

Sacred Eyes and Sovereign Power: The Evolution of Surveillance Practices from the Medieval Church to the Absolutist State in Europe

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Abstract: *This study aims to understand the historical evolution of surveillance practices. It will be argued that surveillance is not a recent phenomenon but has existed since antiquity. Using the genealogical analysis method articulated by the well-known French thinker Michel Foucault, this article analyzes the nature, scope, and functioning of surveillance practices during the medieval era of the Christian church and later during the formative phase of the absolutist state. It has been argued that the social function of surveillance apparatuses differed- the surveillance apparatus of the Church aimed at the salvation of the soul, whereas the surveillance mechanisms of the absolutist state were geared to protect the territory of the state.*

Keywords: Surveillance, Subjectivity, Religion, Dispositif, Sovereignty, Territory

INTRODUCTION

Surveillance is not a recent phenomenon; it has existed since ancient times. Surveillance was integral to realpolitik in ancient times. In ancient Rome, important political players developed their own surveillance networks that provided information about the schemes of those in power. The Roman Empire used its surveillance network to assess its enemies' military strength. The noted Roman xpolitician and lawyer Cicero complained that his letters were frequently intercepted. The sixth-century Chinese military general, in his renowned treatise *The Art of War*, emphasised the role of surveillance as a means of obtaining an advantage on the battlefield (Zurcher, 2013). Surveillance has developed in scale and scope in contemporary times. With the advent of the industrial age and the development of new technologies, new areas of human life have come under the surveillance of the state. For instance, the data generated by DNA profiling and facial recognition cameras were unimaginable in the preindustrial age. Surveillance mechanisms are deployed depending on the nature of social institutions. Surveillance in the workplace is used to keep watch and measure the productivity of workers; in hospitals, patients are kept under surveillance for medical reasons; families conduct surveillance on children to inculcate social and moral values; and civil society's purpose of surveillance may include socialisation practices and control of social deviance. Nation-state surveillance of citizens is ostensibly for reasons as varied as the maintenance of law and order, fighting crime, distribution of welfare services, and external security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The earliest work on surveillance was conducted by Jeremy Bentham. His famous work, *Panopticon* (1790-91), is akin to a policy prescription. In the 20th century, surveillance practices were theoretically underpinned by the works of Michel Foucault. Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) is both historical and theoretical. Thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, in his work *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), consider surveillance an outcome of modernity. In his book *Surveillance, Power and Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day* (1990), Dandeker explains how military and bureaucratic machinery played a crucial role in enhancing the surveillance capacity of the nation state.

METHODOLOGY

This article uses the genealogical analysis method articulated by Michel Foucault to understand the historical development of surveillance practices during the medieval

era of the Christian church and later during the formative phase of the absolutist state. Genealogical analysis explains how discursive practices create certain types of order in a given society. It is interested in the norms, practices, codes, technologies, and institutions that mediate human society. It also explores how surveillance practices were oriented to create certain forms of subjectivity.

Meaning of Surveillance

Surveillance stems from the French word 'surveiller', which means to oversee or watch over. The term surveillance can be deconstructed in its etymological parts, 'sur' (from above) and 'veillance' (to watch). In other words, surveillance literally means to 'watch over,' and in this sense, human beings engage in it routinely. David Lyon maintained that surveillance, as 'watching over,' implies both care and control. Michel Foucault called surveillance 'general formulas of domination' (Lyon, n.d., p. 2). Gary Marx noted that 'Surveillance can serve goals of protection, administration, rule compliance, documentation, and strategy, as well as goals involving inappropriate manipulation, restricted life opportunities, social control, and spying. ... To varying degrees, surveillance is a property of any social system' (Fuchs, 2010, p. 6). Although the term surveillance involves the act of watching, its functions are often contextual. It is important to understand the social structure of surveillance. This requires contextualising surveillance in terms of technology, social functions, goals, and scope. Given the vast and expansive study of surveillance discourse, this article delimits its focus to surveillance practices in medieval Europe, situating them within the framework of the surveillance mechanisms of the medieval Church and the emergence of the absolutist state.

Religious Surveillance in Medieval Europe

In medieval Europe, surveillance practices became systematic and were organised under the influence of the Christian church. The Church kept a watchful eye on Christian folks. The Church was more powerful than many governments and had a powerful surveillance network to match. The Church's surveillance mechanisms during the medieval ages were oriented towards searching for devils and witches, hunting heretics, and compelling the faithful to adhere to the religious code. By the twelfth century, the power of the church over Christians took an institutionalised form (Marx, 2016, p. xii). During the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 AD), Pope Innocent III in Rome promulgated seventy-one constitutions (religious decrees) that became a binding moral and legal code for monarchs, feudal lords, and the laity (Power, 2014). The Church's surveillance machinery targeted the souls of believers rather than their bodies. The aim was to liberate the soul from the body's prison. The Church became the mediating agency between the individual and God (Foucault, 2009, p. 128). Surveillance during the medieval period was limited in terms of scale and reach. Technology in that era was not sophisticated, and institutional structures lacked mechanisms for the systematic collection, processing, and storage of information. A parish is a subunit of the diocese. Surveillance was conducted on both clergy and laity. Surveillance functions were delegated to the local parish, which passed on the information to the bishops. Between

the sixth and twelfth centuries, elaborate tables of sins and corresponding penances were compiled, but the system was inflexible; hence, the Fourth Lateran Council invented the technology of confession in front of a priest (Helmholz, 2015, p. 453). The thirty-eighth constitution (decree) mandated compulsory written record keeping for trials. Heretics were subjected to lifelong scrutiny of their inner thoughts by ecclesiastical authorities. Since pastoral authority was the only mediating agency through which individuals could gain salvation, confessional techniques enhanced the power of the clergy over the masses (Power, 2014).

The medieval Church aimed to create a specific type of subjectivity based on Christian tenets. Christianity imposes certain obligations of truth on believers that are considered sacred. One such obligation is to know the truth of the soul (Foucault, 2016, p. 54). Since the soul is trapped in the body (flesh) corrupted by temptations, desires, and sins, access to the soul can be gained through the purification of thoughts in the presence of religious authority. Confession was a governmental technology to extract the truth of the soul through self-examination and self-submission to the priest. Confession was a form of auditory surveillance in which subjectivity formation took place by laying bare the deep secrets and sinful desires before the priest. Since Christianity demanded complete submission to God without questioning, it is logical that the Church's power was augmented by the collective belief that it was the embodiment of divine power on earth. Pastoral authority was based on a binary structure wherein the laity was considered inferior to the clergy in matters of civil and spiritual privileges (Landry, 2009, pp. 121–122). Surveillance *dispositif* during the medieval ages exerted strong social control over the masses. The practice of excommunication was a powerful disciplinary technique used by the church to instil fear in the minds of the masses. An excommunication order deprived a person of sacramental services and property rights. Even the monarchs and feudal lords dreaded the penal power of the church. Later, the Church appropriated judicial power for itself, such as through restitution and the law of perjury. It invented the doctrine of the arm, which mandated the ministers of the king to obey the order of the Church (Helmholz, 2015, p. 542). The political status of the feudal state was inconsequential to the Church's discourse. The Church propounded the idea of a single imperial political space, that is, the kingdom of God on earth. However, the existence of the imperial empire was not a permanent state of affairs but a transitory phase before the Last Judgement. All of humanity, as a single flock under a single shepherd, will sojourn to the Kingdom of God. Hence, the surveillance *dispositif* never made territory or the human body the target of knowledge, but the human soul (Gros, 2014, p. 20).

Territorial Sovereignty, Absolutism, and Surveillance

The Renaissance and Reformation movements challenged the sanctity of the Church. The challenges came from three directions: religious, in the form of Protestantism; political, due to the rise of territorial states; and epistemological, in the form of scientific inventions and discoveries. Politically, the Westphalian system gave rise to a new form of political community based on the principle of sovereignty. A spatially demarcated territory with well-

defined borders became the hallmark of the European state system. Sovereignty as the source of authority establishes a direct relationship with the territory. Territory became the *raison d'être* of the new political reality (Foucault, 2009, p. 256). The state's surveillance system was geared towards seeking knowledge about the strength of one's own territory and the enemy state. The territorial state became the new site of the discursive representation of political power. Thomas Hobbes theorised singular, unitary, and absolute power embodied in the Leviathan. The reimagining of political authority in the image of the Leviathan produced important political effects. Territory has become a concrete manifestation of sovereign power. The rendering of conceptual realities such as inside/outside, internal/external, national/international, and public/private by the surveillance machinery was a direct result of the territorialisation of political power. Second, territorial-based sovereignty was manifested through the king's body. An absolutist state manifested the new power-knowledge dyad. Third, the territorial state erected new security armature, such as a permanent army, professional diplomatic staff, judicial authority, and bureaucratic machinery, to administer the new reality of political power. Fourth, unlike medieval space, the territorial space was an open, continuous, and singular space. Furthermore, it was extendable, transferable, and replicable (Opello & Rosow, 1999, p. 49).

The signification of territorial power through the king's body made the king both the subject and object of sovereignty. The masses stood on the political margin concerning sovereignty (king). They became pertinent from the perspective of increasing state power. In practice, the surveillance *dispositif* during the absolutist era aimed to maximise the legitimacy of the monarch through rituals, ceremonies, and procedures in the presence of the ruled subjects. These rites of passage drew their source from divine rights, popular rights, or blood lineage, but the whole purpose of the surveillance apparatus manifested in ceremonial practices was to make the authority of the king visible in the eyes of his subjects (Gratton, 2012, p. 122).

The surveillance *dispositif* of the absolutist state functioned on the axes of visibility and violence. Compared to the medieval ages, the surveillance machinery of the territorial state was more effective in terms of its scale, magnitude, and durability. The surveillance *dispositif* during absolutism integrated new as well as old technologies to render the political programmes of the territorial state feasible. New forms of technology and administrative setups, such as Roman law, cartography, printing technology, bureaucracy, and mercantilism, were integrated into the absolutist state (Elden, 2013, pp. 323–324). Similarly, older practices used by the Christian Church, such as punishment, confession, torture, and violence, were integrated into the new system to reify the authority of the absolutist state. These technologies played an important role in intensifying the surveillance capacity of the territorial state (Foucault, 2009, p. 262–264). The revival of Roman law greatly contributed to strengthening the administrative surveillance of absolutist states. Roman law suited the political interests of the centralising monarchies that strategically used law as a function of war against the nobility, aristocratic families, remnants of feudal lords, and taming the masses. Roman law was instrumental in consolidating European monarchs'

power. Simultaneously, Roman law emphasised the right to private property, which suited the interests of merchants and commercial peasantry, whose trading interests were linked with emerging towns and overseas trade relations. The standardisation and uniformity of the Roman legal system were beneficial to both monarchs and merchants (Anderson, 1974, p. 27).

Cartography as a scientific discipline became the primary surveillance tool of the absolutist state for demarcating territorial borders. Maps have become an indispensable source of politico-spatial knowledge in the articulation of state power. By the Congress of Vienna in 1815, territorial states became the sole principle of international politics (Branch 2011, pp. 12–15). The state's administrative institutions played an important role in consolidating the nation-state. Anthony Giddens argued that the surveillance mechanism is rooted in the administrative apparatus of the state. The main function of the administrative apparatus was the collection, storage, and control of information on elements existing within the bounded territory. Giddens highlighted the role of printing technology in strengthening the power of the absolutist state that developed in the sixteenth century. Printing technologies helped enlarge the political sphere of the state because sovereign orders could reach across a large political territory. This enabled the sovereign ruler to create and implement uniform laws and regulations and seek the loyalty of the subjects. During the consolidation of the absolutist state, printing technology was extensively used for administrative surveillance in two fields: taxation and population statistics. Paper records have become a routine activity for state administrative machinery. Later in the eighteenth century, surveillance became more centralised as census data of the entire population were collected, collated, processed, and stored in the administrative capital of the state (Giddens, 1985, pp. 179–180).

Christopher Dandeker has examined the role of war and military organisations in increasing bureaucratic surveillance. In the formative stages, war played an important role in the formation of states; fierce competition among European states led to rapid innovation, professionalisation, and bureaucratisation (Dandeker, 1990, p. 81). The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed a military revolution not only in terms of technological innovation but also in the organisational principle of the armed forces. The absolutist state of the seventeenth century transformed the nature of military organisations. The mercenary forces owned by the contracting captains were transformed into a professional army that owed loyalty to the state. The army was subjected to *rational discipline* on an extensive scale (Dandeker, 1990, p. 84). Military bureaucracy created a disciplined armed force that became a feature of the European system in the twentieth century. Later, the industrial and scientific revolutions accelerated the bureaucratisation of the armed forces. The invention of the telegraph strengthened the command-and-control system of the armed forces, and railways made swift and large-scale mobilisation of the armed forces possible (Dandeker, 1990, p. 83). Alongside technological developments, political factors such as the French Revolution changed the relationship between the state, armed forces, and subjects. The ideas of nationalism

and citizenship gave a nationalistic character to the war. Henceforth, war was not a matter between sovereign rulers; it was the mobilisation of the entire society. War became a war of nationalism (Dandeker, 1990, p. 90).

CONCLUSION

This article examines surveillance practices in the context of the Christian church and the absolutist state. It has been argued that the social function of surveillance apparatuses differed- the surveillance apparatus of the Church aimed at the salvation of the soul, whereas the surveillance mechanisms of the absolutist state were geared to protect the territory of the state. The rise of new technologies, wars, and administrative machinery further intensified the surveillance practices of nation-states.

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