

F*KIT MAG

RADICAL IDEAS AND ACTION
IN THE SOUTH-WEST



F... OFF
FASCISTS

WE ARE
ALL
IMMIGRANTS

ISRAEL A BOMB

ISSUE

2

AUTUMN

24

...INSIGHTFUL REFUSALS TO PICK A SIDE

text: anon / photo: dg

The sociologist stands in a crowd, facing an army of men dead set on smashing through him, the crowd, and the hotel behind them. He looks at the man in front of him, calls him a fascist and raises his fist to strike. The man does the same and in that face full of anger he sees pain, and remembers his lectures. He would tell his students we are all products of society, our beliefs, our principles, all the result of our lives' happenstance. His fist shudders as he wonders what right he has to hurt this man who stands before him because of his life's happenstance, one almost certainly containing much less luck than his own. As the glass flies his limbs loosen with nerves as his fingers curl in anger, his chest hardens with conviction and his fist collides unskillfully into the man's skull.

He sits in a courtroom as a man is lectured on how wrong he was to be there that day. They tell of how he had left the tent he had slept in for seven years in the city, how he'd come across an angry mob and joined. How he hurled disgusting words at the police, and how he'd bolstered the hatred which swarmed upon the hotel. He watched as his partner cried out silently, as the cold hand of the courts ushered him to prison, as they lectured him on how to treat the most vulnerable in our society.

He stood in front of his students, and curled up into a ball and cried out. Wailing and muttering he spoke of social constructions and agency, and how scared he was. A few tired faces looked up from their laptops. He got up and began to ramble 'but how do I, we, know, what if we've all got it wrong' ... 'we must act' he stammered with surprising strength. 'I felt conviction, I hope that was enough'. He looked up at his students, most looked confused, some bored, a few listened intently as if he was saying something profound. He cried out again as he curled over, mumbling to himself 'but I have never know pain like that man has.'

The room was silent for a few moments, two students left giggling to each other. Concerned glances and affronted looks passed between others. Suddenly he rose up, his shoulders spread wider. 'We all must act as if we have the power to shape the world in our fists, I believe from the war that follows decency will prevail.'

A few weeks passed and the man came to his senses, but this lecture left a mark on many of his students. They began to write terrible essays full of moral conviction, hopelessly ambitious, unfounded, empty of sociological analysis. They all seemed to feel the need to end a decent essay, which had successfully deconstructed an aspect of the social world, with ridiculously flawed silly suggestions of how to change something.

Thankfully a few had left that lecture early, some who had missed it altogether wrote the most satisfactorily, always ending with something sophisticatedly vague full of complicated uncertainty's and insightful refusals to pick a side.

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- outside H&M, investors in israel



- these popped up during the far-right surge

EDITORIAL

It's been a heavy few months. The genocide in Palestine has been expanded. The American election has narrowed down to two oligarchic options. The far-right continues to rise, and the state is using it, once again, to increase its power.

People have come together in the face of it; not enough, but enough to give hope. The demonstrations, discussions, and direct actions continue. A thin sliver of South-West resistance is included in these pages. This is, wonderfully, a much more varied zine than the last.

A quick note on sources. The front cover uses pictures from the far-right demonstrations and counter-mobilisations in Bristol (3rd Aug.) and Plymouth (5th Aug.). These are from Bristol and Plymouth Live, and the Bristol Cable.

The back cover is by the awesome creating.oddities. Find them on instagram!

We don't charge for F*kit, but we do have costs. If you'd like to support us or be involved with the next issue, drop us an email at anarchistlearningexe@proton.me.

- DG



- art: doodledubz

AGAINST



words: C + D

art: doodledubz

PLYMOUTH / 5TH AUGUST

D: We'd been hearing about fascist riots breaking out in the North and in London for around a week, and they'd recently put the refugee hotel in Bristol at serious risk. I knew antifascists were travelling down to Plymouth, so I expected their lot to do the same.

C: The far-right 'demonstration' was due to begin at 1900, with two counter demonstrations - more and less militant - called for the same location at 1800.

Arriving early, there were a number of far-right organisers (with earpieces), and intoxicated football hooligans mixed in with our demo, chanting Tommy Robinson slogans and intimidating people. Fortunately, the militant antifascists were able to deal with them, as the police presence was almost non-existent.

A significant black bloc formed, with anarchists from across the south coast. Alongside the SUTR counter, we held Guildhall Square.

I was shocked at the numbers. Perhaps 300 of us faced 200+ fascists. We were separated from them by Royal Parade, with police in full riot gear standing between the two sides.

D: Although we outnumbered them, the momentum was on their side. One of our comrades got on a bus shelter with an antifascist flag and was quickly confronted by one of theirs threatening to push him off, even though the bus shelter was behind our lines. There weren't nearly enough cops for this sort of demonstration.

C: Sometime after 2000, a number of the far-right began trying to flank both the police and ourselves by moving rapidly eastwards along Royal Parade, and attempting to break through to our side of the road. The black bloc cut them off, and we faced them hand to hand for a few moments before the police managed to get back between us.

This is when things began to turn to shit. Heavily outnumbered by the fash facing us, we also had to contend with them throwing missiles. Starting out with beer bottles and cans, it quickly moved to stones, coins, paving slabs and rocks. I saw comrades go down with injuries, and some resorted to returning fire – a poor decision given the number of police and media cameras trained upon us.

D: A couple of antifascists were sentenced for throwing things – 18 months and 20 months –

disposable masks, hats, and sunglasses could have prevented this. It's worth carrying these and giving them out to those at risk.

C: As the sun set the fash stepped things up a gear. More and more missiles headed towards us, and they also began to deploy fireworks, hitting their own side with all but one. Unfortunately, at this point the SUTR stewards decided they'd had enough. The possibility of the fash overrunning us, or picking off groups trying to leave, was very real. Luckily, the police moved them away along Armada Way and eventually out of missile range.

D: I thought it was over and was making plans to go home. My group had split up when a whole bunch of far-right managed to get round the police lines and chase after us.

C: The police somehow lost control of them, leading to clashes between the fash and the remaining antifascists, which spilled out onto the Hoe and further into the city.

Overall, a huge victory for SUTR, in terms of numbers. Even more so for the antifascist bloc, who managed to head-off multiple incursions.

D: Some (white) people tried to physically stop (non-white) people from throwing things, which I thought was a big mistake. There was also some cheering on of the cops, which was ugly. I took the end of the evening as a lesson never to assume it's over, too.

*Plymouth. Guildhall Square on the left,
Armada way and fash lines to the right*



7TH AUGUST – PORTSMOUTH

C: This time our anarchist group operated independently from SUTR. Roughly 30 of us, opposed over 150 far-right. The police were heavy-handed, with multiple officers and vehicles focussed on our side, along with police camera-operators on tower blocks, and a drone. The far-right were in a very awkward location and to approach them directly would mean allowing them to flank us.

We took up position a street away, but found ourselves followed by a number of fash scouts, on bikes and scooters and in cars. After holding our position for over an hour, and increasingly surrounded, we made the decision to evacuate. We moved as a team back through the town centre, stalked the whole time by fash shouting abuse, expecting a group to emerge round a corner any moment. It was intense. Thankfully, we made it out without injury.

– TORQUAY

D: We investigated a rumoured riot in Torquay and found several mosque-goers camped out making sure nothing would happen, the cops doing rings around the area in vans, and a few local kids looking like they might have joined the fash if they'd shown up.

10TH AUGUST – PENZANCE

C: This one was a non-event, thankfully. We were met with nothing but a few fashy-looking individuals with DSLR's, desperately trying to capture our masked faces on film.

– EXETER

D: Widespread concern led to a decent rally against racism earlier in the day. We responded to a call-out by gathering near the mosque, but heavy police presence was the only sign anything was going on.

17TH AUGUST TAUNTON

D: Maybe three fascists turned out, but a significant antifascist and police presence was the main event. The small crowd of locals were a little disconcerted by masked up folks, and we quickly gained the attention of police, who section 60aa'd us while filming with a HD camera.

22ND SEPTEMBER BOURNEMOUTH

C: Continual far-right demonstrations are being called in Bournemouth, and they often outnumber their opposition. This time, several Bournemouth antifascists had police waiting outside of their houses as they left to meet us, so as soon as we arrived, we were surveilled by police, who followed us as we tried to get everyone together. When we made it to our destination, a police officer began addressing comrades by their real names right in front of the fash. The police had a very confrontational attitude towards us but were shaking hands and laughing with the fascists.

We held the town hall and the fash were in a sunken area around the Cenotaph, with a few police separating them from the SUTR counter-demo. We began to use the higher ground to shout and sing over the fascists, and they looked increasingly frustrated. At this point, one of their organisers was allowed by police to make his way up the steps to us, where he attacked an antifascist. He quickly found himself on the floor, but the police rushed over and arrested four of our group, despite our attempts to prevent it.

The fascist that launched the attack then roamed around freely, using homophobic and racist slurs, within ear-shot of multiple police officers. Despite losing some of our team, we saw off the fash, who left early, tails between their legs. The Dorset police, however, clearly and openly sided with the fascists.

*to make a
kinder world,
we need
kinder activism*

Words: S / Art: Conifer



You've walked into a meeting, and you're greeted by the feeling that everybody here knows each other, knows what's expected. There's a vague, awkward, shallow camaraderie in the air. Nobody speaks to you. You sit on a bench at the side of the room.

Some people have coffee. You want coffee. You stare towards the kitchen unsure of how much time there is before the talking will start. The talking starts and you move into the circle of chairs that has formed.

Introductions. Name and pronouns. You're not permitted to say more than that. As the meeting draws on, you zone out and start playing a song in your head. You try hard to listen when the main points are raised but they become fuzzy without the wider context that the others share, and you don't. You leave an hour into the meeting because you have a gig to go to. You're not sure if you'll come back.

You're making chickpea curry for a social you've organised. A social for a group you started. A social being held at a venue you booked. With activities you coordinated. For a group of people that you're trying to encourage to be invested in a project that they are theoretically passionate about but don't seem to get very involved in. It's all resources, you guess. No time. No money. No hope. No future. Something like that. So, you load up your backpack with tins from Lidl and spend the whole day making the curry.

You stir the food with one hand and use the other to make some posts on Instagram, reply to messages, post promotional photos. You're organising several different events. You're scared no one will come. You're scared no one will enjoy it. Have you over-planned or not planned enough? Does anyone want to be there? Does anyone even give a shit?

You want to make people feel welcomed, cared for... You know that others in the group don't take the same approach.

I often say there's something inherently masochistic about community organising. And I believe that community organising is different to capital A activism. Community organising seems to be more of the groundwork and the everyday work that happens out in the community. It's time-consuming and expensive and can go unnoticed. Whereas, activism is more directly politically charged, louder, and more hierarchical. Community organising is about creating spaces and movements, whereas activism is about disruption or change. Although, of course, activism involves community organising. If we're going to create any change in the world, we need to try to be good at both.

My friend, who is neither a community organiser nor activist, but is more of an observer, says that the left needs to build resilience. He jokes that people will cut someone out of their life because their dog's cousin's butcher's brother once read Jordan Peterson. Or something like that.

I am the sensitive snowflake left, and I know this to be true. We are so governed by our insecurities, the judge-others-before-they-judge-you tactic, our anxious tendencies, our need to be liked, our inherited traumas, our lived traumas, the issues we have with our parents, the issues we have with ourselves. Sometimes we are exposed nerves picking up pain from every surface we touch. Every human interaction stings. Every criticism. Every sharp look. This can be particularly apparent when we're organising. When we're giving so much of ourselves and are emotionally frazzled from the work.



When you're putting lots of time and love into a project, two things can happen:

- 1) You can get so attached to the project that your self-worth becomes entangled with it
- 2) Others can become disengaged with the project and lack the feeling of agency to work on it.

We are all victims and perpetrators. Our insecurities and hurt can make us vulnerable to the behaviour of others or cause us to be the problem. Of these previously mentioned things – the exclusionary interactions, the controlling behaviour, and the unkindness – we are all guilty. Yet, we have all also facilitated with love, care, kindness, and passion at times. We may seek to create these pockets of utopia full of care and kindness, but find our communities, and ourselves, falling back into bad habits. So, what can we do?

I don't have the answer. But I think it may lie somewhere in kindness, in releasing tension from political and community spaces, in meeting our own basic needs and the needs of others before embarking on any sort of action. I think it lies in having professional boundaries with others in your community and with ourselves. Take time to turn off your phone, skip meetings, take a holiday. Set-up working hours, or shifts. Focus on longevity, flexibility, and inclusion rather than splintering off or burning out. Step away from arguments. Prioritise being kind over being 'right'. Try to make a gentle, perhaps understanding, space for people you don't like. Remember, we all fuck up.

Keep at least one foot in the outside world. Have friends outside of your 'movements'. Visit the sea, have a laugh, enjoy your damn self. And most of all, keep some perspective. Realise that although you might not start THE revolution, you can still revolutionise the lives of those around you. Live the revolution through tending to the tension between assertiveness, taking up space, being direct and forgiving, mending relationships/communities, giving space, being open to receiving criticism. This isn't going to be easy. In fact, it will hurt like hell. But it helps when you have people around you who respect your humanity more than expect your perfection.

You're not getting involved. Not again. You can see the politics of exclusion forming already. They dismiss your friend because he says he has experience at this. They don't want anyone who knows too much. They want to retain control.

You'll give your money towards it. It's a good cause, after all. But being in the same group as those people for that long would spin you out.

It's all competitive, macho, hierarchical "Queer-revolutionary-horizontal-organising". The cognitive dissonance scrambles your brain. It's those people who come to your event to find the ten minutes of fault in something you worked ceaselessly to put together. It's the person who will be your friend at one event and completely ignore you at another according to whose around to witness it.

There is the "in" crowd and there is the Other. And you're always one wrong move away from being ousted. That's if you ever fit in in the first place. Better to keep yourself firmly footed outside of the circle. Arrange your events, tend your real friendships, and pop your nose in every now and then to help. Don't get embroiled in the life-sucking world of activism. Unless...



WHAT IS THE STATE?

words: dg

(AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?)

I was listening to a debate recently between two activists in the scene. At first, it seemed like a dispute over tactics. Reformism or revolution, effectively, with each side making a claim to be taking the pragmatic stance: 'we can't achieve anything fast enough without the state', *versus* 'nothing can be achieved through the state.' But as the conversation developed, it became clear that each also had alternative theories of what the state was. For one, the state was a tool of the ruling class, along with much of culture and the media. For the other, media – while manipulative – could also be manipulated, and the state, too, could be used to promote democratic change.

The differences between these views are significant, and such a theoretical divide needs (presumably) to be bridged if people are to work together. My own view is that the state is controlled well enough by the rich for major progressive reforms to only occur during times of crisis – and then, only to buy off some of those in revolt. But I'd rather see reformist action than none at all, and I think any pressure towards a more empathic and caring society is valuable.

I also think we have more to learn from understanding why we each say what we do, than we do from arguing whether we should. We're far enough away from being able to achieve some grand goal – either revolutionary, or reformist – as to make the nurturing of multiple perspectives more important than committing to an analysis. As anarchists, we should respect difference wherever possible. My intention, then, is not to define how we should think about the state – finally and forever – but to think through the problem.

What is the state? It is, firstly, people and things. Pierre Bourdieu claims that the 'state may be defined as a principle of orthodoxy' (2014: 4). But this leaves out the state's material aspect. As Latour put it 'when power

is exerted through things that don't sleep... it can last longer and expand further' (in Sayes, 2014: 140).

So, 'the state is a social relationship' (Landauer, 2010: 214), but one between both people and things: authority, and the tools to impose it. These people are usually a tiny minority, and much of those resources are weapons. These two facts are linked; as Hannah Arendt comments: '...the extreme form of violence is One against All' (1969: 42).

This probably seems like a terrible oversimplification. Isn't the state also the doctor's office, the jobcentre, the school? But as David Graeber comments, 'these are institutions involved in the allocation of resources within a system of property rights that... rests on the threat of force' (2015: 58). If you insist on these services without the right documents, the police will be called.

Of course, the state has its own 'magic', (Taussig, 1997) its own grand narratives and terrible threats, its shrines to those sacrificed and hymns of unique progress. It convinces many of us that there is no alternative. As Landauer comments, 'the state will fulfill a certain function... as long as its alternative, the socialist reality, does not exist' (2010: 214).

But who controls this set of relationships? Liberals believe '...a rough equality exists amongst organised groups and interests... each enjoys some measure of access... and government is prepared to listen impartially to all.' (Heywood, 1994: 40).

In empirical terms: '...large protests can be seen as credible signals of public opinion, and public opinion plays an important role in policymaking' (Ozden and Glover, 2022: 7). Or, in a study of the civil rights movement '...nonviolent activism, particularly when met with state or vigilante repression, drove media coverage, framing, congressional speech, and public opinion' (Wasow, 2020: 638).

These claims often rest their case on specific movements for legal reform. Yet in practice, power, stymied in one location, quickly finds an alternative. Former Black Panther Don Cox, writing in 1981, said 'conditions are worse now than they were' (2019: 316) and Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin says of Black America: 'we are being systematically killed... and neither the cops nor the government will take any action' (2021: 24).

The state is deeply interpenetrated with, and often peopled by, the rich and the powerful. More generally, big businesses rely on the state to protect their property and subsidise their growth, and the state – in turn – relies on the support of business. As Nitzan and Bichler put it 'the government has become part of capital.' (2009: 298). Thinking that we can change society in such a way that it costs the rich their power, without having to defend ourselves, is dangerous nonsense.

So we have an idea of the state as a group of people, animated by shared goals (power), shared ideas (authority) and shared resources (guns and money). A thin distinction operates between 'cops' and 'security', 'politicians' and 'businesspeople', sustained through a complex system of law. But the law is also subject to the choices of the powerful, and not only through their construction of it: 'the sovereign can suspend the law. What defines the law is the state of exception' (Edkins 2000: 6).

In the UK, Parliament is sovereign, which means it can declare a state of emergency, removing the rule of law. More generally, however, the state often declares law irrelevant when it considers it a constraint. The murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, and the attempts by police to justify it, are only one example.

So what does it all matter, anyway? Well if we recognise that the powerful control our society partly through telling us stories, then we shouldn't undervalue the power of challenging those narratives. Politics is important. 'The entire system would vanish... if the people began to constitute themselves as a people apart from the state' (Landauer, 2010: 214).

Politics without action is a vacuum; action without politics is insignificant.

Secondly, if we perceive the state as a well-armed group, closely connected to the rich, and effectively ungoverned by law, then we should be careful. We should expect our communications to be surveilled, our groups to be infiltrated and manipulated, and our bodies to be attacked without consequence for the attacker. Anything else would be naïve.

This is not to say that we shouldn't have legal observers at demonstrations, shouldn't pursue claims against the police in the courts, or shouldn't campaign to restrict state power. But we should expect the impacts to be limited, and to attenuate with success. The state perceives us as a threat: the category of 'aggravated activist' was recently defined to include anarchists alongside hate groups (Netpol, 2022).

Thirdly, if we understand the state as a group of people with the resources to control others, an internal agreement on how to behave, and a narrative legitimating their role in society, we should be critically aware of meeting that definition. After all, in Russia and Ukraine in 1917-21, and in Spain between 1936-39, left-wing states emerged which collaborated with, sometimes included – and ultimately betrayed – their anarchist comrades. Nazan Üstündağ writes with regard to the Kurdish freedom struggle:

“... a moral and political society... must continuously defend itself against the emergence of centralized power... *Violence (in capitalism) becomes defense (in communism) when its means are equally distributed across society.*’ (2016: 199).

This means, among other things, thinking about how we do direct action. Who's included? Who's put at risk? Being part of a revolutionary struggle can be fantastically empowering, but being able to do so for a long time requires conscious planning. Who's most able to run away? Is the target worth the consequences if things go wrong? How likely is that to happen?

Who has the resources to support people, and will they share them? Is there any risk of making the people you want to empower feel worse?

Anarchists struggle to *provoke* the development of a revolutionary society, to enable that society's self-defence against the state, and ultimately to abolish themselves as a separate, potentially oppressive force.

Perhaps this is easier than it seems. David Graeber argues that, if anarchists had won the Spanish Civil War, the result would have been a slow, political struggle to convince the conservative parts of the country:

‘...you can’t actually get thousands of human beings to systematically massacre hundreds of thousands... *unless they can at least tell themselves that someone else is responsible*... The only way to really win over the statist enclaves would be to win over their children’ (2011: 27-29, my emphasis)

I hope these comments suggest a useful theory of the state in an appropriate and unpretentious way. Alternative styles and views are a strength, and help us recognise our own mistakes. Anti-authoritarianism is not just challenging the people giving orders, but knowing when you’re the one with authority.

Optimism about the state anaesthetises society. While there are undoubtedly means of using state power to challenge its grip, too often the cost of compromise exceeds the values gained. This is true both for its ‘reformist’ liberal, and ‘revolutionary’ Marxist varieties. Like homeopathy, the smaller the dosage, the more powerful the treatment.

There are, however, real values that we stand for: empathy, solidarity, and liberation of the natural world. At the end of the free-market Leninist sci-fi *The Moon is A Harsh Mistress*, the narrator asks: ‘Are food riots too high a price to pay to let people be?’ (1966: 301). I don’t know where the line is; surely we have to decide it together. But there is a price that’s too high.

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we will live again

in the bodies and minds of those who remember us... who are inspired by us...

who carry on the struggle



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tracking trackers: the hyper-evolution of cookies and privacy in the digital age

- reject all cookies, always -

words: tn

Introduction

Kids are often taught to be wary of accepting cookies from strangers. Yet in today's digital landscape, many users automatically click the "I agree" button, prioritising convenience over privacy. Instead, rejecting all non-essential cookies should be the norm. While first-party cookies can enhance our online experience third-party cookies operate more insidiously, often collecting sensitive data for exploitative purposes. This includes everything from price discrimination (Mikians et al., 2013) to government surveillance (Soltani et al., 2013).

As we learn to clear our cookies, tech giants are always one step ahead. The rise of browser fingerprinting has emerged as a more invasive form of surveillance. Dubbed "cookies on steroids" (Rukavytsia, 2017), this method allows companies to build detailed profiles on users without their consent. Google's Topics Application Programming Interface (API), added to Chrome, Edge and Opera in 2023 without users' knowledge, is also problematic, with Firefox and Safari refusing to implement it, citing privacy concerns.

The Hyper-Evolution of Cookies

First-party cookies significantly improve user experience by remembering passwords, personalising web pages, and facilitating secure logins, and are sometimes essential (Google, 2021). However, third-party cookies belong to domains different from the website you're visiting, allow companies to track your behaviour across multiple sites, and often manipulate your behaviour (figure 1.)

cont. >

Three Scenarios: Understanding Tracking

1. First-Party Cookies: Imagine entering a small local shop where the seller greets you by name and remembers your preferences. This is akin to first-party cookies, which enhance your experience by retaining useful information. If you like the shop, you trust the seller's intention is to improve your experience.

2. Third-Party Cookies: Now, picture a larger store where the seller is still friendly, but there are masked individuals taking notes on your every move. They observe what you look at, what you buy, and even what you discuss with the seller. You have no idea who they are or what they're doing with the information they collect. They can sell this data to anyone without your permission. Even if you leave the store, they can drop trackers in your bag that continue to relay information on you until you clean it out. This represents third-party cookies, which track your behaviour across multiple sites without your knowledge.

3. Browser Fingerprinting: Finally, envision a massive department store with no visible staff, only automated kiosks and digital displays. As you enter, the store's system scans your appearance, noting your height, hair colour, and clothing style. It also records the unique ID of your smartphone. As you navigate the aisles, the system tracks your movements and interactions, even if you don't engage with the displays. When you leave, the system retains your profile for future visits, allowing it to recognise you instantly, regardless of whether you return with the same device. This is browser fingerprinting—an invasive and invisible method of tracking that doesn't rely on cookies.

In response to privacy concerns, major browsers began blocking third-party cookies, with Safari blocking them by default since 2017 (Hern, 2017), and Firefox taking similar measures. However, loopholes allowing existing cookies to be updated enabled the industry to exploit so called *supercookies*, such as Zombie and Evercookies.

Supercookies were designed to resist deletion, and can be recreated even after being cleared (Soltani et al., 2009; Bujlow et al., 2017). Zombie cookies are stored in multiple locations, allowing them to spread across different browsers. Whenever one location is cleared, the cookie is recreated from the remaining data (Soltani et al., 2009.)

Welcome to the Fingerprinting Era

Browser fingerprinting, also known as cookieless or stateless tracking, is a more sophisticated approach than traditional cookies. This technique exploits unique combinations of software and hardware attributes that users' browsers share with visited websites, allowing for unique identification (Vastel et al., 2018). Since no cookies are generated, tracking occurs without user consent, and personal information flows without the user's knowledge, regardless of cookie settings (Bujlow et al., 2017).

The scope of tracking mechanisms is vast, revealing the diversity and extent of methods used to uniquely identify users (see table 1). For example, Canvas Fingerprinting, often referred to as "cookies on steroids," utilises HTML5 canvas to analyse pixel data and render glyphs with slight variations, while also enabling tracking (Fifield & Egelman, 2015).

While browser fingerprinting is not illegal and can enhance web safety by preventing fraudulent behaviour, it has also been used for more malicious purposes. The Battery API fingerprinting technique analyses the charge and discharge time of devices, successfully identifying users (Olejnik et al., 2015).

As of 2019, nearly 70% of the most popular UK websites, including major news outlets like the BBC and Washington Post, employed at

least one type of fingerprinting algorithm. Al-Fannah et al. highlight that 84.5% of fingerprinting sites sent their collected data directly to third-party sites, with Google Analytics being the most widely used service. This pervasive tracking underscores the urgent need for users to be aware of their digital footprints.

Examples of Abuse: EveryLead and Uber

The extent of surveillance enabled by third-party cookies and browser fingerprinting raises serious problems. For instance, the company EveryLead markets its fingerprinting technology to advertisers, claiming it can 'track a customer's complete *online and offline* journey' with just a single line of code added to a website. This allows advertisers to effectively erase any semblance of user privacy (Callsource, 2024. My emphasis).

In another alarming example, Uber was reported to analyse devices' battery status to adjust pricing dynamically. Users with lower battery levels are often in a hurry and their decision making processes can be affected, making them more likely to accept higher fares. While Uber claims to only use fingerprinting for legitimate purposes (e.g. preventing gamification) price manipulation exemplifies how profiling can be exploited for profit, and raises serious ethical questions (Chowdhry, 2016).

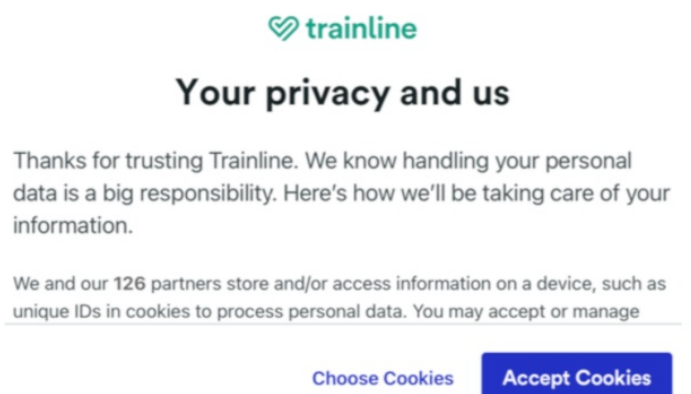


Figure 1: Design of a consent banner where 'Accept Cookies' is a more convenient and faster choice. Here Trainline wants you to accept cookies from 126 unknown vendors.

<https://www.thetrainline.com> [Accessed: October 2024]

Fingerprinting (FP) Tracking mechanism	Technologies	Scope
Network and Location FP Device FP Operating System instance FP Browser instance FP	e.g., geolocation, HTTP headers, HTML5, TCP headers, JavaScript, Flash, Java	IP address, user's country, city and neighbourhood Hardware information: mouse, keyboard, accelerometer, microphone and camera, operating system, screen resolution, timezone, list of fonts, web browser, TCP timestamps, Operating System (OS) instance: OS version and architecture, system language, user-specific language, local timezone, data and time, list of fonts, colour depth, screen dimensions, audio capabilities, access to user's: camera, microphone, and hard disk, printing support, hard disk identifiers, TCP/IP parameters, computer name, Internet Explorer product ID, Windows Digital Product ID, installed system drives, OS instance id stored by Java in privileged applet. Browser instance: detailed browser version, images and media files, preferred languages, list of plugins, browser dimensions, Flash version, screen resolution, colour depth, timezone, system fonts, HTTP headers, IP address, cookies enabled, supercookies limitations.

Table 1. Technologies used to track users and their known scope. Adapted from Bujlow et al., 2017 pp.1480-1483.

How Unique Are You?

The implications of browser fingerprinting are staggering. Research by Narayanan and Shmatikov (2008, 2019) reveals that a small number of data points about an individual—none of which are uniquely identifying—can collectively serve as a unique identifier. In some cases, as few as five unique characteristics can identify a person from a pool of 500,000.

Only 33 'non-unique identifiers' (bits of entropy) are sufficient to identify an individual among the world population (over 8 billion people). This is due to the network's entropy, which, using simplified mathematics, shows that 2^{33} is approximately 8.59 billion. But, if you are identified as living in a town of 100,000, that already contributes 16 bits of entropy, leaving only 17 bits needed for identification.

To understand your uniqueness, you can check your browser's fingerprinting score at <https://coveryourtracks.eff.org/> This tool assesses how identifiable your browser is based on its characteristics. The more unique your browser configuration, the easier it is for trackers to identify you. Try to get a score below 17.

If you're still on Chrome - quit it now

Don't just download a new browser, delete Chrome and its libraries from your machine. Seriously. Similarly with Opera and Edge...

It's beyond the scope of this article to explain Google's recent development of algorithms to track its users. But for the interested, their Federal Learning of Cohorts (FLoC) software was so controversial that all major browsers and search engines refused to implement it. FLoC was quietly dropped in 2022, but the replacement, Topics is a near replica. Topics, which classifies users into one of 349 categories based on their browsing habits, was installed in Chrome in September 2023 without explicitly informing users.

Conclusion

We should demand transparency from websites and browsers regarding tracking techniques and third-party involvement. We need clear indications of how data is collected and used, and websites should provide straightforward options for users to opt out of tracking and access information about the profiles built on them.

While the digital landscape is fraught with privacy challenges, a combination of awareness, technological tools, and advocacy for transparency can empower users to reclaim control over their online identities. The fight for digital privacy is ongoing, and it requires collective action to hold corporations to account and demand ethical approaches across the internet.

Turn over for a summary of solutions to the problems raised here.

Takeaways: Solutions

1. Blend in with the Crowd: Some privacy advocates suggest that using default or commonly used settings can mitigate the risks of browser fingerprinting. The logic is simple: the less unique your machine and browser identity, the more difficult you are to identify. However abandoning our unique preferences stifles innovation and user freedom, ultimately reinforcing the dominant oligarchy of the tech giants.

2. Battle of Shields: Strict security practices, (e.g. opting out of third-party cookies, using a VPN), are only a partial solution. Browser extensions like Ghostery, Adblock Plus, NoScript, and Privacy Badger can block certain tracking methods, but paradoxically - as uncommon characteristics - they can be used as identifiers for browser fingerprinting (Schmuecker, 2011; Fifield & Egelman, 2015). Some extensions may also inadvertently allow certain trackers to bypass their filters, leaving users vulnerable, or rely on users' technical knowledge to operate effectively.

3. Routing through Tor: Using a combination of these methods within the The Onion Router (Tor) network can provide a more robust layer of protection, at the cost of convenience. Tor anonymises user traffic by routing it through multiple servers, making it significantly harder for trackers to identify individuals. However, the trade-off is slower browsing speeds and access issues, with certain websites blocking Tor traffic entirely (Dingledine et al., 2004).

4. Advocate for User Control: In the longer term, we need to organise to gain power over online tracking systems. Accessing information about profiles built on our online behaviour and activities, as well as altering those profiles, should be effortless, secure and private. If a device is unique, only the owner of that device should be able to access the specific tracked information (e.g. browsing history), and not the specific website owner or any other third-party.



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...There is somebody under a car, being crushed by it. The person driving the car is out of it. They are having a narcissistic episode provoked by the size of the car and its power. Not only are they no help, but they drag people away from lifting the car, telling them not to touch it, because it's their property.

Lots of people come to help lift the car, but it is very heavy, too heavy, and so after a while some lose hope. Others try to find out if the person under the car is still alive, or debate how to best lift the car, or get angry with the ones who left, or complain that they can't trust the other people trying to do the lifting. But there just are not enough people doing it.

Some people exhaust themselves, and leave. Maybe, if everyone who had tried to lift the car at some point were to lift it all at the same time, it could be moved. Some people stop lifting the car to try and get more people to help. Other people try to put every bit of energy they have into it. It doesn't matter. The car is overwhelmingly large, beyond the capacity of any one person or small group of people. Some people say the person under it is dead, others disagree.

After some time, the people have been trying to lift the car for so long that they come to think this is actually just what life is like. They don't feel normal unless they're trying to lift this weight, and they feel frustrated with anyone who suggests that life should be different and that it would be better if the car could be gotten off the person under it.

Others, who have just arrived, feel a similar way, but for a different reason. For them, the possibility of lifting the car off still shows immense promise. They can't understand why people would give up, or try to figure out better ways, or otherwise distract themselves from simply lifting.

For yet others, acceptance of the car moves in strange forms. While they still seem to be lifting, their muscles are no longer straining, and instead they are leaning against it, even caressing it. The attitude of the car's driver has rubbed off on them, and the car itself becomes an object of love, even as they pronounce themselves dedicated to lifting it.

The owner of the car, meanwhile, has taken to paying passersby to start arguments with the people trying to lift it off. It's dark under the car, and hard to see the person who has been crushed by it, especially at night, and he has taken to claiming there is no one there at all. Sometimes he also claims that the car is parked legally, and the person being crushed will be able to simply get up when he moves it, which he will do at a sensible time of his own choosing. Occasionally, he points out what a nice car it is, and claims that it is good for the local area to have such a nice car parked there.

One day, someone who has been trying to help lift the car for a long time admits that the driver has been paying them. He's been pretending to lift while telling the driver everything he found out about those around him, and advising him on how to prevent them lifting the car. The others around him are angry, but he leaves quickly with the money the driver has given him, and the others are too busy trying to lift the car to follow.

From this point on, it's even more difficult for the people trying to do the lifting. Whenever someone new arrives, part of their energy goes to watching them, trying to see if they are really helping to lift, or just pretending. Sometimes people ask to see new helpers' IDs, and that makes the new people uncomfortable. Who asks to see the ID of someone who is just lifting a car? The people who have been lifting the longest start talking to each other like old friends, and the new people realise that the most they will likely achieve is to also become accepted as part of the group trying to lift the car.

Sometimes people point out that there are other cars, and other crises, that they could be focussing on. Some people leave, hoping to have a victory, hoping to bring back more people to this car once they have lifted another. Other people stay. This is their crisis. It means something to them. Where are these other cars? Do they really matter as much? They're someone else's problem.

Time passes, but the people lifting the car don't grow old. It's hard to grow old, lifting a car. Young people replace others as they grow tired, and so it remains a youthful group. Some people say this is a good thing, and that it's beautiful that, together, they can get it as high off the ground as it is. Others point out that it's still not high enough for the person underneath to get out. One person suggests they should just set fire to the car. Once it burns out it will be lighter, and they'll be able to lift it. But that would kill the person underneath it, as well as anyone else who didn't get away in time, or simply couldn't let go of it anymore.

There are stories about other cars that were lifted off in the past. Sometimes people are inspired by them. But the same cars often ended up crushing other people, and the problem started over. Worse still, sometimes it was one of the people who'd helped do the lifting who was driving the car when it crashed again. The real answer is to get rid of the car entirely, but the city was built with cars in mind, and it's difficult to get anywhere without them.

On a good day, you can hear the voices of the people trying to lift the car. They sing about lifting, about having strong muscles and determined hearts. They sing about the person stuck underneath, how beautiful and lovely they are, and how they'll be out soon. On a bad day, just a few people lean against its side, waiting for others to join them again, waiting to try, once more.

