

Liberal luxury: Decentering Snowden, surveillance and privilege

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the continued potency of veillance theories to traverse beyond the taxonomies of surveillance inside liberal democracies. It provides a commentary on the ability of sousveillance to destabilise and disrupt sur/violence by shifting its focus from the centre to the periphery, where Big Data surveillance is tantamount to sur/violence. In these peripheral political spaces, surveillance is not framed by concerns over privacy, democracy and civil society; rather, it is a matter of life and death, a technique of both biopolitical and thanatopolitical power. I argue that the universalist, and universalizing, debates over surveillance cannot be mapped through the anxieties of privileged middle classes as they would neither transcend nor make possible alternative ways of tackling the intersection of surveillance and violence so long as they are couched in the liberal concerns for democracy. I call this phenomenon “liberal luxury,” whereby debates over surveillance have over-emphasised liberal proclivities at the expense of disengaging those peripheral populations most severely affected by sur/violence.

Keywords

Sousveillance, surveillance, sur/violence, veillance, drones

When Edward Snowden defected by releasing NSA classified materials in June of 2013, I was in Detroit. Snowden hardly made news in Detroit. For Muslim and Black Americans, in the inner cities of Detroit, Baltimore and Ferguson as well as civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gaza, where surveillance is attached to economies of violence, the dangers of being watched are not shaped by concerns over privacy but over survival and death. Yet, the Snowden affair came to mediate what seemed to be a global political moment against the convergence of surveillance and structural violence in the grammar of civility, democracy and middle-class concerns over secrecy. Marketed as a nostalgic project of *recherche du temps perdu*, times when the government had more consideration for confidentiality, surveillance has come to be seen as an aberration of liberal democracy; a nostalgic attempt that seeks to frame the present, and the future, on a guiltless past, a desire, as the late Boym (2007: 10) observed, that colonizes contemporary political struggles for justice and ties them to “unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that have become obsolete.”

Commenting on the intensification of surveillance through Big Data that can now trace, collect, collide and analyze information into micro and macro datasets, utilized from security projects to social media marketing, Lyon (2014: 4) argues that the Snowden affair generated new debates on the increased speed and scope of Big Data surveillance bringing attention to the way in which it “reverses prior policing or intelligence activities that would conventionally have targeted suspects or persons of interest and then sought data about them.” While Lyon’s critique on the “social-political *consequences*” of Big Data is a necessary intervention in surveillance studies, it is nonetheless limited to concerns over the breach of ethics of privacy, due process and the overall increased reliance on

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“technological” solutions within liberal orders. Foregrounded in the fear that “we are no [longer] people or individuals, but rather individuals – electronic bits of data in an economic process of indexing and constant cost-analysis that never stops” (Hickman, 2016), proliferating concerns over Big Data have over-emphasized the malaise and conformity that digitalization and surveillance have created in post-industrial societies where everyone has become subsumed into the neoliberal “digital factory.” In most of these accounts, there is an assumed universal vulnerability of life under surveillance that levels out – by leaving out – the biopolitical hierarchies that designate certain populations as more worthy of life and living over those actively pursued for death. I want to argue that the universalist tendencies of these debates make tacit demographic presuppositions without consideration, as Butler (2016) points out, of “who poses the moral question and those about whom the moral question is posed?,” despite the continued affirmation by US officials that they now “kill people based on metadata” (Cole, 2016). As a result, questions over how Big Data intersects with, and facilitates, organized violence in the form of biopower in peripheral political spaces are frequently substituted with the struggles of conscientious objectors. A notable exception being The Intercept’s Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald (2014), whose work in tracing the connections between metadata surveillance and drone strikes has been important and comprehensive.

Characterized as heroes and patriotic whistleblowers, Snowden and other post-Snowden defectors have dominated the public debate on surveillance, frequently obscuring the systematic and historic nature of surveillance as an indistinguishable feature and instrument of racial violence. Abstracted from any power formation, narratives around the sufferings of the “injured” veteran US service men and women who once engaged in sur/violence are presented as sites of moral struggles to solicit the sympathy of the American audiences who may otherwise not identify with their victims. Consider the recent documentary film *National Bird* (2016), where the subject of drone surveillance and warfare revolves around three main protagonists Heather, Lisa and Dan. Personalized, identified and humanized as former US military operatives coping with post-traumatic stress disorder, the documentary footnotes the stories of the people most affected by their violence as a substantiating evidence and an attempt of the protagonists to redeem themselves and reclaim their conscience by meeting some of the survivors of their drone attacks. Traded in the entertainment marketplace as consumer commodities,

these projects capitalize on the pain and loss of drone victims while turning whistleblowers into spectatorship stars of reality television.

Reduced to admonitions, these debates have become appeals to the middle classes to re-engage, revitalize and strengthen liberal democracy against the threat of surveillance creeping into their homes. The parallels of this logic in the history of confronting racial violence by appealing to the anxieties of white middle classes are many. Césaire’s (2000: 36) brilliant observation that it was not the crime against humanity that Europeans condemned in the Holocaust:

but the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that Hitler had applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India and the ‘niggers’ of Africa

This rings true in most commentaries on surveillance today. It is this same logic that informs counter-responses, such as imperceptibility or *sousveillance* – strategies that have little currency in the peripheries, where imperceptibility is not a choice to surf the web incognito but a necessity to cross the increased visibility of walls and borders and where *sousveillance* is possible to the extent that the hunted can record their own death or the death of their loved ones.

To unsettle, decenter and rethink surveillance theories beyond the taxonomies of surveillance inside liberal democracies, a critical intervention needs to destabilize and disrupt sur/violence by shifting its focus from the center to the periphery; by hearing and reading from those embodying and embedding drone brutality, those whose lives are informed by sur/violence, the targets of incarceration industries, those sites and bodies produced as *naturally* condemned to being watched, damaged and destroyed and the audacity of these bodies to “move and live in the face of death” (Robinson, 2016). This approach does not disparage solidarities and efforts of everyone to expose and confront the sur/violence with which precarious bodies are hunted. Instead, it invites us to consider whether those too close to the knowledge systems and the teleological promise of progress and too far removed from the agonies of violence should dominate the articulation of alternative epistemologies and living strategies?

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