

The Rise of the Information State: the Development of Central State Surveillance of the Citizen in England, 1500–2000

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Abstract This essay examines existing sociological explanations of the development of the central surveillance of citizens in the light of the English experience, and finds them wanting. Sociologists see the state using surveillance for the benefit of capitalist elites, to reimpose social control over the “society of strangers” created by industrialisation. But surveillance pre-dated industrialisation, and the development of information gathering by state elites had more to do with their own need to preserve their position both within the English polity, and international geo-politics.

Introduction

If one were asked to create a list of the features of the modern Western state which sets it apart from previous political formations, the central collection and analysis of information, especially that on individuals, would be a strong contender for inclusion. This, it is argued, has given the state immense administrative power to direct the lives of its subjects. Sociologists who have examined this phenomenon have tended to see this as a reaction to the decay of older, “traditional”, and “communal” forms of social control during the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, in turn, created, or so it is claimed, a “society of strangers”, and of antagonistic classes. At this point the state stepped in to collect information on individuals to protect capitalism against the discontented, via the detection of deviancy and the planning of the physical environment. Collecting information on populations from the Enlightenment onwards, and the generation of statistics based upon it, has also been seen as a means of giving power and legitimacy to political and technical elites. Space precludes a detailed exposition of this literature but the necessary initial references can be found below.¹ This rather simple model of surveillance as social control in the interests of elites will be interrogated here in terms of an examination of the development of state surveillance of individuals in England from the early modern period.

Surveillance in pre-modern English society

In general terms, the information held on citizens in Britain by the modern central state is used to carry out a fairly limited number of functions – the extraction of taxes; the provision of welfare; the prevention of crime; the general identification of citizens and state employees; and the protection of property rights. There are also a number of general surveys, such as the population census, which are used directly to inform state policy-making and planning (Committee on Data Protection 1978: Appendix 6). What is striking about this list is that few of these activities were in any sense unknown in pre-modern England. Nor were they activities which were carried on in complete isolation from the central state. English kings had always taxed their subjects to fight wars from at least the tenth century onwards (Stenton 1971: 644–8). Similarly, the Old Poor Law, which paid the indigent of the parish a dole levied out of a parish rate, was Tudor state policy enshrined in acts of Parliament (Slack 1988). Royal justices itinerant had been trying local criminal cases since the twelfth century (Crook 1982: 2), and supervising local justices of the peace and parish constables since the later Middle Ages (Eastwood 1997: 10; Harris 1993). The registration of baptisms, marriages and burials by the clergy of the Church of England had been introduced by Thomas Cromwell in the role of Henry VIII's vicar-general in 1538 (Elton 1972: 259–60). Royal courts had been underpinning property rights in land since the reign of Henry II in the twelfth century via collusive court cases producing fictitious “fines”, which were enrolled in the records of the central courts (Public Record Office 1963: 135–6).

However, although the central state in England might initiate and monitor such activities in the pre-modern period, the main focus of surveillance lay elsewhere. As John Hall has argued, the pre-modern state in England, as in most of Europe, was a dispersed “organic” polity. Medieval and early-modern monarchs lacked the power and resources to rule their domains via a state bureaucracy as in the case of imperial China or Rome. Instead, they entered into symbiotic relationships with local power elites to undertake the governance of the realm (Hall 1985a; Hall 1985b: 137–9). In early-modern England the Crown agreed laws in Parliament with the representatives of the landed elite, who also voted taxes for central state purposes, usually military. But it was the aristocracy and county gentry, acting as lord lieutenants of the county and justices of the peace, who saw to the workings of the local police and the overseers of the poor, and dispensed justice locally (Braddick 1991; Hindle 2000; Sharpe 1984: 21–34). Below them the “middling sort” of farmers, craftsmen and superior villagers maintained order in the parish via church vestries,

and local, manor, hundred and borough courts (McIntosh 1998). The monarch was the head of the Church of England from the 1530s, and, therefore, ultimately responsible for the activities of church courts which regulated marriage and local morals. However, the Church bureaucracy was also localised, and the central state seldom interfered in its activities, except in matters of religious conformity (Houlbrooke 1979; Ingram 1990). Serious cases of deviancy could be passed “up” these hierarchies, from the local to the central legal apparatus, with the central state acting as the ultimate guarantor of social cohesion and internal pacification.

Via this decentralised system, the Crown gained its taxes, and prevented the dislocation caused by poverty and attendant social disorder, whilst local elites gained power, prestige and authority from acting as the local agents of the Crown. The rest of “respectable” society were protected from the worst excesses of crime; had some guarantee against poverty; and took advantage of the regulation of family and community relations (Griffiths, Fox and Hindle 1996). Indeed, it has been argued that the activities of the Tudor state in providing means to prevent vagrancy and regulate the poor, were merely codifying and supporting pre-existing, communal forms of social control (McIntosh 1998: 194–5). This whole structure was an incipiently formal and bureaucratic legal network. Social control in the early-modern period was not simply a matter of face-to-face relationships within the family, workplace, or the nexus of neighbours and friends. England was a “much-governed” country as early as the sixteenth century (Sharpe 1984: 21)

Since what surveillance of the population took place, and there was a lot of it in early-modern England, took place at the level of the locality, it was here that records of that activity are to be found. Suspected criminals were interrogated by justices of the peace; vagrants without visible means of support were examined by overseers of the poor; and neighbours “presented” evidence of immorality to ecclesiastical courts. Records of these activities found their way into the parish chest, local diocesan record offices, and latterly local county record offices, rather than into the archives of the central courts and departments of state (Tate 1951). Moreover, such records were usually written minutes of oral proceedings in courts or quasi-judicial gatherings, rather than the structured, standardised nominal records found in modern computer databases. Extracting information about individuals from such unstructured material was, and is, a difficult business.

Similarly, the levying of taxation certainly led to the creation of lists of taxpayers and their contributions to the royal coffers, which have found their way into various central state bodies in the medieval and early-modern periods (Jurkowski, Smith and Crook

1998). However, this did not imply a regularised system of central surveillance because of the essentially local nature of the administration of the taxation in England in that period. As already noted, local elites agreed the taxes with the Crown in Parliament and then undertook the formal assessment and collection of taxes locally before passing the receipts on to the Crown (Braddick 1994; Braddick 1996; Ward 1953). Abstracts of the sums charged on the townships, parishes and, less frequently, individual taxpayers within each administrative division, were sent to the King's Remembrancer in the Exchequer. The purpose of the lists held in London, however, was not to enforce payment by individual taxpayers but to act as a means of auditing the work of the local taxing officers. If the collectors failed to produce the sums assessed, they could be proceeded against in the Court of Exchequer (Braddick 1996: 92–3; Hoyle 1994: 16–25).

When the central state attempted to record information on its subjects directly in the early-modern period it was mainly for political or military purposes. Here one might include the oaths of allegiance and test oaths sworn periodically by office holders in order to ensure allegiance to the monarch, or to exclude Nonconformists and Roman Catholics from positions of authority (Public Record Office 1963: 39). The systematic recording of the Crown's military personnel was also an early example of state information gathering. Musters and pay lists relating to ships' crews in the Royal Navy were regularly maintained in the Admiralty from the seventeenth century onwards, as were army musters in the War Office from at least the eighteenth. These ensured the proper payment of wages and an extensive system of pensions, which were meant to ensure the loyalty of soldiers and naval personnel (Fowler and Spencer 1998; Rodger 1988). In 1696 the early-modern state even attempted to set up a register of merchant seamen, to act as a naval reserve. (Parkhurst 1962: 173–6). This was not primarily the state acting as the means of maintaining an internal order of domination on behalf of social elites but the monarch ensuring his or her own position within the decentralised organic state, and his or her means of pursuing an external foreign policy.

In general terms, therefore, one cannot see the modern forms of state surveillance as being entirely new social functions. What is new, however, is that many of these functions are now carried out by the central state rather than being dispersed throughout the "organic state" in the localities. This raises the general questions of when and why this move to the centre took place.

The introduction of census-taking and civil registration in England

The taking of the first national census in 1801 and the establishment of civil registration in 1837 has been seen by Anthony Giddens as components in the first stage in the development of the Information State in England (Giddens 1987: 179–80). But can these be seen as directed towards the control of deviancy and the central planning of social settings as he argues?

It is actually rather difficult to see the early censuses in terms of the overt social control of individuals. The first census of 1801, and all subsequent decennial enumerations until that of 1841, were merely headcounts carried out by the clerks of the parish (Higgs 1989: 5–7). Although names and addresses were introduced in 1841, there is very little evidence that the state used this information to keep track of its subjects in the Victorian period. Names were first included in order to ensure that local census enumerators did not simply make up the returns, for which they were paid on piece rates (Public Record Office RG 27/1, p. 5). Given the speed with which the Victorian working classes moved their place of residence, a decennial census would hardly have been of much use for this purpose. The English census was never converted in peacetime into a constantly updated population register, unlike the situation in some other European countries (Randeraad 1995). Indeed, for much of the late nineteenth century the central state could not even keep track of the early nominal census returns themselves. These were effectively lost, only being rediscovered in the roof of the Houses of Parliament in the early twentieth century (Higgs 1989: 19–20).

The first census was taken during the Napoleonic Wars, and it is possible that it was intended to reveal the size of the population able to bear arms. The questions asked included one on the numbers of men and women in the parish “exclusive of men actually serving in his majesty’s regular forces or militia, or exclusive of seamen either in his majesty’s service or belonging to registered vessels”. However, it is unlikely that the results of the census could have been used for direct military purposes since it failed to ask for ages. The only pre-Victorian census to ask for such details was that of 1821. A more likely reason for taking the census in 1801 may have been a desire to calculate how many people remained on the land producing food during a period of economic blockade and mass military mobilisation (Glass 1978: 96–8). The requirements of geo-politics were to the forefront here.

However, the titles for all the decennial census acts until that of 1841 indicated that they were for “taking an account of the population of Great Britain, *and the increase and diminution*

thereof'. They were also associated with questions to the local clergy on the levels of parish baptisms, marriages and burials reaching back into the eighteenth century (Higgs 1989: 5–7). These early enumerations may, therefore, have been intended to settle an earlier political debate about the “state of the nation” under the Whig ascendancy, as reflected in the growth or decay of population, rather than as a direct attempt at central state planning. Whigs naturally believed that the population was growing under their careful husbandry of the state, whilst Tories and Radicals claimed that political and moral corruption was sapping the vitality of the nation, and leading to population decline (Glass 1978: 11–89). Again, the legitimacy of a political elite, rather than class domination, appears to have been the issue at stake. Population pressure was, of course, a key political issue in the early nineteenth-century, especially after the publication of Malthus's *Essay on the principle of population*. But rising population in the nineteenth century was generally welcomed, and was, if anything, used as an excuse for *decreasing* state involvement in society under the New Poor Laws. This may have increased the social control powers of employers but hardly those of the state.

The early censuses were organised by a clerk of the House of Commons but the 1841 census, and those which followed in the Victorian period, were taken by the General Register Office (GRO). This had been set up in 1837 to administer the new system of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths (Higgs 1989: 7–10). The questions asked in the census expanded but remained fairly modest until towards the end of the nineteenth century – name, sex, age, relationship to head of household, marital status, occupation, birthplace, and medical disabilities (Higgs 1989: 114–26). This information was tabulated and published on a national and local basis. However, although this information was plainly of use for government policy-making, the GRO's interest in the data was mainly for medical scientific purposes, and much of the application of this data to official action was at the level of local government. This was perhaps inevitable given the generally decentralised nature of the British state throughout the Victorian period. To understand the GRO's activities here, one needs to look at the census in conjunction with its other main task, the administration of civil registration.

Civil registration, like the census, was hardly instituted for the purpose of controlling deviancy. Recording where people were born, married or died was, and is, hardly the best way of keeping track of them. Indeed, one of its main purposes was to free Nonconformists from the inconvenience of having to register their baptisms, marriages and burials with the clergy of the State Church. But the over-riding reason for the institution of the new system, which

included the maintenance of a central registry of vital events by the GRO in London, was the need to improve the title to middle-class property in a period of rapid economic change by recording lines of descent. The older, parochial system was seen as inadequate for this purpose due to the reluctance of the growing numbers of Dissenters to use it, and the dispersed and inadequate nature of its record-keeping (Higgs 1996a: 115–24). The new system had to be generalised to all social classes in order to make it comprehensive – as in so many other ways, middle-class property rights had to be portrayed as universal human rights in order to make them enforceable (see Habermas 1992). The early Victorian period saw a proliferation of institutions for the recording of such property rights, including the Land Registry, the Public Record Office, and the Probate, Patents and Designs Registries (Higgs 1997a). Rather than the middle classes using the state to control the working classes during industrialisation, this reflected their use of state organs to improve their own property rights, and those of other classes in the process. Such rights were, of course, part and parcel of a particular capitalist and gendered concept of property but the introduction of the registration system did not experience any widespread resistance as a result. This was despite the initial absence of any sanctions against non-compliance.

Civil registration also involved the recording of cause of death, and this became the basis of a wide-ranging programme of medical research within the GRO. Its officers combined census with civil registration data in order to create national and occupational life tables, and statistics of deaths per thousand by locality and disease. Life tables were intended to facilitate the work of insurance companies, and of the friendly societies used by the working classes for saving against unemployment, illness and death (Higgs 1996a: 124–8). Mortality statistics were to be distributed widely as a means of shaming local authorities into improving sanitation in order to remove the human effluent which was seen as causing the high mortality in the cities (Szreter 1991). Mortality and morbidity were conceptualised, in turn, as the main causes of working-class poverty (Hamlin 1998: 84–120). The emphasis in the early and mid-Victorian censuses on family structure, age, and migration can be seen in terms of a scientific investigation into the forces creating the concentrations of urban populations, which was perceived as causing insanitary conditions. Similarly, the asking of questions on occupations, and specifically the materials being worked on, was part of a wider investigation into occupational ill-health and mortality (Higgs 1991).

Rather than subjecting the population to central control, however, the aim was to free the working classes from disease and poverty,

and thus from the local state in the form of the Poor Law. In general, individuals were being given information to enable them to make decisions about where to live, how to invest their money, and what occupations to join. To this end statistical data in parliamentary reports was disseminated widely to such bodies as mechanics institutes (Public Record Office RG 29/1, p. 551). Such dissemination was also to facilitate the bringing to bear of local "public opinion" on local political elites. This was, to some limited extent, the recognition of a right to health. The work of the GRO was also implicated in the maintenance of political rights since vital registration data was used locally to help maintain electoral registers, whilst population data from the census informed the process of maintaining equitable electoral boundaries (Higgs 1996b: 298–99).

Little of this was directly concerned with controlling deviancy via deployment of punishment, or the control of physical space. Rather it represented part of the construction of what T H Marshall termed civil, political and social citizenship (Marshall 1994). However, the constitution of the citizen in terms of the ownership of property; the maintenance of family independence via saving; casting the vote in elections; and the right to the protection of health via local administrative action, delimited what citizenship implied. It certainly did not imply a redistribution of wealth, except that minimum available under the humiliating and penal Victorian Poor Laws. Nor did it imply a right to health in terms of rights to decent housing and an adequate diet, or to what Marshall termed the right "to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall 1994: 9). This was not so much social control, in the sense of the identification and control of deviancy from social norms, than the constitution, in Phillip Corrigan and Derek Sayer's terms, of the social norms of a liberal capitalist society, and the socialisation of citizens into them, within the framework of the local and nation state (Corrigan and Sayer 1991). However, it is debatable whether this liberal concept of the citizen – as property owner, thrifty, familial, and politically participant via the franchise – was entirely alien to working-class moral codes and aspirations (see, for example, Harrison 1982: 157–216; Joyce 1991; Kidd 1999: 109–59).

But what of that other signal innovation of early to mid-nineteenth century England, the introduction of the new uniformed police forces? Established first in London in 1829, and directly responsible to the Home Secretary, the new police were extended over the rest of the country in the following decades, and have been seen as a powerful means of surveillance and social control (e.g. Donajrodzki 1977; Philips 1980). Certainly the new police acted as a means of

physically countering Chartist “disturbances” and strikes, and imposed middle-class concepts of order and decorum on the streets (see, for example, Emsley 1991: 24–57; Philips 1977: 76–7). But this was hardly done via the systematic collection of information, rather it involved physically watching for crime and deviancy via “pounding the beat”. Most police forces did not even have extensive detective branches until the 1870s (Baldwin and Kinsey 1982: 11; Critchley 1978: 160; Porter 1987: 5). Given the high turnover of men in the early forces, and their low levels of education, skill and professional status, this was understandable (Bailey 1981: 14–15; Taylor 1998: 88–109). As with the older parish constables and night watchmen they replaced, the local information available to the Victorian policeman was mostly what he carried in his head. In some ways what was crucial to the working of the new police was not their surveillance of the public but their surveillance *by* the public. Deviancy was to be deterred by publicly parading round the streets in conspicuous uniforms (Baldwin and Kinsey 1982: 9–10; Critchley 1978: 158–9; Philips 1980: 188).

In sum, the period of the classic Industrial Revolution in England, and its immediate aftermath, does not appear to show the development of central state information gathering on citizens for the purposes of social control in a narrow sense. Rather than technologies of direct domination, institutions such as the census and civil registration can be seen in terms of creating rights, if of a circumscribed variety. Nor did the collection of information on the population as a whole lead to state policies to manipulate it as an entity. Rather, the classic liberal strategy was to alter the behaviour of individuals by providing them with information and the creation of rights and obligations. Population “thinking” did not lead to population policies at this stage.

The rise of the Information State, imperial crisis and social amelioration

Rather than the early nineteenth century, it was the last thirty years of the reign of Victoria, and the first two decades of the twentieth century, which saw the real foundation of the modern Information State in England. This can be seen in changes to the role of existing institutions such as the census and civil registration, and the institution of new forms of record keeping to facilitate the transfer of incomes at the level of the nation state.

Increasing concern in the late nineteenth century over the loss of British world hegemony, and rivalry with the USA and Germany, gave greater salience to the discussion of demographic issues and the need for “national efficiency” (Searle 1971: 6–12). Fears

regarding the relative numerical, and absolute physical, decline of imperial manpower, exacerbated by the debacle of the Boer Wars, were linked in the Edwardian period to the issue of infant mortality (Lewis 1980: 27–32). In Britain, the need to manipulate consciously the size and quality of the population was thus a feature of the early twentieth-century state, rather than that of the early nineteenth, a process which culminated in the establishment of a Royal Commission on Population in 1937 (Soloway 1995). It could be argued that England simply lacked the internal and external threats which propelled other European states to more direct policies on population in the course of the nineteenth century. Given the British economic and naval hegemony of the early to mid-nineteenth century, there was a limited need for means to ensure industrial or military mobilisation (Strachan 1983: 108–11). These exceptional circumstances ceased to apply in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the English state developed population policies more typical of the Continental powers.

These concerns led to the statistical work of the GRO being integrated more fully into a central state increasingly willing to direct local government to achieve national ends. The orientation of the GRO towards underpinning local and personal rights and responsibilities began to shift in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Thus, in the early years of the twentieth century, the GRO was directed by the Local Government Board at this time to give special attention in its publications to mortality in the first year of life, data which underpinned the state sponsorship of infant welfare measures (General Register Office 1907: cxviii). Similarly, in 1890 a deputation of social scientists, including Charles Booth and Alfred Marshall, met the President of the Local Government Board, the GRO's parent department, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to complain about the lack of information suitable for economic and social analysis. A Treasury Committee on the Census was established which led to the introduction of new questions on employment status into the decennial enumeration. Other government departments, such as the Board of Trade and the Home Office, which were themselves beginning to intervene more openly in national economic and social life, came to have a greater say in the design of the census (Szreter 1996: 114–20).

The early decades of the twentieth century also saw a fundamental shift in the use of the nominal records collected by the GRO. Rather than simply providing actors in civil society with proof of their own identity, or acting as the basis of statistical analysis, they now began, in addition, to underpin personal rights and obligations at the level of the nation state. Census and civil registration records began to be searched on a regular basis for proof of age of those claiming national

pensions under the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act (General Register Office 1911: cxxviii). Similarly, during the First World War proof of marriage and paternity in civil registration records became the basis for claiming separation allowances by the families of military personnel, and of widows' pensions in its aftermath (General Register Office 1916: lv). The Great War also saw the GRO administering a true system of state surveillance – national registration – for the purposes of identifying and calling up individuals for military service and war work. Citizens had to register themselves, and report changes of address (Higgs 1996b: 299). Such procedures, which were reintroduced in the period 1939 to 1952, can be seen as reactions to external geo-political threats to the State, rather than internal mechanisms for handling economic and social relationships in their own right. Moreover, in the aftermath of both World Wars, the system of national registration was abandoned in Britain on the grounds of its potential threat to civil liberties (Higgs 1996b: 300; Public Record Office. RG 28/201).

In the early twentieth century the Liberal Party also introduced a number of key innovations in social and economic policy. Old Age Pensions have already been mentioned, and to this must be added the 1911 National Insurance Act, which gave a portion of the working classes limited unemployment benefits and access to health care. In return, employed men, their employers and the central state paid into privately run “approved societies”, the payments being recorded by the placing of stamps in books held by employees (Gilbert 1966). This nascent Welfare State immediately spawned a vast system of central-state record keeping to test the eligibility of claims and prevent fraud. By 1922 the Ministry of Labour's Claims and Record Office at Kew employed a staff of 3,600, and dealt with the exchange of 15 million employees' books a year by 1939 (Public Record Office. LAB 12/53). Similarly, the Ministry of Pensions' records office at Blackpool was employing nearly 4,000 civil servants by 1946, and processing 40,000 pensions claims a month (Public Record Office. PIN 23/7). Such surveillance expanded still further with the advent of the classic Welfare State during and after the Second World War.

Again, much of this might be best seen in terms of broader theories of social amelioration rather than social control in terms of the identification of deviancy – the incorporation of the working classes into the political nation, if on limited terms, rather than direct domination (Mann 1993: 597–627). The Edwardian Liberal Party saw welfare measures as a means of maintaining the allegiance of the increasingly important numbers of working-class voters who might switch their support to the newly formed Labour Party (Thane 1978: 99; Thane 1999), or to a Conservative Party advocating the abandonment of free trade to protect British industry (Harris 1984:

213–15, 235, 270–1). The state was becoming a pluralist one rather than a simple mechanism for direct social control in the interests of administrative and economic elites. But this was a “bounded” pluralism in the sense that it was pluralism within a capitalist framework.

These welfare rights and obligations could also be conceptualised in the context of the need for “national efficiency” and social cohesion to meet the threat to the British Empire from emerging industrial rivals (Gladstone 1999: 16–17; Searle 1971: 6–12). This might be seen as reflecting the needs of capitalists, although this “new” Liberalism tended to result in a shift of the political allegiance of employers to the Conservative Party (Emy 1973; Clarke 1972). One might argue, moreover, that rather than these developments being driven by the *internal* threats presented to British capitalism by the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century or late Victorian competition, they reflected once again the *external* threats to the English state presented by the “Second Industrial Revolution” of the late nineteenth century which undermined Britain’s international geo-political pre-eminence.

This centralisation of state surveillance also seems to have reflected a decline in the dynamism of local government. The expanding size of commercial concerns, and the increasingly impersonal nature of ownership with the spread of limited liability, concentrated wealth in a new, cosmopolitan rentier class. This undermined the coherence of local ruling elites. The rise of national forms of culture, and of an homogenised public-school ethos, further undermined provincial allegiances. Local government in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain was also in financial turmoil as it struggled to deal with the social costs of increasingly national and international economic trends. National rather than local solutions to social problems came increasingly to “make sense” (Harris 1994: 20–1, 200–1). This coincided with, and was arguably part of, the increasing professionalisation and bureaucratization found within all facets of British life in this period, as new national professional elites in government, businesses and trade unions created a corporate state (Perkin 1989).

The rise of centralised information systems in the police and security services

A mixture of responses to external and internal processes can also be seen in the development of surveillance functions by the police and security forces in the same period.

The 1869 Habitual Criminals Act and the 1871 Prevention of Crime Act gave the police greater powers to apprehend those who

had been released early from prison on license and were subsequently suspected of committing further crimes. This reflected a moral panic over rising national crime rates, in a society which had recently been forced to abandon the transportation of criminals to its overseas colonies (Bartrip 1981; Wiener 1990: 148–51). An “Habitual Criminals Register” was to be kept of all persons convicted of a crime and sent to prison for one month or more. Prison governors were to be responsible for notifying particulars and personal descriptions to a person appointed by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. The system of convicts reporting was initially a dead letter, however, since it was difficult to identify who the “appointed person” was. The Register was subsequently transferred to the Home Office but was not very successful (Committee on identifying habitual criminals 1893–94: 214–6).

Under the 1879 Prevention of Crime Act, however, a formal Convict Supervision Office was established at Scotland Yard in order to supervise convicts within the Metropolis. Given the scale of the movement of people into and out of London, this Office soon took on the character of a national surveillance body (Committee on identifying habitual criminals 1893–94: 217–8). This coincided with an increasing professionalisation of the police, the national expansion of plain-clothes detective branches, and the introduction of scientific methods of identification, such as fingerprinting, in the 1890s (Manwaring-White 1983: 192–3; Taylor 1998: 88–105). This decade also saw the return of the Habitual Criminals Register to Scotland Yard, and its integration with the work of the Convict Supervision Office (Public Record Office. HO 144/566/A62042). Although the early convict surveillance systems struggled to provide supervision of thousands of criminals because of limited personnel, they were the beginnings of systematic central information keeping by the police. Such systems were plainly for the purposes of suppressing deviancy but can hardly be linked to changing social and economic relationships during the classic Industrial Revolution.

There is in the Edwardian period, however, one very clear example of the establishment of a system of general police surveillance for the purposes of control in a “society of strangers” – the licensing of motor cars and their drivers under the 1903 Motor Car Act. Cars were now to carry identifiable number plates which could be traced by the police in local county registries indicating the names and addresses of their owners. Motorists were singled out for special treatment because of the number of accidents caused by “furious driving”, and the anonymity of men and women swathed in motoring gear and goggles, who could traverse several counties in a day. Their vehicles could easily outpace the police pounding the beat on foot, or even on bicycle (*Hansard* 1903b: columns 529–30, 977). However, it should

be noted that these harbingers of industrial modernity were hardly members of the working classes. With the cheapest car costing £130 or £140, this was a hobby for the rich, and one of the few deviant motorists mentioned by name in the parliamentary debates on the Act was none other than the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour (*Hansard* 1903a: column 1055). This form of surveillance was certainly a form of social control but at its inception it was hardly evidence of domination by elites. Again, the state was acting pluralistically rather than as an organ of class domination in any simplistic sense. Although locally based, the system's later centralisation was of signal importance.

The late Victorian and Edwardian periods also saw the origins of surveillance by the security services but, again, this does not appear to fit the model of internal social control. The enemy was initially not the lower orders but foreign agents opposed to the British state. The early 1880s saw the establishment of the Special Branch in the Metropolitan Police to gather information on Fenian terrorists, foreign anarchists, and later the suffragettes (Porter 1987: 86–125). Finally, in 1909, MI5 was set up to develop counter-intelligence work against suspected German spies, and to act behind enemy lines if an invasion of England was launched (Public Record Office. KV 1/1). During World War 1 the size of the counter-subversion forces increased markedly. MI5 grew from 14 officers and staff in July 1914 to 844 by the end of the war. Special Branch expanded from 114 in November 1914 to 700 (Porter 1987: 179–80). As before, what was important here was initially the threat to the British state, rather than any direct threat to the existence of the capitalist system in Britain.

The generalisation and integration of central-state data gathering in the twentieth century

In many ways the expansion of the Information State in Britain was a feature of the twentieth century, rather than of the preceding 100 years. It was certainly then that the citizen body and intellectuals began to grow uneasy at the nature of information gathering by central government, and its perceived threat to civil liberties. This reflected numerous factors but three perhaps need emphasising here – the sheer scale of the modern British citizen's interaction with the state; the intertwining of the external geo-political threat to the British state and the internal threat to British capitalism; and the impact of new technologies of information handling.

Whereas most English men and women in the Victorian period only came into the information net of the central state when they were born, married, or died, or on census night, this was not true of

the following century. Nor did these earlier forms of surveillance usually entail any further interaction with the state as a result of the provision of the required information. The rise of the centralised Welfare State, however, meant that citizens increasingly had to go through a process of interaction with central government agents to claim benefits. Similarly, car ownership, originally the preserve of the rich, became a fact of life for most families, and the acquisition of a driving license one of the typical rites of passage of adolescence. Thus, when the 1903 Motor Car Act was passed there were 8,000 cars but by the 1970s there were 19 million cars on Britain's roads (Mitchel and Deane 1962: 230).

The expansion of the social service state also led to the elaboration of a state statistical service to facilitate the central planning of the provision of goods and services. The state had to become more active in information distribution, apprising citizens of the services available to them. The effective working of official publicity, in turn, necessitated that the state become even more active in information gathering. (Grant 1994; LeMahieu 1988) A Government Social Survey Department was established during World War II, and undertook surveys of patients in the wartime emergency hospitals, morale, public perceptions of shortages, and so on. This was later to combine with the GRO to form the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys in 1970, and then with other government statisticians in the Office for National Statistics in 1996. A number of major longitudinal surveys, such as the National Food Survey, the Family Expenditure Survey, the General Household Survey, and the Labour Force Survey, were added to the decennial census in the post-war period as means of gaining general social intelligence (Nissel 1987: 86–96).

At the same time, the taxation net widened inexorably, sweeping larger and larger numbers into ongoing contact with the Board Of Inland Revenue, and other taxing bodies (Middleton 1996: 512). This process was attended by increasing centralisation. The decentralised taxation system of the early-modern period had been carried over into the workings of the Victorian income tax. However, when Sir Robert Peel reintroduced the tax in 1842 he inserted a clause into the act authorising its collection by which taxpayers could elect to be assessed by special commissioners employed centrally by the Board of Inland Revenue. But this was not conceived in terms of the centralised control of taxpayers but as a means of liberating them from the scrutiny of local lay assessors, who might be their rivals in trade. It was not until the 1931 Finance Act that the appointment of all collectors of taxes in England and Wales was vested in the Inland Revenue, although the City of London was not assimilated in the same way until 1945. Even then, assessments were still in theory made locally by general commissioners until the passing of the

Income Tax Management Act of 1964, which converted them into civil servants (Sabine 1966; 187). In other words, the creation of a centralised system of mass surveillance for taxation purposes was mainly a feature of the present century, despite the importance of such revenue collection for the pursuit of state policy.

Providing civil servants with personal details thus became ubiquitous, and one of the vexations of modern life. One needs to ask, therefore, whether the creation of central databases of information was necessitated by the rise of a "society of strangers", or whether the shift to central responsibility for performing these functions created that anonymity? When welfare provision, taxation, criminal detection, and so on, became centralised was it then that the flow of information simply became too great to be carried on in the informal settings of oral proceedings, as in the previous decentralised system? This might, in turn, be seen as leading to the creation of formal methods of information handling to simplify and depersonalize such transactions (Luhmann 1995). The "informatisation" of interactions in this manner also appears to have attended the increasing scale of commercial organisations in the same period, especially in the USA. In the larger corporation of the late nineteenth century, informal, oral relationships of the workshop were replaced by bureaucratic forms of reporting and information management (Yates 1989). It can be argued that it was the larger scale of interaction and communication which created anonymity, rather than anonymity which necessitated large scale organisation, whether at the level of the international corporation, or of the nation state.

It was also in the twentieth century that external threats to the British state became inexorably entwined with internal threats to capitalism. In the mid-Victorian period of imperial hegemony, British politicians could, on the whole, stand aloof from Continental entanglements, to concentrate on imperial aggrandisement. This was not a strategy which any twentieth-century British prime minister had the luxury of pursuing. With the establishment of foreign powers, especially the USSR and China, on the basis of communism, many of the international threats to the British state could be seen as meshing with internal opposition to capitalism. In the course of the twentieth century both the resources at the disposal of the security forces and Special Branch, and the range of internal targets to which they applied themselves, increased. During the inter-war period, and in the depths of the Cold War, fringe political parties, "fellow travellers", trade unionists, peace activists, and numerous other groups have become targets for surveillance (Deacon 1991). The distinction between geo-politics and internal class politics had

been blurred. The other main focus of increased surveillance by the secret state, Northern Ireland, involved a threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom, rather than to capitalism.

Lastly, the development of information technologies, and the invention of the database, made access to personal information, and its integration, much easier. Anyone who has attempted historical record linkage will recognise the difficulties that the English state prior to the twentieth century had in maintaining comprehensive profiles of its citizens. The invention of machine tabulation by Herman Hollerith for the 1890 US censuses, a technology introduced into the British census in 1911, allowed census information to be pre-recorded on punched cards (Higgs 1996c). Reusing data for supplementary analysis became, therefore, a practical possibility, as the Jews in Nazi Germany found to their cost when the census was used to organise the Holocaust (Luebke and Milton 1994). This discovery of the database need not be seen as technological determinism, because the general take-up of Hollerith's invention in statistical bureaux across Europe appears to have been linked to the increase in information to be collected and analysed in censuses as a result of an international expansion in state intervention in society (Higgs 1997b: 171–4).

The development of electronic means of data storage and analysis after the Second World War, allowed these databases to be easily integrated. In 1969, for example, the responsibilities of the local vehicle licensing authorities were transferred to the Minister of Transport, and in 1973 work in connection with the licensing of drivers and motor vehicle registration and taxation, was centralised and computerised at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre (DVLC) at Swansea (Public Record Office (no date): section 628/2/8). In 1969 the government had given the go-ahead to set up a Police National Computer (PNC), the computers purchased having the capacity to hold 40 million records, one for every adult in the country, and these were soon upgraded. By 1973 each of the 47 police forces in England and Wales had at least one terminal accessing the central database. The first information to be put on the PNC was the lists of the millions of cars and their owners held on computer at the DVLC. Other files included an index to all 3,250,000 finger prints kept by the National Fingerprint Unit; an index to all the criminal records held at the Central Criminal Records Office; a file of all those under suspended sentences; a list of disqualified drivers; a list of wanted and missing persons; and a stolen vehicle list (Manwaring-White 1983: 55–60). The British Information State had come of age.

Conclusion

Thus, the emphasis placed by some sociologists on the period and processes of the Industrial Revolution in the formation of the Information State in England is misleading. The involvement of the central English state in the surveillance of the population pre-dated the modern period, if in a symbiotic relationship with local elites. The belief that early-modern communities in England were insulated from the state is erroneous. Similarly, most nineteenth-century state data collection in England prior to about the 1870s was not essentially for central purposes, or to facilitate the suppression of deviancy, but to facilitate individual self-help and ensure local political accountability. Population might be the unit of state analysis but individuals rather than the state were to make use of the knowledge gained. It was the period after about 1870 which saw the development of the use of central information gathering to facilitate the suppression of deviancy, but much of this effort was not directed to policing economic or social relationships but to deal with direct threats to the state. The central state's interest in using statistical data to manipulate populations as a whole also increased in this period but the application of statistics to policy was strictly limited.

The twentieth century emerges as the period of the true burgeoning of central state surveillance, linked to the provision of various forms of welfare benefits, taxation and technological change, and to increased interest in manipulating the characteristics of the population as a whole. In sum, it is difficult to argue that capitalist industrialisation led directly to increased central state surveillance, at least in the case of the "First Industrial Nation". The needs of the British state as state in a period of imperial crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, rather than as a bulwark of capitalism at the beginning of the century, appears more important in explaining the rise of the modern Information State. Rather than the direct control of deviancy, state surveillance can also be conceived as underpinning the creation of the civil, political and social rights envisaged by T H Marshall, although such rights, and related obligations, can plainly be seen as an indirect means of ensuring compliance with the norms implicit in the capitalist status quo via social amelioration and socialisation within a pluralist state. Such rights can thus be seen in terms of the construction of society and the citizen in a form suitable for the reproduction of capitalism as argued by Corrigan and Sayer. The question is, of course, whether the underlying norms of the liberal, capitalist society in England were not shared by the majority of the working classes. The rise of central state surveillance thus reveals a plurality of interlinking

forces acting upon, through and from the state in a manner not unlike the broader overview of state activity provided recently by Michael Mann (1986; 1993).

Of course, none of this might necessarily invalidate the general applicability of a simple social control model of central state information gathering, as long as one sees England as an exception to the general Western rule. There is, perhaps, some truth in this, but if the First Industrial Nation is an exception to the industrialisation model of state surveillance, then it is not a model which can be applied without extensive caveats. Also, some of the factors which appear to make England an exception had very little to do with industrialisation and the functional needs of a capitalist society, and a great deal to do with geo-politics and the needs of the state *qua* state. It was not so much the nature of society which had changed but the nature of the state and the context, both internal and external, in which it operated.

Notes

¹ State information gathering as a means of mobilising power has been stressed by Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1987: 172–81), and Michael Mann (Mann 1993: 59–61). Both Giddens and Mann see such surveillance as a feature of the state from about the mid-eighteenth century (Giddens 1987: 179–80; Mann 1986: 527). Giddens has tended to see this activity in terms of social control to facilitate capitalist development (Giddens 1987: 181, 1995: 218). For central state surveillance as a means of replacing 'traditional' forms of social control during industrialisation, see Christopher Dandeker 1990: 110–17; and James Rule 1973: 27–8. For the role of 'population thinking' in extending the powers and claims of the state to direct society, see Foucault 1982, 1991; Kreager 1992; Patriarca 1996; Perrot and Woolf 1984.

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