

# Democracy or Hypocrisy in John Le Carre's The Spy Who Came in from the Cold

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*Abstract*

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold is an espionage novel of John Le Carre which takes place in the 1950s and early 1960s. The world war is over but the cold war still continues severely at that time. The western world has perpetuated the vital importance of democracy over the years. In this respect The Spy unveils such untouched issues of the western world. Le Carre highlights the conflicts of the western world. The Spy is the story of the victimization of some people for the sake of society. Within this context, Le Carre deduces the hypocrisy of the west. This study aims to set sight on the experiences of the main character and to uncover the hypocrisy behind democracy.

*Key Words:* Soft Power, International Relations, Credibility, Public Diplomacy, Science Diplomacy

John Le Carre'in Soğuktan Gelen Casus'unda Demokrasi ve İkiyüzlülük

*Özet*

John Le Carre'in Soğuktan Gelen Casus adlı çalışması 1950'lerin sonu 60'ların başında gerçekleşen bir olayı ele almaktadır. Sıcak savaşın bittiği bu zaman diliminde soğuk savaş tüm hızıyla devam etmektedir. Batı dünyasının demokrasiye verdiği önem ve bunun gereği olarak bu kavramı her zaman ön plana çıkararak iyi bilinen bir gerçektir. Bu çerçevede Le Carre'in Soğuktan Gelen Casus'u batı dünyasının çok irdelenmeyen konularını açığa çıkararak batı anlayışındaki bazı çarpıklıkları göz önüne serer. Soğuktan Gelen Casus bir kısım insanın toplum için kurban edilmesini ele alarak batı istihbarat sisteminin ikiyüzlülüğünü ortaya koyar. Bu çalışmanın amacı da romanın ana karakterinin deneyimleri ışığında demokrasi kavramının ikiyüzlü niteliğini ortaya koymaktır.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Yumuşak Güç, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Güvenilirlik, Kamu Diplomasisi, Bilim Diplomasisi

## 1. Introduction

John Le Carre is a distinguished figure in the world of espionage novels. The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, which will be referred to as The Spy from now on, is one of most successful novels of Le Carre. It has been adapted into a movie in 1965 by Martin Ritt. The story takes place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The world war is over but the cold war, in other words the struggle between governments, still continues severely at that time. The Spy unveils the untouched issues of the western world. The west has perpetuated the vital importance of democracy over the years. Le Carre highlights the conflicts of the western world in this respect. The Spy is the story of the victimization of some people for the sake of society. Within this context Le Carre deduces the hypocrisy notion of the west. The democracy concept functions for certain people; it does not

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embrace the whole humanity. This study aims to set sight on the experiences of the main character, Alec Leamas, and to induce the understanding of hypocrisy within western democracy.

## 2. Discussion

Le Carre uses Alec Leamas to unveil the hypocrisy of the system. Leamas works as a spy for the British intelligence service. *The Spy* is apparently an espionage novel but intrinsically it is the tragic story of Alec Leamas. Le Carre's depiction of this character is based on universal values; in this respect the novel still receives essential attention. Yilmazer (1996) states that the world of *The Spy* is not black and white, it is grey and that are why it is more mature (234). Basically the spy novels embody attractive elements because of the tension they offer. In addition to its potential tension, the tragic and romantic elements provide an extremely attractive atmosphere for *The Spy*. Powell (1991) supports this claim; "A common perception is that at the heart of all Le Carre's novels lie a genuine concern for real human issues" (2). What makes Le Carre a distinguished figure is his successful skill in unification of human issues with notions of espionage. Le Carre brings such notions into the forefront but in the background the conflicts of the western world and uncovered realities are presented. The time is after the Second World War, the atmosphere is gloomy, and the economy is weak. In this depressing environment, life appears as a severe struggle.

Alec Leamas is a loyal spy of the British intelligence and he is highly dedicated to his team. The first scene of *The Spy* takes place at the checkpoint where Leamas waits for Karl Riembeck who is the last member of his team. Yet, Riembeck is shot dead as he tries to pass the border. Leamas blames Hans-Dieter Mundt for the assassination of Riembeck. Leamas's hatred towards Mundt becomes the climax in the course of events. The Control, chief of the operations diagnoses Leamas's hatred and determines to take advantage of this repulsion as an opportunity. Leamas is exploited by his own service. This point actually indicates the corruption of the system. The espionage system is based on cheating. As Adler (2005) states deception is first a matter of self-defence and a spy should protect himself not only from without but from within (6). The spies are taught to cheat to cover their tracks and when necessary they can cheat their trainers as well (7). Leamas is well aware of the unreliable nature of the system but he has no idea that he would be victim of the unreliability in question.

Leamas' failure against Mundt causes a devastating effect in his soul. Le Carre (2010) uses a metaphor to clarify Leamas' state of mind: "It is said that a dog lives as long as its teeth; metaphorically, Leamas' teeth had been drawn; and it was Mundt who had drawn them (10)". The 'cold' in the title of the novel symbolizes the espionage system. 'Cold' is an unfavourable adjective used to identify the negative structure of the system. The abrasive patterns of the system have made Leamas tired of his work. He wishes to come in from the cold. His failure in his last mission has oppressed him utterly. In *The Spy* the concept of "cold" symbolizes solitude as well. Despite plentiful colleagues, an agent is in fact a lonesome person. The agents do not trust each other. The lack of confidence prevents a real and close friendship. There is no kinship or fondness among them.

Leamas, himself, swears many times not to trust an agent again (2010, 8). When required an agent may kill his own friends to save himself. As Leamas thinks about these facts, he becomes detached from life more and more. The Control is aware of Leamas's state of mind and as an expert spy he takes it as an opportunity to use this circumstance for the next operation. Leamas is offered a chance to come in from the cold (17). The first query about the hypocrisy of the system takes shape during this meeting:

Thus we do disagreeable things, but we are defensive. That, I think, is still fair. We do disagreeable things so that ordinary people here and elsewhere can sleep safely in their beds at night. Is that too romantic? Of course, we occasionally do very wicked things.' He grinned like a schoolboy. 'And in weighing up the moralities, we rather go in for dishonest comparisons; after all, you can't compare the ideals of one side with the methods of the other, can you, now? (17)

Control goes beyond the philosophy of espionage and as Leamas faces the unveiled reality he feels lost. It can be claimed that Le Carre makes a minor mistake here. Leamas is in his fifties; he is an experienced spy and he is mature enough to be familiar with the true nature of espionage. It is not quite possible to suggest that he is unaware of the fact that the basic requirement of the espionage system is self-giving. Leamas' exaggerated reaction aims to attract attention to defects of the system. Democracy offers the same rights to every citizen, however; the system defined by Control depends on the exploitation of certain people for the sake of the rest. The most important issue is maintaining the system fluently and to provide continuity even immoral moves can be performed. He admits the application of disagreeable operations for the sake of society. Actually this philosophy contrasts with the moral and democratic values of the west.

The ideas imposed by the Control disturb Leamas profoundly and he is determined to get out of system. He remains in the cold for a last mission. His desire to take revenge from Mundt is the motive that keeps him in the system. In fact he is tired of the challenges he has faced. But surviving as an agent in the system, one needs to be strong. The one who becomes weak loses the game. He knows that Mundt is a formidable adversary and preliminary preparations are required to defeat him. So he acts as if he has been put on the shelf by the Control for some time. "Leamas' departure caused only a ripple on the water; with other winds and the changing of the seasons it was soon forgotten" (26). The system is ruthless. No matter how much a spy endeavours, upon his departure he is forgotten soon. Though in Leamas' case the disappearance is premeditated, it makes no difference in the insincerity of the system. Leamas lives in misery when he is on the shelf. But during this time he meets Liz Gold. Everybody scorns him, only Liz shows sympathy towards him. Liz becomes the only source of hope in his miserable life. However, Leamas is incapable of love. The system has turned him into a machine. After Liz' long struggle, Leamas becomes aware of the feeling of love. For the first time he feels the joy of living and Liz becomes a breath of life for him.

The plan of Control serves the purpose. The counter intelligence service connects Leamas and he meets the agents of the counter service one by one in order of their rank. He acts as a traitor

and gives detailed information to convict them about his treason. The hard conditions and long standing interrogations make Leamas feel his profound love for Liz. Leamas develops a reason to live with this love:

He knew then what it was that Liz had given him; the thing that he would have to go back and find if ever he got home to England: it was the caring about little things – the faith in the ordinary life; the simplicity that made you break up a bit of bread into a paper bag, walk down the beach and throw it to the gulls. It was this respect for triviality which he had never been allowed to possess; whether it was bead for the seagulls or love, whatever it was he would go back and find it; he would make Liz find it for him. (102)

Leamas has spent all his life within a hypocritical and formal system. The system has not given any chance for him to see the beauty of simplicity. The complexity has been a burden and he has become unaware of the existence of the ordinary life. The undemocratic sanctions of the system can be observed in the counter intelligence as well. Fiedler supports this idea:

All our work – yours and mine – is rooted in the theory that the whole is more important than the individual. That is why a communist sees his secret service as the natural extension of his arm, and that is why in your own country intelligence is shrouded in a kind of pudeur anglaise. The exploitation of individuals can only be justified by the collective need, can't it? I find it slightly ridiculous that you should be so indignant. We are not here to observe the ethical laws of English country life. (126)

This indicates that the undemocratic system is not unique to a country; it can be observed in other western countries as well. The Spy is configured to be based on the struggle of two intelligence services. The sacrifice of the individual for the society is a common feature of the two services. Both services have defects in respect of human rights. However, despite all its defects Le Carre seems to prefer the western system to the latter. He reflects this idea via Leamas' uttering: "It's typical of your rotten little half-country and your squalid little service that you get big uncle to do your pimping for you" (125). Here the big uncle refers to the Soviet Union: "You're not a country at all, you're not a government, you're a fifth-rate dictatorship of political neurotics" (126). Le Carre's harsh criticism results from the rigid sanctions of the system. Stating the notion of democracy in such a system is inconsistent. Fiedler claims: "I myself would have put a bomb in a restaurant if it brought us further along the road" (138). This claim indicates that the structure of the system is based on antidemocratic approaches. On the way to target anything can be done.

Most of *The Spy* consists of the interrogation that takes place in East Germany. During the trial Leamas believes that the plan is going well. However, he notices that he is deceived by his own intelligence only by the end of the trial. The British intelligence uses Leamas' repulsion to Mundt to save Mundt. As Leamas realizes that Mundt is on the same side with him, his hatred becomes meaningless. London's plan achieves its goal and Mundt is saved. Mundt does not consider Liz worthy to be saved. "'You are a fool Leamas,' he added. 'She is a trash like Fiedler'" (236). From a juridical perspective both Fiedler and Liz are guiltless. But since Fiedler is a threat and Liz is func-

tionless, they are considered as unworthy to be saved. This undemocratic approach is considered as an ordinary process by the espionage.

The truthfulness of the system is discussed by Leamas and Liz as they try to escape from custody. Leamas is familiar with the hypocrisy of the intelligence, however; Liz is unfamiliar about the nature of the system. As she gets familiar she despises the system. Leamas clarifies the whole process:

Mundt is London's man, their agent; they bought him when he was in England. We are witnessing the lousy end to a filthy, lousy operation to save Mundt's skin. To save him from a clever little Jew in his own department who had begun to suspect the truth. They made us kill him, d'you see, kill the Jew. Now you know, and God help us both. (238)

The whole operation has been run to give a chance to Mundt to secure his position. It does not matter how many people are murdered to achieve this goal. Fiedler's single mistake is being righteous and trying to find out the traitor. He pays it with his life. Liz cannot embrace such an inhumane action. George Smiley, who is a common character in some works of Le Carre, in *Honourable Schoolboy* mentions the stated fact as being inhuman to defend their humanity (1977, 460). This moral dilemma does not satisfy Leamas either:

It makes me sick with shame and anger...But I've been brought up differently, Liz; I can't see it in black and white. People who play this game take risks. Fiedler lost and Mundt won. London won – that's the point. It was a foul, foul operation. But it's paid off, and that's the only rule." (2010, 241)

The discussion turns into a heated debate. Liz' argument has no basic reference. As Leamas states, it is a custom of the party that she supports to sacrifice the individual for society. From Liz' point of view Fiedler is kind and decent; on the other hand Mundt is a traitor and a Nazi. In this respect, rescuing Mundt would be killing an innocent person. Facing such an accusation drives Leamas to unveil the real face of the system

What do you think spies are: priests, saints and martyrs? They're squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives. Do you think they sit like monks in London balancing the rights and wrongs? I'd have killed Mundt if I could, I hate his guts; but not now. It so happens that they need him. They need him so that the great moronic mass that you admire can sleep soundly in their beds night. They need him for the safety of ordinary, crummy people like you and me. (243)

Leamas confesses that the exposed face is different from the reality. The system is not democratic as it seems to be. The spies are not what they are supposed to be. The West acts hypocritically because it seems to be the forerunner and voice of democracy, however; in reality it contradicts this notion. The *Spy* comes to end at the Berlin wall. Powell (1991) states that; "The wall is paradoxically a symbol of death and freedom" (67). The end of the novel is the end of Leamas' tragedy. Leamas is betrayed one more time. As they climb the Berlin wall, Liz is shot to death. Leamas has

the chance to escape but he chooses to die with Liz. Lewis (1985) suggests that Leamas' choosing to die with the person he loves is a heroic act (71). Leamas' life used to be unsatisfactory. He does not believe in tenets of the system. He becomes aware of beauties when he meets Liz. When Liz dies, life becomes meaningless.

### 3. Conclusion

Le Carre draws attention to hypocrisy of western understanding of democracy in *The Spy*. Most of the characters are the victims of the system. Riembeck is the last member of the liquidated team who is also killed at the beginning of the novel. Elvira is murdered as well. Fiedler, Liz and Leamas also die at the end of *The Spy*. They are all sacrificed for the sake of the rest. The democracy concept of the west does not serve certain people like Leamas. Their existence or fading away is for the sake of society. Le Carre worked for British Intelligence services, MI5 and MI6, during the 1950s and 1960s (Tonkin, 2013). His success in espionage novels can be based on his experiences in the service. It can also give an idea about the reliability of the information that he gives about the system. As an experienced member of the service, he unveils the real face of the system. In this respect it can be deduced that the apparent truth is different from the non visible truth.

It can be suggested that there are certain ways to unveil the undemocratic applications of the system. In this respect press has a vital role. However, it is striking that the press in Britain does not search for the undemocratic applications of the system. There should be a sanction on the press as well. Uzun (2007) supports this claim and he states that the major part of the British press is controlled by MI6 (147). This claim proves to be another proof for the hypocritical approach of the system.

Some countries in western world, England in the present case, claim having a democratic system and glorify it. Le Carre's *The Spy* generates a question mark in the readers' mind. It leads the reader to become suspicious about such claims for the western democracy does not embrace all citizens equally. Many individuals are sacrificed for the community. This state indicates the hypocrisy of the system. Another point that brings success to *The Spy* is its humanistic side. Martin (1988/89) states that Le Carre's novel is not just dealing with espionage; it involves 'sympathy' and the bond of love (88). The power of love has a major role in the novel. As Leamas loves Liz, he decides to come in from the cold. His feelings for Liz become a reason to live. His love is so strong that when Liz dies, Leamas chooses to die as well. In this sense *The Spy* is not just an espionage novel; it also involves strong emotional themes. These themes of *The Spy* make it a distinguished work among espionage novels.

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