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Surveillance, Mass Culture and the Subject: A Systems/Lifeworld Approach

Stephen Marmura

Habermas's (1984/1989) Theory of Communicative Action provides distinct advantages for considering both the evolving character of surveillance within the context of late capitalism, and related changes to human subjectivity and culture. In particular, the concepts systems, lifeworld and colonization may be employed to identify key threats to democratic life within information-based, consumer-driven societies. Many recent social theoretical approaches to the study of surveillance emphasize the entanglement of human subjectivity with "electronic language" and computer-based practices of personal data gathering and profiling. One result is that conscious, embodied, human subjects are often not treated as potentially significant agents of progressive social change. Alternatively, Habermas makes a methodological distinction between the impersonal workings of administrative and economic systems, and the lifeworld of communally shared experience. This allows for critical attention to the potentially negative social/cultural effects of commercial surveillance practices, while preserving a role for rational human actors.

Introduction

It is safe to assert that recent social scientific approaches to the study of surveillance have been strongly influenced by poststructuralist conceptions of power, and by related understandings of the human subject as "de-centered." In addition to Foucault's (1977) well known elaboration of the panopticon as a model of social control, theorists and researchers have increasingly turned to such sources as Deleuze (1992), whose conceptualizations of "rhizomatic" forms of social order offer new ways of appreciating the changing character of surveillance in information-based societies, and Baudrillard, whose ideas concerning simulation hold considerable relevance when considering computer based practices of data-profiling and the creation of "data-doubles" (see Lyon 2001). One result is that greater attention has been given to the electronic processes and discursive forms associated with the collection, storage and utilization of personal data by diverse

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interests. This in turn has led to many highly sophisticated and nuanced accounts of social control under the conditions of late capitalism. However, a related tendency to either ignore or dispense with notions of the contemporary subject as a potentially rational, communicative, and/or embodied social actor is less fortunate; one which limits the possibility of meaningful social critique.

The intent here is not to recommend the abandonment of what have proven to be innovative and productive lines of investigation vis-à-vis contemporary forms of surveillance, mass communication and social control. However, alternatives to poststructuralist conceptions of the subject/citizen do appear necessary if one hopes to engage fruitfully with a key issue identified by Lyon (2001, 123-125); namely the possibility of “recovering the body” as a means for better clarifying the dilemmas, dangers and opportunities facing individuals and groups within contemporary surveillance societies. This in turn requires the deployment of a framework which presumes the existence of reflexive human agents, potentially capable of recognizing the interrelationships between their own subjective state, and the media driven – and increasingly surveillance dependent – features of their social/cultural environment. As I hope to make clear, Jürgen Habermas’s (1984, 1989) theory of communicative action offers important advantages in this regard. In particular, his development of the concepts *systems*, *lifeworld*, and *colonization*, provide a means for appreciating not only the ubiquity of surveillance practices within information-based societies, but also their potentially negative effects upon human subjectivity and culture.

Significantly, Habermas’s arguments concerning “colonization” draw attention to subtle but important threats to democratic life posed by contemporary forms of surveillance, while still preserving a meaningful social/political role for knowing human agents. Consequently, his framework may be drawn upon as a counterweight or corrective to approaches which view subjects (only) as coterminous with their social/technological environment. The work of Mark Poster (1989 – 2001), one of Habermas’s most persistent critics, will be focused upon as illustrative in this regard. It will be demonstrated that Poster’s position concerning the constitution of the postmodern or “digital subject” undermines his parallel efforts to deal effectively with the issue of emancipation. An alternative approach to questions of subjectivity and human agency will be outlined by directing attention to relevant concepts from the theory of communicative action, as well as to complementary ideas in the work of Christopher Lasch (1984, 1991).

Systems, Lifeworld and Colonization

Habermas’s (1984, 1989) theory of communicative action may be understood largely as an attempt to grapple with the question of modernity. Habermas is interested in both the specific conditions which precipitated the formation of modern state societies in the West, and with corresponding changes to human subjectivity. He is also concerned with the emergence and recent decline of the arguably revolutionary, progressive, and universal – in terms of their normative appeal – institutions and traditions associated with liberal democracies. Central to his project is the

issue of rationality. On the one hand, Habermas draws on the work of Weber to argue that a perceived need for ever-greater levels of legal/governmental and economic efficiency eventually led to the rationalization of modern societies and to the establishment of potentially oppressive apparatuses of social control. By contrast, it is the human capacity for “communicative rationality” or the process of problem solving and conflict resolution through open discussion and debate, which is argued by Habermas to provide the necessary basis for emancipation from the often hidden structures and forces serving to limit political participation and “distort” communication and cultural expression. The significance of these points in relation to governmental and particularly commercial surveillance practices will be made apparent in due course.

It has long been recognized that when the size and boundaries of communities become too large or undefined for their members to interact with one another directly or on a regular basis, increasingly impersonal and indirect mechanisms must be established to allow for the continued possibility of social integration. Likewise, the historic appearance of civilizations throughout the world has invariably been marked not only by the introduction of abstract means of economic and governmental integration, but also by the emergence of intelligentsia and information specialists entrusted with their effective management (Habermas 1984; Harris 1978). These general historic trends are discussed by Habermas in terms of a growing disjuncture between norms and values established at the communal level of directly shared experience, or the “lifeworld,” and the increasing autonomy of economic and governmental “systems.”

Habermas (1989, 124) conceptualizes the lifeworld as encompassing the “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns.” It is the realm within which common understandings of reality are sustained and modified through ongoing processes of interpersonal communication. Here, communicative rationality is potentially exercised, with the normative value of prevailing social practices subjected to criticism. Significantly, the health of the lifeworld is predicated not only upon the exercise of purely practical forms of reason and logic, the purposive expressions of rationality utilized to secure communally shared goals, but also upon the ongoing appraisal and (re)negotiation of moral and aesthetic values which in turn help to determine “practical” group needs. By contrast, the rules governing systems derive entirely from prioritizing greater efficiency in realizing narrowly specified objectives such as the accumulation of profits, or the reduction of risk. “Instrumental rationality,” the form of rationality required for optimal levels of self-maintenance and performance on the part of systems, works to the exclusion of normative considerations.

It is important to note that for Habermas, the instrumental rationality upon which systems depend is not in and of itself a negative phenomenon. In fact, Habermas maintains that the type(s) of “purposive rational” thinking which accompanied the development of modern administrative systems, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the establishment of aesthetic and ethical standards within various professions and knowledge communities, may also be employed to assess values, truth claims and practices pervasive in the lifeworld. This point is important because Habermas (1984, 8-43) also argues that culture remains “reified” within pre-

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modern societies. That is to say, clear qualitative distinctions among orders of reality corresponding to such phenomena as the will of deities, natural processes, and social/cultural norms and practices, remain largely or entirely unrecognized by community members. It is social evolution, and specifically those processes of rationalization which marked the appearance of modernity, which facilitated the establishment of discourses divorced from the realm of traditional knowledge. Hence, the questioning of traditional norms may be understood as a potentially positive consequence of modernity; the constructive exercise of enlightenment ideals of critical reflection and reason.

For Habermas, processes leading to social inequality and ultimately to social pathology, originate when systems come to operate increasingly in accordance with their own internally determined criteria for efficiency while becoming unmoored from the interests and values of the communities they were ostensibly designed to serve. If left unchecked, this “decoupling” of systems from the lifeworld may lead to a phenomenon which Habermas terms colonization; the (re)ordering of social structure and culture to accommodate the instrumental requirements of systems. Inherently threatening to both genuine community and to democratic life, colonization reverses the logic whereby political institutions and (mass) communication channels remain embedded within civil society, and expressive of the will of the citizenry. When social/political institutions become geared primarily towards the satisfaction of bureaucratic standards of rationality or the profit orientation of commercial enterprise, peoples’ ability to question, or even recognize the rules which govern their actions is greatly diminished. Civil society is weakened and the possibility of facilitating communicative rationality on a society-wide scale recedes. Instead, distorted communication in the form of ideology and propaganda becomes pervasive (Calhoun 1992).

Surveillance and Reflexive Capitalism

While the discussion above scarcely begins to touch upon the complex, yet highly systematic arguments put forward by Habermas (1984, 1989) in his two volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, the relevance which his ideas about colonization hold within the present context of economic globalization should already be apparent. It is now widely recognized that transnational commerce, combined with the oversight of trade and investment by international monetary organizations have reduced corporate vulnerability to environmental policies, trade and labor regulations, and to restrictions of currency exchange formerly imposed by governments. By the same token, states have come under growing pressure to ease corporate taxation, and to privatize in such areas as health care, education, national media, and the provision of basic infrastructure. Likewise, a perceived need on the part of governments to remain competitive within the global economy has led to the dismantling of institutions traditionally associated with the social-welfare state. Within the prevailing discourse of neo-liberalism, the well being of citizens/consumers is only comprehensible as the by-product of a properly functioning

economy (McMurtry 1998). Ensuring economic efficiency in turn requires continued adjustments at the level of the lifeworld; to social structure and culture.

Lyon (2003, 11) observes that as the security imperatives of the “safety state” have come to take precedence over broader questions of public welfare, the purposes for which surveillance practices are deployed is shifting in emphasis “from care to control.” The efforts of governments to monitor, categorize and manage their populations now arguably have less to do with ensuring a relatively equitable distribution of goods in the form of rights and resources made accessible to citizens, and more to do with checking potential hazards arising from the contingencies and uncertainties associated with global trade and increasingly porous borders. The state’s growing obsession with reducing “risk” means that global flows of immigrants, workers, tourists, currency, goods, media products etc., must be monitored and managed as efficiently as technological developments and political conditions allow. At the same time, capitalist industry in its post-Fordist or reflexive stage has become increasingly dependent upon the application of surveillance and data-profiling techniques needed for the identification and/or creation of multiple consumer niche markets and media audiences (Turrow 2006).

The increasing reliance upon surveillance by commercial interests may be understood largely as an attempt to stave off crises arising from the potential saturation of markets by mass produced consumer goods. An accompanying need for more flexible forms of production and more personalized appeals to customers demands a greater reliance upon the use of information about consumers and/or media audiences. In fact, since the 1990s, the gathering of personal information, its storage in computer databases, and its sale to a wide range of commercial interests has itself become a major industry (Turrow 2006). The value of data pertaining to such phenomena as the spending patterns, Web-surfing habits, aesthetic sensibilities, TV viewing preferences and even mobility patterns of persons, lies in the fact that such information can be used not only to identify and address specific categories of consumer, but also to make predictions about their future behaviors (Gandy 2006).

Significantly, the growing role of the monitored consumer in supplying the data needed by industry to effectively create and market ever-more specialized commodities does not include any substantive control over the production process. Such control, along with the profits from commercial transactions, remains firmly in the hands of those who own the means of data collection, storage and manipulation (Andrejevic 2003, 141). In addition, industry has placed progressively greater emphasis on minimizing or excluding any extraneous or unpredictable inputs from an increasingly closed and regulated production/consumption circuit. Lizardo (2004) observes that large media conglomerates now exist which make no distinction between agents of production, distribution, delivery, and media gate-keeping. Within such a context, criticism and reviews of mass cultural products such as books, films or music videos may be viewed as just a special case of a mass commodity, “only this time masquerading as independent communicative actions directed at a receptive public” (Lizardo 2004, 17). As Barber (1996, 64) remarks of the MTV network, the culture and commentary on display amount to little more than “one interminable commercial for the music industry and its products.”

It is now very difficult to locate any public or private spaces (however defined) within information-based societies such as the US, Canada or Britain, not vulnerable to the surveillance gaze of the culture industries, or the probes of personalized commerce. In fact, the very “freedom” of the contemporary consumer is predicated upon his or her continuous availability to marketers and advertisers. Such is the case even for those in transit. As Andrejevic (2003, 134) observes, the widespread use of portable, interactive devices such as cell-phones and Blackberries means that one need never leave “the flexible, interactive, and customized world of cyberspace.” Much like the stationary Web-surfer, the mobile subject may readily be integrated within a feed-back loop between business and customer through which ever more aspects of his or her personal environment are adapted to suit the requirements of industry. Surrounded by information flows which expose them to ever more products and services, subjects take on the double role of producer/consumer by supplying the information needed by industry to make increasingly nuanced marketing appeals to distinct categories of persons (Ibid).

The relative ease with which state and corporate computer networks and electronic databases may be interlinked has clearly contributed to the ubiquity of surveillance in technologically-driven societies. For example, many of the security initiatives implemented by the US federal government after 9/11 rely upon the collection and storage of customer data by commercial interests such as Internet Service Providers and telecommunications companies. Convergence of surveillance practices at both the technological and organizational levels is also visible in relation to the phenomenon known as “function creep,” whereby devices and laws justified for one purpose find new applications beyond their original mandate (Haggerty & Ericson, 2006, 18). Curry, Phillips & Regan (2004, 362), note that function creep accompanied the development of E-911 emergency response systems in the US, where the Federal Communications Commission now demands that records of the location patterns of cell-phone users be kept for public safety reasons. American industry standards now also allow for the storage of “locational data” for future marketing purposes. Such aggregate data may be used to generate models concerning the attributes and mobility patterns of specific populations, which may then be employed to create “idealized places, products, markets, and consumers” (Ibid, 367).

Locating the Subject

In light of the trends referred to above, it is worth considering the usefulness of Habermas’s framework in terms of what distinguishes it from other theoretical approaches to surveillance and social ordering. Of particular importance is the emphasis which Habermas places on both the potentially constraining or limiting influences of external (technological, governmental, economic) forces upon human agency, *and* the universal human capacity for “communicative action.” This dual emphasis should be kept in mind when considering a specific line of criticism sometimes directed at Habermas’s work. Giddens (1987, 250), for example, questions whether Habermas’s methodological separation of systems from lifeworld can

also operate as a substantive distinction within modernized societies. In a similar vein, Sandywell (2004) suggests that Habermas's (1987) use of the systems/lifeworld dichotomy reflects "a barely disguised nostalgia for the sustaining source of meaning, of primal significances occluded by the rise of modern science and technology." The result, he argues, is that Habermas's "lifeworld" becomes a "paradoxical 'no-place', a 'horizon' or groundless site for all other practices."

It is difficult to deny that the demarcation which Habermas seems to draw between systems and lifeworld appears artificial. And empirical demonstrations of this artificiality are fairly easy to produce. For example, it was implied above that the surveillance capabilities built into personalized commodities such as GPS-enabled cell-phones or Blackberries may potentially contribute to processes of colonization by allowing marketers to predict and ultimately influence aggregate patterns of mobility and consumption. However, cell-phones might also be used to facilitate interpersonal forms of communication essential to the health of the lifeworld. The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this example is a relatively superficial one, drawing attention only to the potential uses made of specific commodities. The implicit inseparability of systems from lifeworld is more fully apparent when considering the defining features of what Deleuze (1992) refers to as "control societies." These features are noteworthy because they appear to throw into question the usefulness, or even the possibility, of making theoretically meaningful distinctions between the workings of contemporary technological and economic systems on the one hand, and widespread social/cultural practices on the other.

While the control society has most frequently been compared to Foucault's "disciplinary society," its alleged historic precursor, it is also worth making brief reference to its chief characteristics for present purposes. This is because it is the apparent externality of systems to lifeworld which arguably limits the usefulness of Habermas's framework for addressing issues of subjectivity, culture, and resistance or acquiescence to surveillance within late capitalist societies. According to Deleuze (1992), disciplinary societies were characterized by "environments of enclosure" within which human subjects were constituted. These enclosures corresponded to such institutions as the prison, school, hospital, psychiatric ward, reformatory and nuclear family. By contrast, power in the contemporary control society is not imposed upon individuals by a series of identifiable institutions external to them. Instead, "conduct is continually monitored and reshaped by logics immanent within all networks of practice," with surveillance "designed in" to the flows of everyday existence (Rose 1999, 234). Similarly, the modulation of conduct geared to the "optimization of benign impulses and minimization of malign impulses" is "dispersed across the time and space of ordinary life."

One significant difference between disciplinary societies and control societies is that the latter are marked by the widespread use of computer-based technologies, and by the "logic of codes." According to Deleuze (1992, 3), the numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information or reject it. One consequence is that "we no longer find ourselves dealing with a mass/individual pair," but rather with "*dividuals*," masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks." As Lyon (2001, 35) points out, "nomadic bodies and digital personae are the subjects

of contemporary computer-based surveillance, and are categories altogether more slippery and malleable than those utilized in previous surveillance regimes.” He also notes that while bodies occupy space, digital personae do not, and that the relationships between the two are constituted by surveillance practices. It seems clear, therefore, that the entanglement of human agency and subjectivity with electronic discourses and computer-based surveillance and profiling practices is a defining feature of control societies. Nonetheless, it is also clear that if one wishes to engage meaningfully with ideals of social emancipation, explicit distinctions must be maintained between the two types of “subject” to which Lyon (2001) refers. This point will be returned to shortly.

While Habermas’s conceptual framework might at first appear ill-suited for addressing situations in which grassroots expressions of culture may be indistinguishable from contemporary processes of social control, further consideration suggests that this is not the case. Andrejevic (2007) provides a useful illustration when examining the manner in which media forums ostensibly belonging to the public sphere – the common space which Habermas identifies as the site of deliberative, rational communication in democratic societies – have been exploited to provide what amounts to free labor for the entertainment industry. Specifically, he draws attention to the importance which Web sites created by fans of television shows such as *Joe Millionaire* and *Big Brother* have come to hold for the producers of these programs (Andrejevic 2007, 135-60). Fan sites such as Television Without Pity (TWO P), which contain forums dedicated to praising or lampooning (or both) the characters, plot-lines and writing of various shows, are now often treated as the equivalent of commercial focus groups. Their content is closely monitored by market researchers looking for trends in the comments of posters which might help producers fine-tune their media products and increase audience appeal.

What is perhaps most noteworthy about Andrejevic’s (2007) examination of TWO P, concerns the attitudes of those posting their opinions within its forums. The most regular and entertaining contributors – those providing the wittiest and most “snarkastic” commentary – tend to pride themselves on being “in the know” with respect to what motivates producers and writers. During interviews they often looked down on those naïve enough to think that producers actually make plot changes in light of the specific comments of individual posters. On the one hand, these elite contributors were shrewd and cynical enough to conclude that their forums hold value to TV producers mainly as instant focus groups, or for purposes of viral (word of mouth) advertising. On the other hand, Andrejevic (2007, 152) observes that, paradoxically, the same individuals also tend to harbor a strong desire to be recognized by others as savvy viewers “who aren’t taken in by the transparent forms of manipulation practiced by producers.” Quoting the political theorist Jodi Dean, Andrejevic (2007, 153) links these attitudes to a broader context in which the subject is “driven to make itself visible over and over again” and “to understand itself as a celebrity precisely because the excesses of cyberia make it uncertain as to its place in the symbolic order.”

As Rose (1999) emphasizes, control societies are marked by citizen “participation” vis-à-vis their voluntary integration within networks of control. In the example cited above, such participation may also be understood in terms of an

increasing colonization of the public sphere. Andrejevic (2007) notes that, ironically, the most dedicated, insightful, and creative posters to TWoP also held to a mindset incompatible with ideals of citizenship and political participation in democratic societies. Their refusal to be duped into accepting the notion that one might make a serious impression on the Powers That Be of the entertainment world is emblematic of a more widespread malaise in which both market and political forces are understood to be beyond the control of voters or consumers (Andrejevic 2007, 153). The cultural prevalence of cynicism, political apathy, and a preoccupation with “being seen” is best appreciated in light of the more general shift towards a mass-mediated culture dominated by politically uncritical forms of infotainment, scandal politics and voyeurism. The expressions of subjectivity most closely associated with this shift will be given further attention in the next section.

Like Deleuze’s (1992) conception of the control society, Habermas’s understanding of colonization allows for greater appreciation of a social environment within which the exercise of state and corporate power are no longer confined to specific sites such as the factory, school or prison, and in which citizens are encouraged to participate in their own “governance.” However, there is a fundamental difference in the general approach of these two theorists which holds importance here. Deleuze’s orientation is close to that of other poststructuralists, particularly Foucault, who wish to abandon enlightenment conceptions of human subjectivity. As Mansfield (2000, 136) notes of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) work, theirs is a vision which entails the “complete abandonment of any idea of coordinated selfhood.” Rather than approaching the subject as an embodied and conscious human actor – one capable of uncovering universal truths and/or realizing corresponding ideals of scientific or political progress – emphasis is placed instead upon a shifting array of interpenetrating social processes, political discourses, ways of knowing, and states of becoming in which subjectivity has no clear locus. By contrast, Habermas hopes to revitalize the Marxian tradition of social critique by advancing communicative action as both the theoretical framework and the practical means through which citizen/subjects might reestablish their hold over institutions of power.

While Habermas does not view colonization as inevitable in modern societies, he does maintain that any possibility of limiting or reversing its effects presupposes the exercise of critical reflection and communicative reason on the part of rational human actors. This does not mean, however, that Habermas treats the knowing subject as an isolatable, pre-given entity, or that he privileges consciousness in the sense often implied by his critics (see below). As Giddens (1987, 236) recognizes, Habermas “does not posit a self-sufficient subject, confronting an object world, but instead begins from the notion of a symbolically-structural lifeworld in which human reflexivity is constituted.” In this sense, Habermas is every bit as critical as poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault or Deleuze of attempts to make the self-certain individual subject the foundation of knowledge (Callinicos 1999, 284). For Habermas, “truth” is not to be found in what guarantees the objectivity of experience, but rather in the argumentative corroboration of truth claims (Giddens 1993, 74). And just as truth is dependent upon rational discourse, it is communicative action which provides the necessary basis for erecting “a democratic dam against

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the colonizing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1997, 444).

The value of preserving an analytic distinction between systems and lifeworld is readily apparent when considering the approach to electronic culture and surveillance advanced by Mark Poster, a long-time critic of Habermas’s “modernism.” As will be demonstrated, Poster’s conception of the postmodern subject sits awkwardly with a declared interest in emancipatory social change. In a series of works, Poster (1989, 1990, 1995, 1996, 2001) maintains that the “digital age” is producing, or has produced a new type of subject; one which differs radically from the rational, centered “self” of modernity. Poster (1996), attempts to ground his arguments in Foucault’s work on governmentality and related ideas concerning the construction of modern subjects. In particular, he makes reference to Foucault’s use of the term *discourse*, which is contrasted with humanist conceptions of *writing*. Poster (1996, 178) asserts that the former concept may be employed “above all as a counterposition to those who understand writing as the expression of a subject – those who, in their search for meaning in acts of reading or listening, move from words back to consciousness.” Instead, subjects are to be understood as being constituted or created within discourses. In the postmodern period, computer databases are argued to hold particular significance in this regard, since they function as language fields or discourses which act to “constitute subjects outside the immediacy of consciousness” (Ibid, 175).

For Poster (1996, 188), the database may be understood as “part of a larger, massive cultural transformation that positions the subject outside the framework of visibility available to liberal and Marxist theoretical orientations.” The idea that the contemporary subject has become unavailable to traditional sociological analysis is easier to appreciate once it is recognized that Poster takes the poststructuralist conception of a de-centered subject literally. Rather than merely reaffirming an understanding of the subject as overdetermined by countless cross-hatching ideological, material and/or historic social forces, Poster moves in a new direction. He argues that the postmodern subject should be understood as interpellated *within* databases and “dispersed and multiplied” within and across an environment dominated by electronic and broadcast media. The clear implication is that the postmodern or digital subject is not to be conceived of as a conscious, embodied human actor. Indeed, Poster insists that understandings of subjectivity which “privilege consciousness” are ill-suited to the task of revealing prevailing configurations of language/power.

Modernist theorists such as Habermas and Giddens are criticized by Poster (1990, 79) for their propensity to view individual subjects as knowing, acting, human agents. Similarly, Castells is faulted for portraying collective subjects, in this case social movements, as consciously engaging in projects of social emancipation (Poster 2001, 7- 9). Even Lyotard is chastised for suggesting that public access to governmental and/or corporate databases might in some way serve to empower ordinary citizens (see Poster 1996, 189-190). As previously indicated, such criticisms stem from Poster’s (1990, 80) belief that approaches to subjectivity which privilege consciousness and/or human action cannot adequately reveal the manner in which actual language situations contain structures of domination and (hence)

potentials for emancipating change. And yet, Poster never makes clear exactly why it is that the project of revealing configurations of language/power either precludes the existence of conscious human agents or makes their existence irrelevant.

Surely the only actors capable of revealing structures of domination and/or effecting progressive forms of political transformation are (self)conscious subjects “possessing the capacity to judge rightness, know truth and feel compassion” (Poster, 1990, 79). Poster takes Habermas to task for positing precisely such entities, but fails to provide an alternate model of human agency and/or posit an alternative source of emancipatory change. Left to contend with the issues of resistance and emancipation in the absence of knowing human subjects, he offers the following cryptic remarks (my emphasis):

...the moment is passed when language practices are subject to the old contestatory oppositions. The factory site, with its massed, impoverished workers, no longer presents, for so many reasons, the opportunity of revolutionary talk. *If contestatory language is to emerge today, it must do so in the context of TV ads and databases, of computers and communications satellites, not in a culture of co-present talk and debate.* (Poster 1990, 80)

But what do such statements actually mean? Who or what is to be understood as generating oppositional language under present conditions? And what would qualify such language as contestatory? In fact, we can never be sure, since Poster consistently refuses to make the necessary distinctions between the subject and its technological/discursive environment. The following passage highlights this tendency:

If I can speak directly or by electronic mail to a friend in Paris while sitting in California, if I can witness political and cultural events as they occur across the globe without leaving my home, if a database at a remote location contains my profile and informs government agencies which make decisions that affect my life without any knowledge on my part of these events, if I can shop in my home by using my TV or computer, then where am I and who am I? In these circumstances I cannot consider myself centered in my rational, autonomous ego, but I am disrupted, subverted and dispersed across social space. (Poster 1990, 15-16)

What is actually being dispersed across social space and/or within electronic media are not individuals or fragments of selves, but bits of information. Much of this information may be used to create profiles of individuals and groups which may in turn have profound implications for the life-chances of real people (Gandy 1993; Lyon 2001, 2003). Models of individual and collective human subjectivity (in terms of tastes, desires, habits etc.) which do not directly correspond to actual individuals and groups, but rather to constructed “subject-types,” may also be generated through the use of aggregate data (Danna & Gandy 2002). Poster is right to insist that these features of the information society lie at the heart of contemporary

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power relationships. He is also correct to point out that computerized surveillance practices, which increasingly rely upon the use of interconnecting governmental and commercial data-bases, blur past distinctions between the public and private spheres, making traditional conceptions of privacy rights highly problematic. However, Poster's treatment of subjectivity ultimately does more to obscure than clarify the significance of these points. By conflating the subject with its socio-technological environment and by dispensing with conscious human actors as the primary agents of social change, he undermines any basis from which the concept of emancipation might appear meaningful.

Surveillance and Subjectivity

Rather than invoking a framework in which subjects or selves are viewed as literally dispersed within electronic media, those seriously interested in the social/political challenges posed by present day forms of surveillance would be better advised to consider the social pathologies most closely associated with the conditions of late capitalism. In so doing, the blurring of boundaries between subject and object – so widely celebrated in the postmodern literature – may be appreciated in a rather different light, one which allows for a more critical appraisal of the interrelationships between surveillance, (mass) mediated communication and contemporary expressions of popular culture. Habermas (1989) refers to the appearance of social pathologies in Western societies which stem from the displacement of crises originating at the level of systems, into the lifeworld of everyday experience. A similar outlook is adopted by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1991) and *The Minimal Self* (1984). It is worth referring to some of Lasch's arguments here as they complement ideas and lines of inquiry found in the theory of communicative action.

Drawing upon the work of Freud, and proceeding from Durkheim's premise that "personality is the individual socialized," Lasch (1984, 1991) argues that the conditions of late capitalism encourage the development of a "minimal" or narcissistic self, one characterized by "dependence, passivity, and a spectatorial state of mind." He maintains that social conditions associated with the increasing bureaucratization of society, an invasive "therapeutic state," the displacement of traditional sources of moral authority and self-reliance, and "especially the fantastic mass-produced images that shape our perceptions of the world, not only encourage a defensive contraction of the self but blur the boundaries between the self and its surroundings." Unlike the acquisitive capitalist of an earlier period, the contemporary consumer/citizen lacks the confidence and optimism which once accompanied a more stable sense of selfhood. Instead, the personality type "nurtured" under the conditions of consumer capitalism is characterized by feelings of inauthenticity and inner emptiness; traits which Lasch connects to the growing societal preoccupation with selfhood and identity.

Lasch's (1984; 1991) arguments square well with Habermas's (1989, 374) premise that social pathologies arise when systemic imperatives force their way into domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. In fact,

Habermas (1989, 388) credits Lasch with offering a trenchant diagnosis of the times that “goes beyond the clinical domain.” Habermas (1989) too cites psychiatric authority; attributing significance to the fact those seeking therapy today are less likely to suffer from the classical hysterias or obsessive neuroses prevalent in Victorian times, but rather to exhibit narcissistic disturbances. Both theorists work from the premise that the pathological personality in any given era merely represents an extreme case of a more general phenomenon. This is because prevailing social conditions and systemic pressures encourage a particular type of “adaptive” response – manifested in personality structure – even if such adaptation may ultimately have a negative impact upon the health and well-being of the individual. In this light it is worth emphasizing that the social/environmental conditions which Lasch argues serve to blur the boundaries between self and other, and to displace genuine communication with advertising and propaganda, have intensified rather than diminished in the decades following the first publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979).

Lasch (1984, 28) observes that critiques of capitalism which focus upon the shortcomings of an “individualist” society often seem out of place in the information age. In particular, attacks on “privatism” cannot address the realities of a social environment in which the individual finds him or herself “always under observation, if not by foremen and superintendents, by market researchers and pollsters.” The individual is also watched by a plethora of other “experts” who implicitly or explicitly question his or her ability to rely on their own resources and judgment, while undermining traditional sources of authority grounded in family or community life. Some of Lasch’s related observations concerning the “social invasion of the self” are worth quoting at length since they draw attention to many of the defining features of both consumer capitalism and surveillance societies. The following passage, originally written in 1979, appears particularly relevant at a time when an expansion of state security powers has been accompanied not only by new forms of surveillance in both public spaces and places of work, but also by the appearance or growth of such mass cultural phenomena as personalized marketing, the widespread use of cell-phones and camcorders, social networking sites on the Web, interactive media, and a relentless torrent of reality television:

We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Life presents itself as a succession of images of electronic signals, of impressions recorded and reproduced by means of photography, motion pictures, television and sophisticated recording devices. Modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions – and our own – were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time. “Smile you’re on candid camera!” The intrusion into everyday life of this all-seeing eye no longer takes us by

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surprise or catches us with our defenses down. We need no reminder to smile. A smile is permanently graven on our features, and we already know from which of several angles it photographs to best advantage. (Lasch 1991, 46)

It should be emphasized that for Lasch (1984, 33) narcissism largely corresponds to “a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one’s own fears and desires.” According to Lasch, the development of an anxious, other-directed self is encouraged in the contexts of both work and leisure. The “dense interpersonal environment of modern bureaucracy” both elicits and rewards a narcissistic response; an uneasy preoccupation with the impression one makes on others. Drawing upon Goffman’s insights, Lasch suggests that self-presentation arguably has more bearing on success in the contemporary bureaucratized workplace than does character, or even competence. A society of the spectacle dominated by media imagery, the cult of celebrity, and the ideology of consumption with its accompanying “propaganda of commodities” in the form of advertising, also encourages a preoccupation with the self and difficulties in recognizing its boundaries:

Commodity production and consumerism alter perceptions not just of the self but of the world outside the self. They create a world of mirrors, insubstantial images, illusions increasingly indistinguishable from reality. The mirror effect makes the subject an object; at the same time, it makes the world of objects an extension or projection of the self. It is misleading to characterize the culture of consumption as a culture dominated by things. The consumer lives surrounded not so much by things as by fantasies. He lives in a world that has no objective or independent existence and seems to exist only to gratify or thwart his desires. (Lasch 1984, 30)

According to Habermas (1989, 262), actions can be coordinated via consensus formation in language “only if every communicative practice is embedded in a life-world context defined by cultural traditions, institutional orders, and competences.” Habermas (1989, 386) also contends that within contemporary capitalist societies it is the private household that constitutes the point of incursion for the displacement of economic crises into the lifeworld. These points appear particularly salient when considering a rather disturbing line of critique put forward by Schor (2003); namely that industry is now actively involved in raising, educating, and “commodifying,” children. Schor’s (2003, 10) research highlights the fact that advertisers and marketers now routinely provide children with cultural products such as television programming, movies and Web content, and also affect childhood socialization through such practices as sponsoring museum exhibits, school curricula, and leisure activities. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to “create” children who will hold even greater appeal to commercial clients hoping to induce these same children, or their parents, to seek additional products and services.

Significantly, the cultivation of children for commercial purposes includes attempts to structure the content of social interaction and conversation through com-

municative practices such as peer-to-peer marketing (Schor 2003). A related example concerns the “virtual playgrounds” provided within corporate Web sites such as *Tickle*, *Candystand* and *Neopets*. Kerr & Steeves (2005) observe that within these and similar Web sites, devices such as games, “personality tests,” and “buddybots,” are used to exploit the developmental need of pre-adolescent and teen-aged girls to communicate about themselves to their peers. Activities within such Web sites lead girls to trust brands like *Barbie*, and ultimately to view them as “friends.” The virtual friend becomes both role model and confidant, recommending what clothes to wear or products to buy, while gathering increasingly detailed personal data from the subject throughout the interactive process (Ibid). While such examples might at first appear novel, they clearly reflect the logic of the larger “interactive economy,” a context within which it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to make meaningful distinctions between manifestations of their own subjectivity in the form of creative acts of self-expression, and the simulacra which dominate their media-driven environment.

By making the lifeworld increasingly opaque, colonization reduces the likelihood that individuals will be able to make conscious connections between their own subjective states and the workings of systems. Significantly, making such connections requires reflexivity on the part of human subjects. This reflexivity is analogous neither to the anxious self-monitoring of the narcissist, nor to the cybernetic feedback loop which links industry to consumer. Rather, it corresponds to practices of introspection and deliberative exchange, the ultimate aim of which is genuine understanding. Drawing a parallel between Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist critique, Habermas (1989) observes that in both cases, it is theoretical understanding which is ultimately linked to the normative goal of emancipation from “external” constraints. In Freudian theory, this means the patient’s increasing awareness of – and ultimately release from – the control of unconscious processes which distort self-understanding and defy volition; as if imposed from the “outside.” In Marxist theory, emancipation means the proletariat’s release from ideological illusions associated with the workings of a capitalist economy. In both traditions, it is reflexive understanding which allows for the possibility of liberation (Giddens 1993; Lizardo 2004).

Habermas’s (1984/89) theory of communicative action implicates surveillance practices as one potential means through which the instrumental imperatives of governmental and economic systems may encroach upon areas of the lifeworld. The fact that such colonization may also be facilitated through the voluntary participation of consumer/citizens in no way diminishes its potential to impact negatively upon democratic forms of deliberative exchange, community-oriented forms of social life, or the mental well-being of individual human subjects. At the same time, the detection of social pathologies requires the deployment of appropriate conceptual tools. As previously argued, the latter have been conspicuously absent from many accounts of subjectivity, culture and power in information-based societies. Habermas’s framework stands out in this regard; providing a basis for apprehending the ways in which grassroots processes of inter-subjective communication may become vulnerable to distortion by external, coercive influences. Consequently, the theory of communicative action enables us to do more than simply

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chart the ways in which surveillance may be tied to present day forms of cultural production and social control. It may also be drawn upon to ensure that social scientific considerations of surveillance remain politically and ethically meaningful.

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