What is global surveillance? Towards a relational political economy of the global surveillant assemblage

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides interrogates the relationship of the global and surveillance. It makes a broad theoretical argument for a relational political economy of global surveillance by bringing surveillance studies, assemblage theory and political economic work on neoliberalism in geography into a closer conversation. It argues that in the contemporary control society, surveillance is employed to facilitate the functioning of neoliberalism and the naturalization of the global as its proper scale of operation. It draws on multiple examples which demonstrate both the scalar politics of the global surveillant assemblage and its materialization in particular instances of actual global surveillance. The conclusion addresses emergent possibilities of transformation.

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1. Introduction

At a time when surveillance seems almost everywhere, it is easy to assume that the globalization of surveillance is an unarguable fact. But the relationship between surveillance and the global is a complex one, and understanding it necessitates an interrogation of both concepts. This paper makes a broad theoretical argument for a relational political economy of global surveillance by bringing surveillance studies, assemblage theory and political economic work on globalization and neoliberalization in and around geography into a closer conversation. As MacKinnon (2011) argued, "Relational thinking rightly stresses the need for a more dynamic and fluid conception of space [...] but this is not incompatible with the more conceptually open strands of the political-economy literature" (21).

The paper is structured around five sections. The first makes the argument that surveillance is spreading and intensifying and that, whilst tracing of the spread and intensification of surveillance specifically and generally has so far been the major contribution of surveillance studies, this has yet to result in sustained critical attention to questions of space and scale within surveillance studies or to the political economy of surveillance. The second section deals with surveillance as a concept. It argues that surveillance is not a given, but a changeable "mode of ordering" (Law 1992) responding to problems of government. In addition to grounding my analysis in "security" and "biopolitics" (Foucault, 2007; Mattelart, 2010) and the "control society" (Deleuze, 1992), I use and build on three further concepts, the "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty

and Ericson, 2000), "oligoptica" (Latour, 2005), and "periopticity" (Lianos, 2010), to describe post-panoptic surveillance in the control society. The third section summarizes debates on globalization and the global, and argues against a naturalistic understanding of the global as a given scale in favor of the global as assemblage (Anderson et al., 2012a; Collier and Ong, 2005; Delanda, 2006), and for the importance of "scalar politics" (MacKinnon, 2011) in establishing its components. The fourth section adds the political economic approaches of Harvey (2005), Peck (2010), and Brenner et al. (2010), arguing that contemporary surveillance as a mode of ordering responding to problems of government is employed to facilitate neoliberalization.

The conclusion addresses the inevitability of transformation that is key to thinking in terms of assemblage. New forms and new assemblages will emerge resulting in further iterations of capitalism, government and surveillance, which may or may not support each other in quite the same way. Whilst drawing on examples which demonstrate the scalar politics of the global surveillant assemblage and its materialization in particular instances of "actual global surveillance" (after Collier and Ong, 2005), this paper is not empirically-based, rather it is generally theoretical and affirmatively abstract (McCormack, 2012), and it is hoped that it will inspire further theoretical and empirical exploration.

2. Surveillance and surveillance studies

The post-9/11 turn towards consideration of "security" and "securitization" has increased interest in surveillance across the social sciences. If the 1990s was the decade of economic globaliza-

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tion, then the post-9/11 world and the ongoing "Everywhere War" (Gregory, 2011) has made more explicit the spread and intensification of surveillance (Ball and Webster, 2003; Lyon, 2003; Amoore and de Goede, 2005). The emerging transdisciplinary field of surveillance studies has engaged substantially with global security and been remarkably productive in detailing the informational, social, spatial and temporal transformations around surveillance, but has also been relatively weak in engaging theoretically with globalization and the global. For example, Aas (2011, p. 331) has argued that the globalization of surveillance is a "given", and this statement is characteristic of a tendency within studies of surveillance to assume a rather unproblematic notion of globality wherein the spatial transformations of surveillance are largely seen in terms of an apparently inevitable spread from specific places to everywhere. Even when this has been challenged, the replacement has generally been with another simplification, for example in seeing surveillance as undergoing a rescaling from local to international to global (Murakami Wood, 2012a).

This attention to the spread of surveillance has however been enormously productive and has resulted in a welcome increase in international comparative work (e.g. Bennett and Lyon, 2008; Haggerty and Samatas, 2010; Zureik et al., 2010; Doyle et al., 2011). David Lyon in particular has long advocated a greater attention to globalization (e.g. Lyon, 2004) and has also attended to the global political economy of identity cards and identification (Lyon, 2009). Arteaga Botello (2009) has produced a strong critique of surveillance studies based in a view from the Global South. But the only real sustained work on the globalization of surveillance is by Mattelart (1996, 2000, 2010), who has produced a powerful thesis combining the growth of global communications with the centrality of the military, particularly US counter-insurgency, and the influence of finance capital. Non-academic works tend towards a catalog approach embedded in dystopian rhetoric, for example, "there is no escape" (Tudge, 2011, p. 160) even when, like Tudge's *No-Nonsense Guide to Global Surveillance*, they can be wide-ranging and useful catalogs.

3. Post-panoptic surveillance and government

This paper understands surveillance as a mode of ordering. I derive this term from John Law. In *Organising Modernity* he defined modes of ordering as 'fairly regular patterns that may be usefully imputed for certain purposes to the recursive networks of the social [. . .] recurring patterns embodied within, witnessed by, generated in and reproduced as part of the ordering of human and non-human relations' (Law, 1992, p. 83). This is founded in a Foucauldian understanding that words like 'order' in themselves hide continual processes of construction and reconstruction. However recursivity is also important: surveillance does not function for itself alone but works to support other modes of ordering, which in turn can generate and support the need for surveillance – I will return to this below. Like Law, I draw on Michel Foucault in understanding ordering as a process that is at once the outcome of and, always inadequate, solution to perceived problems of government, or indeed to government as such given that David Millar and Nikolas Rose have defined government broadly *as* problematization (Miller and Rose, 2008). As such, surveillance is not specific to any particular period of history, mode of production or political-territorial configuration or current of ideas about government.[1]

Any basic working definition of surveillance – as response to a problem of government – should also be independent of the scale at which the concept is mobilized: as Foucault remarked of governmentality, it should apply as much to individuals as the 'management of a whole social body' (Foucault, 2009, p. 186). Much global surveillance is often not generally thought of as surveillance in the social sciences, or is considered merely analogous to more conventionally recognized forms of surveillance, which often still have a categorically erroneous definitional connection to the individual human subject. Academic writing on surveillance is also all too often overly concerned with local sociotechnical instances of surveillance, in cataloguing the proliferation of what Latour (2005) calls "oligoptica." These are mechanisms that see intensely but narrowly, rather than the maximalist readings of Bentham's Panopticon, which posit a mechanism or mechanisms which see(s) everything. Therefore perhaps the best basic definition of the practice of surveillance in this context is 'the gathering of information about and the supervision of subject populations in organisations' (Dandecker, 1990, p. vii). This makes no *a priori* assumptions about the populations concerned but stresses that all surveillance has an organizational context.

In his lectures on *Security, Territory, Population (2007)*, Michel Foucault claimed that the fundamental aspect of government was "security", accomplished through biopolitics: the management of entire populations in particular territorial configurations. The development of surveillance from the early modern period can in particular be linked to the identification of these populations through rationalism and science, in particular new forms of counting and statistics (Hacking, 1990). Further, according to Hacking's account, these started to emerge prior to the creation of the modern territorial nation-state system, indeed helped to construct the very idea of an apparently necessary coincidence between a national population and a territorial state. Biopolitical surveillance thereafter comes to function as what Foucault would later call "an art of government" or "governmentality", which, seeks to maximize the capacity of the national population in a variety of ways "to participate productively in the market" by differentiating good and bad circulations and maximizing the former whilst preventing the latter (Ceyhan, 2012, p. 40).

Although, Foucault developed his understanding of security after his earlier work in *Discipline and Punish (1977)* on disciplinary surveillance, the concepts are not incompatible. First, as Puar (2012) notes, in *Security, Territory, Population*, discipline is the extraction and construction of the individual subject out of the population rather than the transformation of already recognized subjects. The transformation in thinking about punishment and surveillance that took place from the Eighteenth Century, during which modern subjectivity emerged via disciplinary mechanisms such as Bentham's Panopticon reformatory design happened in an already in-formation world of biopolitical nation-states, and thereafter "security" and "discipline" worked together. As Armand Mattelart argued in two works, *The Invention of Communication (1996)* and *Networking the World (2000)*, the former enlarges the horizon of communication for individuals whereas the latter configures the individual as a the object of communication. The two forms of government connect both for reasons of the state and the market to ensure that neither the freedom offered by expanded horizons allow the subject to escape, nor do the restrictions created by discipline interrupt the constructive participation of the subject in the market and in state projects. This helps understand how it was that modern panoptic surveillance although originally bounded and architectural gradually become social and general: the era that Foucault (1977) termed "the carceral" is also the era of nationally based liberal capitalism, which required the subjects who were willing to work and increasingly desirous of the products of capitalist production.

[1] I use the word "government" as Foucault did, in the generic sense to indicate the activity of governing, rather than the neologism, "governance", which while intended to separate national government from other forms, tends to miss the fact that government never had any necessary relationship to the "nation-state" or other contingent political-territorial configurations. Types of government are specified with appropriate adjectives.