

The ethics of geopolitics – Le Carré’s timelessness

Introduction

The ethics of geopolitics is a notoriously murky question. It is also an incredibly important one. The majority of the global population are part of a nation-state whose government claims to act on their behalf. If we ourselves want to live ethical lives, we must also be concerned with government action. If we believe humans should have a strong moral compass, we should expect the same from our governments. It is all the more important since the power of government is likely far greater than the power of the individual.

There is no shortage of claims to moral superiority among world leaders. Bashar al-Assad claimed he was saving Syrians from terrorists as his regime used chemical weapons on civilians (BBC, 2020). Tony Blair made a case based on human rights as he supported intervention into Iraq and Kosovo; the former created a political and military quagmire that has indirectly killed up to one million people, the latter potentially stopped a period of ethnic cleansing (Tudor 2021). The Cold War saw a constant sparring match on the evils either side embodied. We have seen the US exchanging accusations with China and Russia, all sides claiming to act in the name of a superior vision of human rights, justice and inter-state engagement. One of these has, at the time of submission, escalated into an inter-state war.

Whether a state has a strong moral compass is a hard question to answer – all sides claim superiority, yet all nations seem to consistently commit unethical acts beyond their borders. Even limiting our history to 1945 onwards, powerful nations have consistently been complicit in gross violations of human rights and other forms of unethical behaviour from Vietnam to Chechnya, Afghanistan to Guatemala. That is not to say governments cannot act with a strong moral grounding – interventions such as in Kosovo show there is potential for this to occur. But these are historically rare.

Much ink has been spilled on these events and on the morality of international action. Most have drawn inspiration from political theory, international relations, philosophy and sociology. One area, however, that has largely been unexplored is literature. Many who seek to answer questions concerning geopolitics will turn their nose up at fiction, especially its ability to provide concrete explanations. Yet fiction writers can offer a unique perspective and framework for answering some of the especially tricky questions concerning the ethics of inter-state engagement. One such author is John le Carré.

When British novelist John le Carré's most famous book *Spy who came in from the Cold* (which I will refer to as *Spy*) was released in 1963, it quickly became the party-crasher for the 'innocent, more straightforward place' of 'good guys and bad guys' in the Cold War (Boyd, 2010). Le Carré was able to cut through the narratives of right and wrong, good and bad that were endemic in the Cold War with his sharp, critical writing. His characters and institutions are highly complex and layered, a better reflection of the world than the binaries offered by Cold War leaders. Yet after the end of the Cold War, when the capitalist-communist lens of the world was thrown to the historical rubbish heap, it became clear that Le Carré's writing was not just an antidote to that era, but to the subsequent ones as well. Its cynicism of government action and bleakness remains all to present today.

Most critics and reviewers of his books focus on the intense moral ambiguity in his writing, and how many of the participants in the Cold War are distinctly similar. I would like to take this further and make the case that Le Carré was making an ethical claim that governments, both during and since the Cold War, lack a moral compass. Through his books we can see this important question investigated through the unique lens of spies, and of the secret world that people and governments can occupy. His spy novels can give us a better understanding as to whether or not governments are, or could ever be, ethical. How we use spies and secret services is a crucial element of geopolitics – they are consistently deployed

abroad to further a nation's aims under the belief that their acts are invisible. To investigate the ethics of geopolitics, the ethics of spy-craft seems like a good place to start.

Humans turned to husks

Le Carré wrote dozens of books, most of them concerning the world of spies. What makes his bibliography such a powerful tool in exploring the ethics of geopolitics is that the secret services he writes about are metaphors for civilisation. This sentiment is best expressed by Bill Haydon, the traitor in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (henceforth *Tinker, Tailor*) who was based on the infamous Kim Philby, a Soviet double agent within the British Intelligence Services during the Cold War. Haydon 'took it for granted that secret services were the only real [...] expression of a [nation's] subconscious' (Le Carré, 1974). Socrates came to a similar conclusion in Plato's *Republic* in his discussion on the Ring of Gyges. Like Socrates, Le Carré measures our ability to adhere to professed ethical values by the actions taken when we believe nobody is watching. Whereas the Ring of Gyges gives the bearer the power of invisibility, secret services give governments the power of deniability. It is as close to invisibility geopolitics allows for.

Le Carré's spies and their recruits are the bearers of this ring, the perfect yardsticks of ethical values in practice. In *Little Drummer Girl*, the English actress Charlie is one such recruit, who ends up working for the Israeli secret services. Her transition from passionate, politicised citizen into agent is indicative of what is necessary to effectively bear the Ring of Gyges on behalf of a nation – the shedding of all humanity. In the book, Charlie is recruited into a Palestinian terrorist group as part of an infiltration operation to kill one of the group's leaders. Midway through the operation, Charlie realises that she has become 'separated from life', unable to be the human being she once was (Le Carré, 1983). When finally entering into the group's inner circle she begins to love them 'both singly and collectively', feeling a strong

connection to the people and the causes they fight for (Ibid). Yet despite this intense bond, she works relentlessly throughout the book to carry out the mission at hand, ultimately betraying them. It is only at the end when speaking to Joseph, the Israeli agent who recruited her, that she realises what has happened: 'I'm dead Jose. You shot me, don't you remember?' (Ibid). Charlie became the husk through which the secret service furthered its aims, before being discarded. It is her humanity that is shot, but not her capacity to operate for whichever power holds her. What dies is her ability to fight for what is right, for what she believes in, for what she feels. But it is only through her humanity dying that Charlie can become an effective spy.

In *Perfect Spy*, British spy Magnus Pym is able to become the perfect spy under the influence of his con-man father Rick. Magnus learns how to live on 'several planes at once' and to forget 'everything except the ground [he] stood on and the face [he] spoke to at that moment', skills Rick used in his life of fraud (Le Carré, 1986). Magnus does not live life but instead invents characters to play. Even in love, he cannot help but remove feeling and invent someone to love – his favourite picture was one of his former lover with her back to him, which 'left his fantasies intact', since she could be anyone to him (Ibid). Magnus, the perfect spy, is not a driven fighter of a nation's cause, choosing to act based on what is right or wrong. He is a fraud, devoid of ethics and operating for whichever power claims him. He works for both the British and Czechoslovaks, since living as a fraud defined his upbringing and became his identity. This is precisely what makes him the perfect spy. His ability to slip into whatever persona he has invented, be empty of humanity – this makes him the ideal bearer of the Ring of Gyges to further a nation's aims.

If humans are ethical beings, and our humanity is necessary to make ethical choices, Le Carré's characters must be by definition empty of ethics. Yet they are also the very tools used for geopolitics.

A Hall of Mirrors

If spies are empty husks, it is not surprising how similar they are to one another despite fighting for opposing causes. In *Spy*, the main antagonist is Mundt, an East German intelligence operative. Control, the head of the British intelligence services, explains that Mundt is not ‘the intellectual kind of Communist’, but instead a ‘practitioner of the Cold War’; Alec Leamas, a British agent, immediately replies ‘like us’ (Le Carré, 2013). Fiedler, another East German intelligence operative who is in an internal struggle with Mundt, observes something similar: ‘we’re all the same, you know, that’s the joke’ (Ibid). One of Le Carré’s novels is even titled *Looking Glass War* precisely because both sides were using the same methods, mirroring rather than opposing each other. Both spy on their own members, enforcing internal police-states; the secretive trial of Mundt in *Spy* is incredibly similar to the threatened trial of British civil servant Kit Probyn in *Delicate Truth*. Smiley, a British agent and the most prominent character throughout Le Carré’s bibliography, sums it up in *Tinker, Tailor* when recounting his discussion with Karla, a Russian spymaster: “‘Look,” I said, “we’re getting to be old men, and we’ve spent our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another’s systems. I can see through Eastern values just as you can through our Western ones. [...] Don’t you think it’s time to recognise that there is as little worth on your side as there is on mine?’” (Le Carré, 1974).

The moral reasonings behind the actions of Le Carré’s characters are at best ambiguous – the reader is left with a deep sense of unease as to how murder and sabotage is carried out without a distinct sense of right and wrong. Le Carré’s characters will often lose track of the ‘why’ behind their acts, only to either continue carrying them out or be abandoned by the narrative, surplus to requirements. In *Little Drummer Girl*, one such individual in the terrorist camp realises that his ‘ideological batteries have run low’, and that he ‘kind of forgot the reasoning about how every dead baby is a step towards world peace’ (Ibid). When characters do search for moral reasonings, they hit a brick wall. The few discussions about ethics that do

occur in Le Carré's novels are confused and unconvincing. When Bill Haydon is unmasked as the double agent in *Tinker Tailor* and his reasonings are laid bare they are shown to be rambling thoughts, a set of 'half-baked political assertions' (Ibid). The most interesting exchange is perhaps in *Spy*, when Fiedler is speaking to Leamas and is shocked by his lack of philosophy. Over several pages Fiedler tries to understand how Leamas can justify his actions, but the closest he gets are replies such as 'not everyone has a philosophy,' or 'I just think the whole lot of you are bastards,' or the pathetic 'I suppose they don't like Communism' (Le Carré, 2013). Mostly, Leamas responds that he doesn't know or doesn't care. These instances reveal an important part about ethics, namely its absence from this form of geopolitics. It is not so much that Le Carré chooses not to write about them – it is more that they have no place in his world.

What makes this possible? What allow for this world where everyone ignores any concept of justice, of right or wrong? In *Spy*, Control illustrates how a simple race-to-the-bottom underpins the world of spies: ““in weighing up the moralities, we rather go in for dishonest comparisons; after all, you can't compare the ideals of one side with the methods of the other, can you, now?”” (Ibid). It is a world where method can only be compared with method, and if doing terrible things gives one side an upper-hand, you can be sure the other side will copy it soon enough.

The ethics of the nation

Le Carré builds in a type of nihilism, an absence of a moral compass, into the very core of the people, institutions and governments he writes about. There is thus, by definition of what spies and secret services are, and the power that the Ring of Gyges can bestow on the bearer, a total lack of ethics in our geopolitics.

There are different ways one can see this absence. For example, in *Little Drummer Girl*, the Israeli secret service use what is described as the oldest trick in the book: they capture Yanuka, a Palestinian terrorist whose older brother is the real target, and use fake Red Cross observers to coax out enough information to make their operation possible. When Yanuka eventually gives in to the psychological torture, and demands the paper that the fake Red Cross workers told him he had a right to, the workers hand him a pen which is stamped 'For Humanity' (Le Carré, 1983). The letter he writes will eventually lead to his and his brother's destruction. He is punished for believing in justice, whilst the spies abuse the status of symbols of justice to perpetrate criminal acts.

This also brings Le Carré's writing outside of the specific context of the Cold War period. Both the Geneva Convention and Red Cross existed before 1945 and continue to operate today. This creates a timeless futility to the constant violence carried out in Le Carré's writing. He uses locations to emphasise this point. The apartment in which the Israeli operation is being carried out is located in the Munich Olympic Village, which had 'a grimy view of the road to Dachau'; it is also where Palestinian commandos of the Black September movement had gratuitously murdered numerous Israeli Olympic athletes in 1972 (Ibid). The linking together of different time periods reinforces the timelessness of Le Carré's message – the absence of ethics in this world is not contextual, it is permanent.

This absence of ethics is embodied by spies, but it is the services they work for that are ultimately directing them to unjustifiable ends. These secret services link the state, desiring covert action, to the spies who carry out these actions. Le Carré's characters are ultimately the actors who play the role the state assigns them, and their lack of ethics is what makes them good operatives. What is perhaps most tragic is when characters come into contact with the institutions or states that they admired from afar, only to be left stunned and depressed by their worthlessness. In *Spy Liz*, a young duped Englishwoman who is a member of the British

Communist Party, is shocked by what she encounters in East Germany. The East Germans she meets pity her because they believe she must live in starvation in England, since the ‘capitalists let them starve’ (Le Carré, 2013). They also tell her that Fiedler, the most admirable character in the book and the only person Liz believed to be good, is to be shot because he failed ‘to recognise Socialist reality’ (Ibid). The experience shatters Liz’s entire belief system, and her belief that nations, and people, can be good.

Taking it to our world

Le Carré certainly knew the world he was writing about. He served for both MI5 and MI6 during the early stages of the Cold War, stationed mainly in Germany, before picking up writing (Le Carré, 2013). As he wrote in the Afterword to his 2013 *Spy* edition, his work is fiction (Ibid). Yet his stories are also incredibly believable, since they make sense of a world from a perspective that is unavailable to most readers – the perspective of spies. Readers are able to finally understand the logic behind the geopolitical events of the real world. It is thus easy to draw parallels between Le Carré’s stories and the world around us.

The story of *Spy* is based on Leamas believing he is faking defection to East Germany in order to provide evidence to destroy Mundt, a deplorable character and former Nazi who Leamas believes to be the greater evil. However, Leamas realises near the end of the story that he has been conned and that Fiedler, a Jewish idealist, is the target. Leamas is in reality unknowingly protecting Mundt, Britain’s double agent, and his evidence ends up destroying Fiedler. The symbolism of this sacrifice, set less than two decades after the end of the Holocaust, is extremely powerful. This is not so different from what was happening during the Cold War and ever since. In his afterword to the 2013 edition of *Spy*, Le Carré links Control’s logic of using deceit to carry out abhorrent acts to the present, where ‘the same man, with better teeth and hair and a smarter suit, can be heard explaining away the catastrophic illegal war in

Iraq, or justifying medieval torture techniques’ (Le Carré, 2013). Former Prime Minister Tony Blair also gave British people the sense that they were doing justice by supporting the government’s intervention, noting in a 2003 speech how Saddam Hussein’s regime was one ‘that contravenes every single principle or value anyone of *our* politics believes in’, an intensely moral appeal (Tudor, 2021).

In an essay titled ‘The United States has gone mad’, Le Carré writes how former President Bush had a ‘arm-lock on God. And God has very particular political opinions. God appointed America to save the world in any way that suits America’ (Le Carré, 2003). With God by his side, Bush made an appeal to go to a just war against an evil enemy – yet this appeal was always hollow, and inevitably it was revealed just how devoid of ethics the whole enterprise was. The point Le Carré is making is that these ethical appeals made by the US and British governments are, by definition, empty and false. As long as these nations lack a decent moral compass, their appeals cannot ever be taken to be truthful.

We can also find parallels in *Little Drummer Girl*. There is a moment when the Israeli team are debating what to do with Yanuka, the main target’s younger brother. It becomes clear that in order for the operation to work he must be killed. The Israelis find themselves doing the very thing their enemy would do – using a car bomb to blow up their targets. In fighting these battles on behalf of governments who can use the Ring of Gyges, there is no other way than to be amoral if it makes the end more expedient. Joseph, the Israeli agent who recruited Charlie, is confronted with this reality. He is asked by his colleague sarcastically what the ‘hero’s way’ would be – and is pushed to admit that the path they will go down is the only one available by design (Le Carré, 1983). After the decision is taken, which Joseph agrees to, the head of the operation asks him if he has ‘a moral point to make that will ease [him] into a nice frame of mind?’ (Ibid). Despite the unease around copying the enemy, they all acquiesce to it, eventually accepting it, no matter what their initial stance on the issue may be.

Moving into the present, it is unclear whether the US army noticed the similarities between their storming of Fallujah in 2004 and Saddam Hussein's Al-Anfal campaign. That campaign involved the indiscriminate and genocidal use of biological and chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds during the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The First Battle of Fallujah was no attempted genocide. Yet, the US army used chemical weapons indiscriminately on the city during what they believed to be the end of their own war. Perhaps they too, like Saddam Hussein, thought that this would be hidden in the chaos. US forces later admitted to using white phosphorus and similar munitions in Fallujah, an area where access was incredibly restricted during the storming (Cockburn, 2011) The event is still to this day shrouded in mystery, with unresolved claims such as the US Army's potential use of radioactive uranium-based munitions (Ibid). The legacy of that battle is that the increases in infant mortality, cancer and birth defects in Fallujah are higher than those reported after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Ibid). Consciously or not, they were replicating the actions of previous enemies that they deemed to be absolutely evil, believing or hoping that nobody would notice. The question worth asking is whether such an assault was ever thought of as beneath US forces?

Conclusion

In 1993, Le Carré called for a 'perestroika [...] within ourselves', a reform of our political consciousness in order to move on from the Cold War and get out of the moral doldrum we were left in (Le Carré, 1993). With anti-communism gone, we had to find an alternative belief system. Le Carré believed that the only thing left to do was generate a moral compass which we could use to interact with other nations on a new footing post-1989. In other words, we had to be introspective and install ethics into our geopolitics, no matter how painful that may be.

Unfortunately, we never did. Le Carré had shown through his books that major change was needed, yet we continued to carry on as normal and not ask ourselves the hard questions

necessary to move outside this moral doldrum. We moved from anti-communism to anti-terrorism, opting for a negative crusade instead of a positive vision of ourselves. In his 2013 afterword to *Spy*, Le Carré ended it with a succinct reflection: ‘What have I learnt over the last fifty years? Come to think of it, not much. Just that the morals of the secret world are very like our own’ (Le Carré, 2013).

Perhaps, in the most pessimistic reading of Le Carré, we are doomed to continue like this, doomed to continue this geopolitics because our sense of right or wrong disappears when we wear the Ring of Gyges. George Smiley provides this bleak view in his conversation with Karla in *Tinker Tailor*: “‘Both us, when we were young, subscribed to *great* visions [...] did it not occur to him that he and I by different routes might well have reached the same conclusions about life? [...] Did he not believe for example that the political generality was meaningless? [...] That in the hands of politicians grand designs achieve nothing but new forms of the old misery?’” (Le Carré, 1974). Perhaps we are seeing how the clash between a grand vision of a NATO-allied Ukraine and a grand vision of a joint Ukrainian-Russian destiny is leading to new forms of intense, widespread misery.

I have no answer as to whether we can achieve a new form of geopolitics. I believe it is possible, and examples like the Kosovo intervention should give hope that there is a potential for ethical inter-state interaction. But reading Le Carré has taught me that geopolitics will always tend to the unethical. Unless we can achieve this perestroika, the stories he wrote will continue to resemble the world around us.

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