# PANOPTICON DAYS

## Surveillance and Society

### David Garland
Professor of Penology in the Centre for Criminology, Faculty of Law, University of Edinburgh

Surveillance is a worrisome idea in Anglo-American culture. The word itself - a borrowing from the French which has never quite become naturalised - first entered the English language during the Napoleonic Wars, already laden with connotations of government spies and secret police. In the period since, it has retained this slightly sinister sense, its standard meanings referring to "the watch or guard kept over a suspected person or prisoner" or else to "spying", rather than to the more neutral notions of "supervision" or "superintendence".

## The very mention of the word has people reaching for their civil liberties.

Our queasiness about the concept derives, in part, from the historical contrast between the supposed liberties of "freeborn Englishmen" and the oppression purportedly endured by Continentals under the yoke of the absolutist state. But this sense continues to resonate today because in our liberal individualistic culture - in which the group and the above all "the state" are seen as threats to the privacy and autonomy enjoyed by (some) individual citizens - surveillance is viewed as a means whereby "they" control "us". The very mention of the word has people reaching for their civil liberties.

### An appropriate paranoia?
Our anxieties in these matters are made vivid, and occasionally pleasurable, by the dystopian literature of Orwell and Huxley (and, we might now add, Michel Foucault) which evokes the image of a struggling individual smothered beneath the weight of an all-seeing, all-powerful Big Brother. These anxieties are also manifest in the instinctively hostile reaction many of us have whenever there is mention of government plans to set up Identification Card schemes, subject offenders to electronic monitoring, install Closed Circuit Television Cameras in town centres, or develop databases holding personal information. These reactions are the symptoms of a paranoid culture, in which the ego feels pathologically hemmed in by the super-ego, and institutional authorities are viewed with deep suspicion rather than trust. But then, given the routine abuses of power that occur, and the clear divergences of interest between state authorities and those over whom they exercise control, most of us have a lot to be paranoid about.

"Surveillance" continues to be a worrisome work, and the surveillance dystopias continue to exert their appeal, precisely because relations between the group and the individual, the state and the citizen, are experienced as oppressive, even in "liberal democracies" where rights are for the most part respected and states rule by formal consent of the people. If "surveillance" and "social control" are dirty words it is because the relations of the individual to the political community are pathologically out of sorts.

Despite this common usage, and the political problem that it witnesses, it may be worth trying to think more analytically about the idea of surveillance, viewing it as an essential characteristic of social life, rather than an attribute of authoritarian oppression. Indeed, it might be worth reminding ourselves of the positive senses of the word - "inspection", "superintendence", "supervision", "oversight" - and the indispensable need for such activity in spheres such as child-rearing, education, health or business, not to mention science and the acquisition of systematic knowledge.

### Surveillance and modernity
Viewed sociologically, surveillance is an essential element of social control, operating wherever social institutions govern the conduct of individuals. In small-scale, simple societies, or indeed, in some of the face-to-face communities and organisations which still exist in the midst of our big cities, the surveillance of the individual by the group operates in a relatively informal, spontaneous way. People know what others in the community are up to, and exert a level of supervision, guidance and restraint over each other's activities. Surveillance and control, for better or for worse, occur as part of the normal process of social interaction.

In contrast, larger organisations and complex societies cannot rely upon surveillance and control simply occurring "in the nature of things". The administration of large territories and populations, the disposition of large quantities of goods, the management of complex institutions, the waging of large-scale wars - all of these require a more formalised system of data-gathering and supervision, with the result that surveillance becomes a more specialised activity, adapted to the particular task at hand. The same historical processes that shaped our modern social institutions - industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratisation, the growth of the nation-state, the development of market-oriented capitalism - brought in their


London Guildhall University

# PANOPTICON DAYS

train a massive intensification of the means and scope of surveillance. Modern institutions and complex organisations are characterised by a high degree of rationality and reflexivity. Typically, they are concerned to monitor their own activities and their immediate environment, adapting their procedures in the light of this knowledge. Surveillance is thus driven by the same dynamic of profit and efficiency that drives technological innovation, and few institutions or activities can now escape the tyranny of 'audit' procedures, 'cost-benefit analysis', or governmental inspection. As social theorists like Weber, Foucault and Giddens make clear, whoever says 'modernity' also says 'surveillance'.

Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir* (1975) gives a beautifully detailed history of how the means of surveillance and the principles of inspection gradually emerged from numerous institutional settings such as the monastery, the barracks, the workshop and the prison. In these situations, problems of exerting control over a multitude of persons or processes led to the invention of devices such as the timetable, the examination, the census, and rank and file arrangements. These humble practical inventions were imitated and elaborated by one institution after another until, in the late 18th century, Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" provided a kind of ideal solution to the problem of inspection - a solution that has since been adapted and applied in countless settings, from the lecture theatre to the hospital ward.

### The positive story
The story Foucault tells of the relentless production of knowledge in the service of disciplinary power is one that heavily reinforces the paranoid view of surveillance described above. But there is another story to set alongside this one, a story of the expansion of useful knowledge and rational social control made possible by advances in surveillance technologies. This story would stress that the institutions of insurance, social security, national health, and economic welfare that have been put in place since the 19th century with their massive benefits in terms of life expectancy, education, and quality of

life of even the poorest sections of the population - depend just as heavily on the gathering on information and the routine monitoring of personal life. The same processes that make us vulnerable to the authoritarian state, also make it possible for us to control epidemic disease, insure against risk, and guard against the abuse of children or the abuse of power. The problem is not so much the relentless development of surveillance

---

**The problem is not so much the relentless development of surveillance technology or "power/knowledge relations" but rather the question of how to control the use to which these crucial resources are put.**

---

technology or "power/knowledge relations" but rather the question of how to control the use to which these crucial resources are put.

In criminal justice, techniques of surveillance and monitoring are now routinely used on both sides of the fence. Offenders are subject to the supervision of probation officers, prison guards and community service staff, whether as a restriction of liberty or as a form of social work assistance. At the same time, criminal justice personnel are more and more subject to the routine monitoring of their activities, measuring them against national standards and performance indicators, curtailing their discretion by means of detailed management instructions, usually in the name of economy and efficiency, though occasionally to curb the arbitrary use of power.

Crime prevention too is increasingly seen to depend upon the degree to which surveillance and control can be built into the institutions and locales where crime events routinely occur - not as deterrent threats, but as embedded features of the situation which will gently channel behaviour in a lawful direction. Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning give a brilliant account of how non-intrusive (and more or less consensual) supervision of this kind is achieved in the Disneyworld complexes, so that the

thousands of customers who pass through each day are lightly steered away from deviance and danger, using monitoring devices that neatly blend into the scenery.

Looked at in long-term perspective, the historical tendency of penal systems appears to be to move more and more in the direction of utilising surveillance community supervision and monetary penalties rather than corporal or carceral punishments as the preferred means of control, though the recent upsurge in imprisonment rates obscures this tendency. If the 20th century has added anything to the repertoire of penal measures it is the range of community-based supervisory penalties that includes probation, parole, community service, intermediate treatment, curfews and now electronic monitoring.

Our background anxiety about surveillance, together with our worry that community penalties will 'widen the net' of penal control rather than replace imprisonment, make many of us shy away from the new technologies of monitoring and the control possibilities that they might offer. Perhaps we might do better to consider how surveillance and supervision techniques could be put to more progressive use. ∎

*Further Reading*
J B Rule (1973) *Private Lives and Public Surveillance* (Allen Lane, London)
A Giddens (1985) *The Nation State and Violence* (Polity, Cambridge)
C Dandeker (1990) *Surveillance, Power and Modernity* (Polity, Cambridge)
G Marx (1988) *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America* (University of California Press, Berkeley)
M Foucault (1977) *Discipline and Punish* (Allen Lane, London) (Originally *Surveiller et Punir* 1975)
I Hacking (1990) *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)
R Clarke (1992) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies* (Harrow & Heston, Albany NY)
C Shearing & P Stenning (1984) "From the Panopticon to Disneyworld: The Development of Discipline" in A Doob and E Greenspan (eds) *Perspectives in Criminal Law* (Aurora, Toronto)