its unofficial motto was 'By Any Means Necessary': undercover policing took place with few ethical limits.[6]

Such lax ethical boundaries led to its discovery. Undercover police activity within political groups was exposed in 2010 by female environmental activists who discovered that a man they had known as a friend, lover, and comrade was in fact an undercover police officer.[7] Mark Kennedy (cover name Mark Stone), a member of the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (another unit involved in undercover operations), engaged in long-term romantic relationships during his seven years undercover in the environmental movement.[8] Kennedy was not unique: several 'Spycops' are known to have fathered children with activists while maintaining their cover, and still more have admitted to having had intimate and sexual relationships with women they were spying on.[9] The gendered nature of the invasive activities of the undercover police officers – their sexual and romantic exploitation of women – has underpinned much of the public indignation around the infiltration of activist groups. Further anger was provoked by the revelation that police officers had adopted the names of deceased children for their cover identities.[10] But particular outrage was caused by the admission that undercover police had for years spied on the parents of murdered Black teenager Stephen Lawrence.[11] It was this revelation that prompted then-Home Secretary Theresa May to announce a public inquiry into undercover policing in 2014.

Given these numerous scandals, it is little surprise that information about undercover police activity has attracted close interest among journalists and activist-investigator groups, some of whom – such as the Undercover Research Group (formed in 2013) and the Special Branch Files Project (launched in 2016) – have played a crucial role in interrogating and scrutinizing the UCPI's findings.[12] More widely, too, the inquiry takes place against a background of a society increasingly unwilling to tolerate high levels of state concealment.[13]

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In general, though, attention has centred on the '*individual* impacts of the operations, and criminal activity by individual officers', with evidence that women were deceived into relationships seen to be proof of police immorality.[14] But as this article explores, women were not only the victims of police spies; they were also (albeit on a much smaller scale) undercover agents. There were about twelve officers in the unit during HN348's involvement, with one other female agent. The SOS was pleased to have HN348 on board, reporting in 1971 that 'The arrival of a second woman officer has added considerably to the squad's flexibility and has proved invaluable in the comparatively recent field of "Women's Liberation".'[15]

This article is the first to make use of undercover police surveillance materials that relate to the British WLM. The ethical use of this material is not straightforward, and so the first section of the article explores the inquiry as an involuntary, inadvertent archive of late twentieth-century left-wing social movements. The records of the secret state, as made available in this Inquiry, present ethical issues for historians – perhaps particularly acutely for those adopting a feminist lens. The material invites the feminist researcher to be closely attentive to the politics of consent: but is it a double exploitation to use material extracted from women activists without their knowledge? Are there distinctive quandaries about the use of material that has been generated by an inquiry into state surveillance?

With these ethical questions in mind, I read the WLM through the materials extracted by the state. While scholarship on the British WLM has proliferated in recent years, historians have tended to use identity, politics, or experience as an analytical lens, drawing on a range of sources generated within the movement itself such as oral histories, magazines, and material voluntarily donated to archives.[16] This article takes a different approach; it examines women's liberation as seen through and by the police. This allows the movement to be seen from a position of remove, and to centre a group that was perhaps more marginal to the feminist cause than some other better-known groups in this period. It thus diversifies our understanding of feminism in this period. Focusing on the Women's Liberation Front, it uses the police documents to highlight the fissures and preoccupations that determined the life course of this group. The other strand of this article uses the testimony of the undercover officer and her reports to shine a light on gender and policing in the 1970s. Louise Jackson has argued that the testimony of female undercover officers illuminates 'alternative narratives' to those found in mainstream representations of the work.[17] Here, the testimony underlines the ways that female officers adhered to 'masculine' professional norms, and in this particular instance navigated complex encounters with a group that campaigned on issues with personal resonance.

While the 1970s were, as Bernard Porter noted, 'a period when the Special Branches widened their trawl' driven by an increasingly capacious definition of 'subversion',[18] feminist activism in Britain had been policed before. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century suffrage campaigners were manhandled, imprisoned and assaulted, a history that was recalled by WLM activists in the

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1970s.[19] As feminist Juliet Mitchell warned, 'if verbal aggression escalates into acts of violence then, as it did with the suffragettes, the state's repressive and coercive forces will come into play'. However, Mitchell suspected the recent feminist surge had not yet constituted more than a 'nuisance': women's 'political organizations are never to be taken too seriously', she observed.[20] That the police infiltrated the WLM perhaps suggests that it was taken more seriously than Mitchell supposed. But Britain was not a lone example; police infiltration of feminist movements took place elsewhere – including, as scholars have shown, in Canada and Australia – at the same time.[21] Moreover, the longer history of British political policing extends far beyond the nation's borders: historians of Britain and its global entanglements have exposed its role in maintaining networks of British power at home and abroad, well before the creation of the undercover units in the 1960s.[22] This scholarship further troubles the already threadbare mythology of a British model of consensual policing.[23]

THE INQUIRY AS ARCHIVE: SUBJECTS TALK BACK

Public inquiries have proliferated in recent decades, accompanied by a growing body of scholarship reflecting on this rise. As Matthew Flinders has recently written, British politics is in the midst of a 'particularly vibrant era of inquiries'.[24] These investigate what Nathan Critch has identified as 'highly salient, controversial, intractable issues'.[25] They are 'an institution of last resort, instigated only when there is widespread suspicion from a large or powerful enough group that relevant state authorities lack the requisite powers and independence necessary to do the job'.[26] Three questions lie at their heart: 'what happened? Who is responsible? What can we learn from this?'[27] Despite widespread scepticism about their utility,[28] the call for them is one way for external groups to exert political influence.[29] Public inquiries are distinctive in their '*publicness*'; in their emphasis on 'community expectations of a transparent investigative process and a publicly available report'.[30] In his work on the demand for a public inquiry that followed an uprising against the police in the early 1980s, Simon Peplow has drawn attention to the (uneven) community desire for inclusion,[31] but has also noted that inquiries are an 'inherently political device… intrinsically linked with the colonial legacy of the liberal state'.[32] Other recent work, too, suggests that inquiries produce certain 'kinds of knowledge' by privileging establishment voices and by bestowing distinctive value on classified evidence, producing a 'partial' historical narrative.[33]

But epistemological and methodological questions aside, few would deny that inquiries have an important role for historians. Inquiries are a generative process: they bring historical documents to light and facilitate testimony from relevant witnesses and actors. They seek to generate an 'authoritative' account of events and crises, but in the effort to do this they invite witnesses into the 'sense-making' process, creating – for historians, if not for those seeking to allocate responsibility and make recommendations at the end of the process – a messy, contradictory, and overlapping network of accounts, explanations, and experiences.[34] They are a rich

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historical resource, conjuring an archive to explore and, eventually, providing an authoritative narrative to probe and trouble.

The UCPI, of course, probes the state. And as Ann Stoler has suggested, for historians, 'state secrets excite expectations … for we often covet that which the state conceals, regarding its secrets as accurate measures of its most nefarious intents: unmasking its magic and deceptive opacities is our calling. But we also know that codes of concealment are the fetishes of the state itself.'[35] These codes of concealment are perhaps particularly important around an inquiry which is investigating state surveillance. The UCPI has made available online an extensive, readily searchable archive of surveillance reports and activist ephemera procured by undercover agents.[36] As it does elsewhere, the opening of archives derived from the policing of political dissent allows 'amnesty for those who expressed beliefs contrary to those generally accepted, indemnity for victims of the repression and their families'.[37] For victims, the availability of these documents creates new possibilities to understand their experiences.[38] Nonetheless, as noted previously, such illicitly procured activist materials – made public due to general outrage about police intrusion, violation, and overstep – present ethical issues for historians. For scholars of political activism in modern Britain, there are, no doubt, lessons to be learned from historians and archivists who have made sensitive use of the materials that surfaced during the collapse of repressive regimes – not least, for example, those who have worked with the Stasi files in East Germany – and in this work have balanced the imperatives of 'the need for justice and the right to privacy', as Elena Danielson has detailed. As she says, 'Three forces collide when security police files surface: the right to privacy, the right to state security, and the right to access information'.[39]

How can the archive created by the UCPI, which might 'provide grist for serious research', be used by historians of activism in Britain, considering these competing forces?[40] No doubt historians can use the surveillance reports, collected ephemera, and victims' and officers' witness statements to the Inquiry to develop a richer understanding of British social movements. For historians of feminism, reports from meetings provide information that might otherwise have been lost, containing both rich detail and evocative minutiae.[41] Some reports provide caustic attempts at gauging the mood of participants (a report about a talk on anarcho-feminism in autumn 1983 describes an audience of 'bulky, impassioned feminists' who outnumbered the 'nervous, defensive men').[42] The files comment on personal and romantic relationships, and can be used to map the shifting emotional constellations of political networks.[43] But while attempts have been made to redact activist names in the documentation, identifying details remain for the discerning eye. Might the use of reports, and the material collected by undercover agents, re-betray the privacy of activists who may still be living? What protection do feminist historians owe activists who have come under surveillance by the state?

Perhaps the location of meetings, or the intended audience of the material, matters. For example, the Inquiry has published a leaflet by the Southall Black

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Women's Centre calling for a protest outside the Old Bailey, submitted to Special Branch when the leaflet reached the London office of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp.[44] This protest was planned for a public space and the leaflet was aimed at public consumption: should we have qualms about its underhand provenance? Elsewhere, the inquiry has made available detailed notes on the national women's liberation conference, held in October 1971, which was attended by about 300 people. HN348's account sets out who spoke in large forums, which group they came from, arguments made, and audience responses. But it also details exchanges within smaller group discussions, where discretion may have been anticipated.[45] Another report, about the Women's Liberation Conference in March 1972, appended reams of material distributed at the conference.[46] While some of these leaflets would probably otherwise have been lost, the women's movement cultivated its own archive; HN348 was an incidental contributor to this wider project. Given the public nature of these events, feminist historians might feel less compromised in making use of the material and reports about large conferences that HN348 submitted as part of her deployment.

The reports submitted about meetings in women's homes present more delicate challenges. While they provide a valuable resource to observe areas of discussion and unpick ideological schisms, they are unambiguously the product of deception and intrusion; the meetings of grassroots groups were small – and here there was surely an expectation of consensus and a degree of discretion.[47] The scholarly examination of the materials extricated from these small meetings has potential to re-perpetrate harm if their provenance is not made clear. But does this delineation of public (the large political meeting) and private space (the home as a site of small political gatherings) as an ethical boundary fall back into tropes about what constitutes a political space, something the WLM actively agitated against?

The victims of SDS surveillance have pushed for greater involvement, a changed focus, and an expanded remit for the Inquiry: they are therefore involved in shaping the very contours of this history. Diane Langford was spied on because of her involvement in a range of left-wing movements. This included feminism (she founded the Women's Liberation Front) alongside anti-imperialist struggles such as the Vietnam Solidarity Front, the Revolutionary Marxist Leninist League, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and Friends of China. She was also targeted due to her romantic relationship with prominent activist Abhimanyu (Manu) Manchanda.[48] As Langford in her witness statement says, 'the distinct impression given is that this is not an inquiry into undercover policing, but an investigation into the politics and actions of those who were spied upon, which will ultimately seek to justify SDS operations'.[49] She also challenged the focus of the Inquiry:

> The reports frequently include very subjective, deeply personal, and sometimes racist, sexist and homophobic commentary about those who are being surveilled. Yet, the Inquiry warned me when providing this statement

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> that it was not 'seeking … commentary on the contents of the bundle generally'. What a cheek! What on earth is the bundle but a commentary on the lives that these UCOs [Undercover Officers] infiltrated?[50]

For activists, then, the Inquiry exposes more than the state's interest in their political activities; it constitutes a 'commentary on the[ir] lives'.

The Inquiry is not the only avenue that victims have used to reflect on the impact of surveillance; some have collaborated with academics or written personal accounts to convey the implications of the intrusion.[51] As these accounts make clear, some victims were until recently unaware of the surveillance, while others, like Langford, knew they were being watched at the time (though Langford did not know about the undercover officer within the feminist movement). Langford has published a short memoir which explains that

> We became used to the white van with cables and aerials protruding from its roof that was permanently parked in Lisburne Road. 'Special branch', Manu said … I found it difficult to comprehend why our puny efforts caused so much concern to the authorities when everything we did was within the law and totally transparent.

And police efforts to penetrate their political circles did not go undetected: 'From time to time the police infiltrated our group', Langford writes, describing how when one man was found to be an undercover officer the group 'assigned him the most onerous tasks: collecting heavy banners and placards in his car and carrying them on marches. He was always called upon to buy everyone drinks and asked to memorise long passages from James Maxton, an obscure Scottish Marxist.' Langford admits to quite liking the undercover officer, until the 'sinister nature of his work' was thrown into sharp relief when he threatened the family of an activist who knew of his work in the Special Branch.[52] Police intrusion was a feature of the lives of other feminists, particularly those who were involved in groups interested in Ireland. Sheila Rowbotham, for example, recalls the first time the police raided her shared house: in 1972 she and her partner, David Widgery, were 'awakened early one morning to loud banging on the door downstairs. Two plain clothes police officers were outside with search warrants'. The police were interested in the Irish civil-rights group co-founded by Widgery. The raid was not to be the last. 'At first it was unnerving, but as time passed the search became a tedious routine', she reflects. 'We later learned that many other left-wing people had been raided at the same time', she says, 'I suspect that they were gathering information on radical networks outside the older left parties.'[53] As Rowbotham and Langford's accounts show, some activists lived with the knowledge that they were objects of police interest. Indeed, Langford suspects that state surveillance of her may have continued beyond its stated end.[54] But even if it did not continue, in Michel Foucault's words, 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action'.[55] Langford's involvement with the UCPI, therefore,

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should be seen as an act of resistance to a state that, at the close of the 1960s, consciously extended its capacity to intrude on its citizenry.

THE SURVEILLANCE OF THE WLM: READING FEMINISM THROUGH THE STATE

The SOS – the unit in which HN348 worked – came into being at the urging of Chief Inspector Conrad Dixon within the Metropolitan Police. In 1968, Dixon wrote that 'The climate of opinion amongst extreme left-wing elements … has shifted … to active confrontation with the authorities to attempt to force social changes and alternations of government policy. Indeed, the more vociferous of the Left are calling for the complete overthrow of parliamentary democracy and the substitution of various brands of "socialism" and "workers control".'[56] He was adamant that these forces were agitating towards revolution, and he reacted with alarm as anti-war demonstrations and social movements unspooled around the globe.[57] London had seen large-scale demonstrations in response to the Vietnam war. In March 1968 one particularly large protest gathered more than 10,000 people in Grosvenor Square, an event in which over 100 police officers were reportedly injured.[58] The next day the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, praised the 'restraint and self-discipline' shown by the police 'in the face of severe provocation'.[59] Several MPs called for firm action against the protestors, with one insisting that the organizations involved be investigated.[60] Callaghan did not address this directly, reiterating his condemnation of the violence. But as Jac St John has recently argued, the protest marked a watershed moment for British policing.[61] In July that year the Special Operations Squad, which changed its name to the Special Demonstration Squad in 1972, was formed.

The SDS was housed within Special Branch for 'historical and procedural reasons'.[62] It was 'responsible for acquiring security intelligence, both secret and overt', the capacious terms of reference specified in 1970. This was for the 'preservation of public order' and 'to assist the Security Service in its task of defending the realm from attempts at espionage and sabotage and from actions of persons and organisations which may be judged to be subversive of the security of the State'. The terms made clear that '[b]roadly speaking these are any organisation or individual whose purpose is the undermining or overthrow of the established democratic order'. The aim was to 'to collect, process and record information about subversive or potentially subversive organisations and individuals' and '[t]o investigate or to assist in investigating offences having as their purpose the achievement of a subversive or political objective especially those relating to sabotage and against the Official Secrets Acts'.[63] The 'or' here enabled a political objective to be sufficient cause for surveillance. Even in the 1970s, though, there were politicians who sounded the alarm about risks to civil liberties: in 1979 Labour MP Robin Cook urged 'a proper independent safeguard on the work and records of the Special Branch', lest 'this mighty engine of surveillance… come to represent a greater threat to privacy and democracy than most of the organisations that it watches'.[64]

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The overarching objectives of the WLM – women's rights, gender equality, and an end to patriarchy – were informed by the radical politics of the 1960s.[65] More widely, the decade in which it was most coherent (its first national conference was held in 1970 and its final national conference in 1978) was a period of industrial militancy, in which 'the British left appeared in the ascendency'.[66] The movement was organized through a national network of local groups which set up national conferences, events and protests, and created newsletters, manifestos, and newspapers. As this diverse structure implies, the movement was never cohesive: various left-wing ideologies – from Marxism to socialism – were adopted and developed in different groups.[67] Activists were often involved with other causes, including community campaigns, trade unionism, and anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-war activism.[68] The short-lived Women's Liberation Front – the group into which HN348 inserted herself – was one example of the convergence of ideological lenses and activist commitments.

The WLF was a Marxist group based at 58 Lisburne Road in North London, a house shared by Diane Langford and her husband Manu Manchanda.[69] It emerged from a group led by Manchanda, the Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist League.[70] Although Maoists in Britain were never a sizeable group and were highly prone to internal fissures – one 1975 estimate suggested that there were 1,500 of them divided between eight parties – they were, as Tom Buchanan has observed, a 'colourful, if peripheral' component of the nation's far-left political organizing during the 1960s and 1970s.[71] In the late 1960s Maoist groups made a 'violent contribution' to the student revolutions in France and Italy, and images of Chairman Mao circulated on British and American university campuses.[72] It is notable that Marxist-Leninism held, as Buchanan writes, particular appeal for students and recent migrants from the Commonwealth, two groups of growing social importance and political concern in 1960s and 1970s Britain.[73]

The women's movement's position within this wider activist landscape was used to justify its surveillance. Pressed about the relevance of personal information in her reports, HN348 told the inquiry that 'links with other extreme groups' explained its presence: 'because of the way that the members of this Women's Liberation Front were expressing themselves and their links, more information was required to see the relevance of them'.[74] Here, surveillance was framed as exploratory and precautionary. The edges of what she was looking for were fuzzy, though. The officer who recruited her, Peter Imbert (later Lord Imbert) 'said it was undercover, to collate and disseminate information about anti-social behaviour'. Later in her evidence, her remit was brought back to the political: 'I think we all understood that these groups were working against our form of democracy', she said, and asked what constituted extremism she reflected, 'That was the purpose of our job, to see whether or not they were going to take direct action, or whether it was just words.'[75] The blurring of the relationship between politically subversive objectives and the threat of direct action created an ambiguous justificatory space for police surveillance.[76] As Chris Brian has said, the concept of 'subversion' was kept 'deliberately

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opaque' by those overseeing undercover deployments – and officers were not formally trained in its definition.[77]

If realized, the movement's early demands – equal pay; free contraception and abortion on demand; equal education and job opportunities for men and women; and free, twenty-four-hour nursery provision (more demands were added later) – were indeed subversive, in that they had the potential to affect major structural change. Moreover, feminists widely connected their politics to critiques of capitalism.[78] But while the British movement deployed attention-grabbing tactics – for example, protesting at the Miss World beauty contest in 1970 – it did not use violence as a methodology. Its aims were more radical than its techniques of dissent. Nonetheless, those aims were perceived by some members of the establishment to pose a risk to the social fabric: in 1972 Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Solicitor General, warned that for some women's liberation promised '[c]omplete sexual freedom, the disappearance of the family as an institution, the destruction of some of the principal foundations of our society'.[79] The police, too, regarded women's liberation as a 'worrying trend'.[80]

HN348 was sent to report on the women's movement against this background of concern. The group that HN348 infiltrated, the WLF, was not chosen strategically but rather because, keen to grow its numbers, it happened to solicit HN348 to join as a new member. Nonetheless, it would most likely have welcomed some of the changes that so worried Howe. Founded in 1970, the Women's Liberation Front shared many of its aims with the wider movement. The group's purpose as they described it was to fight for equal rights and opportunities for women; for equal pay; for equal employment, social and political opportunities, enabled by creches and maternity leave; for an end to discrimination against women across various fronts; for free access to contraception and abortion; for greater political and social involvement of women and their talents; and finally to 'support the struggles of women of all countries' against oppression.[81] But none of these aims, submitted in a leaflet alongside a report by another undercover officer, HN45, in February 1971, articulated a violent threat against the state, and nor did the group undertake criminal activity. Instead, members of the WLF mostly engaged one another in ideological debates; they also attended events, including conferences on specific issues such as childcare provision and education. HN348, who attended while undercover, acknowledged that these events posed no threat to state security. For example, one 1972 event was arranged by 'a group of fairly moderate women with no particular political motivation who have recently been campaigning for nursery facilities in the Guildford area', HN348 wrote. At this meeting, attended by just thirteen women, 'Nothing was said of particular interest to Special Branch', she reflected in the report submitted a few days later.[82]

HN348's reports, however, noted many divisions within and around the WLF that impeded efforts to achieve its goals. The group small and on the fringes of the wider feminist movement, emblematic of the tension that existed between non-affiliated socialist feminism and organized revolutionary socialist (Marxist) groups.[83] Some differences emerged around style. Langford attended meetings

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of the London Women's Liberation Workshop from 1968 onwards but expressed discomfort with its style: 'there, women spoke of "gut feelings", not the politics I was used to, or at other times, academic women used a jargon I found incomprehensible', she has recalled.[84] But other divisions were more substantial, and after the acrimonious 1971 national conference in Skegness – which was disrupted by male Communists – Maoists were further marginalized. This exclusion boded poorly for the survival of the group itself, which was riven by internal divisions and struggled to recruit new members. HN348's report on a meeting in 1972 explained that in the first ninety minutes one member 'constantly interrupted and criticised' the minutes from the last meeting, resulting in a 'heated discussion'; between 9 and 10.30 pm the group read passages from Engels, and then, following the departure of the disruptive member, 'The remainder then discussed at some length the "disruptive behaviour" of [blank] and her "group".'[85] Langford was ejected from the group and it folded soon after. In 1972, under a new name – the Revolutionary Women's Union, and again attended by HN348 – the group developed a new constitution, in which it again set out its aim to fight for a socialist society, to eliminate the oppression of women, to contribute to anti-imperial struggles, and to expose the capitalist roots of women's oppression, as well as for equal opportunities, equal pay, childcare, contraception, maternity leave, an end to discrimination against single mothers, and to battle male chauvinism.[86] Langford and Manchanda later attempted to revive the WLF, although it seems that most members at this point were absorbed into the new group or dispersed into others.[87]

What does the story of this group tell us? First, it is a microcosm of the struggle to reconcile divergent passionate beliefs and differing personalities within feminist politics. Further, it broadens our view of the movement beyond the socialist feminists who most often populate the historiography. But one of its contributors was not who she appeared to be, and this figure is largely invisible in the reports we might use to write its history (HN348 did not detail her own interjections or interventions into the grassroots meetings); the story of this group cannot be told without an awareness that it was compromised by the presence of an inauthentic actor.

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF THE SURVEILLANCE STATE

The infiltration of the WLM during the early 1970s informs our understandings of the gendered dynamics of state surveillance in two ways. First, as discussed above, it demonstrates that the security state was actively involved in maintaining the patriarchal status quo. Second, it makes it apparent that those undertaking undercover police work enacted and informed gender politics, and that this gendering shaped their work beyond the sexual exploitation of their subjects.[88]

The infiltration of the WLM brought to the fore the conflict between HN348's gendered subjectivity and professional identity. At the Inquiry HN348 noted the women's movement's perceived links with extremist organizations before

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immediately raising the very inequalities that underpinned the movement's emergence. The 'women's movement was really growing' when she was approached to go undercover, she reflected:

> The Angry Brigade were linked to the women's movement and so were lots of other left-wing extremist groups that were latching onto it. This was before the Equal Pay Act 1970 had come into force. There were certain jobs even then where you had to leave when you got married. I did not understand the logic of that: it seemed unfair. Even in the police service, women had the same powers as men but I was only paid ninety percent of what the men were paid. I was interested in women's issues, such as contraception and nurseries. I was genuinely interested when those topics were discussed in the bigger meetings.

In this statement HN348 slides seamlessly from the justification for the surveillance of the movement to the justification of the movement itself – from the radical politics of organizations perceived to be adjacent to the WLM to the 'unfair' terrain that she navigated in the early 1970s. The slip from discussing her role in the police force to demonstrating the need for the movement is not a one-off in HN348's evidence. At a point where she was ostensibly discussing her reasons for joining the SOS, she highlighted issues that feminists saw as part of reason the movement itself was necessary:

> In hindsight, I was quite exposed at meetings being a young woman alone and with no backup or support, and with no one to supervise me. Some of the meetings finished quite late at night and I was concerned about travelling home alone. Travelling on the tube late at night was always problematic. There were all sorts of weird and wonderful people at that time of night. So I always told [husband] where I was going and what time to expect me back and, sometimes, he would meet me somewhere down the line or at the tube station. This was a backup that I arranged for myself; it was for my own protection.[89]

While HN348 is originally discussing her vulnerability while undercover at meetings, it is soon apparent that this feeling of being 'alone and with no backup or support' stemmed from outside the meeting – that it was 'travelling home alone' that made her vulnerable. The 'protection' that the officer sought was not from activists, but from the risks she faced 'travelling on the tube late at night'. An end to violence against women was an area of campaigning within the very movement that HN348 had been sent to monitor. It was added to the WLM's list of demands in 1978, and took an even more prominent place after 1980, when murders by Peter Sutcliffe caused an outpouring of grief and rage at male violence and the incompetence of the police.[90] By contrast, embarrassment was the most substantial named risk HN348 faced at the WLM meetings: 'At the time, I felt quite detached from the activists and that I was not in any particular danger,

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especially at the public meetings which were open to anyone. But it was always in the back of my mind that someone would point a finger at me and accuse me of being a UCO [Undercover Officer], which would have been embarrassing at the least.'[91]

Indeed, as she admitted, some of the issues raised by the women's movement were of 'genuine interest' to her. At points her investments can be discerned from the reports she submitted to Special Branch. In a detailed report about the eventful national women's liberation conference in Skegness, held in 1971, she described some middle-class women's ignorance about the needs of working-class mothers. This perspective was, HN348 wrote,

> confined, as was to be expected, to the middle-class educated women who had little or no interest in politics. They represented about a quarter of the conference and it was apparent they had no clear concepts but had an open mind to all aspects of Women's Liberation. As a group they were somewhat inactive and tended to see the Movement as an excuse for a chat rather than as a serious issue.

In the same report she admired the 'subtle … politicking' of the socialist groups, which cast them in a 'favourable light', particularly when compared to the 'somewhat dictatorial manner' of the Maoists.[92]

But one does wonder to what extent those reading the reports would have been able to understand the subtle differences in women's perspectives on the need for childcare. The police force was a macho organization.[93] Numbers of women officers were low: there were just 4,700 women employed in English, Welsh and Scottish police forces in 1969 (417 in Scotland), and although women were first appointed to the Metropolitan Police in 1919, it was not until 1973 that male and female officers shared its promotions and line management systems.[94] HN348 was not the first female police officer to go undercover, however; indeed, as Louise Jackson has shown, at various moments in twentieth-century Britain undercover female officers were thought to be both easier to spot (because they came from a more middle-class background than the identities they were assuming) and less easy to identify (because there remained some uncertainty about what a standard female officer looked like).[95] Although women had long been part of the police force, HN348 recalled that her male colleagues still perceived policing as inherently masculine. 'The men used to say: "you joined a man's job so get on with it"', she explained.[96]

Much of what HN348 reported on in the women's movement were conversations in women's homes. These smaller meetings were foundational to the movement.[97] Given this personal setting, HN348 was asked by the Inquiry if she was given advice about how to balance privacy with what was needed 'for effective policing'. HN348 demurred: 'there's so much of an overlap between the personal behaviour and the behaviour that they were involved in, it's difficult to separate one from the other', she suggested. Instead, any checks on the necessity of information were at the discretion of her senior officer. Ultimately, however,

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she could not recall any examples of times when her level of detail had been modified. But within the group HN348 had ascended to a position of authority as treasurer, though when probed by the Inquiry she remembered little about this and cast doubt on what she did within the role.[98] Taking on this position ran counter to advice formulated by Dixon in 1968. He had warned that

> the incompetence of the British left is notorious, and officers should take care not to get into a position where they achieved prominence in an organisation through natural ability … members of the squad should be told in no uncertain terms that they must not take office in a group, chair meetings, draft leaflets, speak in public or initiate activity.[99]

But Dixon's advice was not circulated to officers.[100] When HN348 was recruited to the SOS Imbert cautioned her to act just as an observer and warned her not to be an 'agent provocateur'.[101] In practice, though, few boundaries were put in place, and during her deployment – which ended in 1973 – HN348 largely relied on her own judgement.[102]

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the SOS in 1968 was a transformational moment in the history of British policing, marking, as the UCPI has shown, the beginnings of a period of intense political policing in England and Wales. The 'proliferation of surveillance across the British left' from this point on 'speaks to a Cold War bureaucracy that was out of control and complacent in that it would never have to justify its actions to the public', says Chris Brian.[103] Britain was far from alone in augmenting its security state in the postwar period and in the licence it assumed it had to do so. As Clive Emsley has suggested, 'it would probably be difficult to find a modern state in which there was not some organisation responsible for investigating political subversion and maintaining a surveillance of those suspected of such activities'.[104] Given this, scholars who have used the security state archives of these other nations can serve as guides to both their knotty issues and rich potential as vehicles for justice.[105]

I have argued that the surveillance of the movement indicates that the WLM was taken more seriously by the state as a potentially subversive, politically networked organization than has previously been suspected. Yet this surveillance did not bear fruit: the officer did not uncover dangerous anti-state activity and was eventually withdrawn from deployment. This outcome seems to have shaped HN348's feelings about her time undercover. 'I question whether police officers should be undercover at all', she has said, 'It seems to me that perhaps undercover work should be dealt with by the Security Service, simply with links to senior police officers'.[106] Her sense of the unnecessariness of her deployment was shared by others. Sir John Mitting, Chairman of the UCPI, concluded in 2023 that only the infiltration of three groups by the SDS between 1968 and 1982 was justifiable: the 'great majority' of undercover deployments were not.[107]

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The UCPI has created a tempting archive of radical records from its publication of surveillance material. Here we can access activist material, narratives and information that might otherwise have been dispersed or lost. But this newly-created public archive of British postwar activist movements – unintentionally facilitated and enabled by the collection of material and reporting across years of undercover police activity – is a site of moral hazard, and is accessible with few guardrails. The care its use requires is particularly apparent at this moment, while its surveilled subjects grapple with the ways that their lives were reported upon and altered by undercover actors. In its sheer weight of granular detail and continuity, its curious mix of detachment and judgement, the disjuncture between the efficient organization of the material and the human, complicated lives within, this accidental archive of postwar activist labour and lives is compelling. But counterbalancing these inducements are the live ethical issues in play – around power, consent, complicity, disclosure, exploitation and extraction – which continue to be unsettled and unsettling for the historian.

Sarah Crook is a historian of modern Britain whose research focuses on the intersections of feminism, gender, health, and political activism. Her first monograph, *Unhappy Mothers: Women, Motherhood and Social Change in Postwar Britain*, was published in 2025 by Manchester University Press. She is an editor of the journal *Modern British History*. Her emerging research has two strands: one that looks at the history of student mental health, another that interrogates feminism in 1990s and 2000s Britain. She can be contacted on s.r.e.crook@swansea.ac.uk.

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