The Deep State: Definitional Debates and Impacts

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The business of intelligence has always attracted strongly held views and idiosyncratic commentary. One of the joys of the novels of the late John Le Carré and indeed the film *Lives of Others* is the splendid sense of the routine, the mundane and the ordinary in their accounts of what intelligence officers actually do. The nonsense of the James Bond novels and films, to pick an extreme, is that Bond is not an intelligence officer at all: special forces in a suit would be nearer the mark. Similarly, the drip-feed of stories about intelligence technologies and capabilities also lends itself to rapid turns to paranoia. The leaks that surrounded the Edward Snowden case provided considerable evidence for the notion that highly capable intelligence agencies can spy on you in your home by activating your laptop camera, can listen into your home by activating the microphones in your landline or mobile phone, can make reasonable inferences about your preferences (from meta-data analysis), and can keep tabs on where you travel to (via GPS and other data points). The popularised and bastardised phrase 'big brother' is used to describe a panopticon effect of surveillance, of not being able to secure meaningful privacy, and where government authorities are reigned against the people. The problem for those trying to argue that those who are most concerned by this are paranoid is that the evidence of these capabilities has become compelling. So, in response this chapter aims to try and balance what we know of technological and operational developments against the backdrop of 'conspiracy' and heightened media and social media narratives about the operation of the secret state.

Definitional Battles

The key definitional battle here is whether the term 'deep state' means governmental secrecy, and therefore an element of government behaviour that is part of the routine and even mundane, or whether it means something more advanced and potentially more sinister. The use of the term 'deep state' is nearly always made pejoratively, so it seems unlikely to be designed to cover the secret aspects of machinery of government in a neutral manner. If we strip away the pejorative connotation, it is still valuable to try and define what is meant by the deep state and whether it has any analytical value to us.

One useful definition of the deep state comes from Peter Dale Scott, a retired Canadian diplomat and prolific writer on secret government, who describes it as: "A second order government, behind the constitutional state that is growing stronger. Party institutionalisation in non-accountable agencies like the CIA and NSA, in Booz Hamilton – where 70% of intelligence budgets go. And behind these firms are Wall Street and big oil" (Dale-Scott, 2015). Writing from Indian perspective Josy Joseph offers a definition that describes a form of civilian security state coup. Joseph describes the 'subversion of democracy by a small elite' which in the case of India is located mostly in one city, and which has served to 'intimidate to silence', jail and coerce to support through propaganda (Joseph, 2021). Ultimately, though, the suggestion of a deep state is indicative of an accusation and belief that officials do not or cannot act with professional integrity. The contemporary political environment would suggest that this belief is a product of the fervour with which those making accusations conduct themselves and their politics. In other words, the accusation that officials are behaving unprofessionally or inappropriately might contain an element of mirroring.

The narratives around the deep state are also symbolic of the extent to which the archly political debates that do exist within professional political circles, within professional journalism, within

academic circles and within the arts have transferred across to the mainstream discourse and understanding. Within these professions the exclusion or 'no platforming' of individuals because of their political beliefs is more usual, even if it is often unlawful. But almost everyone in these professions knows of examples where politics intervened in recruitment.

So, the definitional debate around the concept of the deep state centres around: 1) the presence or not of a parallel state structure, and 2) of the aggressive assertion of an alternative or parallel political agenda, one that is said to against the core interests of the people and of elected officials. Nested within those two key pillars is the reality or otherwise of how the security state operates, and how it is cast or presented in public discourse. Similarly, there is an unacknowledged set of debates around what can be said to represent the national or public interest, and the extent to which the state is indivisible from the government: by which, I mean, the extent to which the state ensures continuity whilst governments of all stripes come and go. Populist politicians, who have increasingly taken on anti-system creeds, have taken to conflating their interests with those of the people and, consequently, sought to strongly condemn intelligence, security and law enforcement agencies and officials who have looked to investigate them, whilst asserting that these same agencies and officials investigate their opponents. The definition of deep state has taken on, therefore, one where it being shrouded behind secrecy equates to being opposed to 'us', and therefore part of the grouping of 'them'. It is a version of politicisation that is even starker than the scholars who have worked on politicisation dared to fear (Agrell, 2021) (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

A key problem for researchers in this space is how to pull apart what is conspiracy and what is reasonable political observation and analysis. When researchers have sought to examine the basis for conspiracies, such as those surrounding the terrorist atrocities of the 11th September 2001, the mere doubt around the basis of the conspiracy has been treated as justification for the validity of the conspiracy (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel III, 2007) (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Whilst that tautology is difficult to break free from, it is also a recognition of the starkly politicised nature of conspiracies, be they about alleged deep state activities or not. So, it will be impossible to convince those who are steeped in and proselytising for deep state conspiracies regardless of the weight of evidence, but an evaluation of the weight of validated evidence is the only currency that researchers have and that is what we must seek to rely upon, now and into the future.

Regional and National Variations in the Deep State.

Accusations of and analysis around the deep state are particularly acute in the United States, Turkey, Egypt and India. Since 2016, and Donald Trump's victory in the Presidential Election there has sprung up a highly industrious online and print market in texts 'revealing all' about the deep state. There are, however, some distinctive and national interpretations around the deep state, between these countries.

The United States has the most vigorous literature on the subject. The authors here cluster around some reassuring and familiar themes: the text and intention of the founding fathers has been undermined or sullied by modern politics (Lee, 2019) (Michaels, 2017), the impact of corporate money, the rise of technological elites and lobbying in US politics serves to shape the direction of policy making away from the best interests of the ordinary electors (Lofgren, 2016), that the parts of government that are cloaked or operate within codes of secrecy generate conflicts to distract the public – up to and including false flag activities (Steele, 2019) - or are engaged in activities to deprive the people of their elected will (Stewart, 2018) (Malloch & Stone, 2018) (Rohde, 2020).

In the US, this literature finds itself placed within an uneven topography of evidence and analysis that is based on what is available. At the analytical end of the literature David Rohde's book provides a good account of the divergence in how the deep state is conceived by those at different points in the political spectrum. Rohde argues that those on the right associate the deep state with an ever-growing government bureaucracy, and an administrative structure that protects itself whilst encroaching upon the rights of citizens. By contrast, those on the left see the deep state as a form of military-industrial complex and through generating wars and crises to perpetuate this nexus of interests, upto and including the persecution and prosecution of opponents (Michaels, Trump and the deep state: The government strikes back, 2017). Both sides – Rohde has it – are somewhat fatigued and distrustful of their ideological opponents and assume that both sides continuously leak to the press and within social media posts (Rohde, 2020). There is a strong theme within the US deep state literature around the impact of money in politics, but more particularly the impact of foreign money and foreign influence in US politics. Such a narrative is not restricted to politics in the US, as the resignation of the Overstock CEO was made citing his need to invest in gold and silver 'outside of the reach of the Deep State', suggesting that establishment forces were limiting his ability to carry out his business as punishment for his assistance to the 2016 election investigation (Byrne, 2019). For Dan Bongino, the hidden financial connections of prominent anti-Trump actors are indicative of a deep state waging war against the elected President (Bongino, 2020). Bongino's analysis was foregrounded by Peter Dale Scott, who warned the interconnected impacts of the drive to increase oil revenues and access to oil, the restrictions on constitutional rights and the increasing income disparities between sections of US society that – he argues – is breeding anger and raising the prospects of armed responses, such as those experienced six years after he wrote his book on January 6th 2021 (Dale-Scott, 2015).

In the US, and to a lesser but growing sense in the UK, Germany and other parts of Europe, particularly in Scandinavia and other locations like Hungary, Poland and Romania, it is possible to see a growing literature that is supercharged by the internet, QAnon and affiliated or loosely aligned anti-system interests and groupings. In the US the QAnon phenomenon has sought to serve the 'needs' or wants of an agenda premised around former President Trump and his acolytes. The term deep state was evoked by those involved in the January 6th 2021 insurrection or coup attempt (depending on your perspective) to describe the actors and institutions who thwarted them and what they considered to be their righteous path (Blumenthal, 2022). Whilst the US has always been curiously susceptible to conspiracy theories, including the development of theories around the Illuminati (a religious conspiracy controlling world politics), which was first done as a test case of how conspiracies work, the assassination of President Kennedy and the validity of the moon landings. The more recent conspiracies and activism from QAnon 'truthers' has been facilitated by the tools provided by the internet. Internet forums have allowed communities of like-minded individuals – across international and domestic borders – to collect together in frictionless ways (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021).

To replicate frictionless communities of interest in the analogue or pre-internet world would have been excessively time-consuming, if possible at all. Permissive and barely moderated chat forums such as 4Chan and 8Chan have allowed for the unchecked publication of content that would have previously been very unlikely to make it onto mainstream media outlets (Thorleifsson, 2021). The question of the extent to which this content radicalises the previously reasonable and tame, or whether it merely fuels those who already hold these beliefs is unresolved, even amongst communication studies scholars (Rieger, Kümpel, Wich, Kiening, & Groh, 2021). During my own research into the mechanism by which disinformation and conspiracy travels in online spaces I discovered that often 'patient zero' of these conspiracies begins in the unindexed web, before being

brought to the indexed web by dark web actors (Dover, 2019). The question of what can be done to mitigate the harm of online QAnon radicalisation is a knotty problem: as with parallel and analogue attempts to deradicalize Jihadists in the 2000s, the greater the involvement of government actors, or those associated with government agencies, the greater the push-back and reinforcement of the radicalising narratives of such groups (Adleman, 2021) (Swisher, 2022). The conclusion from these emerging strands of research is that deradicalization must be preventive to be effective (Chan, Rizio, Skali, & Torgler, 2021).

The other dimension associated with the creation of communities of interest – be they regional, national or transnational – is the ability to self-publish e-books, both through Amazon, and through Scribd and other similar services which have also acted as catalysts to the dissemination of these ideas. Again, in the analogue era such efforts would have been expensive and unlikely to reach a decent-sized audience: as the former CIA Officer Robert Steele ably demonstrated through his electronic books and his tour of the USA following President Trump's electoral defeat, upon which he died (Arise USA, 2021) (Rohrlich, 2021).

United Kingdom

Given that in the UK the principal intelligence agencies were not even publicly acknowledged until the late 1980s, which might give rise to a more developed sense of the operation of an unacknowledged and yet influential deep state, the US-style narratives around parallel and hidden governments is a relatively recent phenomena. Indeed, it was in late 2021 when the Daily Telegraph columnist Charles Moore evoked the notion of a form of establishment working against elected officials, and particularly those who had supported the UK's exit from the EU, in his weekly column (Moore, 2021). In doing so, Moore tapped into a wider stream of currently conservative political thinking which has elements of the establishment, like the media, the judiciary and civil servants as trying to deliberately thwart the operation of democracy. Boris Johnson's former and divisive lead advisor – Dominic Cummings – used one of his lengthy blog columns to partly establish 'how Whitehall works'. In doing so he argued that political journalists: "massively exaggerate the importance of Cabinet, which is treated as a largely Potemkin exercise by those with real power around Downing Street (encouraged by the PM). The power of ministers is massively exaggerated, the power of the Cabinet Secretary is massively under-reported. The latter has something like 100X, perhaps 1000X, more true power than the average minister. Who gets the media coverage?" (Cummings, 2022). He went onto describe the centrality of junior officials in security: "The PM's Private Secretary on security issues in 2020 was a brilliant young woman wired into the deep state across Whitehall. On many things she was (thankfully) far more influential than any minister." (Cummings, 2022). Conversely, the former Attorney General in 2019, described the clustering of media, judicial and administrative actors as being a form of cultural Marxism that aimed to undermine Conservative interests (Walker, 2019). This language evokes a form of conspiracy that suggests that left-wing interests coalesce at sites of cultural (re)production, including those of upholding the rule of law, that create a narrative and conditions under which it is impossible for Conservatives to thrive: quite a curious argument for a government who, at the time, were about to celebrate their tenth year in office and with unfortunate echoes to far right conspiracy tropes.

Such a theme of marginalisation is not universally held by British Conservatives. A grandee of the party – Bernard Jenkin MP – forcefully rejected the notion of a Europhile deep state at the heart of the Civil Service, instead accusing weak politicians of failing to capitalise upon their democratic mandates (Jenkin, 2019). Jenkin appears to belong to a shrinking school of thought within the party, which continues to see and position the opposition leader, Sir Keir Starmer, as an establishment figure, whilst they hold the reins of power. Such thoughts and sentiments have led to wide-ranging

attacks from the Conservative leaning press on government officials and advisors, particularly during the Brexit negotiations and Covid debacle, and in seeing a break from tradition in appointing what many have interpreted as a political appointee to head the Civil Service (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2021) (MacAulay, et al., 2022) (Parker, 2020). The UK is, therefore, some way along the pathway to emulating or repeating the tropes of the US when it comes to a mainstream polarisation concerning deep state narratives.

Turkey

The notion of a deep state has a particular resonance in Turkey. It has been used to describe anti-democratic, anti-socialist and anti-Islamism military and security forces whose influence ebbs and flows depending on the stability or otherwise of the government (Gunter, 2014). In stark contrast to the experiences of citizens in the United States and United Kingdom, those in Turkey have experienced political and military upheaval: the notion of a deep state has heft and real-world impact, whereas in the US and UK the deep state is more an imagined entity. The sense of a set of goal-keeper actors who are able to mobilise and save the state has strong echoes with the militarised politics of Pakistan, where some have described security forces in praetorian terms, and similarly with the protection of the royal family and order in Thailand (Mérieau, 2016) (Watmough, 2017).

The literature describing and analysing Turkey's deep state has moved with the intensity of its alleged presence and influence. In 2009 – a moment of relative calm in Turkish politics – scholars were describing the decline of the deep state (Kaya, 2009). The arrival of Erdogan, the coup against him and his exploitation and mobilisation of Islam as a political force has brought the concept of the deep state into very sharp relief in Turkey, and some scholars have focused in on the transformation of governmental institutions and actors within a new Turkish order (Razeghi & Dinparast, 2020). For some, Erdogan's pivot has moved Turkey from being characterised by a deep state to one in which an Islamic deep state prevails (Filiu, 2015). Others have ignored the Islamic tilt in Erdogan and his government and focused more closely on the pivot to a form of populism and politics of marginalisation (Palabiyik, 2018) (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). As with most paradigmatic changes in politics, shifts can be traced and observed in popular cultural outputs, as a sensitive gauge to political and social mores. Turkey has not been immune to such parallel shifts, with popular cultural outputs from and about Turkey responding strongly to the increased securitisation (Çevik, 2019). The concept of the deep state seems well understood in Turkey and there are common points of reference and understanding: something that is not the case in other transatlantic examples.

Egypt

Prior the popular uprising in 2011 – part of the so-called 'Arab Spring' – the description of deep state was used in Egypt to describe the security services (both military and civilian) that were used in the service and protection of President Hosni Mubarak who ruled from 1981 until he was unseated by the revolution in 2011. It should be noted that Egypt had been a British colonial possession, which itself would have provided a deeply ingrained memory of a form of crown service aimed at protecting the governing status quo: a system that echoes much of commonly held impressions of deep states. Similarly, Mubarak's notoriously violent regime had been underwritten by the US government in the form of political backing, advanced intelligence and military and security equipment and assistance. Such underwriting and intelligence and security support would also lend credence to the sense of a deep state in operation (Faris, 2013).

The revolutionary government of the Muslim Brotherhood, itself having operated in parts of Egypt as a parallel state, was overturned by a counterrevolution of those same military and security actors who had underwritten Mubarak (Springborg, 2017) (Saad, 2020). The arrest, trial and suspicious death of the elected leader Mohamed Morsi does nothing to quell the assessments around the violent counter-revolution in Egypt (Al-Anani, 2015). In the terms understood by the populous, the counter-revolution was an operation of the Egyptian deep state with General el-Sisi the clear beneficiary and the spiritual successor to Mubarak in how he has led Egypt in the years since 2013 (De Smet, 2014) (Rutherford, 2018). It is reasonable, though, to understand that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt is the proxy for what is understood in Egypt currently as the deep state (Abul-Magd, 2021). As with pre-2011 politics in Egypt, this understanding would both have an evidential and experiential basis, although the dovetailing of deeply vested colonial and neo-colonial memories makes Egypt an interesting and enduring case through which to explore the concept of the deep state.

Operational Impacts:

It is artificially seductive to see the developing discourse around the deep state as being entirely disconnected from the real-world or operational environment of intelligence agencies, and institutions and actors in their orbits. But questions around the impartiality of intelligence do have an impact upon the way that the public views these essential organisations. The largely unchecked and often outlandish and intense discourse on social media platforms are now making their way into mainstream media and popular cultural representations, where they begin to occupy mainstream positions. The impact of mainstreaming these narratives serves to undermine the legitimacy of intelligence work, and also feeds through into challenges in recruitment of new officers. Such narratives do – ultimately – become reinforcing through the various stratus of the hybrid media system (Carlsson, 2013).

In the UK it is (all too often) said that enforcement agencies operate with public consent. As such these same agencies are now defending themselves and relying on others, including those in the government to defend them against activists and those espousing deep state narratives. Taking any action against these campaigners merely reinforces their narrative about state persecution and over-reaching deep state actors, a further example of that core tautology.

The impact of mis- and disinformation on active intelligence officers and those in the recruitment pool for the intelligence agencies is a currently under-researched vulnerability. Whilst intelligence agencies across the global north spend vast amounts of time and money seeking ever more sophisticated ways of controlling for and minimising the impact of bias in the work and assessments of their officers and analysts, evidence tells us that the compounding impact of algorithmically delivered news and information has impacted the way individuals view and assess issues (Khabaz, 2018) (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). One of the questions for future research is to question the impact of 'online filter bubbles' on the normative positioning and therefore assessments of intelligence analysts.

Conclusion and areas for future research

The concepts of the deep state and military industrial complex have much in common. Both have been used academically or intellectually to describe a phenomenon of political-economy and of power. Both have gone on to be used by activists as shorthand for the abuse of power and the divergence of governments away from serving the interests of the people. Indeed, there may be some shared lineage and history between the two terms as they are preoccupied by some of the

same actors and same phenomena: the evolution of the study of the military-industrial complex brought in the media (Solomon, 2007), brought in intelligence services (Mamikon, 2011), and brought in universities and other intellectual elites (Giroux, 2015). There is a case to be made, therefore, that the notion of 'deep state' is merely a re-worked version of the military industrial complex, but which has greater contemporary resonance. As McGregor noted – in the Chinese context – one of the important components of the deep state includes the sense of constant campaigning: the ability of certain actors to utilise 'all the levers of state' to create particular effects (McGregor, 2020). This moves the Weberian concept of the monopoly of the machinery of coercive violence towards a monopoly or control of the production of understanding and interpretation, something we see clearly in the contest over the representation of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Historically we have seen the mission of totalitarian states not just to be to acquiring political or military control, but also to change the way their publics see politics and indeed to change the way these same publics view the governments or events that preceded them. These tendencies are all too evident in the campaigning and information contests we can observe coming from populist or anti-systems politicians and campaigning groups. The charge of 'deep state' is, therefore, a mirror to their own projections of what government is for and what it does.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that ultimately there is an identifiable 'deep state' of sorts in all states, and that is baked into constitutions and constitutional arrangements. Nearly every state has a cadre of officials who are charged with protecting and ensuring the continuity of the state rather than the continuity of any particular government. Such a cadre of officials ensures that the constitutional order persists. Certainly, within mature western democracies such a system is not a confidence trick, or an attempt rule against the interests of the public, or an attempt to rule on behalf of a foreign power. In recent times those activities or behaviours have sat within mainstream politics, rather than with the intelligence services who have all too frequently been placed in the often-invidious position of being tasked by, and responsible to those who foursquare or in the periphery of their investigations. It should be noted – however – that in this chapter it became clear that colonial and neo-colonial memories and legacy structures do play a role in the development and persistence of deep state narrative. That these legacies can be historically evidenced does then lead credibility to the development of challenging narratives in the US and UK: most conspiracies contain a kernel of truth stretched beyond its original credibility; the same is true here.

It is possible to define what is meant by the deep state, both from an academic and a campaigning perspective. It is possible to define the deep state from national and regional perspectives, there are different flavours of essentially the same phenomena. It is possible to identify common actors, common institutions and common behaviours across various deep states, but just as the term 'military industrial complex' came to take on a deeply pejorative and caricaturised form, the same is true for the 'deep state'. It is a term that, largely due to the efforts of activists in the US and Turkey, has come to be more than the sum of its definitional components. As such, we should question its utility as an analytical tool or description. Where it does offer analytical traction is in the role it plays in the culture wars currently playing out across the globe, the sorts of language and tropes being utilised by activists and what it tells us about the part of the social contract that locates itself precisely in the intelligence realm. In that regard the amplification of the debate around deep state activity is a good gauge of public trust in governmental authority.

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