Colonial oversight

As they colonised the world, European governments invented techniques for tracking the people they conquered. ELIA ZUREIK reveals how domestic spying has roots in imperial history

Students of surveillance usually pay homage to Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century panopticon prison design, which features cells arranged around a single watchtower. Made famous by Michel Foucault as a metaphor for institutional power, it has become a standard trope in commentaries on present day surveillance, even though Bentham's proposed prison architecture did not materialise originally in Britain and remained relegated to the drawing board. When it did become a reality, it did so first in 19th-century British colonies such as India.

In *Colonising Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell remarks: 'Foucault's analyses are focused on France and northern Europe. Perhaps the focus has tended to obscure the colonising nature of disciplinary power. Yet the panopticon, the model institution whose geometric order and generalised surveillance serve as a motif for this kind of power, was a colonial invention. The panoptic principle was devised on Europe's colonial frontier with the Ottoman empire, and examples of the panopticon were built for the most part not in northern Europe, but in places like colonial India.'

Bentham's project was motivated not by moral concerns for the welfare of prisoners and their rehabilitation, but rather by a utilitarian desire to reap economic returns from the inmates' unfree labour. Because the hypothetical prisoners in his design would never know when they were being watched, Bentham speculated that they would police themselves, thus increasing productivity. Indeed Bentham, who played a direct role in advising Britain in its colonial undertakings in India, envisaged the applicability of his surveillance design to the factory, which prompted other writers, primarily Foucault, to conclude that the prison, factory, hospital and school became susceptible to similar disciplinary practices in the modern era.

Surveillance strategy

In their book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observe that: 'One of the most powerful strategies of imperial dominance is that of surveillance, or observation, because it implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpellates the colonised subject in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor.'

One can safely argue that colonialism and imperialism provided the impetus for developing modern surveillance technologies. In the name of state security, surveillance emerged as essential for managing the population and territory.

This occurred in the quotidian everyday context of people watching people. It was also a formal aspect of colonial policies whereby surveillance was embodied in bureaucratic, enumerative and legal measures that aimed to control the territory and classify the population, a pattern that some researchers call 'panopticism'. Edward Said expressed it succinctly when he described quantification and categorisation as discursive forms of surveillance. 'To divide, deploy, schematise, tabulate, index, and record everything in sight (and out of sight – in original),' he argued, 'are the features of Orientalist projections.'

In C A Bayly's masterful book *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India 1780–1870*, he shows how the gathering of information in pre- and post-colonial India involved not only census and survey data about the population and territory but information gathered through informal surveillance by astrologers, physicians, marriage brokers and holy men. The categorisation and enumeration of the population in pre-colonial India was carried out by local elites, and subsequently modified and implemented by the

British for the purpose of ruling and taxation. From the mid-18th century onwards the British cultivated 'colonial knowledge', embedded in a corpus of Orientalist trope.

Although stereotyping of the Other is a basic staple of colonialism, Bayly rightly points out, it is not always successful and triggers resistance by the colonised. The resistance to British rule in India shows how the colonised successfully used the same tools of information dissemination that were applied by the British to control them, notably the print media.

In considering her work on India, 'Panopticon in Poona: An Essay on Foucault and Colonialism', Martha Kaplan remarks: 'Clearly, the power of colonised people to articulate their own projects, to challenge colonial discourses and to make their own histories constrains the projects of colonisers and – sometimes – remakes the panopticon into a constraint on its constructors.'

Contact zone

Surveillance is not a one-way activity. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt takes into account the co-presence of the coloniser and the colonised in a dialectical fashion in the context of the 'contact zone', which she defines as 'the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing

relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict'.

Pratt argues for the need to understand how the coloniser and colonised are co-constituted through these encounters. This has direct relevance to understanding contemporary meetings between agents of the state (soldiers, police, security agencies and bureaucrats) and the colonised, whether at the checkpoint, airport terminal or in routine contact with the elaborate bureaucratic and security apparatuses of the colonial state. Both parties shape the encounter and affect each other, albeit in a situation of asymmetrical power relations.

Although colonising states resort to hegemonic forms of indoctrinating their soldiers, the case of Vietnam and more recently Israel show that the system of control eventually breaks down and soldiers begin to question publicly the rationale and moral basis of the colonial edifice. Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organisation that works with conscientious objectors, regularly publishes testimonies of ex-Israeli soldiers who discuss the personal and social cost of occupation in the Palestinian territories.

Colonial laboratories

As declassified official documents become available to researchers, it is possible to piece together the surveillance methods used by colonial regimes in ruling over the colonies, as demonstrated in two recent works. Martin Thomas' *Empires of Intelligence: Security and Colonial Disorder after 1914* looks at Britain and France as they embarked on expanding their colonial domains in North Africa and the Middle East between the two world wars, while Alfred McCoy's in-depth historic analysis, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State,* focuses on the development of the 'surveillance state' in the
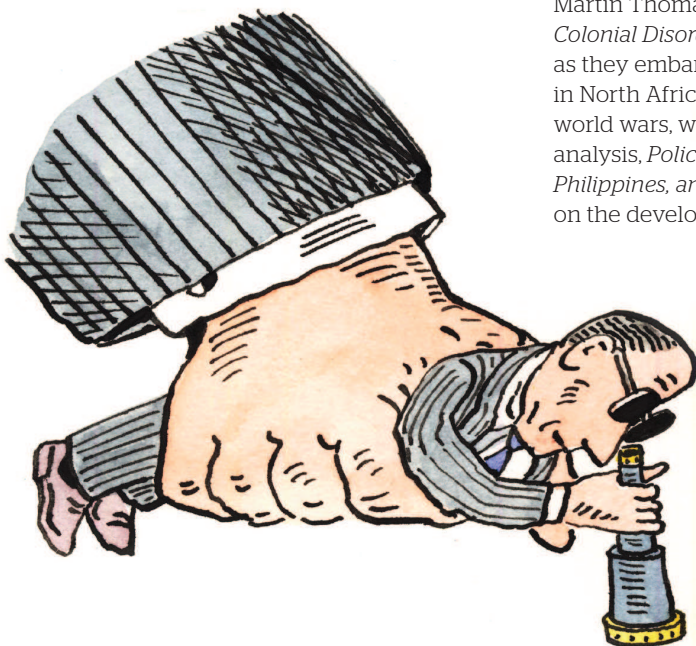
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Philippines following its occupation by the US in 1898.

The historical studies of surveillance in colonial societies demonstrate the eventual spillover, or 'boomerang' effect (to quote Foucault), of such practices and their deployment in the home countries, as shown in McCoy's work. The colony becomes a laboratory for developing and testing surveillance technologies for home use and marketing purposes. This is clearly the case with Israel whose military officials and technologists do not miss an opportunity to tout for export surveillance and control technologies that are used against Palestinians.

It is significant that the basic tools of surveillance as we know them today (fingerprinting, census taking, map-making and profiling – including the forerunners of present day biometrics) were refined and implemented in colonial settings, notably by the Dutch in Southeast Asia, the French in Africa, and the British in India and North America.

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In *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification*, Simon Cole explains that for the British, fingerprinting was 'viewed as a tool for colonial governance'. Proponents of fingerprinting as a method of surveillance and sorting of the population into 'deviants' and 'normal' groups were led in the 19th century by British eugenicist Francis Galton. It is no coincidence that the impetus for the British to further develop a scientific method of population classification occurred in the wake of the 1858 Sepoy mutiny, in which Hindu and Muslim conscripts rebelled against the British East India Company.

Policing Palestine

Methods of surveillance and control are transferred from one colonial setting to another and from the colony to the home country. Taking their cues from the experience in India, the British introduced ID cards in Palestine during the Arab revolt in 1936-39 as part of their campaign to stave off Palestinian opposition to colonial rule and illegal Zionist immigration. With focus on Palestine, Laleh Khalili has explored the 'horizontal circuits through which colonial policing or "security" practices have been transmitted across time or from one location to another, with Palestine as either a point of origin or an intermediary node of transmission'.

In a more recent work, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies*, Khalili examines the development of counterinsurgency measures by the British in Mandatory Palestine and their subsequent adaptation by Israel. Central to these measures and their refinement by Israel is the expropriation of land, application of curfews, restrictions on mobility through the deployment of permit regimes and checkpoints,

expulsion and collective punishment.

Khalili mentions one main difference between the Israeli and other colonial counterinsurgency tactics, such as those adopted by the US in the Philippines or the French in Algeria: 'Although Israeli settler colonialism is predicated on expulsion, carceral methods are used throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) via encirclement and enclavisation of vast terrains.'

The 'separation wall' is considered the main instrument for containing the Palestinian population. Khalili reminds us that the British used similar techniques and carceral mechanisms to cope with the 1936–39 Arab revolt, including watchtowers and security fences, and they hired a Zionist construction company and Jewish personnel to build these fences.

So far, the wall itself has resulted in the expropriation of 10 per cent of occupied Palestinian lands. Bearing in mind that the West Bank and Gaza constituted 28 per cent of the area of Mandatory Palestine, land expropriation for roads, the wall and above all new settlements are expected to reduce the size of the Palestinian enclaves to no more that 45 per cent of the area of the West Bank, which is almost 15 per cent of the area of historical Palestine. The larger effects of quarantining the Palestinian population are to make life socially and economically unbearable and cause emigration, mainly to Jordan. At one time, this was Ariel Sharon's preferred transfer solution, in line with his often-quoted statement that 'Jordan is Palestine'.

According to Martin Thomas, 'Statistics on crime levels among distinct communities, extensive record keeping about individual suspects, and the use of paramilitary "special forces" to deal with the outbreak of political violence or to break colonial strikes were all practices familiar in British India before World War I. All were adopted by the Palestine Police in the 1920s, whose Criminal Record Office and Fingerprint Bureau both drew on profiling techniques developed in India.'

A recent British documentary *The Promise*, which caused protests in Israel, depicted the parallels between current day Israeli policies of house demolitions and similar practices by the British during their presence in Palestine. Israel kept on the books the old pre-1948 British Emergency Regulations to justify its measures against the Palestinian population.

Ruling by records

Keeping records, or 'ruling by records' as it's called by Richard Samaurez Smith, an anthropology professor at the American University in Beirut, is a cornerstone of colonialism, as it is for any modern administrative body. The important distinction in the case of colonialism is that the classification criteria of land, population and other forms of record keeping has serious implications for governing and dispossessing indigenous populations.

This point is demonstrated by Arjun Appadurai in his discussion of the difference between the British census in India and the one used in the home

country ('Number in the Colonial Imagination'). First, the stress on race and ethnicity characterised the British efforts in India, in contrast to the British home census, which in its early days emphasised the geographical distribution of the population and social class. Second, unlike in India, the British home census was tied to citizenship, electoral politics and representation. Third, while the British home census sought to identify marginal and 'problematic' groups (poor people, criminals and so on) in society, the Indian census made no such distinction. It blanketed the entire population for the purpose of control as if it was wholly problematic and deviant.

Thus, from the perspective of surveillance as well as administration, counting people is not an objective, neutral exercise that leaves things unchanged. The way people are counted and their identity categorised in censuses has behavioural ramifications for biopolitics and governance. Anne Stoler remarks that 'the power of categories rests in their capacity to impose the realities they ostensibly only describe. Classification here is not a benign cultural act but a potent political one.'

In 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', Bernard Cohn goes over the processes of British census construction in India as a means of implementing imperial policy. The choices of categories were heavily influenced by pre-existing ideas about India's class structure, and by western notions about the separateness or 'purity' of races. This in effect imposed a racial hierarchy on the caste system that had much to do with western biases.

It is important to note, however, that local and communal pre-colonial conditions played an important role in maintaining traditional values. As Samit Guha writes, 'Community structures of feeling and communication survived into the colonial era, and used the colonial public sphere to assert their claims.'

Darker side of statistics

When ethical rules governing modern censuses are violated, statistics have their 'darker side'. For example, governments may target specific vulnerable groups, usually on the basis of race and ethnicity, for close observation and monitoring, resulting in human rights abuses. The Nazi regime, with the aid of the IBM corporation, performed targeted enumeration to identify Jewish German citizens for the purpose of locating and eventually exterminating the group.

But population targeting is only one side of a sinister coin. Reverse targeting is another possibility. Since in modern nation states, censuses are associated with citizenship rights, the exclusion of certain groups from enumeration has negative consequences, resulting in the denial of citizenship rights and associated social benefits.

As demonstrated by Anat Liebler in the case of the first Israeli census, calculated plans to exclude some of the remaining Palestinian citizens from being counted in 1948 had serious ramifications, since these people's citizenship, homes and property were never documented. To this day they are referred to as the 'present absentees' (present in the country but absent for census purposes) and their descendants continue to reside in unrecognised localities with no access to their original homes.

Significantly, the snap census Israel carried out after it occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 was a repeat of 1948: undercounting the resident population of the occupied territories and denying the right of return to Palestinians who were temporarily absent for study, work, travel or other reasons. A 2012 report by Human Rights Watch estimates that between 270,000 and 300,000 Palestinians were displaced from the occupied territories and were not allowed to return to their homes.

Surveillance expansion

In the 21st century, issues of state and corporate surveillance have become paramount. Recent revelations have highlighted the use of snooping tactics by the Obama administration. In search of terrorists, the US is prepared to bypass warrants and court procedures, casting its surveillance web to include people within the US and overseas. The collection of personal data by the corporate sector and their willingness to share such data with the Obama administration has added to the fears expressed by human rights groups

The past two decades have seen an accelerated expansion of overt surveillance practices in warfare. The use of drones in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East such as Yemen is now acknowledged as a form of targeted assassination through remote control. With the push of a button, soldiers sitting behind desks thousands of miles away from the conflict zone can wreak havoc on unsuspecting communities through so-called collateral damage.

An old hand in the business of surveillance, Israel uses its military power to market its military hardware, drones in particular, as field-tested technology. Palestinians in the occupied territories constitute a laboratory for drone testing that Israel touts in its sales pitch. Like the US, Israel is immune from international legal sanctions against the use of such lethal weapons.

Surveillance technologies of one kind or another are a constant factor that highlights the workings of colonialism, whether in the 16th or 21st century. Resistance to surveillance is gaining ground. National security arguments are being subjected to scrutiny, and there is more awareness of the role of surveillance in violating human rights. It is accurate to say that such awareness is more evident in the so-called 'advanced' countries, the originators of colonialism. Whether resistance to surveillance will be manifest in the third world remains to be seen. ∎

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