1-1-2007

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CHAPTER 5

Under English Eyes
The Disappearance of Irishness in Conrad's The Secret Agent

Graham MacPhee

Nations it may be have fashioned their Governments, but the Governments have paid them back in the same coin. It is unthinkable that any young Englishman should find himself in Razumov's situation. This being so it would be a vain enterprise to imagine what he would think. The only safe surmise to make is that …[h]e would not have an hereditary and personal knowledge of the means by which historical autocracy represses ideas, guards its power, and defends its existence.

—Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes (1911)

Criticism and the Space of the Political

In recent years, Joseph Conrad’s fiction has been credited with extraordinary insight into the cultural and intellectual implications of European colonialism, a capacity often tied to the author’s status as a Polish exile standing at one remove from the British Empire and its dominant ethos of “Englishness.” Recent interest in Conrad’s The Secret Agent ([1907] 1983), a novel that revolves around an anarchist bomb attack on the Greenwich Observatory in London, suggests that Conrad may assume a similar role for critics and commentators attempting to map the broader cultural significance of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. However, if Conrad’s awareness of the brutality of colonialism might suggest that he is well placed to offer insights into the political violence of the metropolis, before transferring his critical credentials from colonial periphery to imperial center, we might take this opportunity to reassess Conrad’s triangulation of politics, violence, and colonialism. For although the impact of colonial violence is explicitly pursued across Conrad’s fiction at the level of the psychological, the existential, the epistemological, and the ethical, it is only in The Secret Agent that

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his engagement with its consequences for modern politics becomes more than implicit.²

A sense of why The Secret Agent may prove suggestive for our critical present is indicated by Alex Houen’s Terrorism and Modern Literature, which sees the novel’s presentation of political violence as moving beyond the oppositions that are said to structure modern discourses of emancipation, equality, and social justice. In contrast to such discourses, Houen’s reading pursues a conception of modern politics as “bureaucratic Being,” wherein “the state’s law . . . comes to incorporate everything” (2002: 51–52). According to Houen, “Conrad . . . sketches a landscape of critique in showing that the creation of zones of ambiguity and double-agency bolsters the functioning of the system,” since the novel reveals that “the possibility of ‘political crime’ is essential for the state’s law” (2002: 52). Yet at the same time, Houen argues that Conrad’s text keeps open a space for “counter” action in terms that resemble Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “micropolitics” or “molecularity” (2002: 53). In this way, Houen claims to identify a way of responding to contemporary events that avoids falling in step with the rhetoric of the “War on Terror,” while nonetheless retaining a critical perspective on “terrorism and its mediation” (Houen 2002: 20).

Implicit in Houen’s reading of Conrad is the wager that such a conception of modern politics will be compatible with a sensitivity to the particularity of historical context and location. Houen affirms the political urgency of this sensitivity by recalling Edward Said’s warning some three months after the attack on the World Trade Center, that already:

Osama bin Laden’s name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had (e.g. as useful conscripts in the jihad raised twenty years ago by the US against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. (Said 2001)

Given the role of the United States in arming and funding muhajadeen groups in the later years of the Cold War (Cooley 2002), Said’s observation about the need for a recognition of the hidden histories which configure the present is clearly fundamental to any analysis of the representation of “terrorism.” But by invoking Said’s warning, Houen raises a question that is becoming increasingly significant for both Conrad’s text and for the impulse within contemporary criticism to rule out any externality to power, the commodity, or the violence of law: namely, whether such attempts to refigure the political are able to retain a sensitivity to the histories of coercion and emancipation which they claim have been erased.

This essay returns to the figuring of political violence in The Secret Agent in order to examine how far Conrad’s conception of the political is able to recognize the histories that configure the space of politics. But in doing so,
it also asks to what extent Conrad’s text is able to register the historicity of its own location within the historical consolidation of European imperialism. For although The Secret Agent is ostensibly based on a historical incident—the detonation of a bomb by the anarchist Martial Bourdin in Greenwich in 1894—as Seamus Deane has noted, in fact it offers an “expert conflation of the Fenian and Russian anarchist stereotypes” of the day, a conflation that gives a “national” inflection to the political questions we have raised (Deane 1986: 39). In this respect, Conrad’s Englishness is not so eccentric, but joins the powerful tendency within nineteenth and twentieth-century British culture in submerging Irish political violence—which emerged within the political and economic contexts of British colonial rule—under the banner of an abstract and irrational assault on “civilization.”

The Logic of “Terrorism”

Despite its broader ambitions, Conrad’s novel deploys a relatively straightforward plot and a limited cast of characters. The central event, the dynamite attack on the Greenwich Observatory, is organized by an unlikely agent provocateur, Verloc, who has infiltrated the ranks of London’s anarchists; but the attack is instigated by the embassy of a foreign power, which, although unnamed in the novel, is clearly that of Imperial Russia. Verloc chooses his malleable brother-in-law Stevie—who suffers learning difficulties and is uninvolved in anarchism—to carry out the attack. Stevie’s pointless and pathetic death causes his sister, Winnie, to kill her husband and commit suicide. This central chain of events is refracted through two additional groups of characters, who provide the background or “surroundings” against which the central event is to be understood and judged (Conrad 1983: xxxvii). First, there are the anarchists, who embody a series of modern types or stock figures: Michealis, the corpulent armchair revolutionary; Yundt, the sham man of action who goads others into violence; Ossipon, the self-regarding freeloader with intellectual pretensions; and the Professor, the quintessential nobody convinced of his own historical importance and genius. Ranged against them are the forces of the law: the dogged but unimaginative functionary, Chief Inspector Heat; the Assistant Commissioner, a frustrated colonial adventurer now deskbound; and Sir Ethelred, the British Home Secretary whose Olympian perspective encodes the indifference of bureaucracy.

Although Verloc, working undercover for a foreign embassy, is the literal secret agent of Conrad’s tale, Houen’s reading prefers to focus on a more diffuse “secret agency” or “entropolitics” that joins anarchists and police, law and violence within an overarching structure of “bureaucratic Being” modeled on the closed systems of thermodynamics (Houen 2002: 51, 53ff).
Conrad’s “Author’s Note” appears to support this decision, since according to Conrad, what crystallized the story were not the details of the bombing nor the tragedy of the bomber’s sister, but his chancing upon the memoirs of Sir Robert Anderson, a former Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, who is described as “an obviously able man with a strong religious strain.” The incident that prompted the novel, Conrad recounts, is the complaint made by the policeman’s political superior, Liberal Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt, that Anderson’s “idea of secrecy . . . seems to consist in keeping the Home Secretary in the dark” (Conrad 1983: xxxv).

According to Houen, the novel figures the obscurity of modern bureaucracy as an all-encompassing thermodynamics of entropy, where ostensible social oppositions are incorporated, dissipated, and neutralized within the invisible interconnectedness of the system (Houen 2002: 50). The all-encompassing nature of this system is articulated in the novel from its opposing sides, by Chief Inspector Heat—who complains that the anarchists break the established rules of the game between police and “ordinary” criminals, both of whom are “products of the same machine”—and the Professor, who complains on the contrary that the anarchists fail to do so (Conrad 1983: 92, 73). At the level of meaning, the system’s capacity to incorporate political opposition is figured by the popular press, whose entropic absorption of daily events provides the semantic conditions for political violence. This logic is articulated by the foreign spymaster Vladimir, who demands an act that will confound the “ready made phrases” which are deployed “in every newspaper . . . to explain . . . away” conventional protest. The thermodynamics of obscurity give rise, then, to a logic of terrorism, since for “a bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now,” as Vladimir explains, it “must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive. It must be that, and only that, beyond the faintest suspicion of any other object” (Conrad 1983: 32).

While Vladimir is the first to articulate the novel’s hyperbolic logic of terrorism, this logic is embodied in the figure of the Professor, significantly the only anarchist who actively pursues his professed end. The Professor’s commitment is not to an ideology, cause or program of any kind, but to destruction itself. Whereas the other anarchists “plan the future” and so “lose [themselves] in reveries of economical systems derived from what is,” the Professor demands a total break with the past, a “clean sweep”: “that sort of future,” he explains, “will take care of itself if you will only make room for it.” What is needed, then, are not steps to create a new world, but the demolition of this one, and so he declares that the most productive political act would be “to shovel” dynamite “in heaps at the corners of streets” (Conrad 1983: 73). Crucially, the Professor’s association with dynamite, and therefore destruction, is not just talk: he remains at liberty because he has dynamite strapped around his body, which he can detonate within twenty seconds. As a potential suicide bomber, the Professor is placed out-
side of the existing social order, which as he explains “depends on life, which . . . is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex, organized fact open to attack at every point,” while he “depends on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked” (1983: 68).

According to Houen, the Professor not only embodies but also reveals the limits of this ultimatist logic, since his claim to stand outside the social order is undone by his reliance upon the fear he induces within it, and he is as much part of “the system” as anyone else. And it is here that Houen identifies the space for an alternative or “counter” action, a “micropolitics” of feeling or affect that is of another order to the “macropolitics” of opposition between legality and anarchy, domination and emancipation. This micropolitics is figured by the temporal deferral of the Professor’s detonator, which despite his best efforts cannot be made instantaneous, but takes twenty seconds. For Houen, such an irreducible deferral suggests a different temporality than that implied by the polarity of full presence or absolute absence demanded by the Professor’s “clean sweep.” However, for all its claims to revelation and exposure, Houen’s deconstructive logic may itself involve a significant elision: for while it wagers its politics on what it sees as irreducible moments of deferral and difference, such moments are in fact articulated in the novel as implying an experiential immediacy that is in important ways blinding.

Houen envisages this other temporality as a return of the past in a moment of primordial violence that undoes the macropolitics of law, morality, and meaning, a violent return which he identifies with the death of Stevie and Winnie’s murder of her husband, Verloc (Houen 2002: 44–45). In the case of Stevie’s death, the temporality of return is articulated by Chief Inspector Heat, who, when staring at the bloody remains of the hapless bomber, “rose by the force of sympathy . . . above the vulgar conception of time”:

Instantaneous! He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up . . . for the last time. The inextricable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved the horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained within two successive winks of an eye. (Conrad 1983: 88)

And in the case of Winnie’s fatal stabbing of Verloc, it is the narrative voice whose superior perspective loads the act with an uncommon significance:

Into that plunging blow, delivered over the side of the couch, Mrs. Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms. (Conrad 1983: 263)
Houen describes this violent return as “a political unconscious,” and claims that it marks the involvement of “terror and violence” within “a wider social field” (2002: 47). But such a claim disregards the fact that this return is clearly marked as a resurgence of chthonic forces—“the simple ferocity of the age of caverns” now manifested as “the unbalanced nervous fury of bar-rooms”—forces which are not only outside of history and politics, but are ahistorical and anti-political. Indeed, as Houen concedes, both Winnie and Verloc become “virtual automata,” “possessed by the past at the same time as embodying it” (2002: 48). There is no place within such a primeval return for the political interplay of determination and decision, and politics are thereby subordinated to the unfolding of a mythic fate.

Houen’s uncritical attitude to the political implications of the novel’s “logic of terrorism” suggests something more than a failure of close-reading: namely, a certain blindness resulting from the affinity between his own conception of the political—as the absolute violence of the state’s law—and Conrad’s presentation of politics in terms of an all-encompassing bureaucracy. What Houen’s reading therefore occludes is the propensity of such all-encompassing systems or logics to reduce politics to an abstract formalism, however finely they detail the mechanisms and processes of assimilation and incorporation. For if the differential demands of politics are always incorporated within the unity of “the system” — whether conceived in terms of “law,” “bureaucracy,” “power,” “commodification,” the “spectacle,” “identity thinking,” or simply “reason” — then the alternative to this unity cannot be found in the potentiality of historical differences, but in an abstract “difference” that holds itself apart from historical actuality.

Ironically enough, Houen’s own survey of the term “terrorism” suggests ways of engaging with the historical locatedness of Conrad’s text which exceed the logic of its equation of politics and bureaucracy. For as Houen rightly points out, while the word was famously used by Edmund Burke to describe the French revolutionary regime of 1793 to 1794, it gained its current sense in the second half of the nineteenth century in response to acts of political violence by both Russian Anarchists and Irish Republicans, or Fenians (2002: 19–30; see also Laqueur 2001: 6–11). Although Conrad’s novel is ostensibly only concerned with the first of these, as a number of critics have pointed out, it draws on the English experience of Fenian political violence in important ways. To gain a sense of the historical location of The Secret Agent therefore means uncovering the hidden history of Fenian political violence within the novel.
From Dynamite to the Politics of Parnell

Although notoriously indefinable, the contemporary sense of the term “terrorism” usually seeks to identify violence that is not primarily directed to the immediate military imperatives of insurrection or the achievement of state power, but which is orientated instead to producing an effect on the morale of civilian populations, and thereby on their political leaderships. Consequently, targets are often symbolic or involve a highly visible or “spectacular” use of violence, designed both to embolden sympathetic audiences and to undermine the feeling of safety enjoyed by civilian populations removed from the immediate arena of political dispute. The emergence of such spectacular violence in the second half of the nineteenth century was fueled by three major factors: the invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel in 1863; the extension of popular literacy and the growth of the popular press; and the frustration of the democratic or nationalist aspirations of significant popular constituencies by existing political arrangements (Houen 2002: 20; Laqueur 2001: 11).

The commitment of Irish republican groups—principally the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB, initially known as the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood), an offshoot known as the Invincibles, and the Irish-American Clan na Gael—to spectacular political violence grew from the unexpectedly strong response produced by more “traditional” deployments of force, in particular the attacks in 1867 on a police van in Manchester and on Clerkenwell prison which were both aimed at freeing captured republicans. While the attacks themselves were directed to immediate aims, they also generated a level of panic among a previously indifferent British public, while the subsequent execution of one of those involved in the Clerkenwell bombing and three of the attackers of the police van—who came to be known as the “Manchester Martyrs”—gave rise to a significant outcry in Ireland and America. While the best remembered act of Fenian political violence is the assassination of Lord Frederick Cavendish, the British Chief Secretary for Ireland, and his aide in Phoenix Park in 1882, the decade also saw a sustained campaign of dynamite attacks on symbolic locations and buildings, including Victoria station, Nelson’s Column, the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London (Townshend 1993: 138ff.). However, the dynamite campaign was discontinued in 1887, when the IRB shifted support away from violent action and toward political negotiation in the light of the growing success of the Home Rule movement under the leadership of Charles Stuart Parnell (Foster 1988: 400–430; Houen 2002: 30). As such, the Fenian dynamite campaign did not occur in isolation, but was one of a number of violent and nonviolent responses to British colonial rule in the wake of the Famine of 1845 to 1849, ranging from the mass civil disobedience of the Land League and the rural insurgency of the “land
war,” to Parnell’s parliamentary bargaining for Home Rule (Foster 1988: 373–99).

That the Fenian bombings of the 1880s remained a significant reference point in popular consciousness in 1907, when The Secret Agent was published, is attested to by the novel’s Home Secretary, Sir Ethelred, whose first reaction to the news of the attack is to ask “if this is the beginning of another dynamite campaign” (Conrad 1983: 136). Indeed, as Norman Sherry recounts in painstaking detail, Conrad drew extensively on events and figures associated with Fenian political violence. The attack on the police van in Manchester is incorporated into the history of the anarchist Michaelis, whose subsequent release on license—or “ticket-of-leave” as it was known—is modeled on the fate of a prominent nationalist figure, Michael Davitt (Sherry 1971: 260–9; see Conrad 1983: 106–7). Equally, according to Sherry, the figure of the Professor, the potential suicide-bomber and incarnation of destruction, draws on the historical figure of Luke Dillon, nicknamed “Dynamite Dillon,” who had been in the bombing of the Junior Carlton Club and the House of Commons, but remained uncaught. Dillon reportedly wore dynamite strapped around his body with a protruding fuse, which he planned to light with the cigar he habitually smoked (Sherry 1971: 283–5).

However, as Sherry points out, although Conrad was well informed about both anarchist and Fenian political violence, in fictionalizing events and individuals he consistently “chooses those aspects which deny sympathetic response in the reader, and which lead to the presentation of an extreme type” (Sherry 1971: 285). For example, although originally sentenced for procuring weapons, on his release in 1877 Michael Davitt did not return to political violence, but launched a strategic policy shift or “new departure” which sought to align the Fenian movement with the parliamentary activity of the Home Rulers and the popular agitation surrounding land issues (Moody 1981: 236–64). Indeed, as a leading figure in the Land League, which united parliamentary nationalism under Parnell with a mass popular movement for land reform, Davitt condemned the assassination of Cavendish in 1882 (Moody 1981: 536). And unlike Michaelis, who enjoys uninterrupted liberty, Davitt was re-imprisoned alongside Parnell and other Home Rule MPs as part of the failed attempt by Gladstone’s government to break the will of the Land League, at the heart of which lay the notorious Coercion Act of 1880 that allowed for indefinite detention without trial.

The point here is not to complain that Conrad’s fiction fails to present the “facts” as they “really were,” a demand that is both nonsensical and naïve. Rather, an awareness of the historical context within which the novel was written helps to open up critical perspectives on the political paradigm that it implies, particularly in light of the affinity we have identified between the novel’s conception of politics and that informing its current
critical reception. Thus, while the public sympathy enjoyed by Michealis in the novel evidences the entropic tendency of the press and public opinion—which erase the suffering produced by political violence by incorporating this figure within lazy stereotypes of the prophet or seer—a different relationship between publicity and politics is suggested by the fate of Michael Davitt. Davitt’s re-arrest was unsupported by evidence of criminality and was patently extra-legal, forming part of a panoply of “emergency” security measures designed to undermine political mobilization in Ireland (Moody 1981: 462–3). Conversely, Devitt’s election as MP for Meath while in prison indicates that popular support was explicitly political and tied to an informed constituency, itself directly engaged in the political conflict (Moody 1981: 500). What Davitt’s case reveals, then, is both the political nature of violence in the colonial context of Ireland and the corrosive effects on the British state of its pursuit of colonial pacification. The overall effect of Conrad’s decision to figure political violence in terms of anarchism rather than in terms of the Fenian response to the British rule in Ireland is to abstract violence from politics and present it, in the words of ambassador Vladimir, as “purely destructive … and only that.”

If it is tempting to think that this process of abstraction nonetheless makes Conrad’s political vision less tied to parochial circumstance and thus more universally applicable, it is important to remember the role of Vladimir and the unnamed foreign embassy, an element of the novel which Houen’s reading neglects. Vladimir orders the anarchist bombing not to engender a state of conflict between the British Empire and his own state, but precisely to bring “England . . . into line,” since “England lags” behind the rest of Europe with its “absurd” and “sentimental regard for individual liberty” (Conrad 1983: 29). As he complains to Verloc, “the general leniency of the judicial procedure here, and the utter absence of all repressive measures, are a scandal to Europe” (1983: 17). This viewpoint is mirrored by the response of the English police and politicians in the novel. On learning of the role of the foreign embassy and its use of a secret agent among the anarchists, Sir Ethelred demands to know “What they mean by importing their methods of Crim-Tartary here?,” adding that “A Turk would have more decency!” (Conrad 1983: 138). The same sentiments, albeit shorn of any explicit racial inflection, are articulated by the Assistant Commissioner, who insists that the whole affair “makes . . . an excellent starting-point for a piece of work which I’ve felt must be taken in hand—that is, clearing out of this country of all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs. In my opinion they are a ghastly nuisance. . . . The only way is to make their employment unpleasant to their employers” (Conrad 1983: 226). While Houen claims the novel demonstrates that both state and opposition are functions of the same totalizing “game” (2002: 51), in fact, the novel very clearly implies that some national—or racial—versions of the game are preferable to others.
The Empire Game

Significantly, Houen’s reading ignores the fact that Conrad’s nihilism has a decidedly national inflection, maintaining a high regard for what it views as an open and tolerant English liberalism while at the same time insisting on its lack of rational necessity or metaphysical foundation. If the novel implies, in Houen’s words, that “the possibility of ‘political crime’ is essential for the state’s law,” this does not mean that it asks us to view them as equally desirable or as morally equivalent (2002: 52). Against the arbitrary arrangements of social structure and political ideology, the novel directs sympathy toward the hapless and innocent Stevie, who figures the plight of the individual caught up in political machinations it does not understand. The moment of pathos experienced by Chief Inspector Heat on viewing Stevie’s disintegrated remains marks a crucial point in the moral cartography of the novel, opposing the existential experience of human pain to the abstract and idealized ideology of anarchism. Ironically, the novel invests the moment of Stevie’s suffering with a cosmic significance through the prosaic consciousness of the secret policeman: “The inextricable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved the horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained within two successive winks of an eye” (Conrad 1983: 88). If political structures are arbitrary and ungrounded, the novel implies, then at least let us have arbitrary structures that do not crush the confused and lonely individual, abandoned by God in a universe without direction or meaning. Or in other words, let us have English liberalism, with its “absurd” and “sentimental regard for individual liberty” (Conrad 1983: 29).

Given this failure to address the national commitments of Conrad’s nihilism, it is perhaps not so surprising that Houen fails to observe that the central moment of identification and empathy in the novel—between Heat and Stevie, but also of course between the ideal reader and Heat—centers on a senior member of the secret police. Indeed, other than Stevie, Winnie, and their mother—characters who are defined by their exclusion from the realm of the political—Heat is the only character who evinces such conventionally human qualities. What this suggests is that Houen’s enthusiasm for Conrad’s equation of bureaucracy and politics not only blinds him to the role of a certain version of Englishness in the novel, but also to the implications for the relationship between politics, visibility, and the police generated by empire.

Nonetheless, the impact of empire on the domestic space of the nation is evident in the figure of another secret policeman, the Assistant Commissioner. For if Chief Inspector Heat illustrates the “sentimental” side of liberal individualism, its existential or “absurd” conception of freedom is figured by the Assistant Commissioner, head of the Special Crimes De-
partment of the Metropolitan Police. The Assistant Commissioner “had begun [his career] in a tropical colony,” where “he had been very successful in tracking and breaking up certain nefarious secret societies amongst the natives.” We learn that “He liked the work there” because it “was police work” pure and simple, rather than the impersonal, fragmented, and isolated operations of bureaucracy (Conrad 1983: 99). However, due to the demands of marriage, he now finds himself chained to a desk far away from the adventure of the colonies, where the individual confronts a hostile existence without institutional support or the metaphysical illusions of civilization. Yet there is one way that the Assistant Commissioner can nonetheless leave behind his status as administrator and relive the freedom of colonial adventure—by shedding his official identity and entering the world of covert action. Adopting disguise, the Assistant Commissioner leaves his office and travels unseen around nighttime London, transporting himself from the administered world of the metropolis to the primeval jungle, and transforming himself at a stroke from somber bureaucrat to “light-hearted” adventurer:

The adventurous head of the Special Crimes Department . . . . felt lighthearted, as though he had been ambushed all alone in a jungle many thousands of miles away from departmental desks and office inkstands. This joyousness and dispersion of thought before a task of some importance seems to prove that this world of ours is not such a very serious affair after all. For the Assistant Commissioner was not constitutionally inclined to levity. (Conrad 1983: 150)

While the world of the anarchist revolutionaries is hypocritical and inauthentic, the role of the secret policeman is the sole locus in the novel where the individual is exposed to existential risk and so granted insight into the ineffable lightness of being.

However, if the Assistant Commissioner’s release from “departmental desks and office inkstands” appears as freedom from the perspective of The Secret Agent’s existentialism, it looks rather different from the perspective of a historical assessment of the relationship between imperialism, bureaucracy, and modern politics. As Hannah Arendt argues in the second part of The Origins of Totalitarianism, it is precisely imperialism’s subordination of human life to the “aimless process” of accumulation and expansion that makes abstract, individual life appear as the absolute value: “since life itself ultimately has to be lived for its own sake,” Arendt writes, “adventure and love of the game for its own sake easily appear to be the most intensely human symbol of life” (Arendt 1973: 216–17). More ominously, Arendt points out, this sense of the ineffable lightness of being provides the perfect subjective disposition for the functioning of bureaucracy, which is defined in its difference to politics as “a form of government” whose “inherent” dynamic is the “replacement of law with temporary and changing decree.”
And far from providing refuge from bureaucracy, as Arendt observes, “the two key figures” of imperialism “are the bureaucrat on the one side and the secret agent on the other” (Arendt 1973: 216).

While the novel construes the freedom of action enjoyed by the colonial policeman “in tracking and breaking up certain nefarious secret societies amongst the natives” as existential freedom (Conrad 1983: 99), following Arendt it can be better understood in terms of the “aloofness [that] became the new attitude of all members of the British [Imperial] services.” In Arendt’s view this aloofness “was a more dangerous form of governing than despotism and arbitrariness [since] it did not even tolerate that last link between despot and his subjects, which is formed by bribery and gifts,” but implied instead “an absolute division of interests to the point where they were not even permitted to conflict” (1973: 212).

English Liberalism and the Secret Police

It may seem anachronistic and unreasonable to complain about the novel’s attempt to figure freedom through the unrestrained field of action enjoyed by the colonial security-police; after all, Conrad’s vision was shaped by his own time and he was not privy to the hindsight we now enjoy. But there was ample evidence available to Conrad at the time of writing that might have suggested this equation was decidedly implausible. Indeed, a very different picture of the relationship between police and politics can be found much closer to home than the far-flung edges of empire—in the very book that Conrad identifies as having inspired his novel, Sir Robert Anderson’s Sidelights on the Home Rule Movement (1906).

Like the novel’s Chief Inspector Heat, Sir Robert Anderson claims in his memoirs to have had the Fenian bombing groups “practically ‘in my pocket’” throughout the dynamite campaign of the 1880s (Anderson 1906: 125), and as Norman Sherry points out, Conrad draws extensively on Anderson’s recollections in his portrayal of Heat, the Assistant Commissioner, and Sir Ethelred (Sherry 1971: 303). But Anderson’s book is not a police procedural concerned with reliving the drama of criminal detection, but a strategic intervention in the politics of the day, which witnesses the return of Home Rule to the political agenda after the hiatus that accompanied the fall of Parnell. Its central concern is not so much with the dynamite attacks themselves as with reviving the already discredited project of connecting the now-dead Parnell with them; or, in Anderson’s words, of convincing British public opinion “that the miscreants of the principal dynamite outrages in this country were the paid emissaries of the movement which, on its public side, owned Mr. Parnell as its ‘esteemed and honored leader’” (1906: 134).
Anderson himself played an important role in advising on the British state’s response to Irish political demands, both as a security consultant for the British colonial administration in Dublin Castle — where he advised on the timing of Davitt’s original arrest in 1870 — and then as the head of the Imperial capital’s security police. According to his memoirs, Anderson is nothing if not consistent, applauding the re-arrest of Davitt in 1881 and the suspension of “ordinary law” which enabled mass arrests of Land League officials under the Coercion Act, but fiercely critical of judicial attempts to subordinate police action to legality (Anderson 1906: 92–93). Such oversight is envisaged as the predicament where “the rules of the prize ring are held to apply to the struggle between the law and those breaking the law,” a situation that prompts Anderson to call for the withdrawal of police action from all scrutiny and publicity: “For a mine can only be reached by a counter-mine,” he maintains. Indeed, Anderson demands the exemption of police operations from all moral strictures, since the administration of security lies “outside the sphere of morals,” and any negotiation between the two is deemed “a phase of folly that leads not only individuals but Governments into trouble” (Anderson 1906: 136).

However, Anderson’s involvement in British attempts to suppress the political campaign for Home Rule was not only philosophical, as he details in his memoirs. He played an important role in what would today be called a “Psy Ops” or “black propaganda” conspiracy, the notorious “Pigott forgeries” which sought to discredit the Home Rule leadership through the publication of forged letters in The Times of London in 1887: the letters purported to express Parnell’s support for the assassination of Cavendish and his desire for a new bombing campaign. The publication of the letters caused a political crisis for the Home Rule movement and Parnell, who sought in vain to have the allegations investigated by a Parliamentary committee, but was granted instead a Special Commission which many saw as weighted in favor of the British establishment. Nonetheless, the plot collapsed even under this limited scrutiny, and although the conspiracy was not pursued, it became difficult to ignore the collusion of the government of the day with the premier organ of the English press and the covert security apparatus in an extralegal operation that involved forged documents, paid informers, and double agents. A large part of Anderson’s memoirs are taken up with defending his own role in the plot itself and in the subsequent cover up: in particular, he is concerned with justifying his refusal to face cross-examination at the Special Commission and his reluctance thereafter to answer questions about the infiltration of Irish groups by informers and agent provocateurs under his direction.

If The Secret Agent envisages a systematic thermodynamics of obscurity—in which all significance is submerged in the entropy of the popular press and “public opinion,” and all opposition is incorporated in a political realm reduced to bureaucracy—a different set of relationships between
politics, publicity, and bureaucracy is implied by Anderson’s memoirs. Rather than simply equating politics and bureaucracy, so casting the political as that “bureaucratic Being” wherein “the state’s law . . . comes to incorporate everything” (Houen 2002: 51-52), in fact Anderson recognizes the potential for their non-identity in the prospect of the political success of the Home Rule movement over and against the will of the British security apparatus. Characteristically, this recognition prompts a call for the restrictive policing of the bounds of the political, since as Anderson remarks, “the Home Rule vote depends entirely upon the lower strata of the electorate, of whom, in three of the four provinces [of Ireland], the vast majority are Roman Catholics.” His proposal for a “political settlement” in Ireland is, therefore, to exert administrative control over the space of the political by raising “the franchise [qualification] . . . to a level which would exclude the ignorant masses,” with the result that “the Home Rule majority would disappear” (Anderson 1906: 173).

That politics and bureaucracy do not coincide absolutely implies that publicity is not to be conceived of simply in terms of “entropy” or the inevitable dissipation of significance. And indeed, Anderson’s conception of publicity is much more differentiated and nuanced than that presented by The Secret Agent. In the novel, it is the anarchists who try (unsuccessfully) to affect public consciousness, while the forces of the state work to keep it undisturbed. But for Anderson, publicity works in a number of different ways for each actor: for example, it may enable judicial and political oversight of the security apparatus, but it may equally be utilized by the police bureaucracy to spread misinformation or propaganda that furthers its own ends. And, of course, this awareness is demonstrated not only by the conspiracy to discredit Parnell, but also by Anderson’s memoirs themselves, which seek to continue via mass-market publishing the project previously pursued through covert operations.

The novel’s failure to learn the lessons taught by Anderson’s memoirs is signaled most graphically by the transformation of the incident which Conrad tells us inspired the novel. In Sidelights on the Home Rule Movement, it is the political figure of the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, who complains that “Anderson’s idea of secrecy is not to tell the Secretary of State” (1906: 89); but in The Secret Agent, it is the Assistant Commissioner, the novel’s senior secret policeman, who complains of his subordinate Chief Inspector Heat that “Your idea of secrecy seems to consist in keeping the chief of your department in the dark” (Conrad 1983: 132). In Conrad’s novel, then, the issue is not the opacity of the police bureaucracy to politics, but to itself, for in The Secret Agent the political is reduced absolutely to the bureaucracy without excess or remainder. In disregarding the possibility of an externality to the administrative apparatus, the novel abstracts violence from politics and so restricts the potentiality of the political by insisting on its absolute identity with bureaucracy. And in so
doing, it occludes the role of imperialism in eroding the properly constitutional and legal character of the political realm of the nation-state.

To recall The Secret Agent’s commitment to a certain version of Englishness implied by the “disappearance” of Irish politics in the novel is to question the equation of politics and bureaucracy enabled by this elision. And in turn, this suggests the need to reassess contemporary attempts to recast the political through the refusal of any externality to power, the commodity, or the violence of the law. For in dispensing with modern discourses of emancipation and social justice, these critical perspectives are in danger of forgetting, like Conrad’s novel, the complex triangulation of politics, bureaucracy, and visibility that underlies the postimperial articulation of violence and civility.

Notes

1. For an example of the way on which Conrad’s novel was quickly enlisted to interpret the 9/11 attacks, see Kaplan (2001). The assessment of Conrad’s relationship to the dominant imperial culture has been read in very different terms within postcolonial criticism; for two very famous but very different assessments, see Achebe (1990) and Said (1993: 19–31).

2. By this I mean that The Secret Agent is the only novel by Conrad wholly set within a polity that exemplifies the modern political condition of formal freedom, characterized by representative democracy and equality before the law.

3. For Houen’s sense of the contemporary significance of his reading, see (2002: 1–17).

4. In this piece Said also links the attack on the World Trade Center with Conrad’s novel: “With astonishing prescience in 1907, Joseph Conrad drew the portrait of the archetypal terrorist, whom he calls laconically ‘the Professor’ in his novel The Secret Agent; this is a man whose sole concern is to perfect a detonator that will work under any circumstances and whose handiwork results in a bomb exploded by a poor boy sent, unknowingly, to destroy the Greenwich Observatory as a strike against ‘pure science.’”

5. According to Deane, “the language of politics in Ireland and England … is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilization” (1986: 39). The same structure of opposition has returned in current claims for the “clash of civilizations” mobilized in defense of the ongoing “War on Terror.”

6. For the original account of the incident, see Anderson (1906: 89).

7. The question of Irish Home Rule effectively returned to the political agenda with the election of a Liberal government in 1906, although a new
Home Rule Bill was not formally tabled in the Commons until 1912.


9. In Anderson’s case, the claim appears particularly implausible given the continuation of the dynamite campaign over a period of years.

10. See chapters 12–14 of Lyons (1977). Significantly, the publication of the letters was designed to coincide with the voting on a new and permanent Irish Coercion Bill, which would no longer require annual parliamentary review. The Bill became law in July 1887.

11. According to Lyons, “there were good grounds for suspecting a substantial amount of collusion” between the British government and The Times of London. He also notes the “widespread contemporary view that the government had succumbed to the temptation to use its parliamentary majority to create a Commission which, despite the veneer of legality conferred by the appointment of judges to preside over it, would in effect be what Randolph Churchill called it, ‘a revolutionary tribunal for the trial of political opponents’” (Lyons 1977: 393, 395).

12. While Anderson’s proposal for an administrative reshaping of the political was not put into practice on an all-Ireland basis, its logic underpins Partition, where the boundaries of the political are restricted territorially rather than economically.

Bibliography


