

# The Public Life of Secrets: Deception, Disclosure, and Discursive Framing in the Policy Process

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## Abstract

While secrecy enables policy makers to escape public scrutiny, leaks of classified information reveal the social construction of reality by the state. I develop a theory that explains how leaks shape the discursive frames states create to communicate the causes of social problems to the public and corresponding solutions to redress them. Synthesizing cultural sociology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology, I argue that leaks enable non-state actors to amplify contradictions between the public and secret behavior of the state. States respond by “ad hoc-ing” new frames that normalize their secret transgressions as logical extensions of other policy agendas. While these syncretic responses resolve contradictions exposed by leaks, they gradually detach discursive frames from reality and therefore increase states’ need for secrecy—as well as the probability of future leaks—in turn. I illustrate this downward spiral of deception and disclosure via a case study of the British government’s discourse about terrorism between 2000 and 2008.

## Keywords

cultural sociology, political sociology, secrecy, symbolic interactionism, comparative-historical sociology

“For in the order of things it is found that one never seeks to avoid one inconvenience without running into another.”

—Machiavelli (*The Prince*, chapter 21)

A vast literature explains how policy makers shape public understandings of social problems in order to accomplish their agenda (e.g., Alexander and Smith 1993; Berezin 1997; Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007; Reed 2013; Skrentny 2004; Somers and Block 2005; Spillman 1997; Steensland 2007; Wagner-Pacifiçi 1994). These studies highlight the discursive frames states

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craft to communicate the root causes of social problems and legitimate corresponding policies to redress them. Poverty, for example, can either be explained as the result of structural inequality or individual responsibility (Somers and Block 2005). While the former diagnosis calls for the redistribution of wealth, the latter demands policies that create incentives for individuals to lift themselves out of poverty. By controlling the meaning attached to social problems, states can structure public debates, monopolize the legislative agenda, and—if discursive frames become sufficiently embedded within the policy process—create laws, protocols, and institutions responsible for the maintenance of social problems across the *longue durée* (Berezin 2009; Hall 1993; Saguy 2013; Somers and Block 2005; Steensland 2007). Yet for all the evidence that meaning-making shapes policy outcomes, very little is known about how states create, sustain, and revise discursive frames in order to maintain their “epistemic authority” to define social problems (Glaeser 2011).

This is perhaps because cultural and political sociologists have scarcely recognized that most discursive frames are created behind closed doors. “The secret,” argued Simmel, “was one of the major achievements of humankind because it permitted an immense enlargement of the world—the possibility of hiding reality and creating a second world alongside the manifest one” (Richardson 1988:209). Thus, all relationships “can be characterized by the amount and kind of secrecy within them and around them” (Simmel 1908:331). The relationship between the state and the civil sphere is an obvious example, but the study of how secrecy shapes the policy process has inexplicably disappeared since the seminal work of Shils (1974) and Lukes (1974). These studies explained how secrecy enables states to manipulate the threat of social problems, explore unpopular policy interventions, and mask internal conflicts within the state itself. While secrecy thus enables a form of Machiavellian power, leaks—or intentional disclosure of classified information by those privy to secret proceedings—are a regular feature of the “business of rule.”<sup>1</sup> Leaks are commonplace for a variety of reasons. These include the altruism of rogue whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, status competitions among state elites that cannot be resolved in secret, attempts to avoid blame for precarious or ineffective secret campaigns, or the unrelenting surveillance of the mass media and new websites for whistleblowers such as Wikileaks (Sagar 2013b).

Yet my goal in this article is not to theorize the internal causes of leaks. Instead, I develop a theory that explains how leaks of classified information shape the discursive frames ruling administrations produce to shape public understandings of social problems. I shall argue that leaks threaten the integrity of discursive frames because they usually reveal the social construction of reality by the administration in power. This is critical, I propose, because so much of the political power of an administration depends on its reputations—and specifically its capacity to create consistent and coherent narratives that justify their official definition of social problems (Carpenter 2010; Fine 2011; Glaeser 2011; Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007; McGraw 1991). Drawing on symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, I argue that leaks of classified information enable non-state actors to challenge the epistemic authority of ruling administrations by highlighting contradictions between its public and secret behavior. Ruling administrations respond by what Garfinkel (1967) called “ad hoc-ing,” or developing hybrid discursive frames that explain their secret behavior as a natural extension of another policy domain. While these attempts to resolve contradictions protect the epistemic authority of the state in the short term, they have several unintended consequences in the long term. Building on theories of historical contingency, I argue that ad hoc-ing detaches discursive frames from the reality of social problems. This is because ad hoc discursive frames result from political exigencies and attempts to avoid embarrassment instead of careful study of social problems. This detachment of discursive frames from reality forces states to expand secret campaigns in order to effectively resolve social problems. The expansion of

secret campaigns increases the potential for leaks by those concerned about the disconnect between official discourse and reality. Leaks thus resemble a sort of “autoimmune” disorder that traps states within a downward spiral of deception and disclosure.<sup>2</sup>

Because my goal is to develop a theory of how leaks of classified information shape the cultural discourses ruling administrations use to define social problems and legitimate solutions to resolve them, I do not address the broader issue of whether such discursive shifts ultimately influence the creation or implementation of social policies. I also do not offer the comprehensive ethnographic data from inside a state that one would ideally use to study the role of leaks in shaping the evolution of discursive frames within the policy process. Instead, I offer a preliminary theory developed through a case study of the evolution of the Blair administration’s discourse about domestic counterterrorism policy. This case study combines large-scale content analysis, in-depth interviews with policy makers, and ethnographic observation of public policy meetings. To be clear, I do not argue that leaks are the primary source of all shifts in discursive frames. Instead, I offer my theory of ad hoc-ing as one of several mechanisms that shape the evolution of discursive frames and distinguish my account from other event-driven explanations that focus on crisis or scandal. This article is thus a first step toward a broader sociology of deception, disclosure, and meaning-making—both in and outside states—that I sketch in my conclusion.

## DECEPTION, DISCLOSURE, AND DISCURSIVE FRAMING IN THE POLICY PROCESS

The study of meaning-making within the policy process—or how policy makers shape public understandings of social problems in order to accomplish their agenda—has deep roots within sociology (e.g., Alexander and Smith 1993; Berezin 1997), political science (Edelman 1964; Laitin 1986), history (Hunt 1984), and anthropology (Ortner 1984). Cross-disciplinary consensus that meaning-making is a key instrument of political power emerged in response to once dominant theories that explained public policies as the result of the rational choices of voters, strategic alliances between policy makers, or outside interests.<sup>3</sup> Though such structural forces continue to exert powerful influence on the construction of social policies, a large literature now shows that the assignment of meaning to social problems is an elementary force that usually determines whether and how different issues reach the legislative agenda. Examples include the rise and fall of guaranteed income policy, which was profoundly shaped by debates about whether poor people are “deserving” of government intervention (Steensland 2007), or, affirmative action policies, which passed in large part because of policy makers’ efforts to define certain minority groups as morally worthy of preferential treatment (Skrentny 2004). These and many other studies demonstrate the influence of meaning-making on the creation of social policies net of structural explanations of the policy process. Yet in so doing, this interdisciplinary literature eschews the more fundamental question of how policy makers create meaningful accounts of social problems for the public in the first place. Or, as Steensland (2008:2) writes, most studies offer an “oddly disembodied picture” of this process that belies the complex social relationships between political parties and the public that constrains the range of meaning-making strategies available to policy makers over time.

Among the central concepts within the literature on meaning-making in the policy process is Goffman’s (1974) concept of a discursive frame. Goffman introduced frame analysis to advance pragmatist William James’s *problematique*: “Under what circumstances do we think things are real?” Goffman defined frames as “schemata of interpretation” that enable us “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” (p. 21) events and situations. In this article, I

focus on frames used to shape *public* discussions of social problems and not the frames individuals use to process the world around them. These are often called policy frames, or discourses that shape public understanding by “promoting particular definitions of problems, diagnosing the causes underlying those problems, or identifying and justifying potential remedies” (Steensland 2008:1029).<sup>4</sup> Yet, as the literature on the policy process colonized the study of framing—and vice versa—some of Goffman’s most important insights have been jettisoned (Gamson 1985). Instead of examining how discursive frames are produced via the interaction of social actors who perform them, most studies assume they are *creatio ex nihilo*—or free-floating discourses that compete for legitimacy based on their own merit (e.g., Rein and Schön 1993). Though Goffman proposed that frames emerge via interactions between individuals in small group settings, I argue that the same insight can be applied to public encounters between the state and civil society.<sup>5</sup> These interactions typically occur within the public sphere: a heavily mediated arena where states and civil society actors deliberate about social problems (Adut 2012). Ruling administrations publicize these discursive frames by making speeches, dispatching press releases, and holding press conferences. Opposing parties or non-state actors such as social movements or pundits respond to these frames in the mass media. Such reactions usually compel states to respond in order to advance or preserve their epistemic authority over the definition of social problems.

Recovering Goffman’s original emphasis on the production of frames through interactions also highlights the social settings in which such encounters unfold (Norton 2014). Goffman famously distinguished the “front-stage” behavior people perform in public spaces from the more hidden—yet equally consequential—social coordination that occurs in the “back stage.” The literature on meaning-making in the policy process has scarcely acknowledged that policy makers routinely transition from front- to backstage roles, even though classic studies in political sociology emphasize the importance of such shifts.<sup>6</sup> Simmel (1908), for instance, argued that backstage behavior was so critical to the function of the British parliament during the nineteenth century that ministers who disclosed the clandestine activities of the state were expelled from government altogether. The function of secrecy in contemporary political environments is of course more subtle—because of growing demand for government transparency. Studies of secrecy in the postwar period revealed that states exert political power by controlling the flow of information about social problems toward the public (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Foucault 1978). Similarly, Shils (1974) argued that policy makers distracted public attention from secret violations of civil liberties in the backstage by reifying American communists as a dangerous ideological community in the front stage—or the public sphere. Lukes (1974) argued that a key function of political power is the ability of states to hide internal conflict or dissent that occurs in the backstage.<sup>7</sup> Together, these studies indicate that much of the epistemic authority of the state—or its capacity to control the meaning assigned to social problems—rests in its capacity to carefully coordinate front-stage activity and ensure that the back stage remains hidden from public view.

## WHAT ARE LEAKS, AND WHY DO THEY OCCUR?

But assuming that states have unmitigated control over the flow of information in the public sphere amounts to conspiracy theory. Even the most authoritarian regimes cannot completely hide the political backstage. This is because states are not unitary actors but complex networks of individuals with competing jurisdictions and opposing agendas (Clemens 1997; Friedland and Alford 1991; Heimer 1999). Thus, internal conflict within the secret proceedings of states is commonplace and invites the potential for leaks as elites struggle with one another for status—though there are many other sources of leaks that I discuss in further

detail in the following.<sup>8</sup> Though he did not write about secret deliberations within states, Goffman (1974:348) described such behavior as “breaking frame.” “The calm and considered action of a fabricator,” wrote Goffman, “can constitute a slip, breaking the frame that was being sustained for the dupes.” A defining feature of leaks is thus that they reveal discrepancies between the public and private behavior of the state, that is, discrepancies between the public discursive frames states use to sustain their epistemic authority over social problems and the clandestine activities they may use to redress them. Leaks often result from the actions of anonymous whistleblowers. They are therefore distinct from scandals, where the ruling administration can scapegoat a single individual or group of individuals for their transgressions (e.g., Adut 2004; Perrin et al. 2006).<sup>9</sup> Leaks are also distinct from crises, which can also be blamed on those whose actions precipitated political upheaval or by the unpredictability of exogenous events such as disasters, financial meltdowns, or invasion by foreign forces.<sup>10</sup>

Why do leaks occur? Here, the literature on secrecy in small groups is instructive. Simmel’s (1908) classic work on secret societies suggests that all relationships between actors are shaped by the amount of information they have about each other. In this way, “secrets are possessions whose value is enhanced by denying knowledge of them to others.”<sup>11</sup> Yet paradoxically, secrets are only valuable if members of small groups can prevent each other from disclosing them. There are therefore numerous mechanisms that prevent disclosure within secret societies. One of these is hierarchical structure. Those at the top of the hierarchy, Simmel argues, enjoyed knowledge of all secrets, while those at the bottom are gradually exposed to secret knowledge as they advanced through the ranks. The motivation to learn valuable information from tightly held secrets prevents low-ranking members of secret societies from leaking information. Simmel’s critics argue that secrecy is not only a relationship between actors but a *process* of continuing concealment and disclosure (Longhi 1974). As Scheppelle (1990:308) writes, secrets have a “double-edged” character: “On the one hand, they make . . . social control . . . and social structure possible. . . . On the other hand, they provide opportunities for undermining the existing order and creating alternative social forms.” Similarly, Erickson’s (1981) survey of multiple secret societies across different countries and historical periods concludes that hierarchy within secret societies creates competition more often than conformity. Fine and Holyfield (1996) extend this critique, showing that people’s status within secret groups depends on their ability to keep secrets from other members of the group.

If competition within secret societies or small groups is common, then it is highly likely to exist within the complex organizations such as states that are comprised of large groups of people with considerable potential for internal conflict or misunderstanding (Heimer 1999; Knoke and Laumann 1982; Michels 1968). The failure of the U.S. government to prevent the September 11 attacks, for example, is a prototypical case of how secrecy within states breeds competition—and ultimately dysfunction. As the *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* concluded, much of the failure of the U.S. intelligence community to prevent the September 11 attacks resulted from the failure of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Administration to share classified information with each other. This failure apparently resulted from competition among the agencies as well as concern about the protection of confidential informants across multiple agencies that follow separate security protocols (Hersh 2004).

Though Lukes (1974) argues that states use secrecy to mask such internal conflict, few—if any—states possess the organizational capacity to completely prevent leaks of classified information.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, leaks may occur precisely because of the highly competitive nature of

secret proceedings within the state. While states use secrecy to exert power over their citizenry, leaks enable policy makers to exert power over each other. “If [state] elites cannot resolve their internal conflicts,” writes Ku (1998:181–82), they may “opt instead for an open discrediting of their opponents.” Leaks are an attractive option for policy makers who cannot advance their agenda within secret proceedings because they can be performed anonymously—thereby removing the risk of reprisals from those higher up the hierarchy. A prototypical example of this type of leak was the “deep throat” informant whose disclosures about the Nixon Administration precipitated the Watergate Scandal (Schudson 1992). The informant was later discovered to be a disaffected FBI agent who was disgruntled by multiple conflicts with senior agency officials.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Hirschman’s (1970) classic study of “exit, voice, and loyalty” suggests disaffected members of organizations such as states must either leave their roles or publicly voice their concern, leaks provide a third option that enables such individuals to challenge their colleagues in public without forfeiting their roles. In Hirschman’s terms, leaking is a form of voice where exit from the state is a likely outcome and loyalty becomes more complex because it is defined not only in terms of the organization but the broader society as well.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to competition among policy makers, leaks also result from their attempts to escape blame for immoral or ineffective clandestine activities. Though Simmel’s study of secrecy emphasizes internal relationships among members of secret societies, Goffman’s sociology reminds us that the power of the state is deeply dependent on their reputation before the public. Being part of a clandestine campaign that is ineffective or otherwise objectionable therefore carries considerable risk—if or when such clandestine activities are made public. For this reason, policy makers or state employees may preemptively leak information about clandestine campaigns in an attempt to secure public approval for bravely questioning authority.<sup>15</sup> Examples of this type of leak are equally abundant. Consider, for example, the efforts of former FBI agent Colleen Rowley to call attention to the threat of the September 11 attacks prior to this landmark event or the more recent efforts of Bradley Manning, who infamously leaked a massive trove of information to the Wikileaks website that detailed wartime abuses by U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most recent example of such “altruistic” leaks is Edward Snowden, who leaked details of the National Security Administration’s PRISM program that obtained personal information from millions of Americans who were not suspected of any wrongdoing.

Finally, leaks may occur because of the unrelenting surveillance of the mass media. While scholars often depict journalists as dutiful conduits who transmit information from the state to the public (e.g., Bennett 2004), other studies describe journalists as aggressive watchdogs that not only promote criticism of government but also probe for inconsistencies within the ruling administration itself (Clayman and Reisner 1998; Negrine 1996; Schudson 2008). Occasionally, journalists can create scandals without the cooperation of the state—as in Daniel Ellsberg’s famous infiltration of the Nixon Administration. The so-called Pentagon Papers that he obtained revealed a secret report about extensive military attacks by the United States in Southeast Asia from 1945 to 1967. More often, journalists simply provide the means for disaffected or concerned policy makers to leak information to the public. The mass media is the preferred venue for such officials to leak classified information because it has a legal obligation to guarantee the anonymity of its sources (Reich 2008). Even those who wish to “go public” when leaking classified information for personal political gain rely on the media to disseminate their message across the public sphere (Cook 1998). In recent years, the Internet has also become a regular outlet for the disclosure of classified information. Websites such as Wikileaks have developed sophisticated technology to prevent the identification of sources and facilitate the disclosure of massive amounts of data with minimal effort.

## HOW LEAKS SHAPE THE EVOLUTION OF DISCURSIVE FRAMES

Regardless of whether leaks result from internal conflict within the state, attempts to escape blame, moral fortitude, or external pressure from the mass media—or from some combination of these factors—my goal is to examine how leaks shape the evolution of the discursive frames ruling administrations produce to structure public debate about social problems. Though states are comprised of complex webs of actors with competing allegiances, ruling administrations enjoy executive privileges to create official definitions of social problems in unilateral fashion. Yet leaks represent a major threat to the state's monopoly on the official definition of social problems. This is because leaks recast the relationship between the state and its opponents. One of the key features of discursive frames is that they enable the state to structure public discourse about the root causes of social problems by defining a shared set of assumptions. Thus, opponents of the state may vehemently disagree with its policy recommendations, but they are usually forced to do so within the discursive parameters established by the state's frame (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Steensland 2008). Leaks, however, create a potent opportunity for non-state actors or rogue state actors to challenge the very basis of such shared assumptions by amplifying contradictions between the public and secret behavior of the state—not unlike what Goffman (1974) described as “breaking frame.” In so doing, opponents of the state not only question the appropriateness or efficacy of state actions but also criticize the social construction of reality by the state. To borrow the language of social movement scholars, leaks create a profound “discursive opportunity” for advocacy organizations, religious groups, think tanks, rival political parties, or other civil society actors to challenge the status quo.

Leaks create opportunities for non-state actors to challenge discursive frames because they threaten the reputation of the ruling administration. Numerous studies suggest reputation is a key component of political power. Fine (2011), for example, shows that states go to great lengths to avoid negative or stigmatized reputations, even though these efforts can have damaging consequences for political parties across multiple generations. Carpenter (2010) argues that states work tirelessly to construct and protect their reputations through careful interorganizational coordination because they realize that political power rests on the trust of the public. Similarly, McGraw (1991) shows that reputation management among political candidates is among the most important determinants of voter behavior. Glaeser (2011) goes even further—suggesting the political power of the entire state hinges primarily on their capacity to produce shared definitions of reality by winning the validation of other collective actors within the public sphere. Together, these studies suggest leaks would be of grave concern to states—not only because they reveal contradictions between the front- and backstage behavior of state elites but also because they reveal breaches of public trust—or worse, intentional and coordinated action to deceive or mislead that damage their reputation.

Given that leaks threaten so many dimensions of political power, how do ruling administrations respond? When faced with crises or scandals, ruling administrations usually engage in purification or “scapegoating” rituals wherein responsible parties are publicly disavowed or recriminated (Adut 2004; Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006; e.g., Larson and Wagner-Pacifici 2001). In the case of leaks, this option is often infeasible since most leakers are either anonymous or occupy a moral high ground vis-à-vis the state precisely because of their disclosure. For this reason, leakers are rarely subject to prosecution—if they are identified at all. As Pozen (2013) shows, less than a dozen legal cases have been brought against leakers over the past half-century of American politics. Similarly, Hecló's (1977) famous study of the policy process suggests senior officials seldom confront suspected leakers for fear of public backlash. Though some leakers can be scapegoated, ruling administrations

often opt not to challenge their accusations in public since discrediting the information revealed through leaks amounts to the administration attacking itself. This is because most leaks reveal some degree of coordinated deception of the public by the entire administration. There may also be practical reasons that ruling administrations are unlikely to discredit the information revealed through leaks. For example, challenging leakers can force administrations to publicly disavow clandestine activities deemed so critical that they were worth sacrificing the public's trust in the first place. Imagine, for example, a hypothetical state forced to terminate a lengthy clandestine counterterrorism operation that had resulted in multiple deaths of informants or high costs in terms of other resources.<sup>16</sup>

Another possible response to leaks is for ruling parties to simply ignore them for fear that responding will only call further attention to their transgressions. Rivera (2008), for example, shows that Croatian leaders created a vibrant tourism industry by "white-washing" their country's bloody history. As Cowan (2014) argues in her study of secrecy, Goffman (1963) described such behavior as "passing." At the very least, ruling administrations may engage in such avoidance tactics immediately following a leak if only to gauge public reaction to their transgression. Yet in order to be effective, such strategies usually require sufficient historical distance from traumatic events such as Croatia's civil war—often in combination with the purification rituals just described. Because leaks reveal the hidden activities of the ruling administration, ignoring leaks implicitly affirms or endorses the classified activities that are exposed—unlike crises or "difficult pasts" that are so public that states can never fully escape them (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Ignoring leaks also invites further criticism or more diligent surveillance by the media and other non-state actors who reason that the state's attempts to avoid discussions of the leaks signals that even more expansive clandestine activities may be underway.

Since purification rituals and avoidance tactics are not practical responses to leaks, I argue that ruling administrations respond by drawing a middle course between these two extremes: They create new discursive frames that resolve the contradictions between their public and secret behavior that are exposed by leaks. My theory thus addresses a longstanding question at the very center of cultural sociology: How do social actors use culture to resolve contradictions? Swidler (1986) famously argued that culture is not a fixed set of values but a set of resources that actors mobilize to interpret or explain the world around them. Because cultural elements such as frames are highly dynamic and multidimensional, meaning-making is a highly incoherent process riddled with bundles of messages that often contradict one another (Friedland and Alford 1991). Hence, the ways in which actors resolve contradictions provide key insight about the relationship between structure and agency—or whether social actors such as states are shaped by preexisting meaning systems or whether they are able to transform such meaning systems through the process of resolving contradictions (Archer 1988; Sewell 1992). Still, cultural sociologists are only beginning to understand the constraints that actors face when they attempt to resolve contradictions. As Swidler (2001:201) writes, "the greatest unanswered question in the sociology of culture is whether and how some cultural elements control, anchor or organize others." States routinely confront contradictions because they are tasked with assigning meaning to so many social problems. Leaks, I will argue, create a particular potent source of cultural constraint because they are so firmly tied to the epistemic authority of the state in defining social problems.

In order to theorize how administrations resolve contradictions exposed by leaks, I draw on Garfinkel's (1967) concept of "ad-hocing." Garfinkel introduced this concept to explain how individual actors resolve contradictions within small group settings, yet I argue that his work can be fruitfully extended to macro-level interactions between the state and civil society within the public sphere. According to Garfinkel, actors who face anomalies in the social

order will creatively modify existing discursive classification systems in order to explain them in terms of the status quo.<sup>17</sup> In this way, transgressions follow the principal of *factum valet*, or “an action that is otherwise prohibited by rule is counted correct once it is done” (Garfinkel 1967:21).<sup>18</sup> As Alexander (1987:269) notes, this principle “neatly combines contingency with the importance of sustaining collective order.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of leaks, states may engage in ad hoc-ing in order to make the contradictions between their public and secret behavior seem to be a logical extension of their public policy agenda.<sup>20</sup>

I invoke Wagner-Pacifici’s (1994) concept of discursive “hybridization” in order to theorize one type of ad-hocing that is particularly germane to the evolution of discursive frames. Faced with discredited or “contaminated” discourses, Wagner-Pacifici argues social actors combine elements of different types of discourse—for my purposes, multiple discursive frames that ruling administrations use to define social problems—in order to normalize contradictions exposed by leaks. More specifically, ruling administrations respond to contradictions exposed by leaks via new discursive frames that creatively synthesize different components of preexisting frames in order to craft the illusion that their transgressions were in fact an obvious extension of their public policy agendas. An exemplary case of such hybridization is President Obama’s response to a 2009 leak that exposed urgent need for troop reinforcements in Afghanistan in a letter from the region’s commanding officer to the Department of Defense. The leak caused a profound dilemma for Obama since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan was a cornerstone of his presidential campaign. Yet failing to send additional troops to Afghanistan would amount to knowingly sacrificing the lives of untold U.S. soldiers and innocent civilians. Obama soon responded by announcing an abrupt increase in troop levels in Afghanistan. He claimed this decision was necessary because the Iraq War—which he famously opposed—had distracted critical resources from the more just cause of defeating the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden.<sup>21</sup> This hybridization of the administration’s discursive frames about Iraq and Afghanistan neatly explained the president’s *volte-face* and justified what would arguably become the most significant foreign policy decision of his first term in office.

While the hybridization of discursive frames thus enables ruling administrations to resolve contradictions between their public and secret behavior revealed by leaks, such ad hoc-ing usually detaches discursive frames from the social problems they are meant to resolve. This is because leaks force administrations to privilege the coherence of their discursive frames above the congruence of those frames with what they truly believe should be done about social problems. Though studies indicate that many social policies are forged through careful, reasoned deliberation about social problems between policy makers, experts, and technocrats (e.g., Hall 1993; Hecllo 1974), leaks force states to commit to ad hoc discourses that are the result of political convenience and not careful study of social problems. Indeed, leaks may result from the failure of so-called “policy learning,” or the inability of policy makers to agree on the root causes of social problems behind closed doors.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, then, the ad hoc-ing or hybridization of discursive frames may *increase* the need for secrecy among ruling administrations in order for them to carefully evaluate unpopular solutions to social problems without the pressure of public scrutiny. Shils (1974), for example, argued that heightened public scrutiny of the U.S. government after WWII enabled Senator Joseph McCarthy to justify his now infamous clandestine campaign against alleged communist sympathizers. In this way, the public success of social policies and secrecy can be characterized as a sort of equilibrium in which public scrutiny can force the state to increase secrecy but transparency can also preclude public scrutiny of the state.

Because hybridized discursive frames are usually ineffective *and* increase the need for secrecy, they inadvertently heighten the potential for additional leaks as well. The mismatch

between hybridized discursive frames and reality—combined with the greater number of people who become involved throughout the expansion of secret campaigns—may increase policy makers' concern about being blamed for failed social policies, heighten their altruistic concern about the failure of classified campaigns, or provoke internal feuds among them. New leaks that result from these conditions are not unlike the sequelae of an autoimmune disorder, to return to the analogy I mentioned previously. Though ad hoc-ing temporarily prevents the state from "attacking itself," it also creates the conditions for even more devastating future attacks—not only because additional leaks further compromise the already stained reputation of states but also because ad hoc-ing constrains the policy framing options available to policy makers over time. This is because the policy process is highly path dependent (Hall 1993; Haydu 1998; Pedriana and Stryker 1997; Pierson 2004; Thelen 2004). That is, ruling administrations' attempts to frame social problems are highly constrained by their past policy decisions, successes, and failures. While the hybridization of discursive frames is a useful response for leaks, it can also set social policies on a collision course with each other. The number of discursive frames "available" for such hybridization decreases monotonically with each leak—as I discuss in further detail in the following case study—because each round of ad hoc-ing decreases the number of frames that are available for discursive hybridization.<sup>23</sup> In this way, ad hoc responses to leaks create the conditions for even more contradictions within the ruling administration's overall narrative—or the "accumulation of anomalies" to borrow Kuhn's (1962) famous phrase about the downfall of scientific paradigms.

### CASE STUDY: THE BLAIR ADMINISTRATION'S DISCOURSE ABOUT TERRORISM, 2001–2008

My discussion of leaks thus far has been relatively abstract. Though the primary goal of this article is to advance a theory of how leaks shape the discursive frames ruling administrations use to define social problems, the following sections present a case study designed to illustrate its potential. The case study examines how five successive leaks of classified information shaped the Blair administration's discursive frames about domestic terrorism between 2001 and 2008. This case study is informed by in-depth interviews with 32 British policy makers and state employees; content analysis of recently declassified documents, public speeches, reports, and press releases produced by the Blair administration during this period; and 10 months of participant observation of the policy process.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, these data do not enable a comprehensive evaluation of my theory because I did not have access to the secret proceedings where policy makers deliberate about how to respond to leaks. While my mixed-method approach enabled me to triangulate different sources in an attempt to collect data on such proceedings, a more comprehensive evaluation of my theory would require multiple years of ethnographic observation in closed-door meetings among policy makers. Therefore, I present the case study not as a conclusive analysis of my theory of leaks but rather a highly suggestive example of its promise.

Table 1 summarizes the case study. My quantitative analysis of all public documents about domestic counterterrorism policy produced by the Blair administration between 2001 and 2008 identified four distinct discursive frames. Between 2001 and 2004, the administration produced a "faith-blind" frame that compared terrorism inspired by Islam to that of the Irish Republican Army. When a leak exposed that the government was secretly spying on Muslim communities in order to monitor terrorism, the Blair administration ad hoc-ed a new discursive frame that explained that Muslim communities had been targeted because they suffer disproportionately from declining social capital—which they argued was primarily

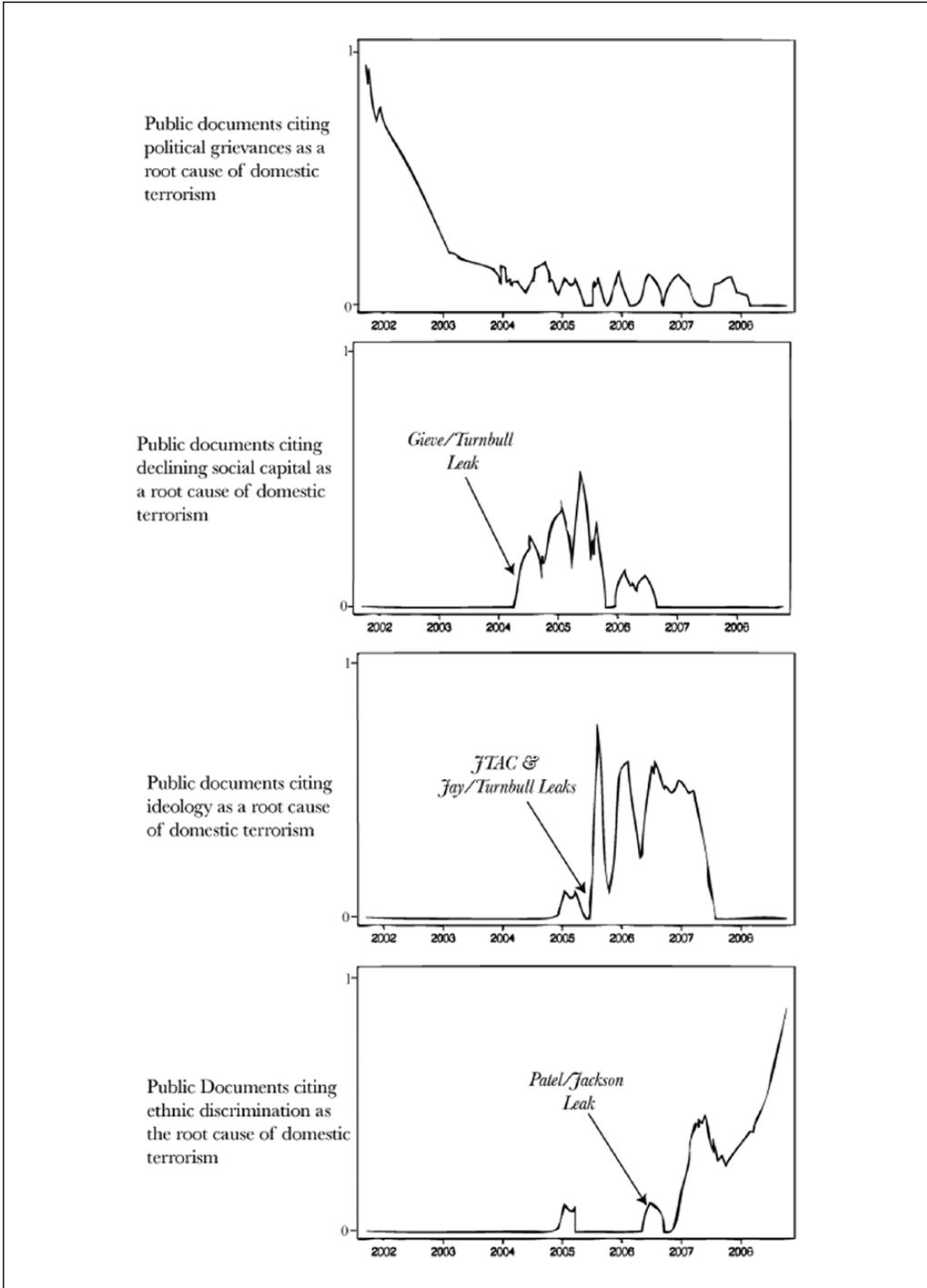
**Table 1.** Summary of How Leaks Shaped the Blair Administration's Discursive Frames about Domestic Terrorism.

	2001–2004	2004–2005	2005–2007	2007–2008
Discursive frame	Terrorism, pure and simple	Declining social capital	Battle of ideas	Enemies of diversity
Diagnosis	Homegrown terrorism inspired by Al-Qaeda is no different than terrorism inspired by the Irish Republican Army	Declining social capital between ethnic groups enabled a small minority of Muslims to develop radical views	Even well-integrated citizens are susceptible to radical ideas	Not unlike white supremacists, terrorists are enemies of diversity
Prognosis	Conventional counterterrorism approaches should be used, and Muslims should be not targeted any more than other religious groups	All British citizens must work to improve “bridging” social capital between ethnic groups	As it has done in Iraq, Britain must help mainstream British Muslims rebuff extremist versions of Islam	As they have done in the past, the British people can marginalize racists via their core values of tolerance
Leak	Gieve/Turnbull memos	JTAC Report, Jay/Turnbull memos	Patel/Ali memos	
Secret debates disclosed	Has multicultural policy encouraged self-segregation among Muslims, making them more susceptible to radicalization?	Has Britain's involvement in the Iraq War increased the risk of homegrown terrorism?	Which groups are “mainstream” Muslims and which are “extremists”? Should Britain have ties with extremist groups?	

responsible for the growth of domestic terrorism. One year later, another leak revealed that policy makers were secretly concerned that Britain's participation in the Iraq war was radicalizing young British Muslims. In response, the Blair administration ad hoc-ed another discursive frame that suggested its battle against foreign and domestic terrorism were both designed to empower moderate Muslims to discredit the extremists among them. Two years later, another leak exposed the Blair administration's clandestine attempts to manipulate the definition of “moderate Islam.” In response, the administration ad hoc-ed yet another discursive frame that suggested its attempts to classify Muslims were part of its broader campaign against extremists of all backgrounds. Figure 1 presents my quantitative content analysis of the prevalence of each of these discursive frames between 2001 and 2008. The following sections present a more detailed narrative account of these transitions, drawing on these documents, in-depth interviews, and participant observation in order to highlight the central role of ad hoc-ing in the transition between each frame.

### THE “TERRORISM PLAIN AND SIMPLE” FRAME (2001–2004)

Prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Blair administration focused its counterterrorism efforts on the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and civil unrest in Northern Ireland. Though Britain encountered terrorism inspired by Islam during the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, the IRA claimed responsibility for the most high-profile terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom during the 1990s. Only two weeks after the September 11 attacks, however, British officials



**Figure 1.** Public documents describing root causes of domestic terrorism produced by British Labour Administration and leaks of classified information, 2001–2008.

Note: Line graphs created using Lowess smoothing of daily mention of root causes of domestic terrorism in public state documents with a bandwidth of .09.

arrested Richard Reid, the infamous “shoe bomber,” who attempted to destroy a plane en route from Paris to Miami. This plot was particularly concerning because it was a case of “homegrown” terrorism—or terrorist activity conducted by a British-born individual instead of a foreign extremist. Despite the far-reaching impact of the September 11 events and this subsequent plot, the Blair administration continued to promote a “terrorism plain and simple” frame that explained terrorism as the result of political—and not religious—grievances. Thus, the administration repeatedly promised that Muslims would not be targeted in counterterrorism investigations any more than those of other faiths. A prime example of this discursive frame was a landmark speech one month after the September 11 attacks in which Blair said, “I wish to say . . . as I have said many times before . . . this is not a war with Islam. . . . It angers me, as it angers the vast majority of Muslims, to hear bin Laden and his associates described as Islamic terrorists. *They are terrorists pure and simple*” [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup> To demonstrate his commitment to the prevention of ethnic profiling, Blair invited British Muslim leaders to Downing Street for consultations with his administration about this issue several times in the weeks following the September 11 attacks.<sup>26</sup>

### *Leak: The Gieve-Turnbull Memo*

On May 30, 2004, a leak revealed the Blair administration launched a secret counterterrorism program that targeted Muslims exclusively. The Gieve-Turnbull leak included a classified report titled “Young Muslims and Extremism” that presented strategies to “prevent young British Muslims from becoming disaffected, alienated and attracted to extremist movements and terrorist activity.”<sup>27</sup> The report was based on extensive research that employed the government’s own public opinion polls, census data, and even focus groups to diagnose the root causes of radicalization among young British Muslims. Among other things, the report blamed the radicalization of British Muslims on declining social capital: “Muslim communities appear to have low levels of civic participation . . . mixed attitudes towards integration . . . and (fairly small) minorities . . . who . . . think terrorist attacks against the U.S. are justified.”

The impulse to explore the relationship between social capital and terrorism was motivated by mounting public concern that Britain’s *laissez-faire* multicultural policy had enabled the self-segregation and radicalization of British Muslims repulsed by the British way of life. Britain’s multicultural policy was designed to accommodate—and not assimilate—immigrants by providing government funds to develop schools or community centers for them to protect their distinctive cultural heritage. While this policy was initially applauded as a way of preserving ethnic diversity, it came under fire following a series of high-profile controversies in the 1990s that involved British Muslims. Most famous of these was the Salman Rushdie Affair, wherein several individuals promised to enact a death warrant issued by the Iranian Ayatollah toward a British-Indian author who had written a polemic against Islamic fundamentalism. Critics of British multiculturalism also blamed the policy for enabling the self-segregation of British Muslims into small ethnic enclaves—primarily within northern British cities. The growth of these enclaves, critics argued, prevented British Muslims from becoming part of the mainstream.

Opponents of British multicultural policy were emboldened by a series of major riots that swept across Britain’s northern cities in July 2001. These riots were sparked by a series of public conflicts between rival South Asian and nativist gangs. Use of petrol bombs and other projectiles injured hundreds—many of whom were police officers—and resulted in 300 arrests and nearly £10 million worth of damage. The riots shocked the Labour administration, which had previously touted the success of British multicultural policy to its European neighbors

who were struggling to accommodate increasingly diverse immigrant populations. An official inquiry into the report concluded that migrant and nonmigrant communities had been living “parallel lives,” not only due to residential segregation but also because of declining social capital between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The report resulted in the creation of an official government commission on “Community Cohesion” designed to create “bridging” social capital between different ethnic groups via public events and competitive grants for community groups designed to straddle ethnic or religious divides. Though the Blair administration vehemently denied any connection between its counterterrorism policy and such efforts to promote social capital between ethnic groups in public, the 2004 leak revealed the two programs were closely entwined. The aforementioned “Young Muslims and Extremism” report even acknowledged that the “Community Cohesion Unit,” which had been established to investigate and improve ethnic cohesion after the riots, had been secretly recruited to explore the implications of their findings for counterterrorism research as well.

### *Public Reaction to the Gieve-Turnbull Leak*

Unsurprisingly, the Blair administration received widespread criticism for its clandestine investigation of Muslim communities because of its purportedly “faith-blind” strategy. In a newspaper article soon after the leak, a British Muslim leader wrote,

Bit by bit we were able to improve relations between communities but since 9/11 it is as if someone pressed the wrong button on a tape recorder and erased all the good work . . . the Government . . . refuse[s] to acknowledge a positive view of Islam and continues to associate it with terrorism.<sup>28</sup>

Other critics of the Labour administration argued, “The most effective way of preventing young Muslims being sucked into extremism is to make them feel like valued members of society. This does not mean treating them all like potential terrorists.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the leader of the largest British Muslim civil society organization emphasized the contradictions between the government’s multicultural and counterterrorism policies: “Taxpayers’ money is better spent addressing the root problems that affect the community, such as education, employment . . . and social inclusion.”<sup>30</sup> An independent Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia—or discrimination against Muslims—took the opportunity to release a major report, demanding that the government start “building bridges with British Muslims again.”<sup>31</sup>

### THE “DECLINING SOCIAL CAPITAL” FRAME (2004–2005)

Citing protocol, the Blair administration refused to comment directly on the leak that exposed its secret program to monitor British Muslims. Instead, state officials gradually ad hoc-ed a new discursive frame in order to resolve the contradictions between their public and secret behavior. This new frame creatively hybridized the government’s discourse about immigrant integration and counterterrorism policy.

Domestic terrorism, the administration argued, resulted from a lack of civic engagement or “bridging” social capital between different ethnic groups. Muslims had been targeted more than others, they argued, simply because they had lower levels of such bridging social capital than any other minority group. The faith-blindness of the government’s counterterrorism frame was thus preserved because the administration insisted the creation of bridging social capital was the responsibility of all British citizens, regardless of ethnic background.

The Labour administration began articulating this hybridized discursive frame one month after the Gieve-Turnbull leak. The Blair administration held three months of hearings on “Terrorism and Community Relations.” The conclusion of the government’s report on these hearings exemplifies this “Declining Social Capital” frame:

Although . . . we focus on issues affecting the Muslim community, we do not wish to add to the stereotyping of this community. . . . Muslims in Britain are more likely than other groups to feel they are suffering as a result of the response to international terrorism . . . we conclude that community relations have indeed deteriorated. . . . The Home Office should review the links between its work on community cohesion and anti-terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

The report later proposes outreach to Muslim community leaders in order to improve counterterrorism policies. In response, the Blair administration launched an “Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society” program based on its belief that “strong community leadership can prevent extremists from gaining a hold in communities.”<sup>33</sup> As part of this campaign, more than £80 million were distributed to community organizations in order to create bridging social capital between ethnic and religious groups.

According to my respondents, the Declining Social Capital frame reconciled contradictions exposed by the Gieve-Turnbull leak in two key ways. First, it distracted public attention from the administration’s clandestine spying on British Muslims by linking it to a preexisting social problem: declining social capital. “It’s become easier to make it a [segregation problem],” said one respondent, “Why? ’Cause these things we can tackle. . . . If there’s another terrorist atrocity we’ll say, ‘yeah see it’s the integration problem. We’re fighting it . . . we’ve pumped millions into integration.’” Second, it enabled the administration to continue targeting Muslims under the guise of political engagement. Remembering early discussions about the administration’s Community Cohesion Programme, another respondent told me, “It’s all about Muslims. And you can tell because when . . . they say ‘let’s discuss Britishness,’ . . . who do they have on the panel? Hey we’ve got four Muslims today. Isn’t that exciting?” In short, the declining social capital discourse made the government’s secret attempts to monitor Muslims appear to be a logical extension of its other policy efforts while enabling them to continue religious profiling under the guise of increasing civic participation.

Through this campaign, the administration reaffirmed its belief that community disintegration was responsible for homegrown terrorism, even though their clandestine activities suggested they were primarily concerned with ideological factors related to the Islamic religion. This is the first of several examples of how ad hoc responses to leaks detach discursive frames from what policy makers perceive to be the real root causes of social problems. As the following section shows, this detachment of the discursive frame forced the Blair administration to expand its clandestine campaign in order to tackle what it secretly believed to be the root cause of homegrown terrorism: a perverse ideology that is loosely inspired by Islam and Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war.

## THE “BATTLE OF IDEAS” FRAME (2005–2006)

The need to diagnose the causes of domestic terrorism became paramount on July 7, 2005, when four men simultaneously detonated bombs on London subways and buses killing 56 people and injuring hundreds of others. It was soon discovered that the men who detonated these bombs were second-generation immigrants from South Asia and Jamaica who identified as Muslims. The government initially responded by reiterating its belief that declining

social capital was responsible for the radicalization of these individuals. For example, a senior administration official responded to the attacks by saying, "We have got to root out those elements from within our community that want to destroy it."<sup>34</sup> The following day, the administration released a statement that suggested its community cohesion efforts would be a cornerstone of its response to the bombings: "The attacks in London were an attack on all of us," said the Downing Street statement. "Communities in the UK have more that unites than divides us. We are determined that these atrocities will not be allowed to create tension between our communities."<sup>35</sup>

### *The London Bombing Leaks*

Since Britain's involvement in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Blair administration vehemently denied that its foreign policy agenda might radicalize British citizens. In the week following the London bombings, an influential think tank called Chatham House added its voice to the chorus of critics who claimed the attackers were inspired by Britain's participation in the Iraq War. "There is no doubt that the situation over Iraq has imposed particular difficulties for the UK," the report stated. "It gave a boost to the Al-Qaeda network's propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising." The Blair administration immediately condemned the report. "I'm astonished that Chatham House is now saying that we should not have stood shoulder to shoulder with our long-standing allies in the United States," said a top administration official.<sup>36</sup> Blair's official spokesmen said "the Prime Minister's view was very firmly that it was misplaced to think this problem arose out of Iraq."<sup>37</sup>

One week later, a leak disclosed classified warnings about the potential of Britain's participation in the Iraq War to radicalize British Muslims. The leak revealed a classified report produced by the Blair administration one month before the bombings that warned "[e]vents in Iraq are continuing to act as motivation and a focus of a range of terrorist related activity in the UK."<sup>38</sup> Shortly thereafter, a second leak exposed additional secret discussions about this issue within the Blair administration. A leaked memo between two senior administration officials showed that Blair was concerned about these risks for more than a year:

[Members of the administration] have flagged some of the potential underlying causes of extremism that can affect the Muslim community, such as discrimination, disadvantage and exclusion. But another recurring theme is the issue of British foreign policy, especially in the context of the Middle East peace process and Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

The memo goes on to recommend that the government should work to ensure that British Muslims have a "legitimate and credible voice . . . on foreign policy issues."

### *Public Reaction to the London Bombing Leaks*

While civil society leaders, religious groups, and opponents of the Blair administration had been warning Britain's participation in the war in Iraq might radicalize British Muslims for more than two years, the London bombing leaks enabled them to amplify their criticism by highlighting contradictions between the public and secret behavior of the state. For example, a popular British Muslim leader said, "The Prime Minister's continuing refusal to accept that his decisions could have led to such extreme consequences does nothing to appease the Muslim community, and on the contrary, seems to be causing more resentment amongst young Muslims."<sup>40</sup> Leaders of opposing political parties also chimed in. "For the government to deny a link between the war in Iraq and dismay among the Muslim community is

ridiculous,” said an opposition party leader. “But to try and cover it up, when senior civil servants have recognized the seriousness of resentment, is even worse.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, another senior political rival of the Blair administration described the leaks as further evidence that the administration’s response to domestic terrorism had been “inept from start to finish.”<sup>42</sup>

## THE “BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS” FRAME (2005–2007)

Once again, the Blair administration declined to comment on the London bombing leaks. Yet policy makers began ad hoc-ing a new hybridized discursive frame shortly thereafter. Only one day after several members of the Blair administration summarily rejected the idea that Britain’s involvement in Iraq had contributed to the radicalization of the London bombers, Blair began to discuss the relationship between foreign policy and homegrown terrorism. Pressed about the contradictions between his policies by reporters in a July 19 press conference, Blair said: “I think when people talk about the links between . . . Iraq . . . and what has happened, of course these [terrorists] will use these things as an excuse. . . .but nothing justifies what they are doing.”<sup>43</sup> One week later, journalists confronted Blair about his sudden recognition of possible links between the Iraq War and radicalization on the home front:

*Reporter:* How . . . can you still deny that there is at least the very possibility that Iraq played a contributory factor into fomenting the extremism amongst some Muslim youths?

*Tony Blair:* Well let me try and make sense of this issue. I think, incidentally, I read occasionally that I am supposed to have said it is nothing to do with Iraq. . . . Actually I haven’t said that. If you go back and look at the comments I have made over the past couple of weeks. What I do say is this: . . . of course [terrorists] are going to use Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup>

As this awkward exchange reveals, Blair not only denied his repeated rejection of the notion that the Iraq War and domestic terrorism were unrelated—but also cited his own ad hoc response to the leak one week earlier as evidence for this position.

Blair and his administration soon began ad hoc-ing a new discursive frame that described its domestic counterterrorism strategy as a logical extension of its foreign counterterrorism campaign in Iraq and elsewhere. A prime example of this discursive hybridization was a major speech about terrorism delivered by Blair in early 2006. Reacting to a video left behind by the ringleader of the 7/7 attacks, Blair said:

There he was, complaining about the suppression of Muslims, the wickedness of America and Britain, [and] calling on all fellow Muslims to fight us. And I thought: here is someone, brought up in this country, free to practise his religion, free to speak out . . . with a good standard of living and . . . a decent way of life, talking about “us”, the British, when his whole experience of “us” has been the very opposite of the message he is preaching. . . . He may have been born here. But his ideology wasn’t. And that is why it has to be taken on, everywhere.<sup>45</sup>

This new ad hoc frame highlighted ideology as the key driver of radicalization. By emphasizing ideology, the administration created a natural link between its foreign and domestic counterterrorism frames. Both policies, they argued, were designed to enlist “moderate Muslims” in a “battle of ideas” with extremists. In effect, this battle for hearts and minds frame explained declining social capital as the result of the failure of this battle of ideas. This

new frame was also consistent with the declining social capital frame, since community disintegration could be explained as one of several sources of the outgrowth of extremist ideology.

Later that year, the Blair administration announced a variety of plans to combat extremist interpretations of Islam, including a public workshop with British Muslim leaders, a major “Islam Expo” in Islam, and a series of “Muslim Scholar Roadshows” that were designed to create a forum where experts could rebuff extremist versions of Islam in public settings. Secretly, however, the administration worried that these community-led initiatives would result in even more community anger about Britain’s participation in the Iraq War or enable the emergence of even more extremist statements in public—which they believed were largely responsible for homegrown extremism at the time. According to my respondents, the Blair administration’s ideological campaign against extremism in Britain was carefully managed to ensure that it resonated with the ongoing war in Iraq. For example, the administration selectively engaged Muslim leaders who would be amenable to their foreign policy agenda in their public consultations or removed foreign policy discussions from the agenda of such consultations entirely. According to one respondent, “The senior [administration officials] were very aware as to which of the recommendations from the start that they would want to concentrate on [in the meetings], and they were very keen for those recommendations to be seen to come out of the [public consultations]—and foreign policy? Forget it.”

To summarize, the Blair administration not only resorted to ad hoc-ing to make leaks appear natural or logical extensions of their public behavior but also worked proactively to repress those who might challenge such meaning-making—in particular, those who might criticize inconsistencies between their domestic and foreign counterterrorism policies. Once again, this move demonstrates how leaks force the detachment of discursive frames from policy makers’ private understandings of social problems—and therefore the need to expand clandestine campaigns outside of public scrutiny. This is because ad hoc responses to leaks have a cumulative effect that constrains the discursive options available to states over time, increasing the chances that discursive frames become disconnected from reality. In the wake of the London bombing leaks, for example, the Blair administration was forced to articulate a new frame that explained *both* Britain’s clandestine campaign to monitor Muslims as well as its public statements distancing homegrown terrorism from its participation in the Iraq War. As before, this increasingly incoherent ad hoc frame caused a significant expansion of the government’s secret counterterrorism campaign, as the following sections describe.

### *Leak: The Patel-Jackson Memo*

The civil society leaders who participated in government consultations about how to counter the radicalization of British Muslims produced a lengthy report that included 64 recommendations ranging from racial and religious profiling to increased government regulation of religious education. By early 2006, the administration had enacted only 3 of these recommendations. On July 3, 2006, a leak of classified correspondence between Blair administration officials revealed that at least one of these three recommendations was forced on civil society leaders by the administration itself.<sup>46</sup> The leak revealed that the officials within the administration had been “tasked to recommend a UK NGO to deliver a successful UK Muslim Scholars Roadshow” before the public consultations with civil society leaders had even begun.<sup>47</sup> Even worse, the leak revealed that secret discussions had taken place among administration officials about which organizations would be amenable to the government’s foreign policy agenda. Three of the organizations identified were fringe elements within the Muslim community that were apparently recruited because they supported many of the

administration's foreign policy positions, according to my respondents. This leak shows that policy makers were secretly worried that public consultations could exacerbate extremism within the British Muslim community, even though they publicly championed the potential of a community-based approach to publicly rebuke extremism.

### *Public Reaction to the Patel-Jackson Leak*

Unsurprisingly, the Patel-Jackson leak provoked criticism about the contradiction between the administration's public requests for input from the Muslim community and its private rejection of nearly all of their recommendations. For example, a former president of a major British Muslim organization asked, "Why should 'moderate Muslims' be the ones to root out extremism when Blair and his stooges are creating it in the first place"?<sup>48</sup> Another critic invited to participate in government consultations added: "It appeared obvious [from the start] that we wouldn't have time to take evidence or travel around or talk to communities in any substantive manner."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, a member of the House of Lords lamented that the report produced by Muslim leaders who were convened by the Blair administration was "gathering dust."<sup>50</sup> "Speaking to members of the taskforce now," said one MP, "there is a huge amount of frustration. We need to show that it was not a short-term PR exercise. . . . Engaging with the disengaged and disillusioned is good, but counterproductive if not done properly."<sup>51</sup>

### THE "ENEMIES OF DIVERSITY" FRAME (2007–2008)

Public reaction to the Patel-Jackson leak pressured the Blair administration to explain why they categorized certain Muslim groups as "moderate" and rejected so much of the input from the Muslim community that they had previously described as an indispensable partner in the fight against extremism. Once again, the administration responded by ad hoc-ing their secret behavior as a logical extension of their public policy agenda. Their efforts to differentiate moderate and extremist Muslims, they argued, were informed by the principles of British multicultural policy. Blair first articulated this discursive frame in a live televised address to the British people in late 2006:

We like our diversity. But how do we react when that "difference" leads to separation and alienation from the values that define what we hold in common? For the first time in a generation there is . . . anxiety . . . that our very . . . willingness to welcome difference . . . is being used against us; abused, indeed, in order to harm us.<sup>52</sup>

By describing terrorists as "enemies of diversity," the Blair administration linked Islamic extremists to far-right nativist groups who inspired race riots in Britain decades earlier. For example, a 2007 government report on domestic terrorism compared terrorists inspired by Al-Qaeda to racist gangs that attacked West Indian immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s. "There has always been a tiny minority [in Britain] who oppose tolerance and diversity," the report stated. "They represent values that have no place in a civilised society."<sup>53</sup> By 2008, the Labour administration asked all government officials to avoid using the term *Islam* when discussing terrorism. Indeed, one administration leader made headlines when she began referring to domestic or "homegrown" terrorism as "anti-Islamic" activity.<sup>54</sup> The Blair administration soon produced a list of 16 people banned from entering Britain for "fostering extremism." Importantly, this list included only a handful of prominent Muslim clerics but a long list of non-Muslims, including two leaders of a Russian skinhead gang, an ex-leader of

the Ku Klux Klan, an American Evangelical leader, and controversial American talk show host, Michael Savage.<sup>55</sup> In early 2009, Britain banned a far-right Dutch politician named Geert Wilders from obtaining a visa because he had called the Qur'an a "fascist book."

According to my respondents, the enemies of diversity frame reconciled contradictions between the government's public and secret activity by making it seem as though the process of categorizing moderate and extremist Muslims came from the multicultural tradition of the British people themselves. As one Labour administration leader told me, "We get an extremist and we get an ultra-moderate in the same room and we make them bash against each other and somehow, this Hegelian dialect will find some truth in the middle." Another echoed this response: "[Categorization] needs to come from people . . . what it means to be multicultural, what it means to a diverse Britain. Because the strength of Britain is diversity." To summarize, the Labour administration's ad hoc-ing not only created the illusion that its secret efforts were inspired by core British values of tolerance but also made anyone who questioned this strategy appear anti-British, racist, or "Islamophobic." This strategy not only resolved contradictions revealed by the Patel-Jackson leak but also maintained the government's previous commitment to being faith-blind in counterterrorism investigations. What is more, this ad hoc revision of the discursive frame explained the outgrowth of extremism in Britain as the result of a breakdown in community relations, thereby resonating with the state's previous claim that terrorism resulted from declining social capital. Yet once again, this ad hoc response demonstrates how few discursive options were available to the Blair administration in the wake of successive leaks about its counterterrorism policy. After a seven-year campaign in which the administration clearly believed that an ideology derived from the Islamic religion drove extremism in Britain, they were publicly insisting that future terrorist events might be prevented if they were described as "anti-Islamic" activity.

## CONCLUSION

The Blair administration's convoluted response to domestic or homegrown terrorism provides considerable support for my theory of how leaks shape the discourses states use to communicate the root causes of social problems as well as corresponding solutions to redress them. More specifically, this case study shows that leaks of classified information reveal significant contradictions between the public and secret behavior of ruling administrations. Civil society actors and rival political factions amplified these discrepancies within the mass media. The Blair administration neither ignored this criticism by using Goffmanian "passing" tactics nor confronted it directly by scapegoating leakers or those whose secret transgressions were exposed. Instead, the Blair administration articulated new frames that normalized their secret behavior as an extension of their public policy agenda. These ad hoc responses linked the compromised frame with another public policy domain via what Wagner-Pacifici (1994) calls discursive hybridization. Though these hybridized frames temporarily resolved contradictions exposed by leaks, they forced the Blair administration to publicly commit to policy strategies that were the result of political exigency instead of careful study of homegrown terrorism. My case study suggests that the disconnect between this public and secret behavior created a downward spiral of deception and disclosure in which each successive leak constrained the discursive options of the Blair administration, forcing it to articulate increasingly incoherent discursive frames. The increasing detachment of these frames from policy makers' own understandings of homegrown terrorism forced the Blair administration to expand its secret campaign in order to tackle the problem of homegrown terrorism outside of public scrutiny. This downward spiral not only led the Blair administration to articulate increasingly implausible frames about domestic terrorism but also

contributed to the rapid breakdown of community relations and perhaps even Britain's capacity to prevent homegrown terrorism. Indeed, the idea that labeling terrorism "anti-Islamic activity" might somehow prevent extremism would later be ridiculed by David Cameron's conservative administration, which promptly announced a new approach to counterterrorism and multiculturalism when he became prime minister in 2010. Whether his decision resulted from the failure of the Blair administration's downward spiral of deception and disclosure is beyond the scope of this article.

Instead, my primary goal in this article was to develop a theory of how leaks shape the evolution of the discursive frames ruling administrations produce to structure public debate about social problems. In so doing, I proposed an unusual synthesis between two theoretical camps within cultural sociology. To demonstrate the critical role of discursive framing within the policy process and extend symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology to the macro-level of analysis, I drew on the so-called "strong program" within cultural sociology (e.g., Alexander and Smith 1993). Yet my emphasis on the generative role of contradictions in producing shifts in such meaning-making drew heavily on tool-kit theory and work on institutional logics (e.g., Friedland and Alford 1991; Swidler 1986). My theoretical synthesis indicates the latter enriches the former by specifying the range of discourses that are available for hybridization—or ad hoc-ing—in the face of contradictions exposed by leaks or other breaches of the public order. More specifically, these theories identify the deeper sources of contradictions within the competing institutional logics within states. What is more, these theories explain how attempts to resolve contradictions often generate further contradictions in turn. This is because actors typically resolve contradictions using tools that are already available to them rather than generating wholly new meaning systems. This behavior creates a cascading effect that constrains the discursive options available to such actors over time. Once again, further studies are needed to determine whether the cumulative weight of such contradictions eventually creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of new systems of meaning—or in this case, paradigmatic shifts in state discourse about social problems.

Future studies are also needed to validate my theory with more sophisticated research designs. Comprehensive ethnographic evidence would be needed to confirm my interpretation of the case study and address alternative explanations of the shifts in policy framing identified previously—several of which I discuss in the online supplement to this article. Yet because my primary goal is to advance a theory of leaks and the evolution of discursive frames, I shall conclude by discussing the implications of my account for a broader sociology of deception and disclosure both in and outside of states. Though secrecy is often associated with the ancient political processes described by Simmel—or Machiavelli before him—the past decade has seen a dramatic expansion in the amount of classified activity within the United States government (Priest and Arkin 2011), alongside new technologies of disclosure that ensure leaks will remain an important feature of politics for some time to come. But a sociology of deception and disclosure need not be confined to states. Future studies might examine the increasing levels of secrecy and leaks within corporations such as Enron, WorldCom, or JP Morgan.<sup>56</sup> Even academia is experiencing unprecedented levels of secrecy. A recent study suggests only 26 percent of scientists felt safe discussing their research with others in 1998, down from 50 percent in 1966 (Walsh and Hong 2003). Academia is also not immune to leaks, as the recent public outcry about the disclosure of private emails between scientists questioning the existence of climate change demonstrates.

Advancing my theory of deception and disclosure both in and outside of states would also improve scholarly understanding of meaning-making more broadly. Secrecy is a

powerful—yet understudied—tool for collective actors or groups who wish to shape shared understandings within a society because it facilitates the social construction of reality. Cultural sociologists must therefore attend to the social coordination necessary to create such illusions. Yet such social coordination also creates the potential for disclosure. The process of leaking or disclosure is perhaps even more critical for those who wish to understand how meaning structures such as discursive frames evolve because they provide critical moments where rival factions can question the very basis of shared understandings of reality. Yoking cultural sociology to theories of impression management and ethnomethodology opens exciting new lines of inquiry about how reputation and social creativity enable and constrain the process of meaning-making. Finally, a more ambitious sociology of deception and disclosure would further outline the historical dynamics that link these two processes over broader historical periods that are usually beyond the purview of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Thus far, studies of deception and disclosure have evolved quite independently of each other. Yet identifying the turning points where deception provokes disclosure—or vice versa—will help cultural sociologists map the front and backstage relationships that enable groups to produce shared understandings or sustain them in the face of challenges across the long term.

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## NOTES

1. On the concept of the business of rule, see Poggi (1978).
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for recommending this analogy.
3. For reviews of the literature on meaning-making within the policy process, see Berezin (1997), Campbell (2003), or Schmidt (2008).
4. Unlike “collective action” frames (e.g., Benford and Snow 2003), I use the term *discursive frames* to refer to the hidden assumptions within texts that structure political debate instead of those that mobilize ordinary people in support of a social movement.
5. My argument thus responds to Gamson’s (1985) call to recognize the interactionist dimensions of state encounters with civil society and the media. I also build on Gibson’s (2012) recent study of micro-level dynamics among members of the Kennedy administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Rivera’s (2008) study of how stigma consciousness shaped the design of Croatia’s tourism policy.
6. An important exception is Zerubavel (2007), who calls for greater attention to secrecy, deception, and denial among cultural sociologists. He identifies the political process as an important site of such

- processes, but he focuses on so-called “open secrets,” such as the presence of LGBT individuals within the military and how they are sustained through collective rituals. These are distinct from leaks of classified information—or non-open secrets—that are the focus of this article.
7. More recent studies suggest policy makers use secrecy to sanction unpopular policies while publicly promoting discursive frames that contradict them. For example, European leaders regularly frame the European Union negatively within their own countries but secretly endorse it abroad (e.g., Schmidt 2006).
  8. Indeed, elites may be more comfortable voicing disagreement in secret if they feel inclined to protect a party line in public. A recent example is the well-publicized tension between policy elites in the FBI, CIA, and Department of Justice before and after the September 11 attacks (Hersh 2004).
  9. Even when those who leak classified information are not anonymous—as in the case of Edward Snowden—such individuals cannot be scapegoated as effectively as those who are involved in more generic forms of scandal such as sexual transgressions or financial improprieties. This is because the public will be aware that such “whistleblowers” risked reprisal from the state because of their moral fortitude—or their conviction that the clandestine actions of the state were so unjustified or injurious to the public good that they must be revealed.
  10. For a more detailed discussion of the effects of crises vis-à-vis scandals, see Section Two of the online supplement to this article.
  11. See also Zerubavel (2007).
  12. Citing a Yale Study commissioned by the Central Intelligence Agency, Harry S. Truman once told reporters that “95 percent of our secret information has been revealed by newspapers and slick magazines” (Pozen 2013:521). Of course, such claims should be viewed with considerable skepticism since it is possible that certain secret activities were successfully hidden from the audit study itself.
  13. A more recent example was the leak that revealed Valerie Plame as a CIA operative by members of the Bush administration who were angry about her husband’s public questioning of whether Saddam Hussein’s regime attempted to secure uranium from Niger prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Another example is the disclosure of the “Hutchinson Letters” in the lead-up to the American Revolutionary War by opponents of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, whose criticism of revolutionary agents forced him to seek refuge in England.
  14. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this extension of Hirschman’s work in terms of my theory.
  15. As legal scholar David Pozen (2013) argues, leaks may also be “planted” by states in order to preemptively gauge public opinion about a potential policy shift. Pozen points to the lack of persecution of leakers in the United States in recent years as evidence for this argument. Yet as I have argued, the lack of persecution of leakers may also result from the reluctance of the state to attack those who occupy a moral high ground precisely because of their disclosure. Moreover, because states are not unitary actors but complex groups of actors who often have incentives to keep secrets from each other (Hersh 2004), it is unlikely that most leaks are planted via the orchestrated action of an entire state. Rather, planted leaks may be one of several strategies available to those inside states who are unable to resolve their conflicts with other state employees or agencies in secret. In a rejoinder to Pozen, Sagar (2013a) highlights these and other factors in order to question the prevalence of planted leaks. Moreover, he concludes that the lack of persecution of those who leak information results from legal and technological constraints faced by states.
  16. Or, consider newly declassified CIA documents that suggest President Kennedy’s decision to invade Cuba was prompted by the leak of information about his clandestine campaign to the Soviet Union (see Dallek 2011). Gibson (2012:126) also suggests that leaks forced President Kennedy to make the hasty decision not to intercept a ship destined for Cuba before the Bay of Pigs disaster.
  17. Similarly, Archer (1988) describes such processes as morphogenic sequences or the transformation of contradictions into new cultural elements in the wake of interactions between actors that reveal such incongruences.
  18. Similarly, Goffman (1963:133) described such behavior as part of a “normal-deviant” drama. “Boxed within a brief social moment,” wrote Goffman, social actors “may be able to perform both shows, exhibiting . . . a general capacity to sustain both roles.”

19. See also Alexander and Smith (1993).
20. For a parallel theory of how social actors react to untoward developments such as leaks, see Scott and Lyman (1968). Not unlike Garfinkel, these authors argue that the act of accounting bridges the gap between acts and expectations and thus enables social actors to produce justifications or excuses that protect their reputations within "speech communities."
21. The White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009.
22. For a more detailed discussion of my account vis-à-vis the literature on policy learning, see Section Two of the online supplement to this article.
23. In this way, the historical consequences of ad hoc-ing are similar to Archer's (1988) argument about the process of morphogenesis. That is, the ways in which social actors resolve contradictions not only reveals the relationship between structure and agency but also shapes social structures in turn.
24. For more details about these methods, see the online supplement to this article.
25. Tony Blair, speech at Downing Street, London, October 7, 2001.
26. Home Office, "PM's Meeting with Leaders of Muslim Communities in Britain," press release, September 28, 2001; Home Office, "Ministers Meet with Muslim Community Leaders," press release, September 24, 2001; Downing Street, "Meeting with Leaders of the Muslim Communities in Britain," press release, September 27, 2001.
27. Classified Home Office/Foreign and Commonwealth Office Report titled "Young Muslims and Extremism," authored between 2001 and 2003.
28. "Why Judge Muslims by the Actions of a Few Extremists?," *The Independent*, June 3, 2004.
29. "The Rising Tide of Islamophobia in Britain," *The Independent*, June 3, 2004.
30. Hugh Muir, "Secret Whitehall Plan to Win Over Muslim Youth," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2004. See also, "Warning to PM on Muslims," *Daily Post*, May 31, 2004.
31. Hugh Muir, "The Love Labour Lost," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2004.
32. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, "Terrorism and Community Relations," March 22, 2005, p. 3.
33. Home Office, "Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society: The Government's Strategy to Increase Race Equality and Community Cohesion," January 17, 2005, p. 13.
34. Alan Coweel and Don Van Natta Jr., "London Attacks Tied to Suicide Bombers," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2005.
35. Downing Street, "British Government's Position on Terrorism in London," July 11, 2005, p. 1
36. Julian Glover, "Two-thirds Believe London Bombings Are Linked to Iraq War," *The Guardian*, July 18, 2005.
37. Website of the Prime Minister, Number 10 Downing Street, July 13, 2005.
38. See Elaine Sciolino and Don Van Natta Jr., "June Report Led Britain to Lower Its Terror Alert," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2005
39. "Memorandum from Michael Jay to Andrew Turnbull," May 18, 2004.
40. "Muslim Students Lay the Blame on No. 10," *The Daily Telegraph*, September 1, 2005.
41. Martin Bright, "Leak Shows Blair Told of Iraq War Terror Link," *The Observer*, August 28, 2005.
42. "FO Blamed War in Iraq for Rise in Extremism," *The Daily Telegraph*, August 29, 2005.
43. Tony Blair, PM's press conference, Number 10 Downing Street, July 19, 2005.
44. Tony Blair, PM's press conference, Number 10 Downing Street, July 26, 2005.
45. Tony Blair, "Terrorism Must Be Tackled Head On," Number 10 Archives, March 21, 2006.
46. See Martin Bright, "The Task Force Was a Sham," *New Statesman*, July 3, 2006.
47. Classified memorandum sent by Riaz Patel of the Islamic Affairs department of the Foreign Office to Andrew Jackson, Supervisor of the Foreign Office, August 16, 2005.
48. Rashed Akhtar, "Blair's Call to Fight Muslim Extremism," *Letters to the Editor, The Independent*, July 6, 2006.
49. Martin Bright, "The Task Force Was a Sham," *New Statesman*, July 3, 2006.
50. "Blair Lays Down Law to Muslims on Extremists in Their Midst," *The Independent*, July 5, 2006.
51. Sadiq Khan, "Being British and Muslim," speech before the Fabian Society, July 3, 2006. Transcript available from author.

52. Tony Blair, "Our Nation's Future: Multiculturalism and Integration," December 8, 2006.
53. "Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund: Guidance Note for Government Offices and Local Authorities in England," Department for Communities and Local Government, February 2007, pp. 1–5. See also "Preventing Violent Extremism—Winning the Hearts and Minds," Department of Communities and Local Government, April 2007.
54. Jacqui Smith, "Our Shared Values—A Shared Responsibility," speech at the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence, January 2008.
55. "Home Office Name Hate Promoters Excluded from the UK," Home Office press release, May 5, 2009.
56. See, for example, Costas and Grey (2014).

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