

The surveillance state

There are now 700 million CCTV's in China, under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. The system to which those electronic eyes are attached is the most complete state apparatus of surveillance yet imagined, with the ability not only to recognize faces at a distance but gait itself when facial features are hidden or obscured.

The demented and naïve engineers who so enthusiastically helped build this system call it SkyNet, after the rogue and all-seeing technology that took such a dreadfully wrong turn in the famous science fiction movies Terminator series, featuring artificially intelligent robot intelligences hell-bent on destroying humanity. The name also references a well-known Chinese phrase describing the reach of the divine itself, “the net of heaven is vast, yet it misses nothing, which aptly describes the capabilities of the new state apparatus.

This system is integrated with the so-called Chinese Social Credit System, which awards its involuntary participants with a score indicating their compliance with the dictates of the Chinese Communist Party, allowing for full control over access to everything they possess electronically, most ominously their savings and access to travel, certainly by modern means of travel, but increasingly, as the electronic gates come up, even by walking.

If you are Chinese—or a visitor—your access to the world can be reduced to zero, if your Social Credit Score falls beyond an arbitrary minimum. This allows you to be shut out of all activities that can be virtualized—and, in a rapidly virtualizing world, this increasingly means all activities: driving, shopping, working, eating, finding shelter; even fraternizing with friends and family (as merely being in the presence of someone with a low Social Credit Score means that your own score can be lowered).

This has also opened up the opportunity for the government to extract slave-like labor from its citizens, so burdened, as the donation of free work to the state still constitutes one means whereby erring Chinese men and women can increase their score and remain part of human society. This is precisely the payment system most desired by the most tyrannical: not the “work for me and benefit thereby” that constitutes the contractual arrangement undertaken by free and sovereign citizens, but the “work for me and I will lift the deprivation I imposed” that has always been the leit-motif of the slaver.

Why is any of this relevant to people in the West? Because the technology that the Chinese Communist Party employs is an extension of Western technology; because we already fell prey to the terrible temptation of lockdown employed by that state in the face of crisis once and in the very recent past; because we are walking, step by step, in the same direction, partly because of the hypothetical convenience of universal and automatic recognition of identity; because any problem whatsoever that now confronts us can easily be used to justify the increasing reach of the security and nanny state.

We all now have our doppelgangers. We all live so much in the virtual world, in consequence of our purchasing habits and modes of electronically-mediated communication that our very selves have become reducible to a frightening degree to data, the modern equivalent of our footprint, with that same data making up an image of our identity—an identity which can be and is increasingly bought and sold by the invisible corporate brokers that still mostly use it to sell us what we so desperately and carelessly and conveniently want but that can also be used to track, monitor and punish everything we do and say.

It is said that stone-age people, first confronted with cameras and their resultant photographs by modern anthropologists, objected to having their images captured, as they feared the captivity of their souls. It turns out that such fear was prescient: the images that we leave behind while navigating virtual space are such close duplicates of our actual selves that the capture of our essence is at this point all but guaranteed.

Behavioral scientists facilitate this process with their reprehensible nudging: the practice of pushing people in a given ideologically-determined direction by manipulating invisible incentives behind the scene. Corporations track purchasing decisions, developing algorithms that with increasing accuracy track our patterns of attention and action, allowing for the prediction of what might next be most enticing, doing so not only to offer us what we want but to determine and shape what we need. Governments can and are colluding with these corporate agents to develop a picture not only of our actions but of our thought and words so that deviation from the desired end can be mapped, rewarded and punished. The development of a digital identity and currency is nothing more than the likely end consequence of such inclinations—and the combination of both can and will facilitate the development of a surveillance state the scope of which optimistic pessimists of totalitarianism such as George Orwell could scarcely imagine.

The new AI systems which are so rapidly emerging do nothing but increase this danger, providing for the possibility of a super-surveillance whose scope exceeds anything that mere unaugmented humans could imagine, while also making it certain that even the perceptions that in the real world shape our attitudes, conduct and personalities can be manipulated to the degree that we will not even be able to see a reality outside that which has been constructed by the superstate—the ultimate fascist collusion between gigantic self-interested corporations and paranoid security-obsessed anti-human governments.

We are already selling our souls to the superstate for the purposes of immediate gratification and convenience, while being enticed to do so by fear-mongering ideologues, guaranteeing to us the security which we so desperately and increasingly crave.

This is by no means a partisan matter. In my country, Canada, the most egregious over-reach of the superstate occurred in the aftermath of a working-class protest against state over-reach during the Covid lockdowns, when our increasingly delusional and totalitarian federal government determined that it was appropriate to suspend the access of protestors

and their supporters, however minor, to their own assets, in collusion with Canada's giant banks. Such an event did and should send a chill up the spines of anyone concerned with the maintenance of personal security, privacy and autonomy, signaling as it did the increasingly ability and willingness of state and corporate agents to act in sync with regard to the data they now possess and means of control at their fingertips, to punish their customers and citizens for their political views, however widespread and appropriate those views might be.

It was recently determined in Canada that such a move was literally unconstitutional. That has not stopped the over-reach of the state. New legislation proposed by the same government mandates the generation of a soon-to-be giant bureaucracy to monitor and punish in an extra-judicial manner so-called crimes of hate, which will soon be defined as any speech or act that the bureaucrats and corporations in charge of the definition themselves object to. The same legislation now even defines what might be well regarded as pre-crime: if a court agent now judges that a Canadian citizen might perpetrate a so-called hate crime in the future, that person can be fitted with an electronic surveillance device for up to a year, restricted in his or her ability to move or communicate, and be made subject to intrusive medical examinations to monitor compliance with the dictates of the state.

With increasing ability to monitor not only the actual attention patterns and behaviors of its citizens, but to predict those that are most likely, the persecution of such potential crime becomes ever more likely. "If you have nothing to hide, you will have nothing to fear," will be the slogan commandeered by those most likely to turn to surveillance to protect and to control. What was the famous Soviet totalitarian joke, attributed to Lavrentiy Beria, head of the secret police? "Show me the man, and I'll show you the crime." Those words were true enough in the time of Joseph Stalin's KGB—and the police were secret enough then, as well. But that's nothing compared to what we can and likely will produce now: a police so secret that we will not even be able to detect their comprehensive and subtle activity; monitoring crime so pervasive that everyone under the dictates of the system will have something to hide and much to fear.