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On subversion and dissolution of opposition movements

by Nikola Miloševi? - Friday, December 24, 2021

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The roots

The strength of activists, social change, and opposition movements seems to be decreasing around the world. The trend is reinforced by the seemingly old tactic of discrediting, deception, building mistrust among members, and disinformation spread by various political and state actors, who over the millennia perfected their methods.

The interest of the ruling elite was always to maintain power. Various advisors and court philosophers, such as Sun Tzu or Machiavelli developed tactics and strategies for the ruling class to maintain power. Sun Tzu was developing his book „The art of war" around the year 500 BC. Even though the book is mainly aimed at military tactics, it highlights the importance of disorienting the enemy, inflicting deception and rumors, and actually going into the battle only when the battle has been already won on the psychological field. He also emphasizes avoiding direct confrontation and waging psychological warfare, until the enemy provides a good opportunity for a decisive final strike. Machiavelli brings a similar approach into the political arena, where he claims that immoral behavior, such as the use of deceit, deception, harm of reputation is normal and effective in politics.

Deception, disinformation, the discrediting of opponents, as well as blackmail, creation of personal tragedy to weaken one's ability for activism and political fight have been used in the political arena probably since the time of Machiavelli. However, one of the main components of these tactics and strategies is information about the targeted individual. At the time of Machiavelli, and actually, until relatively recently this information was not easily available. In order to obtain such information, the attacker would need to infiltrate with an informant the close circle of the targeted person, to follow them, spy on their communication, etc. Such endeavor needed quite a lot of resources, mainly physical and informants or spies always had a risk of being detected. Therefore, successful campaigns of dissolving the movement by injecting conflict and mistrust between members were rare. It was more common to simply arrest, beat or murder political opponents. However, arrests, physical attacks, or murder of political opposition members could actually recruit more people for the cause and bring external pressure. Therefore, this kind of move became increasingly unpopular during the 20th century.

Campaigns of misinformation, deception, discrediting were commonplace in the 20th century in order to bring conflict into the movements, dissolve them and discredit them from the public, causing mass defection from the movement and support for causes major political players advertised. However, lack of access to detailed information on the target's private life made this kind of campaign relatively difficult. World War I brought a significant increase in communication technologies but as well introduced the first kinds of cryptographic systems to keep this communication private. The Second World War introduced the need for the creation of security agencies, whose main purpose was spying on enemies and conducting unconventional warfare, including misinforming enemies public, discrediting their governments, deceiving enemy forces, etc. It did not take long after the Second World War that we could see the use of these capabilities in the domestic political arena fighting opposition movements, human rights activists, the feminist movement, and various kinds of criticism coming from artists and other kinds of dissidents.

For example, in the USA, the FBI officially started a program called COINTELPRO in August 1956, designed to "increase factionalism, cause disruption and win defections" inside the Communist Party USA. However, by October same year, this program was targeting black human right activist, under J. Edgar Hoover's explanation was that they were infiltrated by communists. The program included the creation of fake documents with the aim to divide the organization, fake phone calls in order to harass it, and usage of internal revenue service audits to paralyze and create fear in the organizations. In 1957, when Southern Christian Leadership Conference was created, an African-American civil rights organization, the FBI started targeting them immediately, and eventually, one of the targeted individuals became Martin Luther King Jr, who became one of the priority targets after his 1963 „I have a dream" speech. FBI was wiretapping King's house and various

hotels he would stay in, as well as performed calls and sent letters trying to „encourage him to commit suicide". The letter was typical blackmail containing a tape with recordings documenting a series of King's sexual indiscretions with a letter informing him that the tape will be released to media if he does not take his life prior to accepting a Nobel Peace Prize. When he refused, the FBI commenced a media campaign offering surveillance transcripts to various media organizations, lasting until 1969, a year after the death of Martin Luther King. Similarly, the FBI worked to widen the divisions between Malcolm X and Elijah Mohammad through infiltration, sparking acrimonious debates, rumor-mongering, and other tactics designed to foster internal disputes, which ultimately led to Malcolm's assassination. By 1967-1968, the FBI was heavily involved in discrediting, attacking, misdirecting, and making disagreements in pretty much all black human rights activist groups in the USA. One of the main aims was to prevent the coalition of these movements. Soon the collaboration between the FBI, CIA, NSA, and Department of Defence was established in order to coordinate response to possible riots. In 1967, the CIA launched its domestic espionage project targeting the American people from 1967 to 1974, whose mission was to uncover possible foreign influence on domestic race, anti-war and other protest movements. A later investigation by the Senate's Church Committee stated that „COINTELPRO began in 1956, in part because of frustration with Supreme Court rulings limiting the Government's power to proceed overtly against dissident groups." COINTLPRO managed to disrupt a good number of black civil rights movements, new left movements (including anti-war, community, and religious groups), as well as some far-right nationalist movements (including Ku Klux Klan). The method was reviled in 1971 and J. Edgar Hoover declared it over within a year. The intended effect of the COINTELPRO was to expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize groups that the FBI believed were subversive in one way or the other, by instructing operatives to:

Create a negative public image for target groups (for example through surveilling activists and then releasing negative personal information to the public)

Break down the internal organization by creating conflicts (for example, by having agents exacerbate racial tensions, or send anonymous letters to try to create conflicts)

Create dissension between groups (for example, by spreading rumors that other groups were stealing money)

Restrict access to public resources (for example, by pressuring non-profit organizations to cut off funding or material support)

Restrict the ability to organize protest (for example, through agents promoting violence against police during the planning and at protests)

Restrict the ability of individuals to participate in group activities (for example, by character assassinations, false arrests, surveillance)

However, we will see later, that revelation about the program in 1971 may have ended this program by its name, but not the activities of security agencies to target opposition and other undesirable groups by the government. The programs can be easily renamed and reclassified, resources shifted, but the principle of psychological attacks on the group leaders as well as attempts to make divisions remained active. The only change that later allowed easier execution of these programs was the availability of personal information on the internet and social media.

STASI: Exposed masters of the craft in 20th century

East Germany's (GDR) Ministry of State Security, or how it was usually called Stasi, was operating as an intelligence agency with both domestic and foreign responsibilities. The setup of Stasi was initiated and largely helped by KGB in the late 1940s and Stasi adopted a lot of KGB methods early on, however, over time developed their own approaches. However, when the Berlin wall fell in 1989, most of the documentation, including files of targets and teaching materials for their operatives and agents became public. Stasi was very systematic and

feared secret police, managing to repress almost any kind of opposition movement to the ruling communist SED party for over 40 years. We cannot say whether they were the best in breaking opposition and unwanted movements, but what we can say, is that a lot of their documentation on the methods and procedures became public over time, and therefore, we can get an insight into what methods and techniques were used in the 1970s and 1980s to dissolve and distract unwanted movements and dissidents.

Stasi logo

When Stasi documents were reviled, one particular methodology came up in connection with suppressing dissidents and unwanted cultural and political movements. The name of the method was "Zersetzung". Zersetsung can be translated to English as degradation, biodegradation, or dissolvent. The procedures of Stasi started changing from terror oriented, where people performing anti-government activities were imprisoned, tortured, and even sometimes murdered, to more targeting psychology of victim and distracting them from the planned activities in 1971. However, they were formalized by Directive No. 1/76 on the Development and Revision of Operational Procedures in January 1976. The method was used on over 10 000 individuals and about 5000 individuals suffered irreversible damages (mostly to their mental health) in East Germany.

In Zersetsung methodology Stasi gathered intelligence using their extensive network of informal collaborators (counting between 170 000 and 500 000 people) to launch personalized psychological attacks to damage the target's mental health and lower chances of any hostile actions. This information would then be entered into "sociograms" and "psychograms", which would help craft better personalized attacks. The attacks may be to introduce personal tragedy, invoke a sequence of failures (for example Stasi could request University to reject certain candidates or request employers to reject job offers or fire people), some of the individuals' secrets, such as sexual or pornographic interest, homosexuality, parenting negligence may have been publicized and exploited within their circles. Also, other personal traits and events may have been exploited, amplified, and reinforced, such as drug dependence, alcoholism, divorce, passions for collecting or certain game, gambling. Combined with events that were reinforced or reviled, Stasi may have used their informal collaborators to spread invented rumors about the victim, creating a veil of shame. Likewise, a person may be subject to wrong diagnoses or treatments with medical professionals, or

within other institutions. According to Stasi documentation, the methods were most fruitful when combined with one's personality and with a wealth of intelligence about the person. This is why Stasi not only used intelligence from their informal collaborators but on the target was done surveillance by bugging their apartment and car, their letters were read and censored, etc. This allowed Stasi to have complete control of the information target was exposed to and gaslight them, or start slowly inflicting such attacks that the person would question their reality. It was done by disrupting a person's private and family life. Practices also included property damage, sabotage of cars, purposely incorrect medical treatment, and smear campaigns including sending falsified compromising photos or documents to the victim's family, denunciation, or provocation. Stasi may have also terrorized victims by making small announcements, ordering items in their name, or making calls to emergency services, but as well adding or stealing items from their living quarters. Stasi may have manipulated relations of friendship, love (sometimes using targeted seductions by Romeo agents), marriage, and family by anonymous letters, telegrams, and telephone calls as well as compromising photos, often altered.

When trying to paralyze subversive or opposition groups, Stasi would often infiltrate them and paralyze them by introducing conflicts between members, counter-proposal of actions that would be endlessly discussed. In order to create mistrust, Stasi would spread rumors that some members are unofficial collaborators of Stasi, or sometimes promoted members of these groups to administrative roles in government, making others believe that it is the reward for being an unofficial collaborator. This could be done also by assigning other privileges, such as housing or a car.

As we could see, the methods were ranging from subtle to inflicting serious personal and professional tragedies. Stasi is probably the best-documented source showing how these methods were executed and how they worked. However, during the 1970s and 1980s, Stasi had to invest a lot of effort in gathering intelligence about the targets. In the last few decades that has changed.

Technological enablers

Nowadays, obtaining intelligence enabling psychological attacks is easier to obtain. This easy access came with the dawn of the internet and social media applications. Social media applications, especially given most of them are owned by the same company, therefore it is easy to aggregate information from for example Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, are some of the main enablers of making, what Stasi used to call, "sociograms". Likewise, these applications collect data on one's activities and therefore it is not difficult to create "psychograms". Other companies, such as Google and Twitter, and many network providers would collect a plethora of information on each individual that they are obligated to provide to law enforcement if requested. However, in 2013, which is now quite a while ago, we have learned from Snowden revelations, that most of the big US internet companies, such as Apple, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and likely many others are collaborating with US surveillance agencies, particularly NSA (National Security Agency), through the PRISM program. Other states likely try to follow up trends in surveillance and try to monitor what they can. At the moment, passive intelligence is collected on everybody. Technology and internet applications, especially their monopolization that happened in the later 2010s and is still going on helped it. States even try to crack down on messaging applications that use end-to-end encryption, stating national security interests. It is indeed a breach of people's privacy if they cannot communicate privately, without the government monitoring their communication. However, governments would definitely feel more comfortable if they could tap into any communication on their territory. If one analyses the applications that are using encryption and are not owned by companies collaborating with security agencies through various programs, they are very few of them left and likely in the future this market will consolidate and monopolize even more.

So the situation is that almost everything we provide on the internet is likely routed through the USA and is subject to surveillance by NSA, and storing for an unspecified length of time. Other security agencies may collect some data as well. And a lot of information online is public, so you do not really need to be a security agency to create someone's sociogram and psychogram and execute the targeted attack. Then on top of that, there is a collaboration between security agencies that seems to be nowadays tighter than ever. Where one agency may obtain information about opposition groups from others, just because there is a collaboration deal. This means all information often that many of these internet giants would collect.

We have easier means of collecting intelligence than ever. The intelligence is a basis that was used by both Stasi, and FBI in previous examples, and similar can be found done by many other agencies. The method to dissolve opposition groups may not have changed significantly, because already in the 1960-1980s they were very effective. However, the collection of intelligence did change and became

easier, and therefore the whole method of smearing someone, distracting them from taking action, by introducing rumors and various kinds of personal and professional tragedies became easier. Therefore, if you ever wondered, that may be contributing a lot to the monopolization of the political scene as well as the fact that we see much less successful overthrowing actions against tyrannies in the world.

General methods of the disrupting opposition movements

According to attorney Brian Glick in his book War at Home, the FBI used five main methods during COINTELPRO:

Infiltration: Agents and informers did not merely spy on political activists. Their main purpose was to discredit, disrupt and negatively redirect action. Their very presence served to undermine trust and scare off potential supporters. The FBI and police exploited this fear to smear genuine activists as agents.

Psychological warfare: The FBI and police used myriad "dirty tricks" to undermine progressive movements. They planted false media stories and published bogus leaflets and other publications in the name of targeted groups. They forged correspondence, sent anonymous letters, and made anonymous telephone calls. They spread misinformation about meetings and events, set up pseudo movement groups run by government agents, and manipulated or strong-armed parents, employers, landlords, school officials, and others to cause trouble for activists. They used bad-jacketing to create suspicion about targeted activists, sometimes with lethal consequences.

Harassment via the legal system: The FBI and police abused the legal system to harass dissidents and make them appear to be criminals. Officers of the law gave perjured testimony and presented fabricated evidence as a pretext for false arrests and wrongful imprisonment. They discriminatorily enforced tax laws and other government regulations and used conspicuous surveillance, "investigative" interviews, and grand jury subpoenas in an effort to intimidate activists and silence their supporters.

Illegal force: The FBI conspired with local police departments to threaten dissidents; to conduct illegal break-ins in order to search dissident homes; and to commit vandalism, assaults, beatings, and assassinations. The objective was to frighten or eliminate dissidents and disrupt their movements.

Undermine public opinion: One of the primary ways the FBI targeted organizations was by challenging their reputations in the community and denying them a platform to gain legitimacy. Hoover specifically designed programs to block leaders from "spreading their philosophy publicly or through the communications media". Furthermore, the organization created and controlled negative media meant to undermine black power organizations. For instance, they oversaw the creation of "documentaries" skillfully edited to paint the Black Panther Party as aggressive and false newspapers that spread misinformation about party members. The ability of the FBI to create distrust within and between revolutionary organizations tainted their public image and weakened chances at unity and public support.

Basically same or similar categories of attacks can be seen in playbooks of Stasi or other organizations we know about and that is documented. Also, we can see these categories of attacks going on coming from agencies whose operational procedures were never leaked in the fight against unwanted groups.

Political theory background

Political theory and the general sociological aspect of how the methods of psychological dissolution of opposition groups and targeted disinformation on their work can be probably best explained through the work of Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt is a Germany born Jewish political theorist, who has seen the first-hand rise of Nazism, was imprisoned by the Gestapo, managed to move to France, where she was as well imprisoned as an alien from a hostile country briefly, even though she already lost German citizenship few years before and after her move to the USA, she could carefully observe and analyze the rise of other dictatorships and totalitarian regimes and society's role in their rise.

For Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism that came about with Nazism and Stalinism is different from the previous ways of government that we called despotism, tyranny, or dictatorship, even though they share the same beginnings. The crucial difference is that totalitarianism applies terror to subjugate mass populations, rather than just political adversaries. The word terror in this sense may be a bit misleading. Even though early totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism and Stalinism used physical terror, which included torture and killing of mass populations, these methods over time evolved and focused more on information and psychological terror. Even though Hannah Arendt may not be able to see this transition documented as plainly as we can now from the evolution of operational procedures of Stasi that were previously discussed, where in 1970s Stasi moved almost completely away from murder and physical torture. The goal of totalitarian regimes becomes to isolate people, so they feel alone in their striving for change. And here is the aim to produce psychological isolation, so people feel like they cannot trust anyone, rather than physically isolate them. Another main characteristic of totalitarianism is to produce unity through some historical process or natural process that they want to efficiently help speed up. In today's case, it may be fighting against terror, while in the past it may have been creating a superior race, or destruction of classes that are anyway dying out. In this unity people are acting together, they are becoming one, however, there is distrust, and they feel alone inside. This isolation is paralyzing any kind of action, it causes impotence on the side of society. It is important to mention that this isolation is different from solitude, which is necessary for most productive endeavors of humans from time to time. However, solitude is done willingly and for a certain period of time, while isolation is forced and may last indefinitely. That is what makes it dangerous for the human psyche, and makes societies fall into apathy. This isolation is executed through manipulation of media, contradicting statements, infiltration, and many other actions that were discussed earlier.
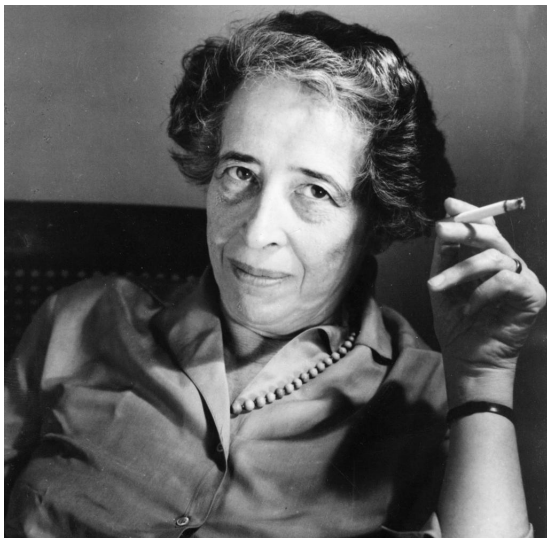
Hannah Arendt

Creating isolation is a highly personal attack and is not easy to perform without much information about a person's life. However, due to the introduction of various technological solutions that are supposed to connect us, while making people more isolated (many researchers showed these effects of social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram or even various dating sites), and government collaboration and utilization of these networks, crafting such personal attacks became easier and more subtle and the subject would be exposed to it willingly for the long periods of time. These platforms have made people more apathyc towards organizing groups with various platforms. Therefore, secret agencies and governments actually have more capacity to deal with the unwanted groups, and these platforms provide them with access to the information on these groups as it was never before possible. With this information and newly gathered capacity, they can easily focus on dissolving unwanted groups like never before through all well-known methods.

Recent cases

We can review a few recent cases, out of which probably the most interesting to look at is the one of Julian Assange. Smear campaign painted him as a traitor, someone who has blood on his hand of US informants and collaborators, as a spy, he was charged under the Espionage act, countless US government members went on TV and other news venues to state how WikiLeaks is an evil and dangerous organization, similar to countless of analysts and other new anchors. When that did not work to undermine the reputation of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks as they were supported by reputable news agencies, such as New York Times, Guardian, or Spiegel, WikiLeaks was denied access to Visa and MasterCard transactions and donations they relied on. Similar happened later with other services, such as PayPal. The story about sexual misconduct was brought to the front. As the case was dropped once he was arrested due to, as the Swedish prosecutor admitted, insufficiently strong evidence, it is likely that it was brought to international attention as a method of mental and moral pressure, as well as a method of discrediting. Assange managed to get asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy, however, living in one building without the ability to go out had effects on mental health. The operations of WikiLeaks became too complicated, there were disputes between members of the organization about ways to redact data that were published. Ultimately, Wikileaks could not continue operation, Ecuador had to step back because of international pressure and pressure on its economy and allow the arrest of Assange. A similar story could be said about the leaks of Edward Snowden. He was prosecuted out of his country, his family was torn apart, and there is still a smear campaign going on by which many people, especially in the US would label him a traitor and spy. These are two of the most public cases performed in the last decade that had heavy involvement of secret agencies and government to target individuals to make his/her life difficult and discredit his or her activities that the government has seen as subversive. However, many cases can be seen in less well-known organizations and opposition movements around the globe, who are failing with their missions because well-gathered intelligence is used against them in psychologically targeted attacks that would make them incapable of any opposition activity.

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