The Panopticon: Not Just for Prison Anymore

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Now it's for the workplace, too, as the workplace becomes ever more prison-like. Via Lenin's Tomb. David Hencke at *The Guardian* reports:

> Workers in warehouses across Britain are being "electronically tagged" by being asked to wear small computers to cut costs and increase the efficient delivery of goods and food to supermarkets, a report revealed yesterday.

> New US satellite- and radio-based computer technology is turning some workplaces into "battery farms" and creating conditions similar to "prison surveillance", according to a report from Michael Blakemore, professor of geography at Durham University.

> The technology, introduced six months ago, is spreading rapidly, with up to 10,000 employees using it to supply household names such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Boots and Marks & Spencer...

Under the system workers are asked to wear computers on their wrists, arms and fingers, and in some cases to put on a vest containing a computer which instructs them where to go to collect goods from warehouse shelves.

The system also allows supermarkets direct access to the individual's computer so orders can be beamed from the store. The computer can also check on whether workers are taking unauthorised breaks and work out the shortest time a worker needs to complete a job.

Academics are worried that the system could make Britain the most surveyed society in the world. The country already has the largest number of street security cameras.

Martin Dodge, a researcher at the centre for advanced spatial analysis at University College London, said: "These devices mark the total 'disappearance of disappearance' where the employee is unable to do anything without the machine knowing or monitoring."…

In a typical example of Human Resources Happy Talk, management's assessment of the results of their own policy is (predicatably) positively glowing:

But the companies say the system makes the delivery of food more efficient, cuts out waste, reduces theft and can reorder goods more quickly.

One firm, Peacock Retail Group, claims workers like the system. The company, which has a modern centre in Nantgarw, south Wales, where employees have 28 wearable computers and six mounted on trucks, says the system has a positive

unactionable commands flow back down. The only thing that keeps the organizations going is the people who know how to do the actual work, and know that everything coming from above is utter bullshit. Were the actual producers to stop using their own judgment for a single day, and actually follow "company policy," production would be shut down as surely as if by a monkeywrench. That's why what the Wobblies call "work-to-rule" strikes are so devilishly effective.

like to believe. The average worker is probably aware of hundreds of ways he can increase costs and slow down the work process, every day, with little or no risk of getting caught. In an earlier post, I mentioned some bright management types who thought they could monitor employee handwashing with computerized soap dispensers and water faucets that recorded activity on a worker's name badge. As I pointed out, any kid who ever squeezed toothpaste down the drain and wet his toothbrush could probably figure out how to fool that system.

Lenin comments, in his post:

> Henry Ford once asked "how come, when I just want a pair of hands, I get a human being too?" The answer is that the only other animal that comes with a pair of hands is a monkey, and monkeys aren't generally very efficient. The other answer is that what Ford was looking for is a disposable commodity that wouldn't have needs, grudges or grievances, one that wouldn't answer back, try to change the terms of its use or renegotiate its price. The problem with purchasing labour is that it is a distinctly unusual commodity, imbued with intentionality.

But despite the blythe dismissal of the bosses, this intentionality is something they can't dispense with. The average corporation is so bureaucratic and irrational, with such distorted flow of information, that its senior management are as out of touch with what's really going on as senior officials at Gosplan. They live in an imaginary world built up entirely of falsified information from below, and follow an industry culture set by their counterparts at other firms who are just as clueless as they are. (How many times have you seen a new management policy justified, in HR agitprop, because it's "the industry trend"?) Falsified information flows up the hierarchies, and irrational,

impact on team morale. "Everybody likes the wearables because they are comfortable and easy to use. The result is the team finds it easier to do the job," it says on the company website.

A spokeswoman for Tesco last night insisted that the company was not using the technology to monitor the staff and said it was making employees' work easier and reducing the need for paper.

As you might expect, those doing the actual work in those authoritarian shitholes see things a bit differently:

> But at the GMB's annual conference in Newcastle yesterday one of the union's national officers, Paul Campbell, said: "We are having reports of people walking out of jobs after a few days' work, in some cases just a few hours. They are all saying that they don't like the job because they have no input. They just followed a computer's instructions."

It should be obvious, though, that the causation works the other way as well. Management resorts to such authoritarianism as a way of coping with already rising levels of disgruntlement, recalcitrance, and outright sabotage, themselves the result of management decisions over the past thirty years. As David M. Gordon described it in Fat and Mean: The Corporate Squeezing of Working Americans and the Myth of Managerial Downsizing, the average corporation has actually become more hierarchical and authoritarian, not less, and devoted even more resources to internal tracking and surveillance.

The elites who run our state capitalist economy made a strategic decision, in the 1970s, to cap real wages and transfer all productivity increases into reinvestment, dividends, or CEO salaries. So while real wages have remained stagnant for thirty years, the wealth of the top few percent of the

population has exploded astronomically. The percentage of wealth owned by the top 1%, which as of the mid-70s had held steady at around 25% for the previous century, is now close to 40%. To impose this policy on society, obviously, required increasing authoritarianism in all aspects of social life. That's why so many of our civil liberties have been transformed into toilet paper under the pretext of the wars on drugs and terror, and (as Richard K. Moore put it) the techniques for controlling subject populations have been imported from the imperial periphery to the core population.

> The most obvious means of social control, in a discontented society, is a strong, semi-militarized police force. Most of the periphery has been managed by such means for centuries. This was obvious to elite planners in the West, was adopted as policy, and has now been largely implemented. Urban and suburban ghettos—where the adverse consequences of neoliberalism are currently most concentrated—have literally become occupied territories, where police beatings and unjustified shootings are commonplace.

> So that the beefed-up police force could maintain control in conditions of mass unrest, elite planners also realized that much of the Bill of Rights would need to be neutralized. (This is not surprising, given that the Bill's authors had just lived through a revolution and were seeking to ensure that future generations would have the means to organize and overthrow any oppressive future government.) The rights-neutralization project has been largely implemented, as exemplified by armed midnight raids, outrageous search-and-seizure practices, overly broad conspiracy laws, wholesale invasion of privacy, massive

incarceration, and the rise of prison slave labor. The Rubicon has been crossed—the techniques of oppression long common in the empire's periphery are being imported to the core.

> In the matrix, the genre of the TV or movie police drama has served to create a reality in which "rights" are a joke, the accused are despicable sociopaths, and no criminal is ever brought to justice until some noble cop or prosecutor bends the rules a bit. Government officials bolster the construct by declaring "wars" on crime and drugs; the noble cops are fighting a war out there in the streets—and you can't win a war without using your enemy's dirty tricks. The CIA plays its role by managing the international drug trade and making sure that ghetto drug dealers are well supplied. In this way, the American public has been led to accept the means of its own suppression.

> The mechanisms of the police state are in place. They will be used when necessary—as we see in ghettos and skyrocketing prison populations, as we saw on the streets of Seattle and Washington, D.C. during recent demonstrations against the WTO, IMF, and World Bank, and as is suggested by executive orders that enable the president to suspend the Constitution and declare martial law whenever he deems it necessary.

And in the workplace, an increasingly disgruntled labor force requires ever closer monitoring and profiliing to make sure they've "got their minds right."

One bright note: the *Guardian* article didn't provide enough information for an independent assessment, but I'm guessing the telescreens aren't quite as foolproof as the bosses would