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Abstract

Decolonizing surveillance studies is an urgent task, needed to comprehend the unequal impacts of surveillance technologies in the past, present, and future. I discuss three aspects of research in comparison: technological novelty versus past experience, nation building versus colonization, and test versus initial operation of technology. Overall, I argue for the significance of colonial narratives that illustrate the early and severe, often violent experiences of surveillance that tend to be historically underestimated or politically concealed. First, scholarly work has been attracted to technological novelties of digital surveillance. But to grasp the social implications of surveillance, the historical background of technology offers a genealogical thread, and the past awaits as a rich repository to be discovered. Second, previous studies have drawn plural origins of modern surveillance from Western civilization. But modern nation building and colonialism should be examined together in research, rather than separating them and placing nation building as central to modernization while placing colonialism as a side effect or exception of modernization. Such a separation fails to grasp the experiences of modern surveillance as a whole because nation-state is all too often colonial nation-state. Lastly, I question the prevailing concept of a “boomerang effect,” meaning that Western countries first test out harmful techniques on colonies, but soon these techniques come home. This boomerang effect view centers on the West. A “test” of surveillance technology targeted a group of people for its own purpose, and the systematic practice of surveillance left irreversible effects in colonies. Those effects immensely contributed to today’s foundation of global political economy as an ongoing process of technological dominance of the Global North over the South. To decolonize surveillance studies, it would be better to discuss the global experiences of surveillance in the frame of unequal distribution and outcome of technology.

Introduction

Decolonizing surveillance studies is an urgent task, needed to comprehend the unequal impacts of surveillance technologies in the past, present, and future. Here, I discuss three aspects of research in comparison: technological novelty versus past experience, nation building versus colonization, and test versus initial operation of technology. Overall, I argue for the significance of colonial narratives that illustrate the early and severe, often violent experiences of surveillance that tend to be historically underestimated or politically concealed (Cole 2001; Longman 2001; Mbembe 2003; Parenti 2003; Breckenridge 2014; Zureik 2015). But I question framing the historical process simply as a “boomerang effect,” meaning that Western countries first “tested out” surveillance technologies in the colonies and then the same schemes returned to the West (Arendt 1968; Foucault 2003; McCoy 2009; Graham 2013). Finally, I suggest the need for transnational or global perspectives and understandings of surveillance relations so as to not overlook the harmful impacts of surveillance on vulnerable populations today.

First, I examine technological novelty versus past experience. Along with the development of the Internet, social media, and other electronic devices, scholarly work has been attracted to technological novelties of digital surveillance. It is crucial for surveillance studies to catch up to new functions and effects of mushrooming apps and platforms that track, retain, and link massive personal data behind the scenes.

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However, merely understanding the technical aspects of digital systems is not enough; we must also grasp the social implications of surveillance. Researchers need to situate technology in social contexts, especially to find out different effects. Unprecedented characteristics of technology may lead researchers to uncertainties and ambiguities.

A historical background of technology begins to fill in the blanks. All human-made tools are birthed within historical dynamics, not in a political vacuum. Technology has a past, and the past can offer accounts of the original purposes and conditions of technology. Historical accounts do not conclude that the future is always like the past, nor do they fall into technological determinism. Rather, they invite researchers to carefully examine how past practices of surveillance have continued, discontinued, or transformed into current forms. New technologies are funded and invented by specific actors for certain purposes, even though powerful technologies often show function creep in other fields. Researchers can find a genealogical thread, and the past awaits as a rich repository to be discovered.

For historical inquiry, Walter Benjamin (1968: 257) posits that every human being has the potential to find the real meaning of the past, which otherwise “flits by” and is never recognized in the present. The past, especially the marginalized past, is fragmented and forgotten unless someone pays attention to it. Colonies and colonial populations, conquered and constructed by the West, carry particular importance in this sense. Just as power stands asymmetrically between colonizers and colonized, surveillance systems reflect a sharp contrast between watchers and watched in colonies. The colonial past can provide narratives of people and show how disadvantaged populations have already experienced surveillance. The experiences of surveillance of the colonized are different from the colonizers’ intentions, so colonial narratives they relate closely to social impacts of ambiguous digital surveillance for today’s vulnerable populations in terms of social position.

Secondly, nation building versus colonization, is observable in historical research. Previous studies have drawn theoretical plural origins of modern surveillance from Western civilization: bureaucracy, industrialization, capitalism, disciplinary society, war, welfare state, and so on (Weber 1946; Marx [1867] 1976; Foucault 1977; Giddens 1987). The apparatuses of modern surveillance were constructed in nation building in Europe and North America, but what those countries were simultaneously doing outside the West is often disconnected. Because surveillance studies first developed from the academic awareness of scholars in the West or Global North, the history of colonized regions is unlike their everyday reality (while colonialism is still likely an everyday reality for scholars in the Global South).

In fact, nation building and colonialism are intertwined in the development of surveillance systems. Edward Higgs (2001: 183–85) suggests that modern state surveillance in Britain began with the census and registration in the early nineteenth century, but that it was principally “international geo-politics” and the “imperial crisis” that motivated centralized surveillance with the loss of British world hegemony. Imperial competition over colonial expansion escalated until the two world wars, which also invited the invention of the passport. John Torpey (2000) argues that the modern state monopolized the legitimate means of movement, parallel to its monopolization of violence, and sorted out movements of nationals and non-nationals. Those studies demonstrate that nation-states gained crucial momentum in developing surveillance systems in the external conditions of colonial expansion.

It may sound banal to say that colonial narratives of surveillance should be counted as equal to those in the metropolis. What I mean by “equal” is examining nation building and colonialism together in research, rather than separating them and placing nation building as central to modernization and colonialism as a side effect or exception of modernization. Such a separation fails to grasp the experiences of modern surveillance as a whole and underestimates the negative outcomes of surveillance, which are often exposed in areas external to the nation-state. Both internal and external consequences of modernity should be looked at through an integrated frame because nation-state is all too often colonial nation-state.

In other words, mainstreaming colonial experiences is essential to getting an integrated frame for surveillance studies. For example, when imperial Japan began to colonize neighboring countries in the time of modern nation building after 1867, the national identification systems also expanded to the colonies like Taiwan and Korea. The systems classified the colonial population as second-class subjects against the “Original Japanese” and helped establish the racial/ethnic order within the Empire through intensive surveillance, such as restricting the population’s movements and stripping their legal protections (Ogasawara, 2019). Exclusionary effects are not the exception to Japan’s modernization but are the rule. The colonial experiences should not be separated but rather mainstreamed in understanding nation-building techniques.

Thirdly, regarding effects of colonial surveillance, test versus initial operation of technology should be debated. Previous historical studies have revealed that powerful surveillance technology was often invented for colonial management and later implemented in the metropolis. For example, fingerprinting was first invented in British India to prevent pension fraud (Cole 2001), while bodily ID techniques were first developed to search for runaway slaves in the United States (Parenti 2003). Simon Cole (2001) points out the racist ideologies embedded in biometric technologies, which inscribed criminal identities in the bodies of racialized others. Fingerprint identification was practiced in South Africa (first in the mines, which then developed into passbook systems) and was eventually institutionalized for criminal investigations in Britain (Breckenridge 2014). Similarly, today’s drone (UAV) technologies, emerging in Afghanistan and Iraq under the American war on terror, were quickly adapted by the FBI to use against the Black Lives Matter movement (Duncan 2015).

This historical trajectory of powerful technology is described as the “boomerang effect,” meaning that Western countries first test out harmful techniques on colonies, but soon bring them home (Arendt 1968; Foucault 2003; McCoy 2009; Graham 2013). Colonies have been the cradle of surveillance techniques, and it may be valid to understand this boomerang as a kind of moral warning for people in technologically advanced countries (“what you have done to others will be done to you”). But, for the same reason, I question this frame because it centers on the West. It potentially passes off colonial experiences as the initial effects of surveillance technology. Yes, the first use of technology can be called a test or experiment. But surveillance technology was used on a targeted group of people for surveillance purposes, whether for controlling resources or policing resistance, and often achieved some level of initial success. It demonstrated satisfactory results for colonizers, then it spread further. The systematic practice of surveillance left irreversible effects in colonies: stealing agency from individuals and depriving groups of access to life opportunities. Those effects are exactly the aim of colonial management and contributed immensely to today’s foundation of global political economy. Technological dominance of the Global North over the South has been mandated, not just attempted. Should we still call this ongoing process a test?

To decolonize surveillance studies, it would be better to discuss the global experiences of surveillance in the frame of unequal distribution and outcome of technology. Particularly in the time of neoliberalism, inequalities have been a major focus of research in surveillance studies and wider social sciences (Monahan 2008; Gandy 2010; Murakami Wood 2013). The aggressive wars over resources and the polarization of wealth reinforced in neoliberal policies are already called new imperialism or neocolonialism (Harvey 2003). In fact, many incidents that ignited mass surveillance systems are rooted in colonial relations, from the war on terror to unprecedented numbers of refugees and migrants from the Global South. The historical accounts of unequal distribution and outcomes of surveillance can draw meaningful implications for today’s vulnerable populations, intersecting race/ethnicity, gender, class, and others.

In conclusion, historical narratives of colonial surveillance play a primary role in decolonizing surveillance studies—in past, present, and future contexts. Colonial narratives can bring out hidden voices of the often forgotten or concealed violent consequences of surveillance. Those voices can challenge the uncertainties of unprecedented technologies, connect intertwined relations between metropolises and colonies, and reveal the unequal distribution and outcomes of surveillance technologies on a global scale. Accordingly, the wide gap of surveillance experiences inside and outside the West requires a more transnational understanding of

surveillance. Surveillance systems have rarely been constructed solely within a national context but have been affected by regional and global factors; the war on terror proliferated biometric airport security, and corporate competition has utilized big data to expand markets. None of those is happening within national history or politics. Mainstreaming colonial experiences is essential to build a more holistic and proportionate understanding of surveillance from marginalized perspectives in the globalized world. As Benjamin (1968) invites, can we catch the temporal index of the past in everyday life before it flits by?

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