Commentary

Surveillance and Critical Theory

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Abstract
In this comment, the author reflects on surveillance from a critical theory approach, his involvement in surveillance research and projects, and the status of the study of surveillance. The comment ascertains a lack of critical thinking about surveillance, questions the existence of something called "surveillance studies" as opposed to a critical theory of society, and reflects on issues such as Edward Snowden's revelations, and Foucault and Marx in the context of surveillance.

I have since 2008 been active in research networks and involved in one nationally funded and two EU-funded research projects on surveillance. I have worked with PhD students and postdocs on the topic of surveillance, have written multiple articles and chapters, and have edited books on surveillance in general as well as digital surveillance in particular. In this comment, I reflect on the relationship of surveillance and critical theory and my experiences in studying surveillance.

There has been surprisingly little use of Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School's works for studying surveillance and privacy. There have been some exceptions, such as the works by Oscar Gandy, Thomas Mathiesen, and studies inspired by Harry Braverman's labour process theory. Studies of surveillance tend to see Marx only as relevant for understanding the surveillance of workers or neglect Marx and Marxist theory altogether with the well-known (and false) argument that his works are outdated (see: Fuchs & Mosco, 2012; Fuchs, 2014a). When I started research on surveillance, I set myself as one of the tasks to conduct studies that explore the relationship of capitalist society and surveillance. It is important to see that Marx and Marxism matter in this respect not just for understanding eco-

nomic surveillance, but also for explaining the connection of surveillance with the modern state, media and technology, ideologies, hegemony, class struggles, and alternatives to surveillance society (see for example: Allmer, Fuchs, Kreilinger, & Sevignani, 2014; Fuchs, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012a, 2012c, 2012d, 2013a; Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund, & Sandoval, 2012; Fuchs & Mosco, 2012; Fuchs & Trottier, 2013, forthcoming a, Trottier & Fuchs, 2015). The modern economy and the modern state depend on the control of workers, consumers, prosumers, and citizens. Surveillance is a form of domination that is an inherent feature of capitalism.

For grounding a critical theory of privacy and surveillance, I have found it interesting to explore the relationship of Marx and Foucault (see for example: Fuchs, 2013a; Fuchs, 2011a). The notions of control, power, and surveillance are an obvious point of departure. It should also be seen that Foucault (2008) introduced his notion of governmentality in a profound study of the 20th century's political economic theory and the rise of neo-liberalism. In contemporary studies of surveillance, Foucault does surprisingly not occupy a dominant but a minority position. Many scholars hold the position that

the notion of panoptic surveillance is outdated because it presupposes a surveillant centre that monitors the many. The rise of new technologies, especially the Internet, would have decentralised surveillance and given rise to a democratisation of surveillance in which the many monitor those in power ("participatory surveillance"). Although subordinate groups can and do make use of digital technologies for surveilling the surveillors to a certain degree, the state and capitalists have much more resources than civil society and citizens, which enables them to conduct much more intensive and extensive forms of surveillance. They make use of decentralised surveillance for centralising surveillant, economic, and political power. The NSA monitors your use of Google and Facebook, but you do not monitor the NSA agent monitoring you, which shows a fundamental power asymmetry. Capital and the state are as collective actors the dominant surveillors. Notions such as the surveillant assemblage and participatory surveillance are relativist and downplay the actual repressive power of capitalism and the state.

"Surveillance studies" claims to be a new interdisciplinary field of research, teaching, and studies. It shares this claim with other new self-proclaimed inter-/multi-/trans-/anti-disciplines such as science and technology studies (STS), Internet research, social media studies/research, social informatics, information science, web studies, systems theory/cybernetics, digital humanities, etc. Such claims serve the mere purpose of accumulating academic resources in the competition for research money, students, academic positions, departments and institutions, journals, publications, citations, etc. with other fields. Although disguised as being inter- and transdisciplinary, the "new" trans- and interdisciplines are the new disciplines that share the same kind of power play with older fields and disciplines and thereby do not question, but reproduce the academic field's logics of power and accumulation. They are not new, but old in their conservative reproduction and uncritical acceptance of academia's power structures. I have found such claims and struggles for new fields completely pointless because the only thing that matters really is being a critical researcher, whereas one should not give a damn about identifying oneself as social researcher, media and communication researcher, surveillance researcher, computer scientist, or something different.

Disciplinary box thinking is an evil that needs to be overcome. Critical theory is the only effective means that can be used for this purpose. Max Horkheimer (1931) understood critical theory as a truly interdisciplinary and holistic project that brings together various researchers from different backgrounds that study society as a whole so that power structures, class, authority, and domination are investigated in a manner that creates a better understanding that can contribute to the establishment of a non-instrumental society that

fosters the public good, happiness and wealth for all. Critical research has under neoliberal conditions been rendered minoritarian. The struggle for new in/disciplines is part of the attempted neoliberalisation of (almost) everything.

In "surveillance studies", key proponents of the institutionalisation as a discipline have followed the strategy to inflate the object of study in order to make the claim that it is large enough for giving grounds to the formation of a new discipline that sees itself as being interdisciplinary. This has resulted in an uncritical, positivistic, and overgeneral understanding of surveillance (Fuchs, 2011a). In contrast to Foucault, many surveillance scholars define surveillance as the collection of information for attaining a specific purpose and say that surveillance is not automatic positive or negative. A Nazi henchman monitoring Jews in Auschwitz who are sent to the gas chamber on the next day is in this administrative understanding equated on the same definitional level with a babyphone that monitors a sleeping baby, an electrocardiogram, or an earthquake detection system considered as constituting forms of surveillance. Such a concept of surveillance is not only completely useless for a critical theory, but also politically dangerous. For countering this tendency, we need a purely negative concept of surveillance, in which surveillance is a specific form of control that forms one dimension of domination, exploitation, class, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and similar negative phenomena (Fuchs, 2011a). Just like Adorno (1973/2003) was calling for a negative dialectic, we need based on Foucault and Marx negative surveillance studies. A problem of the general understanding of surveillance is also that it makes surveillance categorically synonymous with information collection and processing so that no differentiation can be drawn between surveillance theory and information theory.

Edward Snowden revealed in 2013 the existence of global Internet surveillance systems such as Prism, XKeyScore, or Tempora that are operated in collaborations of secret services and capitalist communications companies. Hundreds of research projects focusing on privacy and surveillance could not uncover the existence of this surveillance-industrial Internet complex for the simple fact that surveillance power tends to be invisible and secret and it is difficult to challenge and investigate intransparent power. Institutions such as the European Union fund the development of new surveillance technologies with hundreds of millions Euros, whereas the funding of critical, societal, and ethical impact assessment of information technologies is something quite new and is trapped in the contradiction that such researchers find themselves put into large consortia with representatives of the surveillance-industrial complex, who bring a conservative law and order position to projects that limits and biases research. Snowden's revelations also made once and for

all clear how conceptually wrong those who talk about a democratisation of surveillance and the emergence of "participatory surveillance" actually are. In the surveillance-industrial complex, the world's most powerful state institutions have collaborated with the world's most powerful communications companies to implement totalitarian surveillance systems. It is a system that centralises control by monitoring decentralised technologies with multiple technologies and networking the obtained data. The result is centralised surveillance that as whole is a sum that is larger than its parts.

Because there are citizens in the world who care about a better world, we fortunately have attempts to hold the powerful accountable with the help of WikiLeaks, whistleblowing, investigative journalism, corporate watch platforms, alternative media, etc. The problem that critical citizens and critical media projects however face is that they often lack resources, visibility, attention, and power. They are in a minoritarian position and face power asymmetries that are constituted by the networked power of military, state and capitalist institutions. Surveillance is contested, but in the associated social struggles civil society and social movements are automatically disadvantaged in terms of resources and political economy.

The rise of so-called social media has resulted in a new round of techno-optimism. Ideologues, politicians, management gurus, uncritical scholars, capitalists and their interest organisations, as well as a specific share of citizens, consumers, and users who uncritically accept the discourse that the new is always something better have argued that social media brings about political revolutions, creates employment, wealth for all, a new public sphere, participatory organisations, better democracies, etc. But in contrast to such claims, for example recent rebellions and revolutions have not been Twitter and Facebook revolutions. Rather there is a complex dialectic of offline and online action, mediated and face-to-face communication in such forms of collective political action (Fuchs, 2014c). In addition the positive vision has been proven wrong by the privacy implications of social media capital accumulation models that use in-built real time surveillance and the exploitation of digital labour (Fisher & Fuchs, 2015, Fuchs, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014; Sandoval, Fuchs, Prodnik, Sevignani, & Allmer, 2014), Snowden's revelations (Fuchs & Trottier, forthcoming b), and Western capitalist communications companies' exports of surveillance technologies to regimes that use these tools for monitoring activists who as a consequence have been threatened, tortured, and repressed (Fuchs, 2013b; Fuchs, 2012b).

In order to adequately understand the Internet, media, communications, and surveillance, we need a critical theory of society for the 21st century. Critical theory is a crucial tool that based on its long history and new developments in society, communications,

and theory can create systematic knowledge that can support struggles for a humane society—a society without domination and without surveillance.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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