SO WHAT'S NEW?

Some trends in security and surveillance

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It seems to be a required feature of the post-Foucault literature on surveillance to refer back to Jeremy Bentham's plans for the Panopticon penitentiary, first published in 1791. Yet the Panopticon was never built. In fact, it is the Benthamite-sounding phrase 'the Eye that never sleeps', coined around forty years later, that should perhaps lay claim to symbolising the real extension of surveillance in modern society. The all-seeing and untiring eye, was the logo for the private detective and security agency founded by Allan Pinkerton in 1830, and it represented the availability of a service that promised 24-hour vigilance and invigilation. For a price, private guards, 'private eyes' and undercover infiltrators were all for hire. Over 150 years later, the scale of provision of such services must certainly have exceeded even Pinkerton's entrepreneurial optimism. But the point is that such services are not new, despite what sometimes seems implied in discussions about, for example, CCTV. So what *is* new?

Security, surveillance and 'the anxiety market'

Demand for security and related services is stimulated by what Narr (1992) neatly calls 'the anxiety market'. Narr writes in the German context of post-unification unease about crime and new social problems. But similar anxieties are found in the unsettled middle class suburbs of Britain and the 'tranquilliser solution' is increasingly to reach for a bottle of 'new' (but not so improved) private security. Thus headlines of recent years have included: 'Britain 1993: Private security men and vigilantes patrol the streets which Care in the Community has made the only refuge for the vulnerable and dangerous', 'DIY detectives on the beat as citizen-law fills the vacuum' (both from *The Observer*, 4th July 1993), 'Changing role of police leads frightened residents to pay for patrols'. 'For a £10 fee and a further £1 a week, householders can buy peace of mind from a security company' (both from *The Times*, 15th March, 1994).

In the inner-city, since the 1970s at least, a large number of business associations and local authorities (of various political alignments) have employed private guard patrols in industrial areas, shopping centres, parks and housing estates as a supplementary police-presence. In 1994, the proposal from Wandsworth Council to create a private 'municipal' patrol force attracted considerable criticism (eg *Daily Telegraph*, 24th/25th August). Indeed, the lack of regulation and accountability in this area has begun to attract more attention than ever (eg *Financial Times*, 2nd September, 1994, p.15). A Home Affairs Committee currently considering the matter may even conclude that the old question 'who guards the guards?' has something in it, and urge regulation. (The Home Secretary on the other hand is likely to urge nothing).

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The world of corporate finance is also feeling unsettled and the anxiety of recession has been good news for fraud investigators, skilled in the detection and surveillance of monetary misdeeds. In both the UK and USA, large security companies traditionally involved in guard services have acquired specialist fraud detection agencies. The latter are now capable of generating considerably more profit than old style guard operations. A headline from *The Wall Street Journal* (11th June, 1991) nicely reflects this trend: 'Big security companies branching out, see some flecks of gold in private eyes'.

The security and surveillance mentality

The issues of 'who is doing the surveillance?' and whether they are, in turn, being 'surveilled' are important but can obscure the other fundamental question - 'what is all this for?' The primary 'public good' justifications are 'crime prevention' and 'public safety'. Difficult to argue with until examined in terms of a *broad* notion of 'public good'. For example, use of CCTV to direct private guards to remove 'undesirable youths' from a shopping mall may be so justified, but the broader questions of *where they are displaced to*, and what they will do there, are unasked. In the present 'hard' crime prevention climate, it doesn't matter - if these *are* troublesome youths, they are now someone else's problem and they can take up the options the market offers - ie more CCTV, private patrols and so on.

Meanwhile, having done your shopping safely (with someone to watch over you), back at work in the inner city, electronic service sector, the technology on your desk places you within the new 'networked panopticon'. Here 'time and motion' philosophy meets security and surveillance. In Hagerstown, Md., USA, the post-industrial workplace ('the Electronic Sweatshop' as Barbara Garson has called it), is reflected in the "controlled environment" of Electronic Banking System Inc. (*Wall Street Journal*, 1st December 1994). Here "cameras help deter would-be thieves. Tight security also reassures visiting clients... But tight observation also helps EBS monitor productivity and weed out workers who don't keep up. 'There are multiple uses' the manager says of surveillance. His desk is covered with computer printouts recording the precise toll of key-strokes tapped by each data entry worker. He also keeps a day to day tally of errors." The 'security and surveillance mentality' extends further and further into the routines of everyday life. In the near future, new satellite systems will ease mobile communications, but police are concerned about how this will aid organised crime. A solution is to build in the capacity for surveillance but the builders of the technology are private international consortia (*Statewatch*, March, 1995). In the information age, the security of your phone calls versus surveillance access to them, may be just another commodity for sale in the emerging, international public/private security market (South, 1994).

Security technology can, obviously, bring many crime prevention benefits. *The Futurist* (March, 1988) outlined the merits of the home computer security system of the next century, employing 'biometric devices' to verify visitors' identities and keep out burglars. But there's a sting in the tail. Imagine you've had a long, hard day and all you want to do is relax in the shower. Tough. The security computer of the 'intelligent house' "could even keep track of who has trips or errands scheduled, when the dog needs to come back in, or who is taking too long in the shower." Things are getting out of hand when even the shower is reporting on you.

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References
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