Infiltrators

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While social movements are typically conceived as struggles between authorities and challengers, only analytic convenience justifies classifying all participants cleanly on one side or the other. The involvement of third parties with tenuous or partial loyalties to related causes, emergent schisms among challenging groups, and the myriad motives that define individuals’ engagement in contention all but ensure that uncertain or duplicitous allegiances shape at least some participants’ orientation to the collective struggle. Often, policing agencies – and sometimes the groups that challenge them – formalize this “gray area” of dual, contradictory, or fraudulent orientations by deploying agents to infiltrate competing parties.

Whether conceived as undercover agents, informers, informants, provocateurs, tipsters, or unknowing accomplices, these infiltrators exemplify the implicit complexities associated with players who navigate – often simultaneously – multiple arenas associated with contentious, political struggles. Here, we demonstrate the diverse ways in which infiltrators form and maintain complex and often contradictory relationships, given their interstitial position as both movement participants and representatives of the state. We unpack that role, demonstrating how easy assumptions about infiltrators as straightforward representatives of their employing agency, uniformly undermining the efforts of the groups that they penetrate, give way to more fluid conceptions of active and passive participation, and authentic versus deceptive behavior.

Infiltrators’ allegiance to both authorities and challengers provides a critical touch point for conceptualizing movements within this volume’s players-arenas framework. Drawing on the cases of three informants employed during the 1960s by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), we show how the infiltrator role is conditioned by a set of power relations

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1 We thank Gary T. Marx, volume editors Jan Willem Duyvendak and James Jasper, and participants in the Mini-conference on Social Movements at the 2012 Eastern Sociological Society meeting for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2 Note that we use the terms infiltrator and informant interchangeably here. The former term properly signals a broader range of roles, encompassing all of the terms listed in the first half of this sentence. In general terms, infiltrators include actors who penetrate target groups for any purpose rather than only to “inform” by gathering intelligence. However, all of the cases examined here involve infiltrators deployed as informants.
maintained within specific arenas by key players. These players include, but are not limited to, the informants themselves, as well as state agents tasked with managing them, known within the FBI as “handlers.” We contend that far from straightforward “agents” of the state, infiltrators balance ties to both police and activists, carving out a role relative to their state “handlers” and movement colleagues, toggling between passive and active participation in social movement activity to convincingly maintain their entry and simultaneous allegiance both to authorities and challengers. Indeed, this interstitial position – between policing and activist arenas – defines the infiltrator role.

More generally, the complexities associated with the actions and motives of infiltrators provide a vehicle for rethinking their role as strategic players within contentious political arenas. Emphasizing informants’ paradoxical relationship to other movement players simultaneously highlights and problematizes perspectives on social movements that focus on interactions between authority systems and activists who challenge the status quo. While usefully underscoring interrelationships among individual movement players and authorities – including police – this tradition typically overlooks the inherent dilemmas and contradictions faced by players whose roles do not neatly fit on one or the other side of that dichotomy. Conceptualizing the state as an arena comprised of multiple actors also speaks to players each having their own (sometimes multiple) strategic agendas and interests, which can at times jibe and at other times conflict in often unexpected ways.

As a result, we might productively conceptualize the fluidity of the infiltrator role as emerging within a set of embedded arenas that interact both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal dimension incorporates strategic interactions among infiltrators, handlers, and targets. The vertical dimension places the handler-infiltrator exchange within the broader context of the norms and practices of the handlers’ agency within a broader state apparatus, as well as the institutional features and social position of the contending group being infiltrated.

A Critical Look at Infiltration

Nearly 40 years after its initial publication, Gary T. Marx’s seminal 1974 article “Thoughts on a Neglected Category of Social Movement Participant: The Agent Provocateur and the Informant,” remains the most influential existing work on infiltrators. Marx argued that although the use of
informants within protest movements had been well-documented, little research demonstrated the logic of infiltration. He prodded analysts to take seriously how informants and provocateurs operate strategically (or not; as with much of Marx’s work, he seeks to account for the full spectrum of motivations) and, in direct and sometimes indirect and often unintended ways, impact movement dynamics and the contours of authorities’ control efforts.

Subsequent work has yielded significant insights into the structural conditions and instrumental and emotional conditions that govern movement participation. Other streams of research have taken seriously the processes through which opponents, typically but not always associated with the state, engage with movements. But this focus on movement players on both sides of the struggle tends, understandably, to assume straightforward and unambiguous allegiances either to challengers or authorities. Here, in contrast, we consider the interstitial position of infiltrators, emphasizing their “betweenness” as a lens through which to examine the complexities that govern the multiple and shifting arenas within which contention plays out.

The role of informants becomes particularly salient to efforts to conceptualize movements through the interplay of players and the arenas they occupy and (re)create over time. Such interactions shed light on how the individuals and groups that comprise “movements” interact with their social environment and how those milieus can at times work to control or accommodate action. While more recent work on the role of repression and social control within movements has attended to the prevalence and impact of state infiltration (Cunningham, 2003, 2004; Cunningham and Noakes, 2008; Davenport, 2005b; Earl, 2003; Marx, 1979, 1988; Noakes, 1998, 2000, 2003; Starr et al., 2011), scholars have generally been unable to fully address how the presence of infiltration or other forms of surveillance impacts the mobilization process or how infiltrators obfuscate the boundaries between seemingly oppositional movement players and the arenas within which they act.

A fresh conceptualization of the infiltrator role can place attention squarely on how authorities can operate in diverse, dynamic, and sometimes contradictory ways, breaking down conceptions of the state as a unitary body operating to advance a single set of interests and ends. The critique of simple essentialist takes on the state is a common one in the recent literature (see, e.g., Davenport, 2005a; Earl, 2011). Our discussion here echoes straightforward versions of that critique, highlighting the importance of disaggregating the state into discrete agencies that – both singly and interactively, as part of a field of authorities – may adopt distinct means
and goals and operate with varying degrees of alignment and co-ordination. However, following Jasper’s (2015) insight into the fractal character of arenas comprised of compound players, we also extend that critique, emphasizing the embedded nature of this multi-actor field. This focus on the struggles and tensions both within and across state agencies recognizes that agents (just like their constituent agencies) can have their own strategic agendas and interests, which sometimes align and in other cases conflict with those of their colleagues and the official policy that governs their agencies (Åkerström, 2006; Cunningham, 2009).

Additionally, focusing on various modes of infiltration captures repressive dynamics that move beyond strict conceptual distinctions between “passive” and “active” informants as well as conventionally recognized typological distinctions associated with state repression – e.g., divisions between “intelligence” and “counterintelligence” (Marx, 1988; Starr et al., 2011), “soft” and “hard” repression (Ferree, 2005), “institutional” and “situational” repression (Koopmans, 1997), or various repressive “functions” and “forms” (Cunningham, 2004). As the impact of infiltration – like other efforts to restrict or otherwise shape the actions of challengers – emerges alongside (and in interaction with) other forms of policing, legal action, media coverage, and so on, analysts can capture it most fully by examining how its constitutive arena shapes movement players’ orientations and perceived and actual vulnerabilities to actions emerging within “the state.”

Indeed, studying infiltrators provides a vehicle to observe how players interact with varied forms of what Koopmans (1997) refers to as institutional repression, while at the same time avoiding essentialized conceptions of what constitutes “repression.” Examining the role of infiltrators provides a more inclusive understanding of repression, as the players/arenas framework seeks to “push beyond the vague and often circular language of power” (Jasper 2015) in order to more definitively show how players attempt to attain their goals. Recognizing the strategic actions of movement players across multiple, and conflicting arenas offers greater leverage to understand a more diverse set of repressive actions as well as to recognize that ostensibly repressive efforts can have divergent or ambivalent effects on their intended targets.

Infiltrators as Interstitial Players in Embedded Arenas

Within this broad conceptual framework, how might we characterize infiltrators? Unlike most players, whose moves can be understood interactively as they operate within discrete arenas, the infiltrator’s defining
characteristic is its interstitial position. Existing in a dual role that mediates the gulf between two competing parties – typically an authority and a challenger (Tarrow, 1998) – the infiltrator resides between state agencies and social movement organizations. Thus, the broad arena within which infiltrators operate encompasses both of these contending parties. However, as Jasper (2012) notes, arenas emerge at other levels as well. Compound players, including state agencies and SMOs, themselves constitute arenas, as their internal workings become observable through subdivision into their constituent actors. The inverse of this insight is that arenas themselves are nested – i.e., embedded within broader compound bodies that envelop narrower arena relationships in their organizational contexts.

The infiltrator role typically emerges around the informant’s relationship to primary alters which provides the constitutive ties that activate each side of the “double-agent” position. In a US policing context, in particular with the FBI case examined here, the salient link on the authority’s side is to the “handler,” or state agent tasked with “developing” and “controlling” informants. On the movement side, this link centers on the particular activist(s) through which the infiltrator gains primary entrée and develops legitimacy within the group. While these relationships clearly are conditioned by differential power and control, we refer to them here as constituting the horizontal dimension of the broad arena that subsumes both challengers and authorities. Within this dimension, we strive to identify relational features that define differential capacities, or the variety and effectiveness of what Jasper (2015) refers to as the strategic means available to each party.

A second, vertical dimension emerges when we take seriously the narrower arenas embedded within particular compound players in a higher-order arena such as a state agency or SMO. Such agencies and groups are defined by their own internal processes, with intra-organizational relations shaping the infiltrator’s milieu, by defining the character of the infiltrator’s primary ties to state handlers and movement contacts. The structure and orientation of both state and movement organizations shape the capacities that define the leverage held by infiltrators vis-à-vis handlers/contacts at

While our emphasis on the “vertical” character of this dimension captures the key point that a handler or movement colleague’s actions are conditioned by the nature of the decision-making structure of the body within which he or she operates, this organizational aspect also of course encompasses horizontal relations within the state and movement arenas. For clarity, we fold all of these organizational ties into the vertical dimension so as to distinguish them from the primary horizontal ties that constitute the infiltrator’s interstitial role.
any given point. This vertical dimension captures the broad arena that encompasses the contending bodies defining the infiltrator role.

One limitation of research focused on infiltrators and covert state repression generally is a continued lack of available representative data. While particular cases involving informants and provocateurs have become well-known anecdotally, it remains difficult to assess the comprehensiveness of those accounts, or the degree to which they might be generalized to any hypothetical population of informants. At minimum, the fact that the informants we tend to examine have, by definition, been publicly exposed may mean that they differ from the broader set of infiltrators who succeeded in keeping their identities a secret. While still acknowledging that significant and vexing constraint, examining comparatively the dynamics of particular known cases can provide a window into the processes that govern the interstitial nature of the infiltrator role. As such, we emphasize particular cases that reveal infiltrators’ horizontal relationships with handlers and movement colleagues, as well as how those relations are conditioned by the organizational makeup of both state agencies and social movement groups.

The relative availability and openness of data related to informants associated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provides one window into how a cadre of informants operated within the context of a particular state agency. To assess and extend our conceptualization of the workings of the infiltrator role, we begin by considering case studies of three informants employed by the FBI during the 1960s. Each of these cases involves efforts by the FBI to repress or otherwise monitor and control the actions of suspected threats to national security.4

Cases: Infiltrating the Civil Rights Field

The black freedom struggle has been well-documented, and many of its now-iconic images were captured by the prolific civil rights photographer Ernest Withers. Born in 1922 in Memphis, Tennessee, Withers experienced firsthand the impact of racism and racial conflict. Though he photographed the everyday life of black America in the South after World War II, his most

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4 Given our focus on cases tied to a modern democratic state, we make no strong claims that our conclusions are generalizable to all regimes. Surely the particular dynamics described below would be conditioned by general political possibilities and constraints associated with broad political distinctions – e.g. Tilly’s (1978) emphasis on “oligarchic” vs. “egalitarian” regimes – but we more measuredly assert that the general characteristics of the interstitial role discussed here would apply across a broader range of regimes and cases.
poignant work was of African-Americans’ struggle for equal rights. His photographs, such as the famous image of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike with workers holding signs declaring “I AM A MAN,” helped document the struggles and victories of black America.

Withers was on the scene for a number of seminal Civil Rights Movement campaigns. His photography has shaped resonant collective memories of the 1955 murder trial of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy whose brutal murder for allegedly flirting with a white woman in Mississippi is frequently described as a key catalyst for the mobilization of the US Civil Rights Movement, and the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, which famously required the deployment of National Guard troops to defuse potential mob violence. The aforementioned 1968 Tennessee sanitation strike, in which some 1,300 black sanitation workers walked off of the job in protest of poor treatment, discrimination, and dangerous working conditions, is what ultimately brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis and his untimely death.

Throughout the 1960s Withers became a close confidant and trusted friend to key leaders, sitting in on some of the Movement’s most sensitive strategy meetings. Rather than an active driver or shaper of action, he was best-known as an observer, a “passive” documentarian of both the crucial and mundane aspects of the Movement. His aesthetic acumen and longstanding commitment to the cause earned him the widespread respect of key leaders. Withers’s insider status provided a platform for his photos to help create a new visual consciousness for the American public, and his images comprise some of that era’s most powerful narratives (Willis, 2007).

But Withers also was known in FBI circles as “ME 338-R,” his confidential informant number. From at least 1968 until 1970, he provided the Bureau with information, tips, meeting schedules, and photographs detailing his insider’s perspective on the black community’s fight for equality. Given his close relationships with fellow civil rights activists, near-universal entrée into Movement circles, and the importance of the historic images he captured, the 2010 revelation that he occupied a more complex dual role as a paid FBI infiltrator was treated as a bombshell that called into question bedrock assumptions about the Movement and its allies.

The Withers case provides an example of how such complexities shape the moral terrain upon which infiltrators tread. Rather than viewing his undercover actions in total conflict with his Movement efforts, Withers’s paradoxical relationship with the FBI reflected his broader conflicted ties to law enforcement. A former police officer himself, he had been fired by the Memphis Police Department for his alleged involvement in
bootlegging. The department subsequently cautioned the FBI against using him as an informant, a warning that shaped the relatively distant and informal nature of his subsequent relationship to the Bureau; prior to his emergence as a full-fledged informant in 1968, Withers had less formally received payments in exchange for information for nearly a decade (Perrusquia, 2010). And throughout that period, his connection to the FBI did not protect him from harassment by officials from other agencies. Following NAACP leader Medgar Evers’s funeral in 1963, Withers was badly beaten by police and jailed for participating in a march outside the funeral home, reinforcing the sense that FBI work did not place one solidly on the side of the police or preclude providing aid – documentary or otherwise – to the Movement.

Such a balancing act also reflected the fact that “the Movement” itself was far from unitary, with Withers and others affiliating with certain segments while sometimes remaining wary of other factions. These personal distinctions informed his strategic aims as an informant and demarcated Withers’s perceived allegiances between seemingly incongruous movement players. Many of Withers’s reports focused on militants like Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, the prime minister of the Invaders, a Black Panther-styled militant group in Memphis. His reports characterized Watson as a thief and conman who had planned an armed takeover of the campus of LeMoyne–Owen College. Similarly, Withers told the FBI that Charles Cabbage, the Invaders’ co-founder, had dodged the draft, engaged in bomb making, and was involved with a prostitution ring. Withers’s primary FBI contact, William H. Lawrence, commented on the tensions across Movement factions when he suggested that the photographer’s cooperation with the FBI may have stemmed from his desire to “detect and deter violence,” reflecting a “concern for the peaceful and effective preservation of the Civil Rights Movement” (Perrusquia, 2010).

Withers’s association with the FBI stemmed from the Bureau’s longstanding “racial matters” program, which primarily targeted various groups and individuals associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Agents’ central emphasis was on the Movement’s “subversive” potential stemming from its alleged ties to various communist interests, though they focused as well on the movement’s extremist opponents, especially organized vigilantist vehicles like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Following the murder of three civil rights workers during 1964’s Freedom Summer voter registration project in Mississippi, the FBI initiated a formal counterintelligence program against so-called “White Hate Groups,” which at first targeted 17 KKK organizations and 9 other racist “hate organizations.”
FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and a set of assistant directors in the Bureau's National Headquarters in Washington, DC, defined the purpose of COINTELPRO-White Hate Groups: “to expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize the activities of the various Klans and hate organizations, their leadership and adherents.” The memo initiating the program, sent to 17 of the FBI’s 59 field offices (mostly to offices in the South, where KKK activity was centered), specified that agents fulfill the program’s mandate by surveilling white hate targets “on a continuous basis,” publicly exposing their “devious maneuvers and duplicity,” “capitalizing upon organizational and personal conflicts,” and blocking efforts to recruit adherents or build alliances (FBI, 1964).

As part of this effort, Bureau agents aggressively sought to infiltrate the KKK by extending their existing network of informants. Aided by agents’ ideological overlap with Klan constituencies, they succeeded in recruiting informants to a degree that far outstripped their parallel efforts to infiltrate civil rights, Black Power, anti-war, and student movements during this period (Cunningham, 2004). A few months into the White Hate Groups program, agents boasted that they recruited infiltrators at an average rate of two per day. A later congressional report conservatively estimated that informants comprised at least 6 percent of the KKK’s overall membership. By early 1966, the FBI’s Charlotte field office reported that their coverage extended to hundreds of informants in 165 of the approximately 225 active Klan units in the state.

Throughout the mid-1960s, North Carolina was far and away the most active state for the KKK; by 1966, the United Klans of America (or UKA, widely known to be the preeminent KKK organization of the Civil Rights era) boasted more members in the Tar Heel State than in the rest of the South put together (US House of Representatives, 1967; Cunningham, 2013). The most highly valued of those North Carolina-based Klan informants was George Dorsett. A longtime adherent of various KKK and segregationist organizations and a regionally known evangelist preacher, Dorsett joined the UKA in 1964, quickly rising to be a key leadership figure in that group’s “Carolina Klan,” which boasted an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 members by 1965 (US House of Representatives, 1966, 1967).

That year, Dorsett also served as the UKA’s “Imperial Kludd” or national chaplain, and became a key part of the group’s inner circle. He was a featured speaker at hundreds of UKA rallies across the South, frequently described as both the group’s fieriest orator and someone who could reliably fill the donation buckets circulated at rallies. By 1966, the UKA was wracked by internal dissension and regular threats of emerging schisms, and Dorsett
Da\n\nIn\n\nDr\n\nRowe was at the center of this organizational strife. His conflicts with Bob Jones, the UKA's North Carolina "Grand Dragon" (or state leader), divided the state's membership, and the following year Jones formally banished him from the organization. With the assistance of his FBI handler, Dorsett formed his own competing KKK organization, the Confederate Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, which siphoned members away from the UKA while operating under the Bureau's watchful eye (Cunningham, 2004, 2013; Dorsett, 2005).

While Dorsett was among the FBI's most highly placed KKK informants, the Bureau's most infamous and widely known infiltrator was Gary Thomas Rowe. An eighth-grade dropout from Savannah, Georgia, Rowe moved to Birmingham, Alabama, following stints in the Georgia National Guard and the Marine Reserves. By his 26th birthday, he was on his second marriage, working as a machinist at a Birmingham dairy, and fortifying his well-earned reputation as a tough bouncer and all-around hothead in the city's bars and clubs.

Throughout, he had a strong desire to work with law enforcement. His county sheriff aspirations were stymied by his lack of a high school education, but undeterred, he frequently boasted about being a cop or agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and convinced his Birmingham police friends to let him ride with them at night in their patrol cars. His constant brawling also made him a police target, as well as drew the attention of the local UKA "klavern" (KKK parlance for chapter). After multiple arrests, Rowe was pegged by bartender and KKK member Loyal McWhorter as a "good red-neck Klansman." Rowe was mulling the offer to join when a local FBI agent visited him in 1960 to investigate claims that his law enforcement boasts extended to his impersonation of a Bureau agent. Soon after, Rowe agreed to infiltrate the Klan for the FBI as part of its "racial matters" investigations (May, 2005; McWhorter, 2001).

Rowe's entry into the KKK came through the Eastview 13 klavern, among the most hard-core of the UKA's units. He enthusiastically participated in KKK actions, including a number of acts of violence (and, he alleged, FBI requests to "sleep with as many Klan wives as I could, break up marriages") (Rowe, 1976). Rowe's status was controversially revealed in 1965, after Viola Liuzzo, a Michigan resident, was gunned down on an Alabama highway while shuttling civil rights workers as part of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. The cold-blooded murder gained immediate national attention, and despite the fact that FBI director Hoover told LBJ that solving this sort of crime with no obvious leads would be "like looking for a needle in a haystack," the Bureau apprehended four suspects the following day. Rowe enabled the quick arrests, as he had been among the carful of klansmen...
that had pulled alongside Liuzzo's vehicle and shot and killed her. Rowe ultimately testified against his fellow Klan conspirators, denying that he himself had fired any shots (May, 2005; Rowe, 1976). Assessing Rowe's case, alongside those of Dorsett and Withers, allows us to explore the complex ways in which infiltrators serve as fluid players both within and across contentious arenas, and to examine both the horizontal and vertical dimensions that define these infiltrators' interstitial roles.

**Horizontal Ties: Modes of Recruitment and Oversight**

Infiltrators are commonly conceived of as a category of actor, tied to the state's interests and bound to the agencies that recruit and employ them. In that sense, their work as undercover "agents" makes them de facto extensions of that state and straightforward representatives of its goals and interests. However, the “infiltrator” category is considerably more fluid and heterogeneous – comprised of varying (and sometimes competing) goals and capacities – and should more productively be conceived of as a dynamic role that emerges within particular arenas of contention.

Perhaps the central element shaping the infiltrator role, and the capacity of the infiltrator to pursue goals distinct from those of the employing agency, is the initial mode of recruitment, which reflects the motivations of both the agency and the recruit and defines in turn the degree and style of oversight associated with the infiltrator's actions. In his later work on undercover policing, Marx (1988: 85) similarly identifies a range of entries into the “undercover role,” from sworn agents working surreptitiously as part of their police position, to private police temporarily deputized or otherwise enlisted by state agencies, to private citizens enticed by an ideological belief in the policing cause, an interest in law enforcement work, a sense of adventure, or – more commonly – in return for money or to reduce or eliminate criminal charges or other legal problems they themselves face.

These diverse entry points shape each infiltrator's orientation to undercover work. The mode of entry also defines the infiltrator's relationship with the handler who oversees the operation and to whom the infiltrator typically reports information. Agencies such as the FBI typically charge handlers with the task of “developing" informants, a phrasing that signals the importance of the handler-informant relationship as well as the intended use of that bond to mold the infiltrator's goals to align with those of the state. In practice, the handler's orientation to informants varies significantly, and the evolution of the infiltrator role is significantly shaped by the degree of
leverage associated with its mode of entry. Such structurally induced “lever-
ages,” of course, interact with individual proclivities and agency. Specific
skill sets, thresholds for “deviousness” and vice, or a finely honed sense of
righteousness may condition the infiltrator/handler relationship as well
as the ways in which leverage is perceived and acted upon by both parties.

Indeed, Marx (1988: 156) notes that the “controller-informer relationship
is usually seen to involve the former controlling the latter,” but highlights
how the relationship in some cases can be upturned. Conceived as an
exchange, the currency that informers provide centers on the provision
of useful information that, in the short or long run, can be deployed to
reduce the harm or challenge posed by the target being infiltrated. As
such, infiltrators’ resources tend to vary in degree if not in type, with the
value of information rooted in its quality and utility, a function both of the
infiltrator’s ability to compellingly frame her contributions as pivotal and of
whether that information might also be procured through alternate means
(including by developing additional informants who might viably occupy
an equivalent role5). An informant thus maximizes her leverage when
occupying a “structural hole” between the state agency and its target – i.e.,
the sole link between these otherwise disconnected groups (Burt, 1995).

The currency that infiltrators receive in return, however, is more diverse
– shaped by the motivations that define initial entry into the role, and
reflecting the relative capacities of informers vis-à-vis their handlers. Infil-
trators who respond primarily to tangible incentives – money, for instance,
or a release from criminal charges – have less leverage in the exchange, as
handlers can withdraw support if the infiltrator fails to perform. Informants
motivated by the intrinsic rewards of the work or the ideological satisfaction
it provides are less vulnerable to such resource withdrawals. Handlers thus
have less control over their informants when the resources of exchange at
their disposal are decoupled from infiltrators’ primary motivations. The
likelihood that an alternate informant could hypothetically provide the
same information, thus lending a degree of redundancy and equivalence
across infiltrators, interacts with these dimensions, altering the latitude
that handlers will allow a given infiltrator in their abiding effort to ensure
stable informant coverage.

George Dorsett represents a clear case of an informant, through his
intrinsic motivations and leadership position in the KKK, who leveraged

5 Indeed, agencies such as the FBI frequently seek to develop multiple informants in the
same groups, in part as a way to cross-check the reliability of the accounts offered by particular
infiltrators.
his significant capacities to nurture a loosely regulated and even collegial relationship with his handler. That agent, Dargan Frierson, was well-known within the Bureau for his ability to develop KKK informants, stemming in large part from his ability to relate to klansmen. He made good use of his deep local accent and was quick to disclose that his own grandfather had been in the KKK during the 1920s. He openly expressed his lack of enthusiasm about integration, and sometimes told klansmen to “cuss LBJ all you want; I don't think any more of him than you do.” He would also “look the other way” when his informants were involved with cross burnings or other actions that, in his view, “wouldn't hurt anyone.” To Frierson, working with top-level informants required such latitude. To maintain the trust required to access the KKK’s inner circles, he reasoned, infiltrators like Dorsett “had to be out there, where it was going on. He had to talk like them, he had to act like them, he had to give fiery speeches” (Cunningham, 2009; Schlosser, 2007; Dorsett, 2005 Frierson and Dorsett, 2004).

As a consequence, Frierson’s relationship to Dorsett developed as a partnership of sorts. The terms of Dorsett’s recruitment focused on financial incentives rather than any leverage related to the possibility of his avoiding arrest or criminal charges. The FBI also lacked other informants among the elite leadership of North Carolina’s UKA realm, and the absence of redundancy increased the value of Dorsett’s reports and limited checks on his behavior. Dorsett, for his part, articulated his informant role as a means to “keep down violence and trouble.” Though we might have cause to doubt his veracity, he frequently and proudly recounted particular instances in which he was able to stop a particular member from committing violent acts, though all the while he delivered “fiery” speeches at nightly UKA rallies that seemingly promoted violence and a disregard for legal authority.

This dissonance, while calling into question the veracity of Dorsett’s self-proclaimed peace-keeping role, highlights as well his perceived orientation to the FBI in the context of his informant position. The lack of leverage that Frierson held over Dorsett was reflected in the latter’s articulation of the infiltration dynamic; to Dorsett, the FBI was working with – and, in some cases, for – him, to accomplish a goal that he himself favored. While the terms of his partnership remained bounded by the organizational process of the FBI, Dorsett’s leverage over his handler stretched and loosened the boundaries typically imposed on informants within the FBI arena.

Despite the KKK’s heavy proscription on informing, such stretched boundaries enabled Dorsett to view his undercover status as an extension of his Klan work, and something that at times aided his efforts in the KKK. Such views were not merely self-delusions; Frierson’s collegiality
extended to providing Dorsett with protection for his colleagues to engage in perceived lower-level KKK terrorism such as cross burnings, as well as the resources to start his own competing KKK organization in 1967 (the Bureau ensured a foundation of members in Dorsett’s incipient group, by stocking the new group with lower-level informants and instructing them to encourage their KKK colleagues to leave the UKA). Additionally, Frierson set up Dorsett, a house painter by trade, with jobs painting the residences of new agents when they moved to the area (Schlosser, 2007; Dorsett, 2005; Frierson and Dorsett, 2004).

Gary Thomas Rowe enjoyed similar freedom to take part in KKK violence with seeming immunity from FBI reprisals, though the dynamic that produced that latitude differed markedly from Dorsett’s relationship with Frierson. In contrast with the UKA in North Carolina, which generally avoided acts of deadly violence, Birmingham’s Eastview 13 klavern was among the roughest KKK units in the nation. This militancy added urgency to efforts to develop informants who might procure advance information about future violent acts. The tough, insular character of the Eastview unit also ensured that the task of placing informants, and in particular those capable of penetrating the klavern’s violent core, would be more difficult (McWhorter, 2001).

During the initial meeting during which Rowe agreed to infiltrate the UKA for the FBI, his handling agent Barrett Kemp instructed him to avoid violence, in particular as an instigator. “Don’t start anything,” Kemp instructed. “Don’t be the one to jump up and say ‘let’s go’” (May, 2005: 9). While Rowe, like Dorsett, agreed to infiltrate primarily for intrinsic reasons (in Rowe’s case, a longtime fixation with law enforcement), the FBI’s leverage early on centered on the Bureau’s ability to “disown” and expose Rowe to criminal charges if implicated in a violent criminal act. This leverage, however, was tempered by the klavern’s insularity, which contributed to the Bureau’s inability to successfully develop informants other than Rowe. For a time, Kemp sought to mask that fact, and even lied to Rowe by telling him that he could cross-check the veracity of his information with reports from his (non-existent) stable of Eastview infiltrators.

Rowe’s autonomy increased within a matter of months of his initial entry, when he was elected Eastview’s “Klokan Chief.” This new position as a valued klavern officer left him in charge of reviewing new membership applications and thus privy to the sort of inside information that garden-variety members never learned. He knew this position would both “please” his FBI handler and loosen the bounds of his Bureau-imposed role, increasing his capacity to engage in a broader range of actions without threat of sanction.
By 1961, FBI officials were referring to Rowe as their “ace in the hole,” and that year’s Freedom Rides provided one early indication of the latitude that came with such status. When Rowe reported to the FBI office that the local police had pledged to give klansmen 15 minutes of unimpeded time to attack the group of interracial bus travelers, agents failed to intercede, instead turning the information over to the local police behind the plot in the first place. Rowe enthusiastically participated in the beatings, and ostensibly to maintain his cover Birmingham agents failed to restrict or otherwise penalize him. As still no comparable informants emerged, Rowe’s leverage increased and his leash grew ever looser. The fact that he maintained his informant status throughout the first half of the 1960s only exacerbated this degree of immunity from serious Bureau control, and called into question the balance between his service to the Klan and his efforts, as a state agent, to hinder KKK violence.

The key paradox associated with Rowe’s multifaceted tie to the Bureau, as Marx (1988) observed in another context, is that his embeddedness in criminal violence enhanced his value as an informant but consequently made him more difficult to control. Similarly, as with Dorsett, the long arc of his informant service – Rowe continued reporting to the FBI throughout the mid-1960s, until he was exposed in the Liuzzo investigation – increased the likelihood that the role would fail “to prevent harm or ... actually stimulat[e] or contribut[e] to it” (Marx, 1988: 203-204). This overall dynamic emerges both because continuous success as an informant requires repeated validations of one’s activist bona fides, and also because each subsequent act reinforces and reproduces the latitude that infiltrators enjoy, as restrictions on any single act would risk exposing the agency’s culpability in the full complement of criminal or otherwise unsavory actions.

In contrast, Ernest Withers gained significant leverage through his stature in civil rights circles, which enabled his unique access to the Movement. His involvement predated his recruitment by the FBI, and while his expected contribution allowed the Bureau to loosen its restrictions on informants to place him on the payroll, his relationship to his handler remained distant, centered on the professional exchange of information and money. While the FBI saw Withers as an important asset, agents were reluctant to work with an informant who had previously been fired from the Memphis Police Department. Ultimately, Withers’s access to key information and his status as a respected member of the activist community overrode those concerns. In a report filed during Withers’s recruitment, his handler William H. Lawrence cautioned that:
It is not believed that Withers can meet the Bureau’s reliability requirements as a (racial informant) wherein his activities can be directed or controlled. However, because of his many contacts in the racial field, plus his indicated willingness to cooperate with this Bureau, (...) it is recommend that Withers (...) be contacted regarding general criminal matters. If in the course of these contacts he volunteers any information relating to security matters or racial matters, it of course will be accepted. (Perrusquia, 2010)

Given Withers’s knowledge of the FBI’s initial trepidation, he surely was aware of how his value enhanced his leverage by loosening the boundaries typically associated with FBI operatives. As one of only five paid “racial informants” in Memphis in 1968, Withers still engaged in Movement activities and remained loyal to civil rights causes, while reporting to Lawrence periodically on “racial matters.” That relationship, however, lacked the personal component that characterized both Rowe and Dorsett’s experience, and instead evolved as a business-like exchange. “Periodically, we would meet in person under what we hoped were safe conditions to personally exchange information, go over descriptions, any photographs, things of that nature,” Lawrence later testified, adding that he paid Withers as much as $200 a month – about $15,000 a year today – for such reports (Perrusquia, 2010).

The Dorsett, Rowe, and Withers cases illustrate distinct kinds of relationships that define the infiltrator role within the context of its complementary handler relationship. The obvious contrasting case, treated counterfactually here but described in significant detail in criminological studies of police informers (see, e.g., Churchill and VanderWall 1988; Marx 1988), involves an infiltrator whose past criminal actions puts him or her in the debt of the handler, who can revoke any immunity or leniency previously granted as a condition for informant work. As the lesser capacity of those vulnerable informants causes the leverage pendulum to shift toward the handler, we might expect that the infiltrator’s relationships both to their state employer and to the group being infiltrated to adjust accordingly. The contours of these relationships constitute one arena that defines the tenor of infiltration.

Vertical Contexts: Organizational Structure and the Contours of Infiltration

The handler-informer relationship is also embedded within the broader context of the handler’s position within the overall organization of
policing agencies. While many aspects of agencies' bureaucratic structure and process relate to this dimension, one highly salient consideration for infiltration dynamics is the classic policing tension between: (1) a desire for centralized coordination and uniform standards enabled by tight top-down control; and (2) the decreased quality of infiltrator information and reduced responsiveness that results from such higher-level supervision (Marx, 1988).

Reacting to that tension, FBI leadership sought to balance an overall emphasis on centralized authority – signaled by the fact that the vast majority of its counterintelligence measures against supposed subversives during the 1960s targeted individuals and groups identified as threats by National Headquarters rather than by field agents – by encouraging local handlers and field office supervisors to exploit their local knowledge in the development and use of informants (Cunningham, 2004). Such organizational considerations define the vertical arena associated with the FBI itself, by shaping the ways in which handlers’ actions relate to their relationships to their superiors and the Bureau’s broader organizational routines. Here, we consider how such organizational policing dynamics shape the infiltrator’s relationship both with his/her handler and the targeted group that provides the basis for undercover work.

The FBI’s Birmingham field office, which shepherded Gary Thomas Rowe’s entry into the Bureau, felt this core tension strongly. FBI director Hoover was initially wary of Rowe’s background, and denied Barrett Kemp’s recommendation in 1960 that Rowe’s “excellent” potential should merit his development as a confidential informant. Only after Rowe was elected to a key officer position in the Eastview 13 klavern, thus gaining significant leverage through his unique ability to offer valued high-quality information, was Kemp’s request accepted (May, 2005).

As noted earlier, Rowe’s newfound leverage also earned him a longer leash; despite Kemp’s general admonishments against participating in violent or criminal acts, he soon found himself able to engage in cross burnings without authorization or sanction. While field office reports to Bureau superiors were intended to control such activities, Rowe’s unique contributions provided significant incentive to circumvent the usual rules. In at least one instance, the Birmingham office’s report to headquarters willfully omitted Rowe’s involvement when reporting on Klan violence. Interactions between Rowe and Kemp increasingly acknowledged the tensions between avoiding violence and procuring information. “We have to by law instruct that you are not to participate in any violence,” Rowe recalled being told. “However, I know you need to do this ... to get the information. That’s the important thing: get the information” (quoted in May, 2005: 25-26).
When reporting the serious violence against the Freedom Riders in 1961, the handling agent sent a report to his immediate superior that distorted Rowe’s role. That superior then ignored clear evidence to the contrary and told Headquarters that Rowe was not personally involved in the brutal bus station beatings.

Given Rowe’s prized position, such autonomy was valued and reinforced. His handler Kemp complimented him on doing “one hell of a good job” and let him know that he considered Rowe the “finest” Klan informant in the Bureau. When, soon after, Kemp resigned his post with the Bureau, he reiterated this praise and encouraged Rowe to stay on as an informant. Rowe agreed, and his next handler effectively reproduced the dynamic, advising Rowe to “stay straight, keep your eyes open, don’t get involved with anything, but furnish us the information.” So long as he did the latter, the former warnings generally went unheeded. In 1965, when Rowe agreed to testify against his fellow klansmen for a murder that he himself was a party to and failed to stop, the FBI authorized a deal that won Rowe’s immunity from both state and federal charges, the permanent relocation of his family, and a job in a locale of his choosing (May, 2005).

In other cases, the FBI’s bureaucratic process managed accountability among informants through organizational controls that either drew informants in or maintained distance. George Dorsett’s tenure as an informant clearly reflects the former approach. In North Carolina, repeated orders from National Headquarters to use informants to usurp the state’s top UKA leadership overruled local agents’ appeals to maintain stability in the state’s Klan outfit and thus maximize the utility of Dorsett’s access to the inner circle. As a result, Frierson partnered with Dorsett to foment a major leadership split and the formation of a new, Bureau-managed KKK outfit headed by Dorsett himself. The FBI gained leverage from the process, tightening the agency’s ability to bound its prized informant’s behavior, as Dorsett’s incipient Confederate Knights of the KKK relied on Bureau support to ensure stable membership and dues payments.

In contrast, FBI agents in Memphis sought to balance the significant benefits of tapping Ernest Withers’s access to civil rights circles with the risks they associated with his potential for impropriety and insubordination. To avoid the sorts of tangled complicities they weathered with Gary Thomas Rowe, for a long period the FBI avoided bringing Withers in as a full-fledged confidential informant, instead maintaining semi-regular contact through less formal requests for information about criminal activity alongside implicit encouragement to link that information to known civil rights activists.
Such a move illustrates the importance of each of the dimensions we highlight here: the mode of recruitment, primary incentive structure, and capacities and leverage that characterize infiltrators’ orientations to their employing agencies. The protective insulation that agents erected in their work with Withers was not possible in the case of the even-more-combustible Rowe, who had no prior history as a Klan member and thus required formal Bureau status to encourage his initial entrée into the Eastview klavern. Withers’s willingness to provide information in return for monetary compensation also enabled the sort of straightforward businesslike exchanges that would not have been tenable for Rowe or Dorsett, whose motivations centered, respectively, on an unfulfilled desire to become a bona fide law enforcement officer and a wish to make use of police connections to advance careerist ambitions within the Klan. The fact that all three of these infiltrators could provide difficult-to-obtain information provided them with degrees of latitude greatly exceeding that of most garden-variety infiltrators, who often offered redundant and thus easily replaceable benefits. Such value increased their ability to negotiate arrangements that circumvented, at least in part, the FBI’s tight centralized controls.

But even in cases where infiltrators enjoy significant autonomy from their employing agency, the dynamics of their informant work – and in particular the terms of the “horizontal” relationship with their handlers – are shaped by the vertical organizational context within which those handlers reside. Indeed, one might imagine an agency that required less day-to-day accountability or provided less input or bureaucratic control on the conduct of infiltrators as significantly shifting Rowe, Dorsett, and Withers’s actions and experiences. Similarly, the organizational contours of the social movement organizations that each of these men infiltrated – from Rowe’s highly insular Eastview klavern to the looser civil rights circles that Withers, with his established credentials and stature, could enter even in the absence of formal membership – shaped the overall experience of infiltration. Such vertical considerations serve as crucial contexts for infiltration, conditioning the experience by influencing the autonomy of both handlers and informants, altering the latitude associated with the infiltrator role and thereby the dynamics of its interstitial position.

Interstitial Roles and Arenas of Contention

If, as Jasper argues in the introduction to this volume, groups engaged in collective political struggles are “never completely unified,” with individual
members defecting or pursuing their own goals alongside those of the group, infiltrators represent perhaps the clearest (and most complex) case of players who balance multiple allegiances and interests. They themselves exist in an interstitial state, both in the broad arena that subsumes contending challengers and authorities and within the narrower organizational arenas that constitute specific groups on both sides of the struggle. While the nature of infiltration requires that individuals negotiate – typically through deception – multiple relationships within and across these arenas, the cases of Ernest Withers, George Dorsett, and Gary Thomas Rowe demonstrate that the contours of those relationships relate to infiltrators’ strategic capacities and affective orientations, as they intersect with the structure and process of both their employing agencies and the group being infiltrated.

Here, we have captured the interactively constituted nature of infiltrators’ strategic capacities – the fact that such capacities do not solely reside within individuals but rather are conditioned by the settings within which they are deployed – through our focus on the infiltrator-handler relationship as an exchange characterized by differing *leverages* possessed by one or the other party. Such an approach emphasizes the ability of both sides to deal in the currencies of payment, persuasion, or coercion, and recognizes that, over time, such exchanges are conditioned by individuals’ ethical and deceptive orientations as well as the affective solidarities that characterize the primary handler relationship. Rowe, for instance, nearly abandoned his undercover role in the KKK when his handler Barrett Kemp left the FBI, and only agreed to stay on when both Kemp and his replacement provided assurances that maintaining his past successes was possible in the absence of his collaboration with Kemp (May, 2005).

Though the discussion here has focused predominantly on the manner in which informants attach to the state agencies that employ them, a complete analysis of the interstitial infiltrator role should engage with the full set of horizontal and vertical relationships that constitute the infiltrator role. In particular, the boundedness and insularity of targeted social movement organizations shape infiltrators’ modes of entry, the degree of latitude and control that handlers can exert without compromising their cover, and their effectiveness – sometimes conditioned by emerging ambivalent solidarities – over time.

More generally, the cases examined here also highlight the very permeability of the boundaries that players face as they operate within and across multiple and embedded arenas. For informants, these boundaries can appear artificial, as they utilize available leverage to act strategically to
extend or even rupture such constraints. Infiltrators perhaps appear unique as they necessarily navigate the uneasy waters of deceptive dual identities within competing arenas, drawing on capacities shaped by the leverage they possess on both sides of their role. The broader utility of the study of "undercover" players, however, might well be as a vehicle to illuminate the often-obscured negotiations that characterize how social movement players in general strategically navigate and reconstitute the boundaries that define arenas of protest.

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