

"RADSOG"

I thought that this interview, reprinted from "New Left Respew: a journal of critique and counter-critique", might be of interest.

We met members of the newest radical professional group - Radical Security Officers Group (RADSOG) - in a seminar room at the LSE. As agreed, we do not use their real names.

New Left Respew - Can we start by talking about how RADSOG got started?

Peter - Some of us happened to get chatting about a year ago at a conference. We discovered we shared left-wing views, and a sense of dissatisfaction with the ways in which our work is used or misused for political purposes. We felt we should do something, so we placed a notice in "Cloak and Peashooter", an informal chat magazine for security people. The response took us by surprise, and we gained a few dozen contacts, which isn't bad when you take into account that we are still, unfortunately, such a small profession.

NLR - How do you explain your dissatisfaction?

Peter - Well, most people come into security work in the same way they drift into other kinds of social work - even if not socially committed, at least with vague ideals about helping people. I know I did. Organising fire drills, protecting against bombers, keeping people out of trouble and so on. But then you begin to discover it isn't always quite like that. Our relationship with our clients, even with the best of intentions, gets distorted. There are some difficult ethical problems. I'd better not be too specific here: we want to be responsible about our confidentiality commitments.

NLR - Of course. I meant to ask why we are experiencing, at this particular juncture of the crisis, a certain radicalisation among security operatives.

Fred - By the very nature of their work, security people find themselves in close and not infrequent contact with politically conscious elements of one kind and another. That potential influence by clients has always been there. But to understand why it has only recently become actual, we must recognise the interaction of several factors and study the structural position of security personnel as the crisis deepens.

First of all, then, there is the delayed effect of the student movement of the late sixties, whose militants have later helped form radical professional groups of all kinds.

Secondly, and I think this is the crucial point, there is the continuing change in the organisation of security work. The really satisfying and meaningful thing for the security man - and perhaps even more so for the security woman - has always been the personal relationship with the client. This is what above all gives you the illusion of being to some extent an independent personality. Now with automation the work is becoming more and more routine and mechanical. The old stereotype of the security officer sitting in his room having a cosy chat with his client now bears less relation to reality than the operative working at the terminal linked up to the Security Service computer.

This process of proletarianisation in the work situation naturally generates discontent, a new alienation, even passive resistance, though these can take the utopian form of a hankering to return to "the good old days".

The other thing to remember is that, unlike in other sectors of the economy, the new militancy is not smothered by fear of losing jobs. The cuts have not seriously affected security. In fact, not only can we hope to maintain our position, but even to press for expansion, though the struggle will not be an easy one. Our importance is not yet fully appreciated by any means.

NLR - How has your thinking, as a group, developed over the past year?

Fred - It has been a period of clarification, of resolving our differences of approach and perspective. This has been a long and difficult, though very fruitful, process, and we are now beginning to see the way forward to a clear definition of the central problems, which will no doubt lead to further dialogue both within and even outside the profession.

NLR - That sounds very hopeful. Can I come to one of your conferences?

Jane - I'm sure you see the need to restrict attendance to members.

NLR - What other activities do you engage in?

Barbara - A series of study groups examine areas of application in depth: career structure, document security, physical security, personnel security, methodology and teaching.

NLR - Surely such a structure merely serves to reflect and reinforce the artificial division of the subject into watertight specialisms, and the division between theory and practice?

Barbara - Yes, this is a problem which holds back the creative development of security work. We all suffer from over-specialisation, the fragmentation of labour and personality, in neo-capitalist society. The development of an integrated critique can only be a very long-term programme.

Paul - I proposed that we set up a network to help and advise other radical groups with their security problems. At least this is something we can do, where we could satisfy a real need. We do have an expertise that other radicals would do well to take advantage of. As things are, they often make pointless mistakes and needlessly expose themselves to surveillance and manipulation. But I'm afraid most of the group do not agree, nor do the people we could help see their need for us.

Jim - What Paul sees as a problem - the suspicion of so-called experts - seems to the rest of us a healthy trend. People are starting to see through the elitist mystification of "expertise". To foist ourselves as experts on people just gaining the self-confidence to conduct their own struggles would be hypocritical. It would only demoralise those we would imagine we were helping. We could easily find ourselves in control of other people - a situation similar to the one we face at work.

Paul - This is a distortion of my idea.

NLR - You must come across information in your work which would help ...

Paul - No no, I would never suggest that sort of thing. But I do protest at this denial of our expertise, this nihilist attitude which implies we should give up our identity as security people altogether.

Peter - This is a basic problem of philosophy. The new ethnomethodological phenomenological approach to security theory, whatever its shortcomings, is after all a healthy reaction to the sterile and crude positivist empiricism which has dominated the field for so long. Perhaps what we need is a critical rationalism.

NLR - Can I ask what may seem a trivial question? It could have a symbolic importance. Are you happy with the popular image of security?

Barbara - Of course not. The media propagate a highly distorted image. But the way to tackle misconceptions is to demystify the whole area, and this is what we are trying to do.

NLR - Could the image explain the small number of women in the field?

Barbara - Well, it's only quite recently the formal barriers were removed. There could be a little truth in it. There is the social work image we were talking about earlier, but there is also the tougher male image which may put some women off. In my previous line of work, on the

interrogation side, the stereotype is stronger still. It even colours the attitude of the clients, sad to say. And yet there is no reason why it shouldn't be a woman instead of a man behind the bright lights!

NLR - Can you tell me how you all see the future?

Fred - The group contains people of widely varying political outlook, so you will not get a single answer. I think that we have, as security radicals, an essential role to play, both in building up the revolutionary Party and in protecting the new workers' State after the revolution. The Russian experience is a case in point.

Jane - I suspect Fred is in the minority on this point. The rest of us have a more libertarian approach. For me, the most encouraging aspect of RADSOG is that at last security staff are beginning to look critically at their position in society, and try to take control over their own lives.

Peter - Do you envisage that in the future society the need for security personnel will disappear? (Laughter)

Jane - Of course, in an ultimate sense we are all serving the system. There may come a time, for all we know, in the distant future, when our skills will be no longer needed. But utopian speculation is irrelevant to the immediate struggle.

STEPHEN SHENFIELD

PLUS A COUPLE OF PLUGS for rad-static topics with which I am concerned.

1. The role of statistics in the coordination of production and distribution in a free socialist/anarchist society. I have written an article which appears in issue 10 of "Libertarian Communism", the discussion journal of the "Social Revolution" group - copies from me. I'd be glad for criticism of it. My basic idea is that a free society is made feasible by (among other things) statistical communication networks which could provide a democratic alternative to the market on the one hand and bureaucracy on the other.
2. Some friends and I are trying to get started a Socialist Research Association to investigate the problems of communicating socialist ideas (or radical ideas, more generally). Most radical activity consists of trying to get some sort of ideas across to someone, but little study is done on how to do this effectively, or on how to encourage people to think for themselves. The admen and politicians, however, have a huge research effort into putting across their ideas! We would hope to mount a survey of the attitudes of different groups of the working population towards socialists and socialist ideas, to what extent different ideas are understood or accepted and why etc - though we'll need a lot of support, including money, to do such research adequately. Again - contact me if interested.

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