Rizwaan Sabir. *The Suspect: Counterterrorism, Islam and The Security State.*

London: Pluto Press, March 2022.

Paperback ISBN: 9780745338484

eBook ISBN: 9781786807182

256 pages

Reviewed by Rhiannon Firth, University College London.

Author Rizwaan Sabir, as a then-MA student at Nottingham University, became known following his arrest along with Hicham Yezza in May 2008 as one half of the "Nottingham Two." They were detained for six days without charge on suspicion of terrorism for the possession of a document titled the *Al Qaeda Training Manual*, which was freely available on the internet and from bookstores. Sabir had downloaded it from a US government website for use as primary source material in his proposed PhD research on armed Muslim groups. But Sabir's arrest, detention, interrogation, and release without charge takes up only about a fifth of the pages; the remainder of the book covers subsequent events revealing the extent of the surveillance to which he was subject, and his increasing awareness of information held about him by not only the police but a dizzying array of interconnected authorities. These events include several stop-and-searches by the roadside (each a frightening and infuriating story in its own right), detentions at the border, and an attempt by the UK military to recruit him into their psychological warfare unit. These events occurred more than 7 years after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center that haunt the book, forming a backdrop of ever-increasing securitisation against the everyday lives of Muslims in the West. These historical conditions and their political, social and psychological consequences are the subject of the book, as we witness the development of Sabir's complex trauma and psychological distress. A gripping read from start to finish, the book is a standalone must-read; moreover, *The Suspect is* not just relevant but indeed essential reading for any scholar of utopia.

The book contains a foreword by Hicham Yezza, arrested alongside Sabir, who commends the work for its skillful delineation of 'the contours of the intricate lattice of personal, institutional, political, and ideological forces that led to our absurd, preposterous arrests on our university campus for suspected terrorism, and their long-drawn aftermath' (xi). The Afterword by lawyer Aamer Anwar situates Sabir's story in his broader experience of working with Muslims in the British legal system, arguing that while Sabir's story is well-told, it is by no means an isolated case, "it does not matter how educated or integrated we are into British society … When a police officer or agent of the state wants to racially profile and investigate you in the post 9/11 world, they can act with almost total impunity" (195).

At first glance, *The Suspect* is not self-evidently an academic book because it takes the form of a first-person account, broken into readable short chapters (33 chapters of around 5-10 pages each) which helps the reader digest sometimes disturbing material. It is written with a sense of humour: for example, detecting racial profiling when questioned by a border guard, claiming to recognise Sabir's face: 'have you been on any aid convoys to Syria?', Sabir responds 'I have an extremely common face that is often mistaken for somebody else' (123). The bizarre story of the attempted recruitment of Sabir into the British military is also comedic. Major Hussein insists the military do not go around 'tapping people on the shoulder' when we can see this is precisely what is happening (125-9). It could comfortably be read by a politically-interested non-academic readership. Nevertheless, as the book develops it is clearly an intricately thought-out work of social theory whose form is complimentary with its function. Although written as a first-person personal narrative, this is skilfully interwoven with analyses of historical events (particularly 9/11), social structures (racism, islamophobia) and government policies (Prevent, CONTEST), and how these impacted on Sabir's embodied experience. The book shares the function of consciousness-raising with many utopian books and movements, beginning from embodied experience of oppression before building a structural account.[ii] It is incredibly well-researched; drawing on a range of primary materials including police interview transcripts, government policy documents, letters from the Crown Prosecution Services, responses to Freedom of

Information requests, NGO and Advocacy organisation reports, Home Office statistics, newspaper reports and many more. It also creates a structural account drawing on theoretical scholarship from critical security studies, criminology, and classic texts in politics and international relations theory.

Why should scholars of utopia be interested in a book subtitled "Counterterrorism, Islam, and the Security State"? This indeed seems counter-intuitive, and something I asked of myself—given my own historical connection to these events: A word is needed on my own interest and positionality in relation to this book. I was very familiar with the events surrounding the arrest of the 'Nottingham Two', because I was studying in the same university department as Sabir at the time. I frequently saw Sabir and Yezza around campus, as I attended many of the same events and protests, such as a peaceful protest in solidarity with Palestine which features in the book. I was a regular reader of *Ceasefire* magazine, an independent publication focused on left-wing political theory, art and activism for which Yezza is Chief Editor.[i] I also attended, alongside hundreds of other staff and students, the protests for academic freedom that took place on campus in the wake of the arrests over the university's complicity and response. The arrests shook me, so I obsessively kept myself informed of developments at the time.

I knew little of Sabir's trajectory after 2010, except that he achieved his dream of completing his PhD and becoming a successful academic (which is no mean achievement for a working-class Muslim even aside from the added persecution Sabir was subject to). These events were paradigm shifting for myself and others at the institution. Although ~~I was~~ aware of rising Islamophobia and securitisation following 9/11, and worried about the escalating racist abuse some of my friends experienced in the streets, I never considered that freedom of thought and speech might be under threat for my friendship groups or communities, which had always included Muslims. This is clearly experience from a position of privilege, and it might still be that I personally have no reason to be afraid (although I was/am). Yet as students Hicham and Rizwaan were like me in so many other ways that their Muslimness had never much occurred to

me until these events. I knew them to share similar politics to mine, and to be 'good guys': to see them treated as 'extremists' was far too close to home, and shattered my previously unquestioned sense of safety to freely hold and articulate ideas I believed in.

Herein lies my interest in reading Sabir's book as an important text for scholars of utopian studies. In the first instance, the book can be read as a dystopia. It mobilises the familiar device of the alienated minority figure struggling to navigate a frightening security state and surveillance apparatus that unfairly targets them. It rouses and mobilises political affects of fear, hypervigilance, and paranoia in the reader. Sabir struggles to understand this incomprehensible and secretive state and builds a knowledge base as a means of his own survival within it: to remain free from arrest, to maintain a livelihood and develop his professional career. The knowledge he builds is profiled as 'criminal intelligence' (72; 96-99) – and his intrinsic desire for learning means he is increasingly viewed with suspicion, construed as a potential enemy of the very state for which he was seeking to produce knowledge as a productive citizen (30). The tone, style, and themes covered, are remarkably like those of canonical authors of dystopia such as Orwell and Zamyatin. The author describes his experiences as 'Kafkaesque' (101), and the term is repeated across endorsements and reviews - *if only it were fiction!* The subject and his voyage into mental distress become the site of dystopia: a frontier between the utopian promises of the West and the securitizations and exclusions that these are built upon.

This leads to a second point - the need for utopians to become invested in knowledge of contemporary counterinsurgency tactics, as utopian solutions are increasingly securitised and criminalised. This is highly racialized– in my own recent book, *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action* (Pluto Press, 2022). I discuss how Black Lives Matter were excessively policed during the Summer 2020 wave of protests, and how Hurricane Katrina, which disproportionately affected Black communities, was policed in a much more violent and militarised fashion than was the "Occupy Sandy" hurricane relief effort: a more diverse movement than is often thought, yet certainly majority white. Nevertheless, my book argues, as

does Sabir's, counterinsurgency tactics are increasingly being used against leftist social movements regardless of race (132). Repression/criminalisation and recuperation/co-optation are two sides of the same coin, which divides social action into that which is helpful to the neoliberal state and capital (therefore mobilised as such, to plug gaps as the welfare state withdraws), and that which is perceived as a threat and quashed. This is inherently anti-utopian, because it does not allow for expression of political desires beyond the status quo.

Utopians must stand against racism, because we should stand in solidarity; but also because as critical and radical people trying to create alternative futures in the present - counterinsurgency tactics are increasingly aimed at all political activists. Sabir's case illustrates they threaten our freedom as academics to think and to speak, and fear is increasingly internalised. Securitisation can be understood as an anti-utopian practice that attempts to define and delimit the range of desires and grassroots alternatives that are permissible within the terms of the system. White, middle-class and depoliticised mutual aid initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic were lauded by the government and media so long as they did not extend beyond helping neighbours with shopping, keeping the wheels of capitalism turning as the welfare state withdraws. Those mutual aid initiatives which sought to defend groups and communities from dispossession found themselves at the sharp edge of the security state – such as deportation resistances seen in Glasgow, and the defense of squatted spaces from eviction and of long-standing social centres at risk from increasing rents in gentrifying areas. If, as I argue in my book, the state seeks to capitalise on all social relations,[iv] and if those relations which it cannot mobilise as state-friendly 'social capital' are criminalised and repressed, then it stands to reason that this ultimately includes all utopian thought and practice. Ironically, it is we scholars, in our roles as academics, who are expected to be at the front-line of this policing of thought, under the Prevent legislation in the UK. Sabir's story tells the horrific consequences when individuals and institutions make mistakes undergirded by media and policy-driven racist hysteria and moral panic.

Finally, *The Suspect* culminates in its own utopian vision. Rizwaan Sabir is one of us. He was

persecuted because he is a Muslim, but also because this identity intersected with his socio-political desires to create a better world. He initially dared have faith in the promise of justice within the legal system, then despite persecution continued to hope and fight for a better world in his scholarly work 'for the Muslim community as a whole' (62). It is probably in his articulation of a positive utopian vision that I am least persuaded. Sabir outlines a vision of a community-driven 'support hub that exists outside the prying eyes of the surveillance state' (194). It functions to provide a space for those with mental ill-health triggered by racism, Islamophobia, and state violence to authentically express their experiences, thoughts and feelings, whilst 'resisting the damage that is being done to ordinary Muslims and communities of colour by the securitising of the public sector' (194). At this point, I am on board with the vision of what sounds like a grassroots infrastructure and social movement of action-oriented consciousness-raising groups. He goes on to envision the support hub serving as a blueprint for what a future (utopian) National Health Service (NHS) might look like, since the NHS has been prevented providing authentic psychiatric care, having been coerced into conducting counter-radicalisation surveillance through the Prevent policy (192).

The point at which I diverge, however, is at Sabir's suggestion such an initiative be 'autonomous' (190) yet funded through a 'central government commitment to dealing with … the trauma and harm that emerges as a result of specific government policies and state violence' (192). It is on this final point that I diverge, in a hopefully productive dialogue. I would follow classical anarchist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin[iv], and contemporary anthropologists of the state such as James Scott,[v] to argue it is fundamental to the nature of the state to mobilise public services and provide funding as a foil for securitisation and surveillance, so the very best one can fight for is autonomy. I believe this is a project that utopian scholars can and must fight in solidarity with those who are closer to the front-line of repression than ourselves.

[i] *Ceasefire* is still in operation and contains many articles of interest to utopian scholars, and can be found online at https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/

[ii] For explorations of the consciousness-raising function of utopia, see Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2000); Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020); Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson, "For a revival of feminist consciousness-raising: horizontal transformation of epistemologies and transgression of neoliberal TimeSpace" *Gender and Education*, 28.3 (2016), 343-358.

[iii] Firth, *Disaster Anarchy*, 8.

[iv] Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, *The State, its Historic Role* (London: Freedom Press, 1920).

[v] James C Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 2008)