

Filling in the Blanks: Trevor Paglen's Parapolitical Geography

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For the past several years, geographer, artist and writer Trevor Paglen has been creating a body of work investigating the contours of the US security apparatus. His latest book, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*, is a travelogue into the darkest corners of the US "black world" – the secret geography of the American empire in which the US state conducts its classified military and intelligence activities. His exploration of this world and its accompanying juridical vacuum does not only lead him to remote desert locations in which the black world exists in geographical isolation from the everyday lives of most citizens. These are of course included, but beyond the sweltering depths of the Nevada desert and military bases on the outskirts of Kabul, Paglen's investigation takes him to places like the geography department at the University of California Berkeley, where he did his PhD, and corporate parks in northern Virginia. What emerges is, as he puts it, a world map of the war on terror's "relational geography".

Whether thought about in geographical or economic terms, this black world is immense. In the United States approximately four million people have security clearances to work on black world classified projects, in contrast to the 1.8 million civilians employed by the federal government in the so-called "white" world.¹ In terms of quantity of pages, more of the recent documented history of the US is classified rather than not. While the number of secret documents can only be roughly estimated in the billions, an astounding fact is that in 2001 the US Information Security Oversight Office reported a \$5.5 billion expenditure to protect these classified documents.² Secret military bases cover large swathes of America's southwest and classified networks connect different locations throughout the world.

Blank Spots on the Map is a convincing critique of this world and the abuses it allows: everything from the sanctioning of torture to corporate and bureaucratic corruption and the avoidance of wrongful death lawsuits. While it is written with a great deal of anger at times, in the book as in his entire oeuvre, Paglen exhibits a fascination with his subject that differentiates his work from the more hackneyed books on the various ways in which the war on terror undermines democracy. Importantly, rather than being another addition to the legions of literature documenting the misdeeds of the Bush administration, Paglen stresses the historical origins of the black world and its corrosive affect on American democracy since World War II. Paglen does highlight the ways in which the black world expanded under the Bush administration, but he makes it clear that it is not merely the case of one administration's abuses of power, but a systemic problem.

¹ Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map* (USA: Dutton, 2009), p. 4.

² Peter Galison, "Removing Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (Autumn 2004), Available online at: <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/features/artsstatements/arts.galison.htm>.

Sissela Bok has argued that increases in secrecy in government and business have a direct connection to the rise conspiracy theory: as secrecy multiplies so does the fear of conspiracy.³ This process seems to work the other way as well: as conspiracy theory has become all the more prevalent over the past two decades, many researchers are scared of dealing with the black world for fear of being taken for cranks. Paglen claims early in the book that one of the reasons that research into the black world is nearly non-existent is its susceptibility to the charge of conspiracy theory: many associate the very notion of the black world with paranoid visions of New World Order helicopters, alien holding facilities at Area 51, and theories of obscure elites manipulating history from the shadows. It is not only its rigorous research that allows *Blank Spots on the Map* to avoid the conspiracy theory tag, but rather its refusal to use this research as the basis for speculation. As such the book functions well as a contribution to the burgeoning field of parapolitics. Parapolitics is usefully defined by Robert Cribb as the study of “systemic clandestinity” or “the study of criminal sovereignty, of criminals behaving as sovereigns and sovereigns behaving as criminals in a systematic way.”⁴ The term “parapolitics” has only emerged in scholarly literature very recently, in the early nineties, and focuses not merely on the activities and crimes of clandestine and criminal groups like security services, cartels, terrorist organizations, secret societies, and cabals, but primarily on the systemic roles played by such actors. If traditional political science looks at the “overt politics of the public state, so parapolitics as a field studies the relationships between the public state and the political processes and arrangements outside and beyond conventional politics,” claims Eric Wilson.⁵ As a discipline it has been tainted by its similarities to traditional conspiracy theory, but also by the widespread failure of researchers to investigate the systemic nature of these phenomena, often preferring to see them as the work of rogue elements or corrupted individuals.

Blank Spots on the Map clearly posits the black world as a sector whose influence is global and systemic. In her reflections on the Pentagon Papers, Hannah Arendt writes, “[S]ecrecy – what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government – and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history.”⁶ While this is undoubtedly the case, what is novel about the current period is not only the fact that secrecy has been generalized – to borrow a concept for Guy Debord – but that the secrecy of the black world has become an enormous part of the military-industrial complex.⁷ This does not only affect the art of government, but impacts society as a whole. As Paglen writes, “The black world is much more than an archipelago of secret bases. It is a secret *basis* underlying much of the American economy” (277).

Paglen identifies the Manhattan Project as the foundation of the black world in its enormous expenditure, mobilization of manpower, and its generation of large secret sites. “Building secret weapons during a time of war was nothing new. Building

³ Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, (Vintage, 1989), p. 199.

⁴ Robert Cribb, “Introduction: Parapolitics, Shadow Governance and Criminal Sovereignty,” *Government of the Shadows*, ed. Eric Wilson (Pluto Press, 2009), p. 2, 8.

⁵ Eric Wilson, “Deconstructing the Shadows,” *Government of the Shadows*, p. 30.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 8. (Nov 18th, 1971). Available online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/10375>.

⁷ See Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Verso, 1990).

industrialized secret weapons, employing hundreds of thousands of workers, the world's top scientists, dedicated factories, and multibillion-dollar budgets hidden from Congress – that was unprecedented. It would become a standard operating procedure” (93). If the quest to build the world's first atomic bomb set the foundations of the black world, it became a legitimate part of the US state with the National Security Act of 1947, which, among other things, created the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, and merged the various branches of the military into the Department of Defense. A key event in this history is the CIA Act of 1949, which remains the statutory basis for the black budget. Remarkably, the bill was voted into legislation without congress even being able to read it in its entirety. It had been vetted by the Committee on Armed Services who removed portions of the bill that were “of a highly confidential nature” – as Paglen emphasizes, “*The bill itself was secret*” (190).

Paglen skillfully moves from the historical foundations of the black world to stories of individuals around the world caught up in its occasionally Kafkaesque intricacies. One of the book's more harrowing chapters is the story of Walter Kasza, a sheet metal worker who had been assigned by his union to work on a secret Air Force base deep in the Nevada desert near Groom Lake. In order to work at the base, Kasza and his co-workers were forced to sign secrecy agreements, and the military in turn classed them as John Does. The base's dominant mode of disposing of top-secret garbage was to simply burn it, and the workers were consistently exposed to the resulting toxic smoke. They developed bizarre skin conditions – “their bodies were covered with fishlike scales that seeped blood when they moved” – and had lung and kidney problems as well (149). When some workers died, many of their families, together with surviving workers suffering from similar symptoms, filed a class-action suit for wrongful death against their employer. The courts threw out the case as the defendants were able to simply cite the state's need for secrecy, in that even the simple presentation of evidence of the victims' ill health would compromise classified information. The military would not even acknowledge that the base on which the workers inhaled the toxins existed.

Blank Spots on the Map makes clear the epistemological boundaries that stand in the way of any investigation into the black world. This is dramatized in a fascinating passage in which Paglen goes through the Department of Defense's public budget from the 2008 fiscal year. As fat as a phonebook, the budget contains line items for various projects. Many programs include descriptions, but alongside of more banal expenses like latrines and postage, there are line items for programs like Chalk Eagle, which was allocated \$352 million for 2009 and does not include any program description. Beyond this there is another class of programs with names like Cobra Ball and Forest Green that don't even have their budgets listed, and then at the most extreme there are programs whose names or expenses are not revealed and only are listed as “Special Program” or “Special Activities”. By adding up all of the line items and comparing the result – \$64 billion – with the overall Department of Defense budget – just under \$80 billion – one can roughly figure out how much was spent on these completely secret projects. This \$16 billion is only a part of the overall black budget, however, and Paglen, citing a study, claims that it was around \$34 billion for the 2009 fiscal year.

Here Paglen acknowledges his literal inability to “follow the money” and the inevitable incompleteness of any investigation into the black world. This is reflected

in Paglen's artistic work as well. Paglen's photo series, *The Other Night Sky*, captures classified reconnaissance satellites by taking long exposures of the night sky, while in his *Limit Telephotography* project he used astronomical equipment to photograph secret military installations at great distances. Both shoot their objects of study at a great distance, and one has to take the artist's word that one is in fact looking at a spy satellite and not merely an ordinary communications satellite; that one is looking at a secret military installation and not merely a remote airport hanger. In *I Could Tell You but Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me* (2007), Paglen presents a collection of patches connected to various black world projects. One, for example, is an image of a topless woman riding a killer whale with the words "Rodeo Gal" stitched onto the patch and was worn by the flight crews testing a particular cruise missile. The distance in this work is not as literal as in Paglen's photography, but the viewer is also forced to put a great trust in the veracity of the artist's revelation and there is also a layer of mystery that cloaks the images, intensified by the notion that one is perhaps viewing sensitive, classified information. These works engage the epistemological drive, presenting the existence of a secret world, the knowledge of which seems as essential for any understanding of the contemporary world as it remains restricted in its totality for anyone without the highest levels of security clearance.

Towards the conclusion of *Blank Spots on the Map* Paglen writes, "I must confess that when I began this project, I was seduced by blank spots on maps, by the promise of hidden knowledge that they seemed to contain. It was easy to imagine that if I could just find one more code name, if I only knew what the HAVE PANTHER project was, [...] somehow the world itself would change for the better" (280). As he concludes, however, this is not enough. Simply revealing the details of many of these classified projects is a complex and time-consuming task – getting the state to acknowledge their existence is even more difficult. While the exposition of these programs is important work, it has to be linked to systemic concerns if it is not going to be reduced to a mere cataloguing of the black world. This is exactly what makes Paglen's work so powerful and innovative. Paglen is able to shed light on many of the dark corners of this world, but the map that emerges is inevitably incompletely. Their contours can be grasped, but the blank spots are not completely filled in. In Paglen's cartographic successes and failures, the black world emerges in relief.