

The State is the Real Threat

Jeff Shantz

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a review of

Manufacturing the Threat, Dir: Amy Miller, 2023

Online archive note: Several paragraphs were inadvertently not included in the printed edition of the magazine, starting with “Still, I do recommend it as a powerful piece of storytelling...”

Below is the complete article.

John “Omar” Nuttall and Amanda “Ana” Korody were arrested July 1, 2013, after planting what they had been led to believe were functional pressure cooker bombs on the grounds of the provincial legislature in Victoria, British Columbia. Their arrests eventually led to the revelation of years of police dirty tricks, manipulation, and abuse in the name of anti-terrorism.

The couple lived two blocks from my home. As an anarchist, and police abolitionist, as well as a criminologist who lives and teaches in Surrey, an integral part of Metro Vancouver, I gave police actions serious attention and scrutiny. Almost immediately it became clear that this was a contrived setup by the cops.

In the court cases that followed, my suspicions were confirmed. What the RCMP, the Canadian national police force, presented as an extremist Muslim terror attack, uncovered by their so-called Project Souvenir, a five-month covert investigation, was a police fabrication—a shoddy effort to both take advantage of anti-Muslim panics and the marginalization of a poor couple who struggled with drug use. It was a cynical effort to expand RCMP resources for community surveillance and pacification under the fear of anti-terrorism in a period where some of the post-9/11 mania was shifting, and police practices were being questioned. Unfortunately, it cost Nuttall and Korody years of imprisonment.

Director Amy Miller’s *Manufacturing the Threat* is a necessary and compelling work that puts the Nuttall and Korody case at the center of a broader examination of political policing and repression in the post-9/11 period. Its main strength is drawn from the extensive interviews with Nuttall and Korody who have understandably spoken little, beyond court dates, on what the police specifically subjected them to. Miller also makes effective use of police surveillance footage.

The documentary adds to the understanding of police and security apparatuses and the strategies, tactics, and deceptions they deploy to extend their powers and increase their resources and budgets. It offers useful insights into anti-terror policing (and police mobilized terror panics) as part of state regimes of social control more generally. It details the hand-in-hand workings of the RCMP and Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS). The focus on the Canadian state is welcomed given that much more has been produced regarding the U.S. state context in this regard. It is a work that should be of interest especially in this period of rising movements acting to defend and/or abolish police.

Miller puts on poignant display the harrowing, torturous, heartbreaking, experiences of Nuttall and Korody and makes clear the abuse they were subjected to by the RCMP. In doing so, she tells us much about the rot at the heart of policing cultures. Horrifically, Nuttall speaks of being brought to the point of considering suicide because of police pressures during the entrapment. The couple still suffer PTSD from these events.

Through historical discussion and analysis, Miller effectively details the always ongoing political role of the RCMP. More than an everyday crime fighting unit, the RCMP originated as a colonial force and developed through policing of social, especially labor and anarchist/leftist/socialist, movements. All the while ignoring Nazi and far right movements, as remains the case today.

Despite the Canadian focus, there are insights to be gained for viewers elsewhere. American viewers will see connections with political policing in the U.S., such as the FBI's infamous 1960s and '70s COINTELPRO program of infiltrating and disrupting radical groups. It is perhaps the best-known case of police use of entrapment, informants and agents provocateur. The RCMP evolved their own practices, including document destruction, in light of the criticisms of COINTELPRO.

Viewers in the UK will see points of resonance with the "spy cops" case scandal where undercover officers infiltrated over 1,000 leftist groups between 1968 and 2012. Police agents lived in activist communities for years, even having children with activists, a situation that led to lawsuits for sexual assault since women did not know they were having sex with cops and could not have reasonably given consent.

Miller's choice to make connections with police repression of Indigenous land defenders is significant, too. Similar dirty tricks were used by U.S. cops, dating back to the Red Power movements and Wounded Knee of the 1960s, but more recently in policing of Indigenous resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline. This includes the discursive and material shift to frame land and water defenders and direct-action ecology movements as eco-terrorists.

Unfortunately, the documentary says nothing about the secretive Community-Industry Response Group (C-IRG), a unit of the RCMP which specifically acts as a security force for extractives capital. C-IRG has received much condemnation recently for its violence and abuse against Wet'suwet'en pipeline opponents and actions against clearcut logging at Fairy Creek in British Columbia.

Despite this there are some important limitations. The documentary overlooks local histories of opposition to the RCMP. For instance, Miller did not interview people in Surrey who have been organizing against the RCMP for years including several anarchists who could have provided specific interesting insights. Members of the group, Anti-Police Power Surrey, for example, could have spoken about surveillance and suppression efforts by the RCMP in that city that targeted land defenders and environmentalists organizing against road construction as well as anti-Olympics organizers in the years right before the Nuttall and Korody arrests.

Miller missed an analysis of how social war policing is rooted in repression of working class, Indigenous, racialized people and communities in specific local settings. That it is interlinked with the broader national security issues and the wielding of anti-terror policies and panics she focuses on. Poor bashing and anti-drug user fear politics were a big part of local framings of the Nuttall/Korody case.

The BC RCMP are headquartered in Surrey and is the largest municipal division in Canada. There is even an established Surrey Model of policing, rooted in intensive and intrusive surveillance of communities through integrating policing with non-police agencies. This is social war policing—policing as pacification of oppressed people and communities. It includes those social services organizations, health care, housing, etc., to poor people and drug users.

Poverty and homelessness, and lack of social resources for poor and unhoused people in Surrey, played important parts in the police targeting of Nuttall and Korody. A key part of the public demonization of the couple involved their landlord allowing reporters into their home following their arrests. This was an act of poor bashing in which they were deemed problematic by the "unkempt" state of their residence.

Surrey is at the center of racist and xenophobic narratives throughout BC. It is also a place where racialized communities, Sikh and Muslim, are targeted for layered policing practices, from schools to community centers, to malls, to neighborhoods. Racist anti-gang policing also plays major parts in this. Unfortunately, Surrey, and its policing, comes off merely as wallpaper in the film, a backdrop. In reality, it is an important part of the story itself.

One final caution for anarchist viewers. There is a rather liberal approach in the documentary. It expresses a concern for liberal democracy, police overstepping their bounds, promises of reform. Anarchists know that the capitalist state is the threat. It is doing what it was designed to do.

Still, I do recommend it as a powerful piece of storytelling that, crucially, allows those victimized by police opportunism and cruelty to speak fully for themselves. It opens a too often closed window into the machinations of political policing, the processes behind infiltration and surveillance, and the construction of enemies of the state.

It carefully details how class inequality and racism—and social isolation—play into police calculations and how the most oppressed are made targets.

Watch closely. And take note.

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