

“An Unparalleled Plethora of Idiocy”: Len Deighton’s Political Skepticism in *The Ipcress File**

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A widespread critical bias holds that the spy story, which at its inception drew on elements of adventure romance and detective fiction, is formula-driven. Despite John G. Cawelti’s efforts to illuminate the cultural significance of literary formulas,¹ the genre still tends to be regarded with a certain degree of suspicion in academic circles. Part of its discredited status is owing to the spy story’s continuing association with the word “thriller,” a tag, as Michael Denning points out, that was adopted in the late nineteenth century “together with ‘shocker’ as a designation for the proliferating cheap sensational fiction which emerged at the moment when a mass-produced culture started to come into being in Britain” (18). He therefore supplements “Cawelti’s somewhat neutral term, ‘formula,’” with Fredric Jameson’s concept of an embedded “ideologeme” or unifying *topos*, emphasizing that “formulas in popular fiction never appear inertly, simply to be catalogued, but emerge as part of antagonistic collective discourses” (15). A fictional narrative critiques, then, what Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* refers to as a “pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or [...] protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy” (87). The target of that critique in the spy thriller, according to Denning, is the Manichean binary of “Us” versus “Them,” or “Good” versus “Evil,” inherited from its antecedents.

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/len-deightons-political-skepticism-in-the-ipcress-file/>.

Consistent with this understanding of the genre, the main dynamic of Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) is a profound skepticism about all political ideologies regnant during the Cold War. Not only does this undervalued author expose the inanity of Western capitalistic materialism, linked primarily with America's postwar boom economy, but he also deprecates the vacuous rhetoric of communist socialism or, more accurately, those who mouth it. At the root of his critique is the extradiegetic conviction of a liberal humanist who recognizes, in the tradition of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and John le Carré, that "groupspeak" is invariably the refuge of scoundrels.

Much of *The Ipcress File's* originality consists in its *not* framing the story's conflict around ideologically opposed antagonists or nation states. Instead, the narrative begins and ends with two complicit traders in classified information, and its human sources, as a marketable commodity. The first of these brokers is Dalby, a "languid public[-]school Englishman of a type that can usually reconcile his duty with comfort and luxury" (11), who supervises a covert intelligence unit in London known only by the unexplained acronym of WOOC(P). Reporting directly to the Cabinet, this shrewd bureaucrat directs the protagonist to make contact with a man code-named Jay, who has masterminded the abduction of several British scientists with top-grade security clearances, and pay him £18,000, with the option of going up to £23,000, on behalf of the government in exchange for a recently kidnapped biochemist. Not anxious to risk "another [Guy] Burgess and [Donald] Maclean shindy" (88), an allusion to notorious double agents of the Cambridge Five spy ring exposed during the 1950s, Dalby figures as "one of the most powerful men in England" (90), excels at securing annual budgetary appropriations from Parliament, and drags his feet on approving payment of back salary owed to the narrator. Jay, on the other hand, is an international rogue with a far different vita. Born Christian Stakowski, he was "recruited into Polish Army Intelligence in London" (72) during World War II before betraying his chain of underground cells to the German Abwehr. By

1947, a note in his file indicates, this émigré was working for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, after which he fled to the United Kingdom where he played off expatriate political factions against one another while launching his entrepreneurial “brain drain” venture. When the novel opens, Jay’s cover is that in Switzerland he runs a research facility funded by “various industrial foundations to investigate what they call ‘synthesized environment’” (58). Despite their divergent backgrounds, both of these nominal adversaries are essentially businessmen guided by adherence not to any ideological doctrine but rather to the dictates of pragmatic expediency. Each is adept, moreover, at camouflaging his commitment to espionage for personal profit.

Dalby’s front, given his privileged status, is an almost parodic elitism,² a persona that suggests an inverted form of Marxian “false consciousness.”³ That is to say, Dalby presents himself as steeped in the ideology of a dominant managerial class, although he is also capable of chameleonic adaptation when not in an Establishment setting. Ruthlessly efficient in field operations, as when he metamorphoses into a “natural hooligan” (50) while leading a commando-style interception of the biochemist Raven in Lebanon, Dalby reverts to mandarin condescension when presiding over his staff at WOOC(P)’s headquarters in Charlotte Street. Because Deighton’s anonymous protagonist (hereafter “I.”)⁴ hails from Burnley, a rural town in Lancashire, and has spent the last three years in Military Intelligence, his civilian boss is fond of baiting him: “You are a bit stupid, and you haven’t had the advantage of a classical education. [...] But I am sure you will be able to overcome your disadvantages” (85). For his part, I. typically counters with anti-authoritarian and sardonic quips. “It doesn’t take much to make the daily round with one’s employer work smoothly,” he remarks at one point, “but it takes about 98.5 per cent more than I’ve ever considered giving” (178). Notwithstanding his autocratic rigidity, the duplicitous Dalby can be unpredictable, as when, in order to throw the narrator off his secret partner Jay’s trail, he burdens him with a statistician laboriously searching for forensic

clues and then appoints I. as his replacement during a protracted leave of absence. Dalby's tactical success in this maneuver can be gauged from the fact that his subordinate becomes bogged down by presupposing an ideological binary. "What chance did I stand," he opines, "between the Communists on the one side and the Establishment on the other—they were both out-thinking me at every move" (116).

When halfway through the novel its setting shifts to Tokwe Atoll in the Pacific, Deighton introduces a sharp contrast between America's prosperity and England's struggling economy in the 1950s. Invited there by the U.S. Department of Defense to witness the test-firing of a fifty-megaton neutron bomb with approximately 2,500 times the destructive power of the Hiroshima blast on 6 August 1945, Dalby urges the narrator and his attractive assistant, Jean Tonnesen, to travel with him. Upon arriving near the detonation site, they see an impressive outpost of a new postwar imperium.

In ninety days they [the Americans] had equipped the islands with an airfield, suitable for dealing with both piloted and non-piloted aircraft; two athletic fields, two movie theatres, a chapel, a clothing store, beach clubs for officers and enlisted men, a library, hobby shops, vast quarters for the Commanding General, a maintenance hangar, personnel landing pier, mess hall, dispensary, a PX, post office, a wonderful modern laundry and a power plant. At one time during the test we were told there were ninety baseball teams in ten organized leagues. The telephone exchange could handle more than 6,000 calls per day; one mess alone served 9,000 meals per day, and a radio station operated around the clock, and buses across the island did likewise. I wish that London could match it. (156)

While in this multi-million-dollar overseas installation, described as an "apogee of twentieth-century achievement" (184), Dalby embraces the prevailing off-duty dress code. Shortly after landing at Tokwe he abandons his usual London attire of dark grey suit with a St. Paul's tie and, having had his longish hair trimmed at the local barber's shop, appears for dinner in "a red Hawaiian shirt with large blue and yellow flowers across it." Comments the protagonist: "Dalby had this knack [...] for sinking into such a combination without looking differ-

ent from all the Americans wearing it" (171). A few days later, at a party hosted by General Y. O. Guerite, Dalby poses as staunchly anti-Communist while in conversation with a lower-ranking U.S. brigadier. The implication in both cases is that this trader in negotiable intelligence gravitates toward whichever corporate entity promises the best protection of his private interests.

Meanwhile, Dalby sets about making his underling a target of the Americans' suspicion in connection with a spate of information leaks from their scientific labs. After the death of Lieutenant Barney Barnes, who earlier had warned of Dalby's "forked tongue" (189), he does so by framing I. for the electrocution of a corporal guarding the Tokwe bomb tower. Already impugned as a possible KGB agent, the narrator has discovered that his supervisor is preparing to radio an offshore Russian submarine monitoring the nuclear test, but he is arrested, drugged, interrogated, and told that he is being deported to Hungary. After thirty-four days of sensory deprivation and physical abuse, at the end of which he is read an indictment filled with such slogans as "'enemy of the State', 'high treason', 'plotting for the illegal overthrow of Peoples' Democracies' and [...] a few 'imperialisms' and 'capitalisms' thrown in for good measure" (249), the protagonist manages to escape, only to find that all along he has been incarcerated in a house located in the north London district of Wood Green.

From this point onward *The Ipcress File* reprises the man-on-the-run motif of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) and other thrillers before revealing the full extent of Dalby's collaboration with Jay. The novel begins to come to a head when, after the murder of Charlie Cavendish, a deceased friend's father who had been providing him with sanctuary, I. makes his way to Dalby's home and, peering through a window, sees his department head chatting amiably with "the prince of evil" (283). As that epithet suggests, his perceptions are still being shaped by a reductive binary.⁵ The shock that the narrator registers upon witnessing this scene makes the point explicit by means of two similes: "How can I tell you the impact this made on me? It was like seeing Mr. Macmillan drop a CP [Communist Party]

card out of his wallet; it was like discovering that Edgar Hoover was Lucky Luciano in disguise" (283). I.'s disillusionment, however, soon leads to a keener insight in the novel's climax that revolves around his one-on-one confrontation with Jay, who until now has been an elusive and shadowy figure lurking in the background.

During the face-off between these adversaries Deighton underscores the hollowness of ideological rhetoric while simultaneously using its ventriloquism to reinforce earlier observations about England's post-war consumerist culture.⁶ Because of its importance to the work as a whole, the episode warrants some brief staging. After leaving Dalby's residence, I. follows Jay's chauffeured Rolls Royce to a converted Victorian mansion near Brompton Oratory. Having expected his visitor, Jay engages him in conversation while basting a lobster and sharing a bottle of champagne in the kitchen. Upon I.'s quoting a culinary analogy by Chinese philosopher Lao-Tze, his host warms to "the English patriot" and admits to running "a very big business" that involves brainwashing, which he describes as a weapon "more terrible than nuclear explosions" (293, 296). When his guest seems non-plused by the revelation, Jay launches into a long-winded peroration about the superiority of socialism to capitalism that is intended to provoke some ideological counterargument. A key part of their exchange is the following passage:

Behind Jay's voice I could hear the radio playing very quietly. An English jazz singer was even now Gee Whizzing, Waa Waa and Boop [B]oop booping in an unparalleled plethora of idiocy. He noticed that I was listening, and his attack veered. What of the capitalist countries themselves? What of them then, racked with strikes, with mental illness, with insular disregard for their fellow men. On the brink of anarchy, their police beset by bribes, and by roving bands of overfed cowards seeking an outlet for the sadism that is endemic to capitalism, which is in any case licensed selfishness. [...] He'd timed his speech well, or he had luck, for he switched the radio across to the Home Service. It was time for the news. He went on talking, but I didn't hear him. (297-98)

Recognizing that Jay's harangue is only a spiel by a man who "has spent his life amidst changing political scenes" (307) and come

through them all “like a plastic duck going over Niagara—by floating with the current” (308), I. responds: “Cut out all this [...]. Who killed Charlie Cavendish?” (298). Already forewarned by a telephone call that he is about to be apprehended by Colonel Ross’s men, Jay quietly replies, “We all did [...]. You, me[,] and them” (298).

The answer blames Charlie’s death on what Allan Hepburn calls “the sacrificial logic of espionage” (18), the institutionalized system of distrust that pits nations against one another for ascendancy in the name of domestic security and sanctions murder for the sake of a “greater good.” Although Deighton seems to share this negative view of espionage’s corrosive effect on moral values,⁷ the spokesman who conveys it declares only moments before his arrest that brainwashing, the erasure of human autonomy and agency, is “the greatest step forward of the century” in “dealing with anti-social elements” such as criminals (298), then presses a nuclear-disarmament badge into the narrator’s hand without saying another word.

What exactly are we to make of this climactic scene and particularly Jay’s speech in light of his equivocal views regarding brainwashing? I. dismisses the declamation as mere rigmarole and equates it to the jazz vocalist’s “unparalleled plethora of idiocy” heard on the radio, but the peroration’s illocutionary effect, as already suggested, allows Deighton to acknowledge the “licensed selfishness” (297) of Western capitalist culture. In terms of *The Ipcress File*’s plot, the antagonist’s monologue is meant to draw “the English patriot” out and convince him that they can transcend the ideological divide of their age by not choosing sides, thereby avoiding interpellation as subjects. Intuitively, however, the narrator appears to recognize how specious is this pitch by a practiced opportunist. He also understands that Jay’s readiness to extol brainwashing, or “thought reform” (302), as “the greatest step forward of the century” aligns him with the perpetrators of what prominent Cold War psychologist Joost A. M. Meerloo, no doubt influenced by the dystopian vision of Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), termed “menticide.”⁸

Jay's initial description of brainwashing as a weapon "more terrible than nuclear explosions" (296) coincides with widely shared attitudes toward mind control during the preceding decade. As David Seed's comprehensive book on the subject points out, the term *brainwashing* was coined in 1950 by journalist Edward Hunter to denounce indoctrination "methods being used by the Communist authorities on Chinese citizens and [...] the treatment of U.S. captives in the North Korean prison camps set up along the Manchurian border" (27). The neologism caught on almost immediately, fanned in part by CIA Director Allen W. Dulles, who on 8 May 1953 warned in *U.S. News & World Report* that "brain warfare" was "Russia's secret weapon" and, in Seed's words, "a covert analogue for nuclear war" (29). Less than a month earlier, in order to counter this perceived threat, Dulles had ordered the start of MKULTRA, the cryptonym for a now infamous project to develop a program of psychedelic drugs and hypnopedic techniques for use against the enemy. Well before Richard Condon's bestselling novel *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959) and director John Frankenheimer's well received film adaptation (1962), then, the notion of induced conditioning known as brainwashing had captured the attention of both the American public and the nation's espiocrats for whom it represented a powerful tool in what William Sargant, writing in 1957, referred to as a Cold War "battle for the mind." The vexing worry, though, was that, in going down the MKULTRA path, the U.S. and its allies were resorting to the tactics of totalitarianism. As George F. Kennan, while serving as Chargé d'Affaires in Moscow, warned fellow policymakers at the end of his "Long Telegram" on 22 February 1946: "Finally, we must have courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping" (Etzhold and Gaddis 63). Both sides in the global conflict were thus replicating each other's strategies in a process that theorist Luc Boltanski terms "*symmetrization*" (160), which occurs in situations where "[t]hreats of conspiracy [...] result in

the maintenance, through fear, of a diffuse belief in the presence of an enemy that is at once threatening, concealed[,] and multiform" (167).

In light of these historical developments, *The Ipcress File's* resolution makes clear that, in the arena of contemporary geopolitics, ideologies and their grand narratives too often serve as convenient cover stories for hidden agendas including self-advancement. The rewards for dissimulation by deceivers such as Jay can also be substantial. Thus, even though he was hatching a "plan to brain-wash the entire framework of a nation" (301) through "a network of well-placed men" (308) under his direction, the British government after arresting him pays Jay £160,000, a sum nearly nine times what Dalby had authorized for bribing the opportunist, to open a liaison department with Military Intelligence. On the same day, we are told, Dalby is killed when his sports car careens off a by-pass "while going at an absurd speed" (319), the clear implication being that London's security Establishment had found him expendable.

"The day of the political philosopher is over," decides Deighton's protagonist in *The Billion Dollar Brain*: "Men no longer betray their country for an ideal; they respond to immediate problems" (297). If the word *ideology* once denoted "visionary theorizing" and "idealism," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by the mid-twentieth century a revealing semantic shift had occurred. The *OED's* fourth definition, in support of which it cites a 1955 article by sociologist Edward Shils, indicates "a systematic scheme of ideas [...] regarded as justifying actions, esp. one that is [...] adopted as a whole and maintained regardless of the course of events." Over the two decades immediately following World War II there emerged a growing sense that "political ideas," as Daniel Bell's influential 1960 book *The End of Ideology* was subtitled, had reached a point of "exhaustion." Nine years later scholar Giovanni Sartori glossed the operative term as meaning "a typically dogmatic, i.e., rigid and impermeable, approach to politics" (402). Well before our own age of more parochial and virulent ideologies, *The Ipcress File* recognized the obsolescence of all

utopia-envisioning systems of belief, whether promulgated by the communist East or the capitalist West during the Cold War.

As a spy thriller, then, Deighton's best-selling first novel transcends its genre's stock themes and characters. *The Ipcress File's* default ideologue, to borrow again from Jameson's lexicon, figures as a kind of old-fashioned individualism that refuses to be overwritten by the dicta of formally encoded ideologies reliant upon the perpetuation of an "Us" versus "Them" mentality. In the case of Dalby and Jay, comparable rogues though of different stripes, such individualism takes the form of playing the political system off against itself for purposes of self-advancement. I.'s skepticism, on the other hand, is the measure of his independence and autonomy, which he will not allow to be curtailed by homage to the superstructure of a vocation that for him is only a job at which he happens to be fairly proficient. Deighton's narrator nevertheless does not betray his own side for a cynical, purely personal agenda, as do Dalby and Jay, simply because he is a man of honor. In so depicting him, ironically, *The Ipcress File's* author is harking back to the espionage thriller's antecedents, given his suspicion of all modern political ideologies.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* and "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature."

²Dalby's elitism is captured well by actor Nigel Green's supercilious demeanor in Sidney J. Furie's cinematic adaptation of *The Ipcress File*. Gary McMahon remarks of the 1965 film that "[s]tereotypes border on caricature with [the protagonist's] superiors, Colonel Ross and Major Dalby, [...] but they convince you that stereotypes do exist in Whitehall, and some of them run the country" (25). Deighton's novel, however, assigns no military rank to Dalby, who figures as a new civilian breed of intelligence mogul and not, like Colonel Ross, as a carryover from service in World War II.

³Although Karl Marx never used the phrase “false consciousness,” Friedrich Engels deployed it in a letter of 14 July 1893 to Franz Mehring while discussing ideology as a process that perpetrates “bourgeois illusion.” Since then the concept, which suggests class-based mystification, has enjoyed wide currency among proponents of Marxist theory. See Eugene Goodheart, *The Reign of Ideology* 13-14.

⁴Only in the film version of *The Ipcress File* is Deighton’s protagonist identified as “Harry Palmer.” Scriptwriters W. H. Canaway and James Doran presumably took their cue for so dubbing him from the novel where the narrator remarks, “Now my name isn’t Harry, but in this business it’s hard to remember whether it ever had been” (43). For the sake of convenience I shall follow Nicolas Tredell’s practice of referring to this unnamed agent as “I.” One reason for using this abbreviation, proposes Tredell, is “its similarity to ‘K.’, the initial used to designate Franz Kafka’s protagonist Josef K. in *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), [which] suggests that I.’s battle with disorientation and misdirection has a Kafkaesque quality.”

⁵Despite his sporadic bouts of verbal sparring with Dalby, the protagonist, perhaps because as “a refugee from the War Office” (13) he dislikes by-the-book Colonel Ross, admits on two occasions his admiration for the WOOC(P) supervisor. In the context of referring to Dalby’s “IBM machine,” which in its efficiency confers his power, I. acknowledges that he was “one of the best bosses I ever had” (89). Later he speaks of his “pleasure” in “working closely with Dalby” during their first few days on Tokwe Atoll, specifically because of “his readiness to use information from his inferiors—both socially and militarily speaking” (211). The plaudits suggest that, although piqued by Dalby’s condescension, I. has been conditioned by his own form of internalized “false consciousness.”

⁶A few examples may suffice. In Chapter 2, after making initial contact with Jay, I. describes what he sees along a street in central London: “We walked past grim-faced soldiers in photo-shop windows. Stainless-steel orange squeezers and moron-manipulated pin-tables metronoming away the sunny afternoon in long thin slices of boredom. Through wonderlands of wireless entrails from the little edible condensers to gutted radar receivers for thirty-nine and six” (24). Later, in a passage that anticipates Jay’s derisive speech, the protagonist reads in the *Daily Express*: “A policeman earning £570 p.a. [was] attacked by youths with knives outside a cinema where a nineteen-year-old rock-an’-roll singer was making a personal appearance for £600” (137). Deighton thus contrasts images of England’s wartime past (“grim-faced soldiers in photo-shop windows” and “gutted radar receivers”) with the gadgetry, diversions, and materialistic culture that succeeded it.

⁷I base this inference on the climax of *The Billion Dollar Brain*, Deighton’s fourth novel. While in Leningrad, his serial protagonist unaccountably kills Harvey Newbegin, a freelance agent and “friend” intent on defecting to Russia, by pushing him under the wheels of an oncoming bus. When Colonel Alexeyevitch Stok discusses the incident with I., the Soviet counter-intelligence officer warns that in the world they share “[w]hat we have to fear is the loss of purity within ourselves[, ...] an abandoning of principle for the sake of policy” (282). Deighton

clearly implies that moral integrity cannot remain uncontaminated by prolonged participation in the "Great Game" of espionage.

⁸For directing me to Meerloo's several publications on this subject during the 1950s, I am indebted to Timothy Melley's "Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States" and his subsequent book titled *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*.

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