Liquid Surveillance
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Surveillance is a growing feature of daily news, reflecting its rapid rise to prominence in many life spheres. But in fact surveillance has been expanding quietly for many decades and is a basic feature of the modern world. As that world has transformed itself through successive generations, so surveillance takes on an ever changing character. Today, modern societies seem so fluid that it makes sense to think of them being in a ‘liquid’ phase. Always on the move, but often lacking certainty and lasting bonds, today’s citizens, workers, consumers and travellers also find that their movements are monitored, tracked and traced. Surveillance slips into a liquid state.

This book examines through conversation how far the notion of liquid surveillance helps us grasp what is happening in the world of monitoring, tracking, tracing, sorting, checking and systematic watching that we call surveillance. This provides the key thread through our conversation. It engages with both historical debates over the panopticon design for surveillance as well as contemporary developments in a globalized gaze that
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seems to leave nowhere to hide, and simultaneously is welcomed as such. But it also stretches outwards to touch large questions sometimes unreached by debates over surveillance. It is a conversation in which each participant contributes more or less equally to the whole.

The two of us have been in touch, discussing sporadically issues of new technologies, surveillance, sociology and social theory since the late 1970s (or early 1980s, we can’t recall). Bauman has continued to use the panopticon critique and related themes in his work and has encouraged Lyon in his growing analysis of surveillance. Most recently, we prepared back-to-back presentations for the Surveillance Studies Network biannual conference in 2008 (Bauman’s had to be given in absentia). Lyon’s was published in International Political Sociology (Dec. 2010) as ‘Liquid surveillance: the contribution of Zygmunt Bauman’s work to surveillance studies’. Bauman’s contribution to that event is unpublished. Our conversation occurred by email between September and November 2011.

We’re very grateful for the very thoughtful help given by some valued colleagues in reading our conversation and making suggestions for how things might be better put, and made more accessible to a wider audience: Katja Franko Aas, Kirstie Ball, Will Katerberg, Keith Tester. Warm thanks are also due to Emily Smith, Research Associate at the Surveillance Studies Centre at Queen’s University, Canada for help with this project, and Andrea Drugan, our Polity editor, and Ann Bone, copy-editor, for their encouragement and advice.

Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon
Introduction

David Lyon  Surveillance is a key dimension of the modern world and in most countries people are all too aware of how surveillance affects them. Not only in London and New York but also in New Delhi, Shanghai and Rio de Janeiro video cameras are a familiar sight in public places. Travellers through airports everywhere are conscious that they not only have to negotiate twentieth-century passport control but also newer devices such as body scanners and biometric checks that have proliferated since 9/11. And if these have to do with security, other kinds of surveillance, relating to routine and mundane purchases or online access or participation in social media, are also increasingly ubiquitous. We have to show ID, insert passwords and use coded controls in numerous contexts from making online purchases to entering buildings. Every day, Google notes our searches, prompting customized marketing strategies.

But what does this mean, socially, culturally, politically? If we simply start with new technologies or
regulatory regimes we may acquire some sense of the scope of this phenomenon but will we understand it? Certainly, getting an idea of the magnitude and rapid spread of data processing is vital if the surveillance surge is to be appreciated for what it is, and discovering just whose life chances and opportunities are affected by surveillance will galvanize efforts to rein it in. But this conversation is intended to do more, to dig deeper – to probe the historical and Western origins of today’s surveillance and to raise ethical as well as political queries about its expansion.

Surveillance has been a constant theme of Zygmunt Bauman’s work over several decades and many of his observations are, in my view, of great interest to those trying to understand and respond to surveillance today. In the first decade of the twenty-first century Bauman became best known for his reflections on the rise of ‘liquid modernity’ and here we explore how far this frame is also illuminating for considering the contemporary role of surveillance. But the other leitmotif of Bauman’s analysis is the stress on ethics, above all the ethics of the Other. To what extent does this offer a critical handle on surveillance today?

**Liquid surveillance?**

‘Liquid surveillance’ is less a complete way of specifying surveillance and more an orientation, a way of situating surveillance developments in the fluid and unsettling modernity of today. Surveillance softens especially in the consumer realm. Old moorings are loosened as bits of personal data extracted for one purpose are more easily deployed in another. Surveillance spreads in
hitherto unimaginable ways, responding to and repro-
ducing liquidity. Without a fixed container, but jolted
by ‘security’ demands and tipped by technology com-
panies’ insistent marketing, surveillance spills out all
over. Bauman’s notion of liquid modernity frames sur-
veillance in new ways and offers both striking insights
into why surveillance develops the way it does and some
productive ideas on how its worst effects might be con-
fronted and countered. Of course, that’s my view of the
situation. What Zygmunt Bauman thinks becomes clear
in our conversation . . .

It is widely accepted that surveillance is a central
dimension of modernity. But modernity does not stand
still. We also have to ask, what sort of modernity?
Today’s conditions may be described as ‘late’ moder-
nity, possibly ‘postmodernity’ or, more colourfully,
as ‘liquid’ modernity. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that
modernity has liquefied in some new and different ways
(beyond Marx and Engels’s early modern insight that
‘all that is solid melts into air’). Two features stand out.

First, all social forms melt faster than new ones can
be cast. They cannot hold their shape or solidify into
frames of reference for human actions and life strat-
gies because of their short shelf-life. Does this apply to
surveillance? A number of theorists have noted the ways
in which surveillance, once seemingly solid and fixed,
has become much more flexible and mobile, seeping and
spreading into many life areas where once it had only
marginal sway.

Gilles Deleuze introduced the ‘society of control’
where surveillance grows less like a tree – relatively
rigid, in a vertical plane, like the panopticon – and more
like creeping weeds.¹ As Haggerty and Ericson observe,
following this, the ‘surveillant assemblage’ captures flows of what we might call body data, turning them into highly fluid and mobile ‘data doubles’.\(^2\) William Staples also notes that today’s surveillance occurs in cultures ‘characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty as many of the once-taken-for-granted meanings, symbols and institutions of modern life dissolve before our eyes’.\(^3\) Thus the bounded, structured and stable liquefies.

Bauman agrees that the panopticon was a key modern means of keeping control, by barring movement among inmates and promoting it among the watchers. But the watchers still had to be present sometimes. Of course the prison panopticon project was also expensive. It was designed to facilitate control through a semi-circular arrangement of cell blocks whose ‘inspector’ at the centre could see into any cell while remaining invisible to the inmates, behind a blind. It entailed the inspector taking some responsibility for the lives of inmates. Today’s world, says Bauman, is post-panoptical.\(^4\) The inspectors can slip away, escaping to unreachable realms. Mutual engagement is over. Mobility and nomadism are now prized (unless you’re poor or homeless). The smaller, lighter, faster is seen as good – at least in the world of iPhones and iPads.

The panopticon is just one model of surveillance.\(^5\) The architecture of electronic technologies through which power is asserted in today’s mutable and mobile organizations makes the architecture of walls and windows largely redundant (virtual ‘firewalls’ and ‘windows’ notwithstanding). And it permits forms of control that display different faces. Not only do they have no obvious connection with imprisonment, they often share
the features of flexibility and fun seen in entertainment and consumption. Airport check-in can be done with a smartphone, even though the international exchanges involving the crucial PNR (passenger name record) still occur, prompted by the original reservation (which itself could have been generated on that smartphone).

Discipline and security are actually related, in this view, something that Foucault failed to recognize. Foucault insisted on their separation just as their (electronic) connections were becoming clearer. Security has morphed into a future-oriented enterprise – now neatly captured in the *Minority Report* (2002) film and novel – and works through surveillance by attempting to monitor what will happen, using digital techniques and statistical reasoning. As Didier Bigo points out, such security operates by tracking ‘everything that moves (products, information, capital, humanity)’. So surveillance works at a distance in both space and time, circulating fluidly with, but beyond, nation-states in a globalized realm. Reassurance and rewards accompany those mobile groups for whom such techniques are made to appear ‘natural’. Profiling processes and exclusionary measures await the groups unlucky enough to be labelled ‘unwelcome’.

Secondly, and related to this, power and politics are splitting apart. Power now exists in global and extraterritorial space, but politics, which once linked individual and public interests, remains local, unable to act at the planetary level. Without political control, power becomes a source of great uncertainty, while politics seems irrelevant to many people’s life problems and fears. Surveillance power, as exercised by government departments, police agencies and private corporations,