

Surveillance and Domestication

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Surveillance is sold to us on the grounds that ‘the innocent have nothing to hide’, but the reluctance of the watchers to also become the watched—the police will plead ‘operational security’ to excuse themselves from disclosing even the most trivial points of detail about themselves, such as canteen menus, etc—shows this as both a transparent excuse to extend surveillance way beyond the point where it should be socially acceptable and a disguising of what is in the interests of the powerful with reference to what is supposedly ‘in the interest of all’.

The Worm in Adam’s Apple

By way of excusing current levels of surveillance, where there is now one camera / four people in UK alone, it is possible to present the first band societies ‘where everyone knew everyone else’s business’ as the most surveilled societies of all. This totally misses the point, however, as people then felt they were ‘everyone else’s business’. Although individual’s ‘right’ to ‘do their own thing’ in negotiation with the band regardless of traditional custom was highly respected,¹ there were not the firm boundaries of selfhood that characterise capitalism’s atomised individualism, not least because personal and societal survival were so intimately interrelated. Part of your identity was your relationship to the rest of the band and you would not be complete without this, nor think of withholding something from them as you would from yourself. These were free, equal societies where an unevenness of knowledge, where it was hoarded to advantage one over another, was an entirely alien, civilised concept except possibly between genders and then not always. In fact, continuous sharing of news and skills were as much part of the fabric of daily life in hunter-gatherer societies as the sharing of tools (usufruct) and resources.

With the rise of class society, where it became in the interests of the labouring majority to conceal resources and information about them, work rates etc, from the non-labouring minority overseeing them, it equally became in the interests of the latter to try to find out what was being concealed from them. This, in truth, was the birth of the surveillance society, its limited effectiveness still pretty much restricted to what could be seen directly by overseers and residual ‘group think’ that led people to disclose information they really wouldn’t in modern, individualistic societies.

Alvarez’s *Centuries of Childhood* is very good in pointing this up in the Medieval era, when any idea of an ‘internal dialogue’ was the privilege of a literate monastic minority. Others would say what they thought, their expression being limited to the presence of others with whom it could be shared — possibly getting back to the ears of feudal law enforcers and tax collectors. The most radical significance of the book in terms of shaping the human psyche was that it allowed private thoughts and expression in ‘dialogue’ (for surely the relationship is not mutual in the way conversation is) with the page. The first diaries — typically records of spiritual exercises by cloistered divines — are thus Medieval.

The self-enclosure facilitated by writing led, of ruling class necessity, to the elaboration of more sophisticated techniques of surveillance — the spy networks engendered by Elizabeth I’s courtier Sir Francis Walsingham, for example, still celebrated as original in Establishment spook

¹ In his *Human Cycle* (Touchstone, 1983), Colin Turnbull cites a Mbutu (Pygmy) lad taking a nanny goat as his ‘wife’, something his band members discourage not with the horror of taboos against inter-species sex being violated you might expect in this society (they have none, though the situation was unusual) but because, as a domesticated village animal, the she-goat could not be expected to cope adequately in their beloved forest. The Mbutu typically extend refusal of the distinction between self and other to that between human and other.

circles today. They would solicit disloyal comment through infiltration techniques, pretending to be who they were not to suspects, as well as incidentally engaging pretty comprehensively in mail interception and attempting to crack counter-measures such as concealment and cipher. They were still largely dependant on the word, however, often words procured by duress (torture) and misrepresentation (forgery or ‘over-reading’ of intercepted correspondence). Of course, this was also the era of the witch hunts with their ‘spectral evidence’ (the testimony of ‘victims of witchcraft’), but this dependence reached its apex in the reign of Charles II and the baseless conspiricising of the Protestant fanatic Titus Oates and his ‘Popish Plot’. Simply on the basis of tortured ‘confession’ and guilt by association, an anti-Catholic pogrom was whipped up, though its only true substance was Oate’s own paranoid fantasy.

The All-Seeing Eye

This sort of thing may have been adequate as an instrument of terror befitting the majesty of absolute kings, but increased rationalism and individualism associated with the ascendance of Protestantism, with its claims of the believer’s unmediated relationship with the Divine, meant consequent increased demands for physical evidence as a break on the arbitrary power of courts (both kingly and judicial), especially in matters concerning the ‘sanctity’ of private property.

Paradoxically, as well as demanding more explicit legislative regulation, the bourgeoisie’s pet religion also demanded greater self-regulation, the self now being bounded by contract — and financial relationships rather than intimate, social relationships. Thus we have the commonplace appearance² of the divine ‘all-seeing eye’, as seen miserably decorating Protestant homes and chapels to this day, as well as topping the Masonic pyramid Washington and Jefferson incorporated into the design of every dollar bill. This idea of ‘the Lord sees all’ meant that even the individualistic Protestant clung on to the vestige of community, of public being,, in the sense of being in a community of two, s/he and the ever-watchful God, even if real community — typically more reciprocal, less judgmental of ‘sin’ and ‘slackness’ — was sacrificed to such an unremitting moralistic code in consequence. As well as insisting that the worshipper be hard-working and thrifty, the Protestant faith self-imposed harsh standards of personal behaviour when it came to the body and bodily interaction with others. As Norbert Elias classic study of the rise of ‘good manners’, *The Civilising Process*, graphically documents, food became problematic, no longer to be indulged in gluttonously or passed from mouth to mouth but rather, like sexual or excretory functions, to be seen as a shameful concession to physicality to be controlled and bounded by taboos, best a private thing the better to avoid public shame. Such etiquette was literally domesticating, confined to the home, and homes too became more elaborate, with particular concessions to the body confined to particular rooms — a dining room for eating, a toilet for excretion (the corners of rooms having previously been preferred, even at Louis XIV’s Versailles!), and the bedroom for sex behind curtained, canopied beds. The point of all this specialised architecture — of privacy — was that as few people saw it as possible. And so lose respect for someone shamefully indulging their body, as if we all don’t. It was mainly something between a wo/man and the all-seeing Lord.

² It had its origins in the early individualism of monasticism, of course. We have not missed the irony that though denouncing ‘monkery’, Protestants bought monastic practice outside its traditional confines, universalising its body-loathing codes of behaviour.

Seeing by Numbers

A combination of capital accumulation secured by resultant fixed, abstract laws and 18th century innovations in food production and transportation made the mega-cities that characterised the Industrial Revolution possible. This, then, was when surveillance came of age. On one level, faced with cities inhabited by millions, many born and raised undocumented or newly immigrated from the countryside and forming tight village / ghetto communities closed to casual investigation by outsiders, it was impossible to surveil them using the old techniques of gossip gathering. On the other hand, this redoubled the need for self-surveillance as a curb on the spontaneous, riotous street mob behaviour of previous centuries as the only practical guarantor of social order.

On a general level, the inculcation of a self-denying moral code into the poor was the responsibility of charismatic Methodism — as in the ruling class dilemma of the early-1800s, ‘Wesleyism or revolution?’ — and later ‘do-gooders’ dispensing unwanted advice about thrift, temperance and other supposedly good domestic practice. For those who wouldn’t accept social inequality as a problem to be resolved by behaviour adjustment on their part, there was the hero of bourgeois rational social calculation, Jeremy Bentham, and his panopticon, a prisonhouse designed to do this architecturally.³ Its two key features were (1) individual cells, a rule of silence and the hooding of inmates outside their cells to enforce complete isolation from their community and force them to fall back on the Protestant ‘God and I’ ‘community’ instead and (2) a central tower from which guards could watch each cell unobserved, much like the Protestant God. Whether actually watched or not, the prisoner had to assume the worst for fear of harsher punishment, also inculcating a feeling of permanent surveillance and thus self-regulation. Needless to say, in practice this brutal, unnatural treatment amounted to sensory deprivation and whilst it made some suggestible enough to be effectively brainwashed, it broke others entirely, yielding horrifying hallucinations and self-harm. As recidivists could expect many more years in such a system than first offenders, there was naturally an attempt to evade such treatment by increased anonymity and impersonation of identities amongst the urban poor.

Of course, Michel Foucault dealt with this extensively in his *Discipline and Punish*, but it is often forgotten that the first concern of the new generation of surveillants was not to control crime but rather to contain disease, a much more widespread and deadly threat to the rich living in close geographic proximity to the poor. High walls, sturdy footmen in livery and a mastiff would no way keep cholera from their doors, so we find as early as the 1830s the first epidemiologists descending into the unplumbed depths of ‘darkest London’ to identify sources of disease and its carriers. This was rightly seen as social control being imposed on areas that typically rioted before admitting even one of Robert Peel’s newly-minted ‘blue devils’ (police). The proletariat typically refused to acknowledge the reality of epidemic crowd diseases such as cholera (uniquely deadly in the early megalopolises and once a key check on their development) and to destroy cholera carts intruding into their space as a conspiracy to confine the poor to ‘houses of death’ (as they reckoned hospitals, not without justification) for the sadistic amusement of surgeons, during and after life.⁴ And, of course, the poor only had to look to the panopticon to see with what degree of

³ The first such panopticon was HMP Pentonville, London, where I was myself confined in 1988.

⁴ Ruth Richardson’s *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) is excellent on this. See also my forthcoming essay, ‘When Doctors Were Hated’.

humanity they would be treated by the new impersonal total institutions we seem so disturbingly accepting of today.

A combination of a bureaucracy not sophisticated enough for individual documentation of entire populations before that developed out of regimented military practice during the American Civil War, and widespread illiteracy and resistance by its intended target population meant that the issuing of identification documents to the poor for voluntary presentation was not practical. In fact, it was so impractical that the threat of epidemic disease wasn't resolved by way of identifying and confining individual carriers (typically bourgeois moralistic 'blaming the victim') but rather by anonymous sanitation measures such as the building of London's sewers in reaction to the 'Great Stink' of the 1850s, even though the idea of the state assuming responsibility for such massive, tax-eating public works would have previously been anathema to bourgeois sensibilities.

The breakthrough came in Paris as late as 1870 when a Surete clerk Alphonse Bertillon developed biometrics from a 14th century Chinese model. Bertillonage consisted of individually identifying anonymous individuals by a 20 minute examination when many key features of their body — their height, the length of their limbs, the spacing of their facial features — were systematically measured and then recorded to card indexes. Potential recidivists were typically uncooperative during these examinations, later (1903) augmented by 'mug shots', so called by the subject 'mugging' (pulling faces) at the camera in an (often amusingly successful) effort to make themselves less identifiable in future. It should be noted that Bertillon was heavily influenced by the imperial anthropology of its day, with its emphasis on the physical classification of 'types'. Like the absurd Italian criminologist Lombroso, he attributed mental and moral characteristics to these physical signs, typically in a classist and racist manner than only served to reinforce such ideologies in future.

Bertillonage finally failed and fell out of police use not because it was racist or unwieldy or even because it was felt to be an excessive intrusion on individual privacy ('sir, my statistics are my own') but rather because it couldn't do its job. In 1903, a man called Will West was confined to Leavenworth jail for murder on the basis of biometric measurements actually appropriate to another man, coincidentally also called William West, despite a supposed 243m-to-one chance against this happening (not counting any slips of the police tape measure!). Besides, by then they had something quicker to collect and easier to file, which didn't require the perp's physical presence to identify him. It is probably no surprise that fingerprinting arose from a colonial context, that other great 'submerged mass' that caused the Victorian elite such worry. A chief magistrate in Jigupoot, Sir William Herschel first noticed in 1856 that Indians either illiterate or otherwise unfamiliar with English script signed themselves with thumb prints instead of writing, an administrative procedure for unique identification he adopted himself. From there, it was a short step to Darwin's pal Sir Francis Galton writing this up in the scientific journal *Nature* and a former supremo of Bombay's colonial police, Richard Henry introducing fingerprinting to Scotland Yard's repertoire of crime detection procedures in 1896.

Learning to Love Big Brother

Although the state had a technique for distinguishing one anonymous individual from another with unerring accuracy,⁵ this was fairly useless if that individual could disappear into the anonymous urban mass. As former Resistance fighter Jacques Ellul noted in his *Technological Society*, an immediate consequence of seeking to surveil particular individuals is that the whole society in which they might conceal themselves has to be surveilled also, the ‘innocent’ majority as intensively as the ‘guilty’ few.

Perhaps more surprisingly, by the time fingerprinting was initiated, the resolute resistance to classification of the early-19th century was crumbling. There were a number of factors accounting for this, but key was the inducements offered the majority not to remain anonymous. Mass education on a monitor system — much like that adopted by Napoleon’s Grand Armée, the basis of Bentham’s panopticon — not only provided a more literate, technically sophisticated workshop with a greater chance of individual socio-economic betterment, it also meant the young came to accept such treatment as normal — both classification by name and number and harsh restrictions on personal behaviour in class (‘no talking, no fidgeting’) — and could be systematically documented, generation by generation. This was augmented by the centralisation of registers of births, deaths and marriages in places like Somerset House instead of scattered through disparate parishes, the taking of censuses to facilitate national planning, and the creation of employment-based taxation which meant both bosses and workers (unless inclined to fraud) had to declare their identities along with their earnings if they were to make a living at all. Even systematic mapping, such as carried out initially for military reasons by the Ordnance Survey, meant that space in which people could exist anonymously evaporated (‘everyone in their place’). This process was only accelerated by the Liberal welfare reforms of the early-1910s and the post-World War 2 creation of the welfare state, both of which had disclosure of identity as prerequisite requirements of receiving their services. It was a citizen’s ‘right’ (the ‘carrot’) and ‘duty’ (the legislatively-enforced ‘stick’) to enter into all this, without realising that by surrendering their anonymity to the state, they were also surrounding a key check on its otherwise unlimited power.

I could rehearse at great length the elaboration of technological means that now exist to strip us of any possibility of anonymity, but this is done elsewhere this issue and besides, there is always Privacy International to consult. I will note that when a text like *The Technology of Political Control* was written in the supposedly paranoid 1970s, the suggestion that a comprehensive database could be linked with face recognition programmes and cameras blanketing every public space in the country was regarded as pure science fiction, something out of George Orwell’s dystopian *1984*. But today this is, of course, a reality and augmented by overgrown police and internal security agencies, parallel services like social workers and market researchers that want to know everything from the value of your home through to your children’s eating and TV watching habits the better to predict and manipulate you, easily surveilled e-communications (ECHELON) and card transactions, ‘predictive’ databases and profiling, and any other amount of technical intelligence. No — the point of this section is to explore why people have come to accept that quarter of a century ago would’ve been thought totalitarian (‘like Russia’) and nightmarish.

⁵ In fact they did not. As with Bertillonage, there is an outside statistical chance of accidental correlation of fingerprints from otherwise dissimilar individuals — and there have been documented miscarriages of ‘justice’ arising from this — and twins always have identical fingerprints. As de facto clones, even DNA doesn’t distinguish twins, only retinal scans as the pattern of blood vessels at the back of the eye develops post-natum.

We've already had the *homo Economicus* version above — that people gained in terms of access to education, employment and healthcare by bringing themselves to the attention of the state and lost in terms of prosecution if they failed to do so. However, I think there is more to it than this. A phenomenon like mass observation in the inter-War years was popularly and eagerly supported in its detailed documentation of everyday life — and what do you make of the dating rituals in Chile where, after years of state-orchestrated surveillance to the nastiest of ends, courting couples now trail each other round with video cameras, 'romantically' building files on each other?

The point is that with all the mass institutions that came out of Bentham's panopticon, the traditional role of the community in providing education, employment and neighbourly care has been replaced by these. Community has been replaced by institutionalised specialisation and so people feel it only natural that such specialists look out for them now there is no meaningful community to. They have been given no reason to get to know other people and so have no reason to trust them. Far from it — as society atomised, anyone can be a criminal under the rubric of surveillance and lacking any social feeling except fear of punishment under the eye of the camera only encourages selfish behaviour. Of course, the cameras are sold on the grounds not that we are the criminals, but that they are there to protect us from everyone else who potentially is. The old Wesleyans were right that give someone a penny in their pocket and the slightest whiff of a chance of advancement and they'll see everyone else around them as a threat to that, either as potential thieves or as temptations to be repudiated with the zeal of the tempted. 'Terrorists' are currently flavour of the month threat. Before that it was 'paedophiles', meaning kids had to be microchipped and cameras installed in every family home while a generation of kids turned into scared, whiny couch potatoes alongside their parents. Not many years ago it was witches, for fucksakes, absurd social workers seeing cracking the local coven of 'satanic abusers' as their next step up the career ladder. If this doesn't convince you what nonsense it all is, it's agreed that now surveillance is so ubiquitous it can't displace crime anywhere else (itself surely an exercise in imposed policing), it's not actually reducing crime rates. Offences of violence people fear most — irrationally, as they're still rare — are committed spontaneously by people too drunk or angry to be deterred by a camera or too cunning to get filmed by one.

Why do people still welcome surveillance despite this? Well, the reliance on experts and definition of ourselves that comes through identification with their institutions and their representations of us — qualifications, income, birth and marriage certificates, conformity to consumer trends, and all the rest of that inane kit and caboodle — continually serves to emphasise our insignificance, an eight digit number in their overwhelming megamachine. It is this that leads people to love Big Brother, essentially a show where we pass tabloid-like judgement on intensively surveilled wannabe nonentities undergoing months of sexual frustration in the hope of getting to be children's TV presenters at the end, Endemol's even more sinister Shattered where people were subjected to voluntary sleep deprivation in the manner of victims of Stalin's Cheka, and even lower on the totem pole, searching for themselves in crowd shots (be it big sporting events, pseudo-archaic spectacles typically orchestrated by the royals, or futile 'crawl round London' marches) or 5 second slots on clip shows using RL footage the police or whoever have cobbled together as an extra earner.

One in the Electronic Eye!

How do we put an end to the reign of surveillance — assuming you don't want to lead over-controlled lives like shadows until you die of boredom and insignificance, that is?

Well, firstly don't take advice from me and start thinking for yourself, but a few suggestions include:

- First realising that there is not a quid pro quo between you and those surveilling you, that they are not accountable to you, that they have no right to do to you what they would not tolerate done to themselves, and potentially these voyeuristic parasites have the power to make quite a mess of your life from as little motivation as boredom-induced whim. They are the enemies of a free society, not its guarantors, a further concentration of state power that prevents any injustice being righted.
- Unplugging yourself from all the BS images surrounding you — the clowns in the *Big Brother* house, the endlessly banal biogs of the lives of the rich and famous, the five day fashions, all that irrelevant crap — and learning to laugh at them and (with consequent increased self-confidence) yourself and your past folly
- Unplugging others through irreverent satire and sheer indifference to the manufactured dreams they undoubtedly hold so dear. You'll probably start with the people you know best (typically a tiny number now people have careers, not friends) but best try to broaden it out a bit more than that, as a key factor for sustaining a surveillance society is intolerance and fear of anyone at all different. The new / old you will have better things to do and talk about, maybe even the recreation of authentic, trusting human connections without constant manufactured electronic babble and distraction, of baseless paranoia.
- Disconnection and direct action of a more 'hands on' kind, a refusal to fill in tax returns and other official or quasi-official requests for information — the census, market research, card applications — or responding to them in absurd, misleading ways to gradually fill their databases with (even more) useless shit. Believe me — when up against it, you'll find it's really possible to live without that credit card and all the form-filling bureaucratic BS, especially with a few mates on board with you too. Reformists please note: denying paperwork and opportunities to surveil the public cuts the lifeblood of the dozens of agencies that exist principally for that purpose, so they can start being laid off as irrelevant too. And the campaign against speed cameras is way to go for all intrusive surveillance and related records, the creation of genuine unmonitored space (at risk of sounding bogus: 'liberated zones') and the return of the lawless, deprogrammed 18th century King Mob!

In conclusion, I'd like to say that I am not arguing for 'privacy', a thoroughly bourgeois concept based on self-disgust and shame. No, let yourself go and do what comes naturally — fuck in the streets, I say! I am arguing for the revolutionary re-creation of original, genuine community where there are no secrets, no shame and no surveillance of the powerful as a tool to rule over the powerless.

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Surveillance and Domestication

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