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The Origins of Mass Surveillance

Interview with Sophie Cœuré

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By tracing the history of surveillance in Europe and the Soviet bloc, the historian Sophie Cœuré explains the differences between democracies and dictatorships in this area. She also urges us to put things in perspective: We do not (yet) live in a "surveillance society."

Sophie Cœuré, professor of history at Université Paris Diderot Paris 7, is a specialist of the Soviet Union and Russia. She has published, among others:

La Grande Lueur à l'Est. Les Français et l'Union soviétique, 1917-1939, Paris, Seuil, 1999;
Frontières du communisme, Paris, La Découverte, 2007 (co-directed with Sabine Dullin);
La Mémoire spoliée. Les archives des Français, butin de guerre nazi puis soviétique, Paris, Payot, 2013;
Pierre Pascal, *Journal de Russie 1928-1929* (co-directed with Jacques Catteau and Julie Bouvard), Lausanne, Les Éditions Noir sur Blanc, 2014.

***Books and Ideas:* How did mass surveillance work concretely in the first half of the twentieth century?**

Sophie Cœuré: The surveillance of populations by state, police, or military administrations is not an invention of the twentieth century; it has existed at least since the eighteenth. The creation of centralized administrations made it possible to collect and keep written records of information, and so to rationalize and perpetuate surveillance. In the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Alphonse Bertillon in France, a new system was put in place for the identification and monitoring of populations through files that included photographs and a series of anthropometric measurements (height, eye color, etc.) or dactyloscopic data (fingerprints).[1]

The Great War was a major turning point in Europe, as the obligation to present a document proving identity, but also very often a visa to travel from one country to another, was generalized. The hunt for deserters, traitors and spies led to the extension of surveillance to ever-larger populations.

However, as was shown by the 2011 exhibition "*Fichés*!" ("On File!") at the *Archives*

[1] See Pierre Piazza, *Du papier à la biométrie: identifier les individus*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2006.

Nationales (National Archives),[2] we must not confuse systematic surveillance by ministries, police, or counterintelligence services with temporary "profiling." The latter is aimed not at maintaining order, but at being used by administrations, businesses, sports and cultural associations that seek to centralize data on certain individuals.

***Books and Ideas:* Comparing the history of the USSR and the socialist countries with the history of France, what would you say are the differences between dictatorships and democracies in this regard?**

Sophie Cœuré: There are two major differences. First, there are the objectives. In republican France, agencies specialized in internal and external intelligence monitor individuals in function of crimes or offenses that they have already committed (from the prostitute to the murderer), or because they are identified as potentially dangerous for public order and the security of the territory. Surveillance can be collective and, as was the case in the interwar period, can target political parties of the far left or the far right, anti-colonial activists, Italian, German or Spanish refugees, Soviet or Nazi spies, etc.

Yet surveillance is never determined by the *a priori* categorization of a given group, but by the identification of a specific risk, which means that it can be abandoned at any time. The only population to have been systematically monitored in France is that of "nomads." The law of 1912 created for them an "anthropometric booklet" that was compulsory starting at age 13. The law was repealed in 1969, but nomads—who then became known as "travellers"—were still subject to a special status. Their "*titre de circulation*" (internal travel document) was abolished only in June 2015.

In the USSR, however, for reasons related to the project of constructing a communist society, and for more conjunctural reasons linked to the civil war and Stalinist developments, surveillance agencies—such as the Cheka created in December 1917—were of a new type.[3] They were aimed at purifying society of "counter-revolutionary" elements. The latter were defined by their actions (real or fabricated by the prosecution), but also—and this is a key difference—by their *a priori* membership in a given category: children of nobles or priests, "kulaks" (rich peasants), or "punished peoples" who were suspected of complicity with the Axis powers during World War II (such as the Crimean Tatars).

All of these became targets for a form of surveillance that, in fact, eventually concerned everybody and resorted not only to specialized agencies, but also to very extensive networks of agents and informers. This process reached its climax with the Stasi in East Germany.

***Books and Ideas:* And the second difference?**

Sophie Cœuré: The second difference concerns the legal framework and the separation of powers. The essential distinction between administrative decisions and judicial ones was not

[2] Jean-Marc Berlière and Pierre Fournié (eds.), *Fichés? Photographie et identification, 1850-1960*, Paris, Perrin, 2011; and Exposition virtuelle sur le site Criminocorpus.

[3] See Nicolas Werth, "Un État contre son peuple," *in* Stéphane Courtois (ed.), *Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1998.

respected in the communist states. The latter established systems of permanent surveillance that lay outside the purview of justice—as did the Nazi state and later the Latin American dictatorships.

In democracies, there are controls by the courts as well as Parliament, which alone can establish extraordinary jurisdictions or vote laws to generalize surveillance in the event of a war or state of emergency. But the history of Europe between 1940 and 1944 shows how "ordinary" instruments of surveillance—such as files—can rapidly become tools for identification, exclusion, oppression, and even genocide. Claire Zalc has shown this in her recent work on denaturalizations under Vichy.[4]

Books and Ideas: **Do these differences preclude us from speaking of an overall rise in surveillance in the twentieth century?**

Sophie Cœuré: Without ignoring the differences in nature and scale between democracies and dictatorships, it can be argued that, in the twentieth century, the common point between them was the "inflation of surveillance." In the late 1930s, central administrations in France had collected 7 million files! All this makes for beautiful archives, provided historians read them carefully, as mistakes are common in surveillance records. Unfortunately, because the archives of administrations descended from the Cheka (GPU-NKVD and KGB) are closed, there is little basis for comparison between France and the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the knowledge produced in this way is an obvious political stake. In the early days of the Occupation, in 1940, the Germans took hold of the central registry of France's *Sûreté nationale* (National Security), which concentrated approximately 650,000 individual records and 2 million nominative files. The registry was seized in 1945-1946 by the Soviet services, which kept it secret until the fall of the USSR. This "Moscow fund" is now preserved in the *Archives Nationales*. The interception of intelligence became a key issue during the Second World War and the Cold War, and remained so thereafter.

Books and Ideas: **Are we living with the legacy of those societies? Or are we heading towards a radically new form of surveillance?**

Sophie Cœuré: Of course, the development of the means of communication—for instance, the appearance of the telephone—caused surveillance to evolve. But the major turning point was computerization, which paved the way for a change of scale in the collection, processing, and storage of data starting in the 1970s.

Since the 1990s, the evolution of technology (Internet, GPS, surveillance cameras) has provided states with greater and virtually instantaneous powers. As recent affairs involving the US National Security Agency have shown, the danger of extending surveillance indiscriminately—without defining its targets precisely and locally—is even greater now that terrorist threats are becoming more global and more complex. This would seem to entail a change in the nature of mass surveillance.

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[4] Claire Zalc, *Des relations de pouvoir ordinaires: les dénaturalisations sous Vichy*, mémoire d'habilitation à diriger des recherches, 2015.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that we should not exaggerate the “securitarian” inflation (the term “*sécuritaire”* appeared in the early 1980s in France, and has since been on everyone’s lips) in democracies, whether in the US or in Europe: Legal and parliamentary safeguards are still clearly in place. Knowing the antecedents of totalitarianisms and identifying their persistent traces in China or in Russia helps to put things in useful perspective. Moreover, the 1970s saw the emergence of citizen vigilantism, which facilitated the voting of supervisory laws (the French “Data Protection Act” of 1978) and created new forms of intervention such as Wikileaks.

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