The Patterning of Repression: 
FBI Counterintelligence and the New Left*

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Abstract

While the social movement literature recognizes the interactive nature of collective action, models almost uniformly focus on protestors themselves. Consequently, we know a great deal about how social movement organizations recruit participants, mobilize resources, and initiate activity, but have considerably less understanding of how authorities allocate repression in response to (and sometimes in anticipation of) protest events. Here, I use memos from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) against the New Left between 1968 and 1971 to understand the patterning of repression against protest groups. COINTELPRO is a unique data source; the program was autonomous from other government agencies and was organized solely to covertly “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” the activities of FBI targets. The level of tangible threat proxied by New Left groups’ size, level of activity, or propensity for violence did not directly structure FBI activity. Instead, these target group characteristics were mediated by organizational processes endogenous to the FBI itself. Specifically, central actors in the FBI allocated organizational controls that ensured that visible (i.e., nonlocal) targets were repressed independent of the targets’ local activities.

The literature on social movements and collective action usefully recognizes that protest is an interactive clash between authorities and challengers. Most work in this area, however, has dealt with one side of this equation, focusing squarely on the challengers themselves. Consequently, we know a lot about how

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social movement organizations recruit participants, mobilize resources, and initiate activity, while processes related to state repression are more crudely theorized; repression (presumably in all of its forms) becomes a cost of participation or, to the extent that it builds solidarity among aggrieved actors, an indirect benefit (Gamson, Fireman & Rytina 1982; Oberschall 1994; Opp & Roehl 1990). Researchers interested in the “conflict-repression nexus,” or the effect of repression on protest and vice-versa, have taken the relationship between challengers and power holders more seriously but have been hindered by a lack of consistent results (see DeNardo 1985; Francisco 1995; Muller & Weede 1990; Neidhardt 1989; Rasler 1996; White 1989, as well as attempts to explain these inconsistencies in Davenport, in press; Koopmans 1997; and Lichbach 1987). Another offshoot of research on movements has focused on the policing of protest (della Porta & Reiter 1998), which, while it usefully recognizes that repression is shaped by organizational features of policing agencies, has been limited by its predominant focus on overt policing of large public demonstrations.

The implicit assumption behind most of this work is that authorities allocate repression — here defined as any action intended to increase the cost of protest activity or reduce challengers’ capacity for dissent — in a rational manner. As state agencies evaluate threats to the status quo, the expectation is that they allocate repression purposefully, with the level of repression increasing with the level of threat (Davenport 1999; Gupta, Singh & Sprague 1993; Hibbs 1973).1 Such assumptions are often insensitive to the fact that repression is allocated through multiple policing agencies, which vary in terms of their resources, tactics, and organizational structure. Since these agencies are likely at times to operate outside of established legal and political controls on their behavior (as is apparent when looking at the legacy of scandal that has marked many big-city police departments across the United States and federal agencies such as the CIA and FBI), it is likely that such organizational characteristics play a significant role in structuring the form and pattern of repressive activity.

A single case — the FBI’s COINTELPRO against the New Left — can illustrate how organizations allocate repression. This case provides a unique window into the processes that underlie such activity because this program was intended solely to “expose, disrupt, and neutralize” its targets; and its actions against the New Left were documented within internal memos now available to the public through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The FBI, through the maneuverings of its director, J. Edgar Hoover, was able to remain remarkably insulated from exogenous oversight of its activities, meaning that the program effectively was subject to internal controls only. Additionally, the FBI’s counterintelligence activities were almost always instituted covertly and proactively to hinder targets’ capacity to engage in protest activity. Largely due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable data, such covert activity is rarely included
in examinations of repression (Marx 1974, 1998), a fact that has likely biased
our understanding of the patterns and impact of state repressive efforts.

The FBI: A Brief History

The Federal Bureau of Investigation began as a small agency with a limited
jurisdiction in 1909; it quickly grew to employ thousands of agents who
handled federal criminal investigations as well as the monitoring of domestic
security threats. Much of this growth was spearheaded by J. Edgar Hoover, who
served as director for an incredible 48 years, beginning in 1924 and ending at
his death in 1972. Hoover brilliantly managed to consistently and successfully
lobby for higher budget allocations. These were largely buoyed by strategies that
ensured the Bureau held the attention of the national media, either through
the suppression of subversive threats in times of crisis (i.e., the Palmer Raids
in 1919, suspected spies and saboteurs during World War II, and the Red Menace
at the outset of the Cold War) or, even more successfully, by capturing well-
known gangsters such as John Dillinger and Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd during
the 1930s. Throughout his long tenure as director, Hoover refashioned the FBI
into a highly centralized bureaucratic organization; its field offices were
dispersed across the country but each came under the tight control of the
director's office at the national headquarters in Washington, D.C. He also
ensured that the bureau's activities were not compromised by its ostensible
bosses in the executive branch; this autonomy was facilitated by the extensive
files that Hoover compiled documenting the illegal or immoral activities of
many powerful Washington figures, including congressional leaders, attorneys
general, and even presidents (Theoharis 1991).

This propensity for intelligence gathering extended as well to any groups
or individuals deemed a "domestic security threat." As early as the 1920s,
Hoover directed the bureau's infiltration of various anarchist groups, as well
as the Ku Klux Klan; such monitoring became an FBI trademark. A mandate
from President Roosevelt in 1939 formalized the bureau's authority in such
matters, though by that point Hoover could already announce that the FBI had
"compiled extensive indices of individuals, groups, and organizations, engaged
in . . . subversive activities, in espionage activities, or any activities that are
possibly detrimental to the internal security of the United States" (quoted in
Powers 1987:232). Such activities formally extended to actual harassment and
disruption of suspected threats with the advent of the FBI's COINTELPROs
in 1956. The first COINTELPRO predictably targeted the Communist Party-
USA; its stated mission was to "expose, disrupt, and otherwise neutralize" its
targets (FBI Memo, Brennan to Sullivan, 5/9/68). Over the next twelve years,
new classes of targets were defined as threats within the bureau, and by 1968
there existed COINTELPROs against the Socialist Workers' Party (begun in 1961), white hate groups (in 1964), black nationalist/hate groups (in 1967), and the New Left (in 1968). In theory, these programs could be disbanded if their goals were met (i.e., if the targeted groups were completely neutralized). However, in practice none of these programs were ever discontinued, even when field offices requested to do so after targeted groups had been inactive for an extended period of time. All COINTELPROs were terminated in 1971, when the public became aware of the FBI's activities after a group of activists calling themselves the "Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI" burglarized the bureau's files and gradually leaked them to various media outlets.

This analysis of the FBI's counterintelligence activities focuses on the program against the New Left, which was in existence for almost three years. When the New Left program was initiated in 1968, the bureau was almost completely insulated from other agencies both within and outside of the U.S. government. FBI director Hoover had responded to external pressure to investigate the Ku Klux Klan after the murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 by requesting the initiation of a COINTELPRO against "White Hate Groups." Since the proposed program against the Klan had broad political support, Hoover was able to use this leverage to obtain the autonomy he desired for the bureau (Keller 1989), and COINTELPRO-White Hate Groups became the template for subsequent programs. This autonomy was secure for as long as the bureau's activities remained secret, and the central consideration for the appropriateness of COINTELPRO activities was always whether they risked exposure of the FBI's programs. The bureau successfully avoided external accountability or oversight of these programs until its actions were finally publicly revealed in 1971.

The Organization of the FBI

During the COINTELPRO era, the FBI consisted of a national headquarters in Washington, D.C., and 59 field offices throughout the country. Each field office was responsible for its surrounding territory, determined largely by the boundaries of federal court districts; therefore, every county in the United States fell under the jurisdiction of a particular field office. The staffing of field offices ranged from a few dozen agents in the smallest offices to several hundred in the largest (the New York field office was by far the largest office, employing over one thousand agents). Each field office dealt with a full range of federally prosecutable criminal acts; even at the height of COINTELPRO, intelligence and counterintelligence activities against subversive targets only made up a small fraction of agents' activities. In a field office, each COINTELPRO was assigned to a special agent, who in turn reported directly to the Special Agent
in Charge (SAC) of the office (all of the 59 field offices eventually participated in at least one COINTELPRO). SACs served as direct links between field office activity and J. Edgar Hoover, the bureau director throughout the entire COINTELPRO era. As discussed above, Hoover had personally shaped almost every aspect of the modern FBI, and most accounts of the bureau view him as the primary, if not the unitary, architect of all bureau programs (see Keller 1989; Powers 1987; Theoharis & Cox 1988; Whitehead 1956). However, while COINTELPRO memos sent from national headquarters were formally signed by "Director, FBI," there were in fact a number of central actors in the bureau who could send memos under this heading. In all likelihood Hoover did indeed read most of the memos associated with COINTELPRO, and he had veto power over any other bureau employee's recommendations. However, it would be a mistake to view memos from "Director, FBI" as equivalent to Hoover and Hoover alone. Rather, a small group of individuals at the assistant director (or higher) level based in Washington, D.C., made the final decisions about all counterintelligence actions.

In the case of COINTELPRO-New Left, each SAC was expected to initially compile a description of all existing target groups and key activists ("those individuals who are the moving forces behind the [target groups] and on whom we have intensified our investigations") and submit general recommendations for effective counterintelligence activity. The director then summarized these initial recommendations in a memo to all field offices. SACs were subsequently expected to provide quarterly progress reports (specifying potential activity, pending activity, and tangible results since the last report) as well as propose actions to "expose, disrupt, and neutralize" the targets found in their territory. The directorate, in turn, had to authorize proposals prior to the implementation of any counterintelligence actions.

The relationship between field offices and national headquarters was complex and to some degree obscured by the fact that Hoover exerted such a high degree of control over local agents. While the directorate did actively ensure a consistent allocation of repression through top-down controls, the bureau viewed field offices as its "eyes"—local experts translating massive amounts of intelligence data into reliable recommendations about repressing the protest field. The ethic of COINTELPRO was such that, in theory, field offices made judgments about when to initiate repression and which targets to repress; the directorate's authorization was required to ensure that no bureau policies were violated by these local actions. In practice, the directorate did have considerable input into the allocation of repression, but the key point here is that the bureau's overarching policy was based upon field offices responding to local threats and opportunities with counterintelligence activity. Responsiveness to local happenings was always the stated strategy within COINTELPRO; field offices were never instructed to only privilege particular national-level targets.
The directorate's emphasis on local knowledge did not, however, translate into meaningful field-office autonomy. While communication between the directorate and individual agents in field offices throughout the country was essential to initiating COINTELPRO actions, it is clear that information flowing up through the organization (i.e., from SACs to the directorate) did not have the same impact as information flowing downward. The directorate had access to the information provided by each field office and could reach a conclusion independent of the influence of any particular SAC (although his decision may have been shaped by the information provided by a particular SAC, the directorate was not subject to any sort of sanction for not following the SAC's recommendation). The directorate also was able to impose its wishes on every SAC. This power asymmetry operated through two types of organizational controls (March & Simon 1958). First, obtrusive controls constituted orders that SACs had to follow in order to avoid negative sanctions. These controls could take on a general form, such as when the bureau made a "request" that all field offices were to submit proposals to neutralize the alliance between the targeted groups Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Panther Party (see FBI Memo to 16 SACs, 8/20/69). Frequently, these "suggestions" did not hide the potential for negative sanctions. One memo from the director to Boston (10/21/68) concluded with this warning: "You will be expected to be aggressive and forceful. A lackadaisical attitude will not be tolerated. Failure on your part to seize the initiative may result in administrative action being taken."

Alternately, the directorate exerted power over SAC activities through unobtrusive controls, which constrained subordinates' behaviors not through explicit demands or orders but instead through control of the premises upon which agents made their decisions. These types of controls were effective because they voluntarily restricted the range of alternatives to include only those that furthered the interests of the organization. Thus, within an organization with strong unobtrusive controls, we should not be surprised to hear William C. Sullivan, an assistant director of the FBI, observe: 

During the ten years that I was on the U.S. Intelligence Board . . . never once did I hear anybody, including myself, raise the questions: "Is this course of action which we have agreed upon lawful, is it legal, is it moral and ethical?"

We never gave any thought to this realm of reasoning, because we were just naturally pragmatists. The one thing we were concerned with was this: will this course of action work, will it get us what we want, will it reach the objective we desire to reach? (Quoted in Churchill & VanderWall 1990:33)

Beyond the pragmatism signaled by such a myopic view, it seems clear that the premises upon which everyone on the board made decisions were limited to those oriented toward the group's ultimate goals. Within the context of COINTELPRO memos the directorate often presented the bureau line, which then became the baseline for any further related activity. Unobtrusive controls served to shape the range of actions initiated within particular contexts, either
through positively reinforcing desirable proposals or by "guiding" SACs to these types of desirable options. Note that the key distinction between this type of control and the obtrusive controls discussed above is that no explicit commands were used here and no sanctions directly resulted from noncompliance. Instead, SACs were guided to the directorate's ideal path through constraints on their decision-making process. In Herbert Simon's conception, unobtrusive controls lead a SAC to "make decisions, by himself, as the organization would like him to decide" (1976:103).

The Data

Virtually all activity and transfer of information within COINTELPRO took the form of memos sent between the director's office in Washington, D.C., and field offices located throughout the U.S. These memos are accessible by the public through the FOIA, and all of the memos that had been released as of 1977 (amounting to approximately 50,000 pages) have been collected on microfilm by Scholarly Resources, Inc. Overall, the FBI has released 2,487 separate memos related to COINTELPRO-New Left, and there has been considerable debate over the completeness of the released files. Most optimistically, James Davis (1997:18) describes the documents released in 1977 as "virtually the entire file," though he does not explain how we might be able to verify this estimate. At the other (conservative) extreme, if each field office actually filed quarterly reports for the remainder of the 1968 calendar year, there should be 118 such reports existing in the record. In actuality, 77 quarterly reports are available, 65% of the total expected population. However, it is highly unlikely that the full number of reports were ever filed, since field offices overseeing territories with no New Left targets active or even present only rarely checked in with national headquarters, and unlike other offices, were never subject to organizational controls to ensure compliance. Thus it seems reasonable to suspect that using quarterly report submissions as an indicator systematically under-represents the completeness of the record as a whole.

Indeed, the strongest sign that the overall record is considerably more complete than the quarterly reports suggest is the fact that, when read together, the released files compose a coherent narrative. Since there is a significant amount of cross-referencing of proposals and actions, the extent to which this narrative emerges in an understandable manner provides a fairly good sense of the completeness of the available files. With few exceptions, I have been able to piece together the sequences of information and actions that comprise the repressive activity under COINTELPRO. For example, there are few actions referred to in quarterly reports or other documents that do not cross-check with other released memos; in the few cases when actions are not cross-
referenced, the information in the summary report was often detailed enough to document the earlier action in the data set. Of course, it is possible that certain (probably severe) activities were not included in the files at all, but rather were dealt with face-to-face, over the telephone, or under a different, more highly classified memo heading. However, since the directorate strongly encouraged a culture of exhaustive documentation, there was no incentive to hide such actions and there was no consciousness of the fact that the memos would ever be viewed by anyone outside of the bureau. (Revised FOIA statutes were not put into effect until the 1970s).

Beyond the potential for unreleased files, the FBI also censored information within files released to the public by deleting information to preserve the “interest of national security” or to prevent interference with law enforcement proceedings. For certain files, when the deletions eliminate entire paragraphs that presumably discuss particular actions against targets, they harm the coding process used for this study. More often, however, these deletions only include the names of informants and, in some cases, particular targets (although these targets’ group affiliations are generally uncensored). Even in instances where entire paragraphs or pages are censored, it is sometimes possible to re-create the missing pattern of events, since these are generally communicated within multiple memos. (In addition to sending proposals and information about specific events related to targets, each field office’s quarterly progress reports summarized all potential and pending counterintelligence activity, as well as any “tangible results” of previous actions.) Often information that is censored in one memo is included in later summaries. The criteria used to censor memos varied over time as the state developed differing interpretations of “threats to national security” under particular presidential administrations. Statutes were periodically revised to allow the FBI more or less freedom to censor documents as they saw fit. Fortunately, the COINTELPRO files were released in 1977, a period marked by an extraordinarily lenient censorship policy (relatively speaking, of course).

For this analysis, I draw on two distinct portions of the COINTELPRO files. In the section that follows (which is summarized in Table 2), I am interested in the first wave of COINTELPRO activity against New Left targets, and therefore make use of the files — totaling over 1,800 pages spread across 928 memos — associated with the first eight months (May-December, 1968) of COINTELPRO-New Left. In the second part of the analysis (associated with Tables 3 and 4 below), I draw upon the 2,487 memos that constituted the complete three-year output of COINTELPRO-New Left. In both cases, these memos represented communication between field offices and national headquarters. They include all known correspondence related to the repression of any New Left target during the time period in question. As discussed above, this communication was in the basic form of 59 separate, but intersecting,
dialogues between the director and SACs within each individual field office. The flow of memos over time was remarkably consistent, and multiple memos were written regarding the activities of each identified target (literally hundreds of memos were compiled on the activities of the SDS, the FBI’s central New Leftist target), either to summarize the target’s activities (or lack thereof) or to act upon a perceived opportunity to disrupt the target in some way. For each memo, I coded pertinent background information (date, to/from), as well as its type (14 distinct memo types were used, which are listed in Table 1) and intended target. For our purposes here, we are interested in memos that indicate the initiation of particular activities against FBI targets, which, as Table 1 shows, constituted 12.6% of the memos written during the time period in question.10 While the bureau acted against New Left subjects in a wide variety of ways,11 we are interested in memos that indicate the initiation of any activity against FBI targets — the presence of which indicates the key shift from a group identified as a potential threat to one that was actively targeted by the FBI.

The Allocation of Repression: Evaluating Rationalist Assumptions

Consistent with the common, implicit assumption that state repression is rationally allocated, previous historical work on COINTELPRO has made claims about the importance of number of factors in the structuring of repression. While the specific factors that are cited vary, they are each similar in the sense that they assume that the level of repression allocated within an organizational context such as COINTELPRO predictably varies with the degree of threat posed by protest groups. Here, I evaluate three of the most common claims, namely that level of repression is positively related to protest groups’ (1) level of activity (Goldstein 1978: 438; O’Reilly 1994), (2) size (O’Reilly 1989: 49), and (3) association with previous acts of violence (Churchill & VanderWall 1990; O’Reilly 1989; Pearson 1994). While anecdotal evidence is generally cited to support these sorts of claims, past studies of repression have not been able to measure repressive activity in a manner that would allow such hypotheses to be tested systematically. As a program solely designed to repress FBI targets, COINTELPRO provides a unique opportunity to evaluate such claims.

In this section, I test the relative influence of each of the three propositions discussed above, as well as a single proxy of endogenous organizational structure: whether or not targets were identified and monitored by multiple FBI field offices. This dimension is key, as targets operating in more than one locale meant that multiple SACs reported on their activities, which in turn provided the directorate with a broader range of information about that target’s potential level of threat. A national target, then, is a New Left group identified
as existing within more than one field office’s jurisdiction. I discuss the significance of this dimension below.

Note that estimates of each of these protest group characteristics (level of activity, size, and association with violence) are based on FBI perceptions, as communicated in each SAC’s response to the director’s request for information in a memo to all field offices on May 28, 1968. These perceptions may not, of course, match the “reality” as it is recalled by those within particular movements. However, to the extent that the information presented to Hoover in these field office reports served as the central factual basis for evaluating proposals, it is important to use these accounts in an analysis of the bureau’s endogenous decision-making process.12

I conceive of a repressive act as any action undertaken by the FBI that raises the cost of targets’ collective action.13 I obtained information about FBI perceptions of target groups from each field office’s response to the director’s request for an estimation of New Left activities as of spring 1968. At that point, the field offices cumulatively identified 148 targets.14 Using information contained in these summary memos, I have coded agents’ estimates as follows:

### TABLE 1: COINTELPRO Memo Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memo Types</th>
<th>Number of Memos (1968)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a Information about target(s)</td>
<td>298 (32.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Quarterly progress report summarizing information about potential activity, pending activity, and tangible results</td>
<td>77 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Information about events</td>
<td>93 (10.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Proposal for counterintelligence action against target(s)</td>
<td>150 (16.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Action against target(s)</td>
<td>40 (4.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a Authorization of proposal by director</td>
<td>68 (7.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b Authorization of proposal after revisions by director</td>
<td>9 (1.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Rejection of proposal by director</td>
<td>25 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Request by director for revision of proposal</td>
<td>27 (2.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Request by director for information or proposals against target(s)</td>
<td>52 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Recommendation</td>
<td>25 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Result of action or update on status of action</td>
<td>46 (4.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Revision of proposal by SAC</td>
<td>14 (1.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Cancellation of proposal or action by SAC</td>
<td>4 (0.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total memos (April-December 1968)</td>
<td>928 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total memos (April 1968-April 1971)</td>
<td>2,487</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Size is simply the number of individual members reported as belonging to each New Left organization. Since there tended to be many small New Left groups, along with a few that were very large, I logged the size variable to reduce the skewness of its distribution. In order to simultaneously deal with both frequency and scale of protest activity, the level of activity of New Left organizations is captured by three ordinal categories: (1) no activity, (2) low activity (up to three reported organized actions during the past school year, with none of these considered a major disruptive act, i.e., a riot, building occupation, or other action leading to multiple arrests), and (3) high activity (more than three reported organized actions during the past school year or at least one major disruptive act). In the resulting models, “no activity” is the reference category. Association with violence is dichotomized as either no (=0) or yes (=1, if the agent reported any violent acts\textsuperscript{15} associated with the organization during the past school year). The final independent variable, whether or not the organization can be considered a national target, is dichotomized as either no (=0, if the target organization is local, i.e., only recognized by a single field office) or yes (=1, if the particular target organization is recognized by agents in multiple field offices). In all cases, the dependent variable, repression, is a dichotomous measure of whether or not any repressive action was initiated against the organization between April and December 1968.\textsuperscript{16} This eight-month time period roughly represents the first wave of repression against targeted groups; actions resulting from the first set of proposals (requested in a memo from the director to all participating field offices on July 5, 1968) were generally completed and results reported to the director by the end of the 1968 calendar year. I did not include actions occurring after this first wave, since they would, in some cases, no longer be based on the characteristics of protest groups reported in May 1968.\textsuperscript{17}

For Table 2, the unit of analysis is the local New Left group. As discussed above, while the FBI is a national organization, repressive activity was always proposed by agents within each field office who were considered to be closely connected to happenings within their territories. As we will see below, the directorate certainly exerted influence on particular field offices to initiate actions against certain targets, but it would be a mistake to conceive of the Bureau as a top-down organization insensitive to local and regional dynamics. FBI targets thus became visible to the directorate through field offices’ reporting of local activity; treating national targets (i.e., those with chapters in multiple locales) as a single unit rather than as a collection of local chapters would inaccurately represent the process through which these targets were identified and acted against within COINTELPRO. Thus, for the analysis in Table 2, a group such as SDS (which had local chapters in 43 field office territories) is treated as 43 distinct local groups. However, because each of these groups was affiliated with an organization, SDS, that was recognized and monitored by
TABLE 2: Coefficients for Logistic Regression of Repression on Protest Group Characteristics and Endogenous Organizational Indicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$e^\beta$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$e^\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.941</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.792</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size (logged)</td>
<td>.9638*</td>
<td>2.622</td>
<td>.7490†</td>
<td>2.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low activity</td>
<td>.1964</td>
<td>1.217</td>
<td>.2149</td>
<td>1.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High activity</td>
<td>.5218</td>
<td>1.685</td>
<td>.4258</td>
<td>1.531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>-.8449</td>
<td>.430</td>
<td>-.2976</td>
<td>.743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.5282**</td>
<td>12.530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 Log likelihood</td>
<td>113.593†</td>
<td></td>
<td>102.674***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 115)

† $p \leq .10$  * $p \leq .05$  ** $p \leq .01$  *** $p \leq .001$

multiple field offices, each of these local groups is considered a national target when this variable is introduced in the second model in the table. Table 2 presents the results of two logistic regression models. Looking at model 1, we see that protest-group characteristics poorly predict which New Left groups become targeted for COINTELPRO activity. Only a group’s size is a significant indicator of repression, and the overall predictive power of the model is weak — barely significant at the 0.10 level. Model 2 replicates the first model but also adds an endogenous organizational indicator: whether each target was recognized as national (i.e., observed by multiple field offices within the FBI). With this variable included in the model, size remains significant, though only at the 0.10 level. The exponentiated coefficient indicates that a unit increase in a target group’s size makes it 2.19 times as likely to be repressed. However, as the size variable is logged, this effect is not nearly as dramatic as it appears; a unit increase in this case occurs as targets grow by a power of ten (say, from 10 to 100, or from 100 to 1,000). Since the overall distribution of New Left group sizes shows considerable clustering between 20 and 50 members (with groups in the lowest size decile differing by fewer than one hundred members from those in the highest), a single unit increase would stretch the upper bounds of size heterogeneity among target groups.

Meanwhile, independent of group size, level of activity, or proclivity toward violence, groups considered to be national targets were 12.53 times as likely to be repressed as local targets. This relationship is highly significant and dwarfs the effect of the other variables. This finding clearly points to the necessity of accounting for processes within repressing organizations to understand how repression is allocated, rather than assuming that “objectively” larger threats automatically face higher levels of repression. In the next section, I focus on
how specific endogenous organizational processes shape the allocation of repressive activity by the FBI. However, two general points need to be emphasized here. First, in the aggregate, national and local targets do not significantly differ along any dimension measured here except for the fact that the former, by definition, is located in multiple regions. Violence was rare within both national and local groups (occurring in only 4% of the former and 6% of the latter), and national targets were only slightly larger (mean size for national groups is 47.2 and for local groups is 42.2) and a bit more active (72% of national groups were perceived to be active, compared to 63% of local groups) than their local counterparts. This means that it seems unlikely that groups identified as "national" are really proxying some other difference in the targets’ makeup, or that the directorate could have meaningfully differentiated national from local groups through anything other than the fact that the former had multiple centers.

Second, as we will see below, the results of the models in Table 2 should not be interpreted as indicating that target group characteristics were absolutely irrelevant in structuring the allocation of repressive activity. Instead, variables such as size and level of activity take on meaning through endogenous organizational processes. In other words, New Left group characteristics became significant not in their raw form in individual field office reports, but based on how they were ultimately perceived by the directorate at national headquarters. The fact that the directorate received information from all field offices created a context for a national-level perspective that may have significantly differed from that of any particular field office. This gap in perspective only emerges, however, when particular target groups exist within multiple field office territories. When targets remain local, the directorate’s view of the target’s makeup is equivalent to that of the local SAC, as no alternative sources of information about the particular group exists. Information about each national group, in contrast, comes from multiple sources (i.e., from each SAC whose territory contains some version of the group). In this case, the directorate’s interpretation of the level of threat posed by the group results from the confluence of information received from these multiple sources. Among the population of national targets, the largest and most active chapters were consistently targeted, though with an added consequence: The threat posed by these chapters created a context in which entire organizations could be perceived as a potential threat, ultimately resulting in other field offices targeting smaller and less active chapters of the same organizations in other regions. In this sense, characteristics of New Left groups themselves played a role in the level of perceived threat that they posed, but these characteristics were mediated by processes occurring within the FBI itself. To understand these endogenous processes, I focus on the flow of information and imposition of organizational controls within the bureau in the next section. However, the
general conclusion about the determinants of the patterning of repression is important: Though we find no significant relationship between target group characteristics and the allocation of repression, these characteristics indirectly shape the patterning of COINTELPRO activities.

An Endogenous Organizational Approach

The inability to directly explain the FBI’s allocation of repression based on key characteristics of New Left groups breaks down any straightforward understanding of repression as a predictable response to disruptive activity. Even in a setting like COINTELPRO, where the sole mission was to disrupt and eliminate threats to the status quo, worthy targets had to be identified and defined as such. The key is to not conceive of repressing organizations as acting in a unitary manner. As the decision-making process within the FBI involved decision-making at multiple levels, with an unequal and imperfect flow of information about the protest field at each level, decisions about the allocation of repression were necessarily negotiated. These negotiations were often clearly asymmetric, since the director and his immediate assistants at national headquarters had the ability to exert controls on the behavior and decisions of individual agents in each field office. Della Porta (1995, 1998) and others in the protest policing literature have recognized the importance of endogenous organizational processes, though without yet specifying how these processes may operate to generate a logic behind the allocation of repression. Following neoclassical assumptions about organizational decision making (March & Olson 1986; March & Simon 1958; Simon 1976), as well as the results from Table 2 above, I now focus in more detail on the structure of the COINTELPRO itself — specifically the flow of information among organizational actors and the constraints placed on decision making by powerful individuals and subgroupings. Also, in contrast to the analysis in the previous section of this paper (i.e., Table 2), which only dealt with targets identified by field offices at the outset of COINTELPRO-New Left, I now include all groups or individuals targeted throughout the full three-year life of the COINTEL program.

For COINTELPRO-New Left, the first stage of this endogenous negotiation process involved the construction of a population of targets around the nebulous concept of the “New Left.” Despite the lack of a coherent definition of what constituted New Left activity, between 1968 and 1971, the FBI considered the following general classes of targets to be affiliated with the New Left itself.

Student groups such as SDS and its various factions (Weathermen, Worker-Student Alliance, Revolutionary Youth Movement I and II, etc.), Youth Against
The Patterning of Repression / 223

War and Fascism (YAWF), and the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC).

Antiwar groups, including the Student Mobilization Committee (SMC) and the New Mobilization Committee (NMC).

Anarchist groups, the most prominent of which was the Youth International Party (Yippies) led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin; several other local, loosely organized “hippie-type groups” were also identified by the bureau as advocating anarchy.

Groups affiliated with the Communist Party, including the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and DuBois Clubs of America (DCA).\(^\text{19}\)

Visible public figures, namely individuals who were perceived to hold political sensibilities closely aligned with the New Left; many were academics (e.g., Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, and 16 other faculty members at universities across the United States) or individuals who had gained status as activists or revolutionaries apart from their organizational affiliations (e.g., Mark Rudd, Eldridge Cleaver).

Underground publications, especially the many self-published newspapers or other periodicals that served to connect persons sympathetic to New Left causes. Examples included Open City (published in the Los Angeles area), The Haight Ashbury Tribune (San Francisco), Duck Power (San Diego), and Rat (New York City).

Black protest groups, many of which were associated with the later civil rights and emerging Black Power movements, most notably SNCC and the Black Panther Party. Another set of these groups, including the Black Allied Student Association and the Black Student Organization, were only located on college campuses.

The second negotiated process involved the filtering of this large, diverse population of potential targets to a smaller, more focused subset of subversive individuals and organizations that ultimately were actively repressed. The majority of these groups and individuals identified with the New Left were never the target of COINTELPRO actions; of 317 potential (identified) targets, only 122 were actively repressed.\(^\text{20}\) While particular groups and individuals in all of the classes identified above were targeted to some extent, Table 2 makes it clear that national or regional organizations were considerably more likely to be targeted than local groups. Only 17 of the 62 separate organizations identified at the outset of the program were repressed during the three-year life of COINTELPRO-New Left, but every group with chapters active in two or
more field office territories was actively targeted. Meanwhile, fewer than 10% (5 out of 52) of local (e.g., limited to a single field office territory) groups were repressed.\textsuperscript{21} As I have argued above, it is not obvious why this occurred, since national organizations were often indistinguishable from their local counterparts except for the fact that they existed within multiple regions. Nor was the FBI only concerned with national-level threats; it sought to disrupt the New Left wherever it existed and doubted the ability of local policing organizations to effectively eliminate the threat posed by any radical organizations. To some extent, this finding could be a result of the FBI having more opportunity to act against groups that existed in multiple locations. However, it is important to understand how particular national organizations became visible within the Bureau in a way that local groups never could.

To illustrate the importance of visibility, we can examine the case of SDS. Since SDS was the primary group responsible for the Columbia University uprisings that led to the establishment of COINTELPRO-New Left, it automatically was defined as a subversive and — more importantly — an organized disruptive force. It became clear to all field offices that, even if the particular SDS chapters in their division had not participated in any disruptive activity, their mere existence signaled the potential for such action. In August 1968, the director sent a series of three memos (to a total of 35 field offices) specifying that SACs were to distribute the enclosed reprints of a Barrón's article entitled "Campus or Battleground?" that was highly critical of the SDS presence on college campuses throughout the nation. This action signified the creation of a climate where any SDS-related activity was to be noted and all efforts were to be made to hinder SDS organization.

Failure to do so did not escape the notice of the directorate in Washington, DC. In October 1968, the Oklahoma City SAC reported the existence of an SDS chapter at the University of Oklahoma. Until that point the chapter had not been associated with any disruptive activity, and no proposals from the Oklahoma City field office were forthcoming. The director responded:

It is to be noted that you have previously reported that an SDS chapter has existed at Oklahoma University since the latter part of 1963 and that there was a plan being considered by SDS to interest high school students in that organization. \textit{The above information, in itself, is sufficient grounds for the Agent to whom this matter is assigned to develop a hard-hitting program designed to neutralize the SDS in your territory.} The fact that no proposals have been forthcoming from your office seems to indicate a lack of interest in implementing this Program. You should thoroughly review this matter, including your approach to the problems involved and the objectives desired. Thereafter, you will be expected to furnish specific proposals for combating
the New Left in your Division. (FBI Memo, Director to SAC, Oklahoma City, 10/10/68; emphasis added.)

This perception that the mere existence of SDS was inherently subversive was also true (though in most cases to a lesser degree) for other national protest organizations such as the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), Progressive Labor Party (PLP), and W. E. B. DuBois Clubs of America (DCA). Disruptive activity by any chapters of these organizations tended to create a perception at the national level of the FBI that the group itself was potentially disruptive wherever it might exist and thus must be dealt with proactively. A year after the directorate’s exchange with the Oklahoma City office, the Knoxville SAC proposed to place their investigation of the New Left on a “closed status” since local university officials had been effectively preventing existing SDS and SSOC chapters from engaging in any disruptive activity (FBI Memo, Knoxville to Director, 6/24/69). Because these groups were still active in other territories at that time, the directorate disagreed:

You concluded that since school officials were doing everything in their power to prevent New Left organizations from gaining a foothold on college and university campuses, it would be possible to close your file on the counterintelligence program. In view of the serious [acts of] violence which occurred on campus during the last academic year, many of which were spontaneous, and in view of the fact that there has been no evidence whatsoever to substantiate the conclusion that the New Left’s efforts on the Nation’s campuses are abating, you should not close out this Program in your office. During this period of abated activity by the New Left, you should prepare for and seek new ways of arresting the attacks by the New Left which will, in all probability, develop during the coming academic year. (FBI Memo, Director to Knoxville, 7/8/69; emphasis added.)

None of the campuses upon which “serious acts of violence . . . occurred” were located in the Knoxville office’s territory. The directorate was speaking generally about the “Nation’s campuses” (referring for the most part to schools in the Northeast), but the fact that these acts had been initiated by New Left groups that also benignly existed in Knoxville provided the necessary impetus for this refusal to accept Knoxville’s inactivity. In this way, individual field offices’ failure to propose actions against existing chapters of these groups, whether active or not, was noticed and controlled by the directorate. While the Bureau was in fact responding to threats, the interplay between the local and national levels of the FBI created a context within which the perception of threat no longer matched any observable characteristic of FBI targets. Outcomes, then, only become observable through an analysis of how organizations with groups operating in multiple locales became visible to the bureau’s directorate.

Extending this approach, we see that local organizations were not subject to this same process. By definition, these groups’ activities were confined to the
particular campus or community where they were located, and the actions of other distant groups claiming a common organizational affiliation could not affect how these groups were perceived. Therefore, each field office was able to independently evaluate the threat posed by each local target and determine whether to propose repressive activity. The institutional control that existed when dealing with national groups, which emerged as the directorate received information about national-level targets from field offices and subsequently used this information to evaluate the danger posed by any segment of this target group, was absent when groups were local. The field office in question became the sole source for information regarding these local targets, and control over the decision-making process concerning whether particular targets constituted a threat and should therefore be repressed fell to the SAC.

Generating Repression: Allocating Organizational Controls

This emphasis on the neutralization of national targets is paralleled by the structuring of repressive acts against the New Left in general. Here, I again make use of data reflecting COINTELPRO-New Left actions between 1968 and 1971. During this three-year period, 449 actions were initiated under the COINTELPRO-New Left program, only 62 of which involved either local groups or individuals with local authority (i.e., who were not national leaders of targeted groups). Thus, 86.2% of actions were directed solely against national-level targets. However, even this percentage is deceptively low — of the 62 locally directed actions, 22 were against graduate students or university faculty members, all of whom were either directly or indirectly tied to chapters of national protest organizations. While faculty members were seen as especially dangerous due to their ability to potentially influence large numbers of college students, they became targets when they were connected to organized campus protest groups. For example, the two-year campaign to dismiss Arizona State University professor Morris Starsky was not a direct product of the “subversive” beliefs that he introduced in the classroom, but instead resulted from his involvement with the SWP. On October 1, 1968, the SAC from the Phoenix field office (prior to submitting counterintelligence recommendations) characterized Starsky in the following manner: “by his actions, [Starsky] has continued to spotlight himself as a target for counterintelligence action. He and his wife were both named as presidential electors by and for the Socialist Workers Party when the SWP in August, 1968, gained a place on the ballot in Arizona. In addition they have signed themselves as treasurer and secretary respectively of the Arizona SWP” (FBI Memo, Phoenix to Directorate 10/1/68). While intelligence reports on Starsky largely focused on his political beliefs, this tie to SWP became the impetus for the systematic campaign that led to
his dismissal from ASU in 1970 and his subsequent failure to obtain other jobs in academia (see Churchill & VanderWall 1990; Davis 1997).

Of the remaining 40 actions involving local groups, 12 were undertaken in conjunction with a national-level target. Generally, local groups were targeted in this manner either to generate a conflict with a national-level organization in order to weaken both groups, or to reduce the effectiveness of either group to organize a particular protest event. Thus, only 28 of the 449 actions (6.2%) were allocated solely against local groups. The lesson we can draw from this is not that protest itself always involved national-level protest organizations, but instead that, in order for repression to occur, central actors within the FBI needed to perceive and define protest groups as ideal targets and then ensure that these groups were repressed wherever they were located. The labeling of groups as targets — and, by extension, the allocation of repression itself — was profoundly shaped by organizational controls placed on each field office by the directorate.

Cunningham (2000) discusses the FBI's organizational structure and the types of institutional controls that shaped the allocation of repression. The key point here is that the directorate responded to organized New Left protest activity in the following way: National-level protest organizations that initiated disruption were defined as targets, which created an expectation that these groups would be repressed wherever they were located, despite the FBI's ostensible focus on identifying threats on the local level. The directorate's connection to all field offices created a basis for ensuring that this repressive
activity was carried out, even by field offices reporting an absence of activity by local chapters. One important outcome of this organizational process is the generation of repression in the absence of disruption—but only when the target in question was a segment of a national-level group that had been active somewhere at some time in the past.

This outcome was dependent upon the directorate's ability to exert controls on the behavior of agents in each field office. These controls served to guide SACs' decisions through the threat of sanctions; the directorate's exchanges with the Oklahoma City and Knoxville SACs are good examples of this. Following the argument in the previous section, controls were allocated based on two key factors: whether national targets were present in particular territories, and whether national targets were active in these territories. Since activity in the absence of a target's presence is logically impossible, variation on these dimensions yields three possible scenarios faced by field offices. These scenarios are summarized in Table 3a and discussed below, along with an outline of the FBI's typical response and a description of actions at both the local (field office) and national (directorate) levels.

**Three Scenarios**

**A. National targets are present, and these targets are active within the field office's territory**

This scenario is characterized by a high level of field office activity; instances of disruption by targets yielded opportunities for the types of repressive activity specified by the directorate at the outset of the program. While the directorate may have imposed obtrusive controls (orders that SACs had to follow to avoid negative sanctions) to increase activity against particular targets, these controls did not generate a significant increase in proposals, and a consistent level of activity was sustained in the absence of obtrusive controls. The Detroit territory provides a clear example of this scenario. The Detroit SAC identified five nationally visible targets at the outset of COINTELPRO-New Left, three of which had been highly active during the previous school year. These three targets, all chapters of SDS, had participated in a total of 13 disruptive actions. Over the course of the program, Detroit submitted 25 proposals, 21 of which had the goal of repressing these national targets. Of the remaining four proposals against local targets, three were against faculty members aligned with SDS at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University and the fourth targeted the campus newspaper at Michigan State University, which the Detroit SAC felt was largely controlled by SDS interests and frequently included "vulgar language" (FBI Memo, Detroit to Director, 2/28/69). Thus, all of Detroit's proposals were initiated against national targets, either directly against
nationally visible groups or indirectly against individuals tied to these groups. The Detroit SAC submitted these proposals fairly steadily throughout the three years of the program, averaging about four proposals per school semester period (spring, summer, fall), with this frequency only dropping off after organized New Left activity greatly diminished on local campuses after the 1969-70 school year. While the directorate did request further proposals from Detroit on two occasions, neither of these resulted in additional repressive activity. In both cases, the Detroit SAC responded with information about the targets in question but not with proposals intended to repress these targets (FBI Memos, Detroit to Director, 8/2/68, 2/7/69). Here we clearly see that the presence of national targets generated both a high level of activity (in the form of proposals) by the field office and obtrusive controls on that activity by the directorate. These controls were not imposed to increase the office's activity so much as to shape its focus, and they tended to have little effect on the frequency of proposals initiated against targets.

B. NATIONAL TARGETS WERE PRESENT, BUT NOT ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN PROTEST ACTIVITY WITHIN THE FIELD OFFICE'S TERRITORY

Since little threat of disruption existed around inactive targets, especially if they were not highly organized, the expectation would be that this scenario was characterized by low levels of repressive activity against targets. However, since national targets existed in these territories, the directorate utilized obtrusive controls to generate proposals when these targets were active in other areas. In this way, we see the directorate acting out of fear of a contagion effect — if a particular target was active somewhere, like-minded members of the same organization were capable of initiating activity wherever the organization existed. We see this concern in the directorate's interaction with the Sacramento field office after that SAC reported that inactive chapters of SDS and The Resistance (both of which were then very active in other regions of the country) still existed in the Sacramento division. When the Sacramento SAC argued that it was difficult to develop a counterintelligence program against targets that lacked leadership, organization, or a real following, the directorate responded:

A period of disorganization such as the New Left has in your division is the time to take counterintelligence action to prevent the formation of New Left programs. You should give this matter careful study and devise methods of utilizing the disorganization to prevent the New Left from becoming active.

(FBI Memo, Director to Sacramento, 7/22/69)

SDS and The Resistance were not treated as benign due to their past record of local disorganization and inactivity. Instead, the fact that these targets were active in other territories indicated that although they were mired in “a period
of disorganization” in the Sacramento area, this condition was subject to change at any time.

The recognition that these New Left groups were active elsewhere necessarily emerged at the national level, since only the directorate had access to information from all field offices. Information from any SAC indicating that particular national targets had been active locally thus often led to requests for proposals against this group on a national level. These requests had little effect on the patterning of repression in territories where the targets in question had been active; it is likely that these field offices were already actively mobilized in response to disruption. However, these sorts of controls were often a prerequisite to the initiation of action in field offices with inactive targets. Suddenly, it was not enough to monitor these targets; the directorate’s fear of potential disruption required that even inactive chapters be repressed.

C. No National Targets Were Present Within the Field Office’s Territory

Field offices falling under this scenario observed a low level of protest activity, similar to the offices discussed in scenario B. However, the only targets present in these offices’ territories were local, meaning that they could not possibly be active in any other office’s territory. In such cases, the directorate’s information about particular targets was equivalent to that provided by the SAC, since there was no other bureau source (i.e., no other field office) that had jurisdiction over these local targets. In the case of local targets, obtrusive controls could stem only from a lack of proposals in response to the SAC’s reports of local activity, since there could be no alternative basis for creating a perceived need for counterintelligence if this activity was absent (or unreported). Therefore, the level of activity in these offices tended to be low; for COINTELPRO-New Left, the mean number of proposals initiated in offices with no national targets present was 1.3, compared to 9.3 proposals per office that identified national targets. The directorate did not attempt to stimulate more proposals through obtrusive controls; predictably, there were no obtrusive controls allocated to field offices with no national targets present.

The directorate’s request that all field offices submit detailed reports of existing targets’ activities at the outset of COINTELPRO-New Left provides an opportunity to place field offices into specific cells in Table 3a. More importantly, it allows us to examine the extent to which the directorate’s allocation of controls generated unique outcomes from each of the three categories of offices in the table. Table 3b places each of the 59 field offices participating in COINTELPRO-New Left into the cells identified in Table 3a. National targets were present and active in the territories of 23 field offices, while existing national targets were inactive in 24 others. The remaining 12 offices had no nationally recognized targets existing in their territories in 1968.
### TABLE 3B: Crosstabulation of National Target Presence and Activity

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<tr>
<th>National Targets Active?</th>
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<td>National Targets Present?</td>
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This placement of offices into cells represents a “snapshot” of the protest field in 1968, and is by no means able to capture changes in the presence and level of activity of various targets over the next three years. However, while the level of activity of particular New Left targets shifted over time, it was rare for national targets to have become entirely inactive until the 1970-71 school year, which saw a great overall reduction in the level of organized student-based protest. Additionally, the spatial distribution of targets did not change significantly over time; national New Left organizations rarely made meaningful inroads in previously inactive territories such as Birmingham, Alabama; El Paso, Texas; and Salt Lake City, Utah. Therefore, for the vast majority of field offices participating in the COINTEL program, movement between cells would have been minimal.

If the dimensions in Table 3 (whether targets were present in a territory and whether they were active in that territory) were indeed salient determinants
of the directorate's allocation of controls to field offices, we should be able to uncover significant differences in the directorate's treatment of each class of offices. I have argued that COINTELPRO repression was primarily allocated against visible targets rather than always directly against large, active, or violent groups. Targets became visible when they existed in multiple territories, thus allowing the directorate access to information about these groups from multiple sources. If these groups became active in any territory, the directorate expected SACs to repress them wherever they existed, regardless of whether they were active in these other locations. Since SACs did not generally have access to information from other field offices, the directorate utilized controls to ensure that these nationally visible targets were repressed.

During the three-year life of COINTELPRO-New Left, the field offices in scenario A (territories where national targets were both present and active) were clearly more active than the offices in scenarios B (national targets present, but not active) and C (national targets neither present nor active). The mean number of proposals per office was 13.5 for A, versus 5.3 for B and 1.3 for C. However, the offices in B were as likely to receive controls from the directorate as the offices in A, even though those in B reported no activity by national targets. Here, I coded any memo that included a “request” or “recommendation” from the directorate (either for proposals or information about target activity; these are listed as memo types 8 and 9 in Table 1) as a control on the field office's behavior. These requests served to indicate that the SAC's reports either did not contain the right type of information (or not enough of it) or did not react to the information provided in an appropriate manner, which most often indicated a lack of proposals against existing targets. The directorate allocated controls in 11 of the 23 offices (47.8%) in A, compared to 12 of the 24 offices (50%) in B. Although the offices in C were the least active, none of these offices were controlled by the directorate. This finding is consistent with the overall argument here, namely that controls were always generated by the presence of visible targets. Where nationally visible targets did exist, the directorate sought to increase field offices' activity against them; the key point is that the presence of these targets (rather than their level of activity locally)
created a context for the allocation of controls. While field offices in A received a significantly higher number of controls than those in B (2.3 controls per office in A, versus 0.9 controls per office in B), the directorate allocated these controls in order to maintain a stable level of activity against national targets. The number of field office proposals per control received is remarkably stable in A and B, with offices in A averaging 6.0 proposals per control and those in B averaging 6.4. Table 4 summarizes these measures of field office activity and interaction with the directorate.

Conclusions

The organizational structure of the FBI allowed for repression to be allocated locally through agents in individual field offices who were considered to be local experts on protest threats. This local autonomy was, however, simultaneously constrained by significant organizational controls imposed on each office's behavior by the directorate. These controls functioned largely to generate stability in the rate of repression and had the unintended effect of ensuring that the allocation of counterintelligence activity was largely insensitive to key local characteristics of FBI targets. As I have shown, protest groups' size, level of activity, or involvement in violence did not directly shape the FBI's allocation of repressive activity. Instead, these dimensions, which capture the level of threat posed by a New Left group, were mediated by particular processes within the FBI itself. To capture endogenous organizational effects in this specific case, I focus primarily on how information flowed between the national and local levels of the Bureau, which allowed a centralized national headquarters to construct a broad picture of national-level threat. This emphasis on the repressing organization is essential to see any coherent patterning of repression against the New Left. Glancing at the COINTELPRO-New Left files, it seems as if the directorate allocated controls in an almost arbitrary manner, consistently threatening certain inactive field offices while all but ignoring others. However, the ability of certain field offices to escape the imposition of such controls had little to do with their submitting a steady stream of proposals or proof that existing targets continued to be inactive within their particular territory. Instead, the directorate allocated controls when field offices were not sufficiently active in the presence of visible targets.

Examining the patterning of these controls allows us to solve two puzzles: first, why almost 94% of the Bureau's repressive activity was directed at national protest groups at a time when a considerably greater proportion of protest activity was initiated by local individuals and groups; and second, why chapters of certain protest groups were targeted in the absence of any local activity. The organizational dynamic within the Bureau ensured that the level of repression faced by New Left adherents was not primarily determined by protesters'
initiation of local activity (violent or not) or mobilization of large numbers of persons. Instead, protest organizations that had multiple centers were at risk of being repressed, even in locations where these organizations were inactive.

What does this tell us about the repression of protest groups in general? The single case of COINTELPRO-New Left uncovers a logic within the FBI's repression of an abstract class of targets and provides insight into the bureaucratic mechanisms that generated actions that, on the surface, only weakly match on to the "objective" distribution of political threats. The fact that this occurred — that many non-threatening groups with weak or nonexistent dissident capacities were repressed due to their perceived connection to a broader New Left threat — should not surprise students of the FBI. The history of the organization, especially under J. Edgar Hoover but in some important ways today as well, shows a consistent pattern of defining abstract threats (whether they be from anarchists, communists, or terrorists) that are then found and dealt with in an often self-fulfilling manner. The larger purposes of such activity, beyond the preservation of national security, have undoubtedly included self-aggrandizement and securing ever-increasing budgetary allocations (Donner 1980; Powers 1987). The objective here, however, is to understand how particular outcomes emerged from the FBI's actions, rather than the director's motivations for engaging in such actions. The process through which patterns of repression emerge in a predictable manner requires some focus on both the flow of information through the bureau and the unique role of the directorate in controlling the behavior of field office agents.

On another level, the findings here, though only indirectly concerned with social movement organizations (SMOs), have something to say to the social movements literature. Repression often plays a role in studies of SMO outcomes, though to the extent that the focus is on the SMO itself, models often fall back on a straightforward relationship between movements and authorities; as SMOs pose larger threats to the status quo, they become subject to increasing repression from authorities. While such findings have frequently been empirically supported, it is important to understand the process through which authorities allocate repression and to consider the possibility that there may be a less than direct relationship between "objective" threat and subsequent repression. Indeed, the case of COINTELPRO-New Left shows that endogenous organizational processes within state agencies are key to understanding the level of repression received by particular protest groups. Rather than directly resulting from these groups' size, level of activity, or predilection for violence, the patterning of repression by the FBI was bound by the flow of information within the bureau and the consequent ability for SMOs to become visible at the national level of the FBI.
Notes

1. Of course, context is important here, and much related work has discussed how the form and magnitude of repression vary by regime type (Davenport, Johnston & Mueller n.d.; Tilly 1978), degree of democracy (Gupta, Singh & Sprague 1993), and various demographic and economic factors.

2. These groups were categorized in this manner by the FBI. See Cunningham (2000) for a more detailed discussion of particular groups targeted under the programs against white hate groups and the New Left. In addition, two other COINTELPRO-type programs were initiated, on a much smaller scale, in the 1960’s. The first program targeted Puerto Rican Nationalists (begun in 1962), and the second sought to create a conflict between the Communist Party-USA and organized crime elements. This program, instituted in 1964, was known as “Operation Hoodwink.”

3. The response to an attempt by the Indianapolis Field Office to disband their COINTELPRO against the New Left is representative of the Bureau’s reaction to such requests: “Every evidence points to the fact that militant leftists are continuing their efforts to disrupt higher education. You should continue to follow the activities of the New Left in your territory through the program and to seek means to neutralize it in accordance with outstanding instructions” (FBI Memo, Director to Indianapolis, 3/16/70). A lack of proposals from the Kansas City Field Office (after eight months of reports of inactivity by New Left groups) prompted the following memo from the directorate: “This reflects a very negative approach to this program by your Division. It is to be noted that the best time to attempt to neutralize the New Left is when it is weak and disorganized. Counterintelligence action taken can be decisive and may even result in complete withdrawal of the New Left from these educational institutions” (FBI Memo, Director to Kansas City, 1/23/69).

4. See Feit (1979:107) and Sullivan (1979:142-43) for anecdotal accounts supporting the fact that these assistant directors had considerable input regarding particular COINTELPRO actions.

5. The conception of unobtrusive controls here is similar to that originally formulated by James March and Herbert Simon; see March and Simon (1958) and Simon (1976) for a full explication. Perrow (1986:123-31) gives a summary of these ideas.

6. I thank an anonymous Social Forces reviewer for suggesting this method of gauging completeness.

7. For a full discussion of FBI criteria for deleting information within documents, see Churchill and VanderWall (1990).

8. See Churchill and VanderWall (1990) for a detailed discussion of censoring in FBI memos over time.

9. I spent some time looking through copies of the COINTELPRO files released in 1977 with Linda Kloss of the FBI’s Archival Matters division. She was continually surprised by the types of information that escaped the censor’s marker then and informed me that much of the uncensored material in the COINTELPRO files would not escape censorship if released to the public today.
10. This percentage is derived from the sum of actions initiated by a field office (memo type 4) and actions authorized by the Director (memo types 5a & b) and subsequently carried out locally.

11. COINTELPRO-New Left activities took the following fourteen forms (see Cunningham 2003 for a detailed discussion of these forms): anonymous letters, fake (signed) letters, articles or “public source documents,” information furnished to officials, planted evidence, strategic use of informants, strategic use of media sources, dissemination of bureau-generated information about targets, target interviews, misinformation, fake phone calls, active harassment of targets, resources supplied to anti-New Left groups, and ridicule-type information.

12. It does, however, appear that the FBI’s perceptions did quite accurately match independent measures of New Left organizational strength. These measures are fairly hard to come by because many organizations were not careful about their own record keeping, especially if they experienced rapid growth, as SDS had by 1968. Also, there was often an unclear distinction between members and sympathizers in many New Left groups. Local FBI estimates of SDS membership at Columbia University and Committee to End the War in Vietnam (CEWV) membership at the University of Texas very closely match that documented by central adherents on both campuses (see Avorn et al. 1968 for Columbia SDS data, and Rossinow 1998 for Texas CEWV figures). The bureau’s overall estimation of SDS national membership (142 chapters, with about 4,000 individual members) was considerably below “official” SDS counts (280 chapters with 35,000 members, according to Sale 1973). SDS officers, by their own admission, used rough estimates for their own chapter and membership tallies; the bureau was aware of the other roughly 30,000 members, listing them (not unreasonably) as “New Left sympathizers.” The FBI’s accuracy is not surprising, because they had significant numbers of informants placed within campus New Left groups.

13. See Tilly (1978). Of course, government agencies can facilitate as well as repress challengers’ activities. However, in this case, COINTELPRO was by definition only engaged in repressing the New Left. As an organization solely designed to disrupt its targets, every action proposed by field office agents was a repressive act.

14. Though $N = 115$ for the models in Table 2, because targets that lacked estimates of size or activity were treated as missing cases.

15. Agents were specifically instructed to report on “violence and disruption.” Activities identified as “violent” included riots and smaller-scale aggression toward police or campus officials. Later, bombings would be added to New Left adherents’ repertoire of violent activities.

16. While I deal elsewhere with the types of actions initiated within COINTELPRO-New Left (see Cunningham 2003), the range of these repressive actions was remarkably stable both over time and across targets. The organizational process that generated these actions, in contrast, was much more sensitive to the frequency of activity, and as a consequence I focus on this dimension here.

17. Partly due to the FBI’s efforts, the characteristics of many New Left groups were extremely fragile. SDS, for instance, had a membership that increased geometrically throughout 1968. The official SDS newspaper, New Left Notes, triumphantly reported
that "across the country, first SDS meetings [of the fall 1968 semester] have seen two, three, and four times as many" participants as before (quoted in Sale 1973:479), only to tumble to the point of near-collapse a year later. Likewise, the willingness of SDS factions to participate in violent actions had greatly increased by 1969. The use of this eight-month time period (April-December 1968) ensures that even the longest-term actions in the first wave of field office proposals had been completed within the time frame captured here. While the efficiency of FBI actions increased over the life of COINTELPRO (see Cunningham 2000), in 1968 COINTELPRO-New Left actions were carried out within an average of two months of first being proposed.

18. Rerunning the first model in Table 2 using only national groups still yields no significant relationships; characteristics of the New Left groups themselves do not directly predict which national targets were subject to COINTELPRO actions. (The results are not shown here but are available from the author.)

19. Here, the line between the COINTELPRO-Communist Party USA and COINTELPRO-New Left is blurred. It seems, however, that Communist groups represented on college and university campuses tended to be dealt with under the New Left banner. In other cases, the groups targeted under this program also overlap with those targeted under COINTELPRO-Black Nationalist/Hate Groups.

20. To again clarify, the 317 targets here include any group or individual identified during the entire existence of COINTELPRO-New Left (May 1968 to April 1971). This contrasts with the previous section of this paper (see Table 2), which only focused on the 148 targets identified by field offices at the outset of the program. It is important to note that, while the number of groups and individuals defined as targets expanded considerably over time, the range of targets that fit under the New Left umbrella was defined relatively early on in the program. The first faculty member, black protest group, coffeehouse, underground publication, public figure, lawyer, Communist Party-affiliated group, "anarchist" group, anti-war group, and student group all appear as potential targets during the first six months of the program. Additional groups and individuals associated with all of the above categories were defined as targets after 1968, but the only new classes of targets were highly politicized "hippie communes," radical left-wing white power groups modeled after black nationalist groups such as the Black Panther Party, and various splintered factions of national student-based organizations such as SDS. Presumably, none of these groups would have been in existence or have had widespread influence in 1968, so their inclusion was a product of the changing protest field rather than a broadening of the range of groups perceived as subversive by the FBI.

21. Of these five groups, two (Youth Against War and Fascism and AWARE) were actually national organizations that were only reported by SACs as existing on a single campus at that time.

22. Central or national-level actors in this sense refers to the directorate, the circle of actors around Hoover in Washington, D.C. These actors differed from others in the bureau since they had access to information from all field offices.

23. As stated above, the stability of this finding in the literature is sensitive to various contextual factors (see Davenport 2004; D. Davis & Ward 1990; Hibbs 1973). Also, authorities can of course choose to accommodate SMOs rather than repress them (Tilly 1978).
References


