

Arts and Letters Awards
David C. Saxon Humanitarian Essay Competition
"Do We Have to Surrender Privacy to Achieve World Peace?"
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When we ask a question like "do we have to surrender privacy to achieve world peace?" we have to make a conscious effort to avoid the trappings of approaching both privacy and world peace from the perspective of state power. Linking the two inevitably draws upon claims by the United States government, who are at the forefront of both global surveillance and the global geopolitical arena, that its ongoing mass surveillance programs are not only in its own national interest, but also in the interest of global geopolitical stability. Taking this at face value we are meant to conclude a few things: 1) that the goal of the United States' foreign policy is indeed the defeat of any threats to global stability; 2) that surveillance data is being used solely to gather intelligence on such threats; and 3) that the strategies used to counter these threats will result in a more stable and peaceful geopolitical arena. These claims do not hold up under scrutiny, however. The sacrifice of privacy and the goal of a more stable and peaceful world are, I argue, antithetical to one another; the sacrifice of privacy and the sacrifice of world peace are both aspects of a project of neoliberal state and class power being undertaken by the United States and its allies. As the United States is at the forefront of both global surveillance programs and the geopolitical arena, it is almost impossible to look at these issues without focusing on them and as such they will be the focus of this essay.

When Edward Snowden leaked information regarding the United States government's widespread surveillance program known as PRISM undertaken by the National Security Agency, many were quick to draw comparisons to George Orwell's "Big Brother." While there are

obvious parallels it might be more useful to think of this and other mass surveillance programs in terms of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon; or more precisely in terms of Michel Foucault's reading of Bentham's Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*.

Bentham's Panopticon was a prison design (though Bentham also intended the principle to be applied to schools and hospitals as well) in which prisoners could be readily surveilled at all times. Its design was circular, with "the apartment of the inspector" occupying the centre. From here it is possible for the "inspector" to observe without being observed. Inmates are separated into cells to prevent collusion. Rather than the traditional imprisonment of the dungeon, which is designed to, as Foucault put it in his chapter on Panopticism, "to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide," the Panopticon was designed to invert the principles of depriving of light and hiding the prisoner; indeed the Panopticon put the prisoner under full light with the intention of making him fully observable. Foucault describes the function of the Panopticon in terms of its use as a means of wielding power:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.¹

¹ Foucault 1977: 200-201

This is instructive in terms of the power structure created within a postmodern neoliberal society. We are *enclosed* in terms of the individualization that is an inextricable aspect of neoliberal ideology, no better demonstrated than in the words of arch-neoliberal British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: “There is no such thing as society, only individual men and women.” As David Harvey explains in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*:

*By capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state, capitalist class interests could hope to protect and even restore their position. Neoliberalism was well suited to this ideological task.*²

From the decline of union power and solidarity in the workplace to increased competitiveness in every aspect of our daily lives, by positing us as individuals, neoliberalism seeks to deny us any collective identity and robs us of the collective power we might otherwise possess. Beyond this individualistic enclosure, we are fully observed through the ever-expanding presence of technology in our lives. Our email, telephone and online interactions are all under the potential scrutiny of the watchful eye of the panopticon’s inspector. Whistleblowers such as Snowden simply confirm what we’ve always been aware of but has been previously unspoken: we are being watched.

This is not a recent development. In 1978, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) “which prescribes procedures for the physical and electronic surveillance and collection of ‘foreign intelligence information’ between ‘foreign powers’ and ‘agents of foreign powers,’” was signed into law.³ In 1981, Ronald Reagan issued Executive Order 12333 which, as noted by the Denver Post in a recent article, “spells out when spies are allowed to peek into mail, homes

² Harvey 2011: 42

³ Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act 2013

and electronics, identifies who has to approve of specific searches, and details how to carry out clandestine collection of foreign intelligence.”⁴

After the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the USA PATRIOT Act was signed into law by then-President George W. Bush and subsequently extended by President Barack Obama. As described by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a watchdog group with a focus on privacy and technology, the USA PATRIOT Act “gives sweeping search and surveillance to domestic law enforcement and foreign intelligence agencies and eliminates checks and balances that previously gave courts the opportunity to ensure that those powers were not abused.”⁵

Since the tragic events of 9/11, much of the United States’ domestic and foreign policy has been focused on national security. From George Bush’s warrantless surveillance program to PRISM, the surveillance programs that have a global reach are meant to provide intelligence to target terrorist plots that might threaten the United States and its allies.⁶ A spokesperson for the NSA stated in reference to the “is focused on discovering and developing intelligence about valid foreign intelligence targets like terrorists, human traffickers and drug smugglers. We are not interested in personal information about ordinary Americans.” A brief overview of the targets tell us that this is not the case, however; targets such as the World Bank, IMF and United Nations are neither terrorists, human traffickers nor drug smugglers. In fact the World Bank and IMF part of the neoliberal project, which indicates an interest in keeping even the major institutions that aid in the neoliberal power project in line. In addition to these larger institutional targets, indiscriminate dragnet searches are focused on the communications of domestic citizens as well

⁴ Mendoza 2013

⁵ Electronic Frontier Foundation

⁶ Sanger and O’Neil 2006

as foreign citizens. In June it was revealed that the FBI, acting on behalf of the NSA, had demanded that U.S. telecom provider Verizon “on an ‘ongoing, daily basis’ [are requested] to give the NSA information on all telephone calls in its systems, both within the US and between the US and other countries.”⁷

It is worth noting that, contrary to popular belief, this privacy is not willingly being surrendered. On his blog, sociologist Nathan Jurgenson points to a recent Pew report that shows the ways in which people, despite the self-publicizing nature of pervasive social networks such as Facebook, are making strong efforts to preserve their privacy, making their self-publicizing selective, especially in situations in which authority figures are able to observe and punish.⁸ Of course the surveillance programs undertaken by the United States go far beyond the public/private social media sharing of individual citizens—for example, one of the documents released by Edward Snowden discloses a program that “intercepts e-mail address books and ‘buddy lists’ from instant messaging services as they move across global data links,”⁹—but it does point to a growing sense that our privacy is valuable and that, rather than succumb to the panoptic power structures that mimic Foucault’s account of Bentham, we must resist attempts by governments and corporations to undermine that privacy.

If the sacrifice of our privacy is indeed as much about neoliberal state and class power as it is about combatting terrorism and other such threats to global stability, how does neoliberal state and class power itself threaten this global stability? Even insofar as these surveillance programs are used in combatting terrorist threats, this also serves the neoliberal project, which in turn fosters the conditions for instability.

⁷ Greenwald 2013

⁸ Jurgenson 2013

⁹ Gellman and Soltani 2013

When the United States experienced the first attack within its borders since the attack on Pearl Harbor, a common reaction was to treat it as an unprovoked, unanticipated attack that was simply an act in defiance of the liberal democratic American society; an attack on freedom. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, President Bush heralded the arrival of freedom to Iraq. From the point of view of the United States the most vital threat to the stability of the world is a lack of freedom. What did President Bush mean, however, when he proclaimed that “as the greatest power on earth we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom”?¹⁰ Geographer and sociologist David Harvey tackles this question in his book *Spaces of Global Capitalism*:

*What the US evidently seeks to impose by main force on Iraq is a full fledged neoliberal state apparatus whose fundamental mission is to facilitate the conditions for profitable capital accumulation.*¹¹

Harvey continues to quote an op-ed by President Bush and published in the New York Times on the first anniversary of 9/11 in which he proclaimed that “We will use our position of unparalleled strength and influence to build...A peaceful world of growing freedom [that] serves American long-term interests.” This is a prime example of one of the trappings I spoke of in my introductory paragraph: the assertion that these policies are ultimately seeking a peaceful world. Through invading countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan and pursuing prolonged military engagements, the United States seeks to eliminate the lack of freedom perceived to create the conditions for what is considered the greatest threat to American interests since the fall of the Soviet Union: radical Islamist terrorism. George Bush was fond of invoking the terrorists’ hatred of freedom to explain the attacks of 9/11, but is this truly the reason for radical Islamist

¹⁰ Bush 2004
Harvey 2006: 11

terrorism? One need only look to the words of Osama Bin Ladin himself to clarify the motivation behind attacks such as 9/11:

I say to you that security is an indispensable pillar of human life and that free men do not forfeit their security, contrary to Bush's claim that we hate freedom.

If so, then let him explain to us why we don't strike for example - Sweden? And we know that freedom-haters don't possess defiant spirits like those of the 19 - may Allah have mercy on them.

No, we fight because we are free men who don't sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation. So shall we lay waste to yours.¹²

Bin Ladin goes on to describe American support for Israeli “oppression and tyranny” towards Palestine and Lebanon, as well as George Bush Sr.’s invasion of Iraq in 1991. He refers to the 2003 invasion of Iraq as well as a continuation of the oppression that is imposed upon the Middle East by the United States and its allies. “This is the message which I sought to communicate to you in word and deed, repeatedly, for years before September 11th,” Bin Ladin insists.

Journalist Jason Burke explains in his book *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* that radical Islam is political in nature, despite the religious articulation of grievances; it is “rooted in social, economic, and political contingencies.”¹³ This is evident in the words of Bin Ladin himself. Burke goes on to explain that rather than asking why 9/11 happened, and by extension why the threat of radical Islam exists at all, the policies of the United States have focused on how. The “why” is explained in terms of a “clash of civilizations” Burke tells us,

¹² Bin Ladin 2004

¹³ Burke 2004: xxv-xxvi

which he considers to be counterproductive, as it ignores the social, economic and political contingencies that create the conditions that foster radical Islam and indeed encourages tactics that are counterproductive.¹⁴ That is to say, tactics that will breed more terrorism and global instability. The continuation of these policies can be seen in the Obama administration's use of drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Philosopher Judith Butler makes note of people who echo Jason Burke's concerns in her essay *Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear*: President Arroyo of the Philippines stating that "the best breeding ground [for terrorism] is poverty" and Indian novelist Arundhati Roy insisting that Bin Ladin "has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid waste by America's foreign policy."¹⁵ It is not uncommon for those who prefer to ask "why" rather than "how" to be accused of supporting radical Islamist terrorism, or at least of exonerating the perpetrators. "It is not only the conservative Republicans who did not want to hear about causes," Butler says. "The 'just war' liberal Left made it plain that it did not want to hear from 'excuseniks.'" To seek an understanding about why is to be "complicitous with an assumed enemy."

Challenging the basis of American foreign policy in such terms has long been considered grounds for government surveillance. This summer it was revealed that the CIA had a file on influential critic of U.S. foreign policy MIT professor of linguistics Noam Chomsky.¹⁶ Chomsky has discussed the "why" of 9/11 at length, for instance stating in an interview on September 22, 2001, "Osama Bin Ladin shares the anger felt throughout the region at the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, support for atrocities in Palestine, along with the U.S.-led devastation of Iraqi

¹⁴ Burke 2004: xxvii

¹⁵ Butler 2004: 9

¹⁶ Nelson 2013

civilian society.”¹⁷ His critical analysis of 9/11 is just part of a long running critical analysis of the “why” of U.S. foreign policy and the “why” of threats to American national interests, dating back to the Vietnam War. It is his involvement in activism based on these questions of “why” that led the CIA to keep a file on Chomsky. This is to say nothing of other programs such as COINTELPRO, which were targeted at radical groups within the United States that pose many similar challenges in the 1960s.

It is from examples like these that it becomes evident that the neoliberal project benefits from both the disintegration of privacy as well as the pursuit of policies that create conditions that foster global instability rather than creating a more peaceful world. Instability and crisis open the doors to push through neoliberal deregulation and open the doors to unfettered capital, as Naomi Klein explains in her book *The Shock Doctrine*:

The history of the contemporary free market was written in shocks. Some of the most infamous human rights violations of the past thirty-five years, which have tended to be viewed as sadistic acts carried out by anti-democratic regimes, were in fact with either the deliberate intent of terrorizing the public or actively harnessed to prepare the ground for the introduction of radical free-market reforms.¹⁸

The doctrine of using military force to spread American values—neoliberalism in their most recent ideological incarnation—is a long standing tradition that dates back to at least the presidential administration of Woodrow Wilson. From Wilsonian Idealism through to the neoconservatism of the Project For A New American Century influenced Bush Administration, which we see continued in the Obama administration through much less explicit (though no less devastating and violent) means, American interests have relied on instability throughout the

¹⁷ Chomsky 2001: 59

¹⁸ Klein 2007: iii

world. When power is exerted implicitly through mass surveillance of a populace as well as explicitly through military force, surrendering privacy cannot result in world peace because surrendering privacy is what is required to maintain a state of war.

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