

Watching the Population: Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Modern State

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Abstract: The paper will examine the relationship between biopolitical surveillance and practices of the modern state. It will focus on the role of the census as an instrument of biopolitical surveillance, explaining how the systematic collection of demographic data renders the population visible and countable. The article will examine the census practices in the United Kingdom and the United States of America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The article will show how the census, as a technology of power, played an important role in the process of nation-building in the United Kingdom, and on the other hand, promoted racial discourses in the United States of America. It will conclude that the census, often perceived as a neutral administrative tool, played a significant role in the expansion of biopolitical surveillance and the consolidation of state power in contemporary liberal democracies.

Keywords: Biopolitics, surveillance, discourse, discipline, census, rationalities, state, race.

I. INTRODUCTION

Surveillance practices have existed since ancient times, but they have acquired distinctive characteristics in modern times. Modern society developed administrative rationalities and scientific technologies aiming to create social order based on the biological attributes of human life. The French thinker Michel Foucault termed the phenomenon as biopolitics. According to Foucault, biopolitics emerged when ‘...the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power...’ (Foucault, 2009). It was a new form of power distinct from the old sovereign model prevalent in the European landscape. In the sovereign model of power, the monarchy and its attributes are important. Sovereign power is juridical, focusing on the legal and administrative machinery. The main aim of the sovereign power is to protect and expand the state's territory. Roman law, cartography, printing technology, bureaucracy, army, and mercantilism were the main attributes of sovereign power (2013, pp. 323–324).

II. MEANING AND FEATURES OF BIOPOLITICS

In contrast, the main target of biopolitics is human life. When life becomes the privileged object of political power, the biological aspects of human life become the object of surveillance. Biopolitics aims to foster the life of the individual and the population because, in the nineteenth century, human beings became the main attribute of state power. The rise of modern capitalism, democracy, urbanization, industrialization, and modern science made human life an important element of state power and wealth (Foucault, 2009, p. 69).

Biopolitics functioned along two axes of power. The first was disciplinary power that targets human bodies. The main aim of the disciplinary power was to make productive use of human labour. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, disciplinary surveillance has been used to turn human beings into productive labour by the capitalist system and docile subjects of the institutions of the state. Factories, schools, hospitals, and prisons were based on the panoptic mechanism (Foucault, 1980, p. 71). In the nineteenth century, biopolitical surveillance aimed at taking hold of the lives of the population. The finer aspects of human lives, like sexuality, health, hygiene, diseases, and psyche, etc., came under the gaze of biopolitical surveillance (Foucault, 1980, p. 161). Disciplinary and biopolitical surveillance mechanisms targeted human life for multiple purposes like security, welfare, health, economy, and war. Both types of surveillance created normative

categories like normal/ abnormal, healthy/ pathological, productive/ destructive, and efficient/ inefficient in order to classify the population. The normative categories are outcomes of power- knowledge practices of the given age, which is used by the modern state to increase its power (Lyon, 1994, p. 7). The role of technology has been crucial in the amplification and intensification of the surveillance powers of the modern state. Census, statistics, medicine, sexuality, race, and biological science became the main elements of biopolitical surveillance.

III. CENSUS AND BIOPOLITICAL SURVEILLANCE

Census taking has a long history and existed in ancient Greece, Egypt, Rome, and China is a massive exercise conducted by the state to enumerate its population. The primary focus was on assessing military capability or tax collection. Since the eighteenth century onwards, population became the main focus of census activity (Central Statistical Office, n.d.). In 1662 John Graunt drew a demographic table of mortality rates in the city of London. Several colonies like Peru, Virginia, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, were subjected to statistical study to assess their resources. Ireland was looted by the British in 1679 by carrying out a prior survey of land, buildings, and cattle (Hacking, 1990, p. 17). Statistical information as an instrument of state power was used to measure material resources. Census technology to assess the manpower was envisaged by the philosopher Leibniz, who sent a memorandum to Prince Frederick in 1700 to conduct a statistical survey of the population. He believed that the true strength of the state was its people. Leibniz's argument for conducting a population census was linked to his proposal for tax reforms and a national insurance scheme. By 1730, the official statistics classified the Prussian population into nine categories. The figures were kept secret for fear that alerting the enemies loomed large in the minds of the Prussian authorities (Hacking, 1990, p. 19). The modern census began in the 18th century when the modern state made population the source of its strength. With the rise of statistical discipline, probabilistic knowledge of the population became possible. Statistical knowledge created facts about the multitude by converting it into categories. As Ian Hacking argued, during the 19th century, 'social facts simply became facts that are statistical in character' (Hacking, 1991, p. 182). Statistical technology was integrated in the apparatus of biopower.

Census became an element of a security dispositif in the 19th century. Biopolitical surveillance through census was motivated, influenced, and guided by factors like state security, identifying the normal population, race science, eugenics, commercial interest, medicine, immigration, welfare, etc. Biopolitical surveillance mechanisms were used for regulating the movement, flow, and circulation of the population within the milieu. The forms of knowledge-power and the role of discourses were important in shaping these surveillance practices (Levitan, 2011, pp. 3-4). In the formative phase, census enumeration was a time-consuming process due to a lack of modern technology, communication, and transport. With the passage of time, new technologies like punch card machines began to heavily influence the census process. The cumbersomeness of the census grew as new categories were introduced. Categories are not merely conceptual knowledge but technical means to intervene in the social world. Examples from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany will elucidate how surveillance functions through the census. Through these examples, it will be shown how biopolitics operating through the census can foster, discriminate, and destroy certain types of population (Desrosières, 1998, p. 236).

IV. CENSUS FOR NATION-BUILDING IN ENGLAND

Britain conducted its first census in 1801. Other countries like the United States and France started census between 1790 and 1805; a period marked by revolutionary politics. The social landscape of England underwent rapid change after industrialization, causing the disintegration of traditional social ties and a large-scale movement of population towards cities. Urban towns and cities became sites of unemployed, poor, migratory, dangerous, and criminal populations. An important discourse in the beginning of the nineteenth century was identifying surplus population. Surplus became a negative term to refer to people lacking productivity in terms of labour power and posing a security threat to the nation (Levitan, 2011, p.47). Identifying such surplus groups harmful to the social body became a concern for both the state and the social elites. The notion of surplus gained traction from Thomas Malthus's works, who argued in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* that excess population put pressure on the agricultural productivity of the country. The English state was concerned about the relation between poverty and social discontent because similar conditions in France in the 18th century had fuelled the French Revolution (Levitan, 2011, p.48). Understanding the number and nature of the population was necessary from the perspective of national security and social stability.

In 1800, Abbot, a member of the House of Commons, demanded a count of the population for three reasons, namely, to propose measures to tackle food scarcity prevalent at that time, trade disruptions caused by Napoleonic wars and the need of the armed forces (Levitan, 2011, p.15). He highlighted the benefits of the census if Britain wanted to retain its superiority

in international politics by pointing to the census activities conducted by its competitors, like the United States and Spain. The Parliament passed the bill, and the first census was conducted in 1801. It was around the same time that positive discourse about statistical science developed in Britain. For instance, a minister called Richard Price contended that with statistical data in place, governments cannot legislate arbitrarily, and this would help check the power of government and safeguard liberty. John Rickman, who was a statistician and public servant when the first census was conducted, saw in the census a potential to develop statistical knowledge of the industrious workforce and armed forces that would bring national pride to England in world politics (The History Press, n.d.).

The first census collected information needed to meet the requirements of national security and the economy. The 1831 census included age groups, forms of occupation or trade, number of families in household etc. The insurance companies lobbied in the Parliament to collect such information in order to estimate the cost of annuities (Levitan, 2011, p.20). After 1830s there was a demand to improve the census techniques in order to fine-grain the information about the population, industry, economy, and defence. The Statistical Society of England was established on the suggestion of Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet. It developed a close relationship with the British Parliament. Census became an element of a security dispositif. The Office of Registrar General was formed in 1837 through a parliamentary act, and officials were recruited. One objective was to collect mortality statistics to improve public health. The linking of statistics to medicine resulted in greater state intervention in health issues. It increased the centralizing power of the state. Census was becoming a powerful tool of mass surveillance (Higgs, 2014, p. 25). Levitan argued that it would be misleading to assume that the census was used for surveillance alone; it served other functions like nation-building, the enforcement of rights, and empowering citizens.

Census created both singular and multiple identities. It allowed the population to envisage itself as belonging to a single community of a nation called Britain. At the same time, multiple categories like gender, class, region, etc., coexisted with singular categories. Competing groups began to claim representational rights during the 1832 reforms bill by using census numbers. The industrial middle class demanded new Parliamentary districts in urban centres (Levitan, 2011, p.7). By the mid 18th century, class divisions intensified in England, and the focus of the state was to create national cohesion. The census was used to understand various aspects of poverty, unemployment, health, and education in greater detail. The population census later paved the way for the emergence of the welfare state in England in the twentieth century. The availability of census data became a powerful tool in the twentieth century to criticise social and economic injustice suffered by the working-class population. The Beveridge Report of 1942, after studying previous census and survey reports, advocated the creation of a modern welfare state. It highlighted the need to urgently address five giant evils: want, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness. The report proposed the creation of a national insurance scheme to provide old age pensions, unemployment and sickness benefits, family allowances, and free, universal health care (Buchanan, 2017).

V. SURVEILLANCE, RACE, AND CENSUS IN AMERICA

America, like the United Kingdom, has the dubious distinction of being the most advanced form of surveillance state among Western democracies. From inception, the census in the United States set the tone for racial discourse. The abstract ideas of equality propounded by the republican constitution were diluted by the concrete racial discourse of white superiority and the pragmatism of keeping slaves for the agricultural economy in the South. Article 1 of the Constitution provided apportionment of seats on the basis of enumeration. Race was inscribed in the constitution as it identified three categories of population: 'free persons' (white American Europeans), 'Indians not taxed' (Native Americans), and 'other persons' (black slaves) (Jobe, 2004, p. 67). The first census of 1790 included a fivefold classification- free white males of 16 years and upward, free white males under 16, free white females, all other free persons, and slaves. The discriminatory laws and census categories regarding blacks were deliberately crafted by the white population to preserve its racial superiority. Surveillance of the black population was part of institutionalized racism practiced by the state. Census based on statistical categories has epistemological significance. Classificatory power can have disciplinary effects on the people (Mezey, 2003, p. 1705).

By 1850, pseudoscientific racial theories gripped the American scientific community. The American School of Ethnology openly claimed that the differences and inequality among human races were natural. Implicit in their theory was the assumption of white race superiority. During the same time, racial conflict was intensifying on the issue of slavery. Supporters of slavery were drawing evidence from racial theories like polygenism to justify slavery. The Secretary of State Calhoun used some 1840 census figures to argue that freed slaves were likely to suffer from mental illness and other

disabilities compared to their enslaved brethren. The United States Congress was eager to know the degree of separation between whites and slaves and the impact of racial intermixing. The so-called scientific evidence was provided by Josiah Nott, a polygenist who had written an article in the prestigious American Journal of Medical Science about the consequences of interracial marriage. He considered Anglo-Saxons and African Americans to be distinct human species. He further stated that the offspring of interracial marriage will be a hybrid i.e. mulatto. The mulatto, being a defective species, suffered from reduced fertility. Nott's argument was supported by other ethnologists, and it produced deep impact on the political climate in America (Brace, 1974, p. 516). After some debates, the United States Congress inserted mulatto category in the census to identify the population of mulattoes (Nobles, 2004, pp. 51–52). By 1890, polygenism was combined with Darwinism. The natural selection thesis of Darwin was given a racial interpretation of survival of the fittest. Efforts were made to prove through statistical data that mulattoes – hybrid of black and non white race have high mortality rates. The intense surveillance of blacks can be proved from the instructions given to the enumerators in 1870, which read, 'Be particularly careful in reporting the class Mulatto. The word here is generic, and includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood. Important scientific results depend upon the correct determination of this class...' (Nobles, 2004, p.53)

While racial discourse against blacks had created well-defined racial categories and resultant surveillance, the entry of the Chinese immigrants created confusion about racial categories. Between 1840 and 1870, some 6 million Europeans and 70,000 Chinese arrived in America. While the immigrants from Europe were counted as white, the 1870 census added a new category to enumerate the Chinese population as non-white Europeans. A decade earlier, in the 1860 census, they were classified as Asiatics. In the coming decade, the Chinese migrant's concentration in California and their heavy presence in main industries like railway, road, mining, and agriculture created disquiet among the white labour force and they pressured the government to deal with the Chinese problem. In response, the federal government considered Chinese as a new racial category; this was done to facilitate discipline, regulate and monitor the Chinese population (Mezey, 2003, pp.1725-1727). Following the census-based racial categorization, the Chinese came under surveillance with the passage of the Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Geary Act of 1892, which required Chinese to obtain identification certificates of residence to avoid arrest and deportation. The law provided for summary deportation in case of failure. Even the Supreme Court upheld the act in 1893 (Mezey, 2003, p.1741). In the 20th century, it was the Japanese immigrant population who came under surveillance on account of national security. After the Pearl Harbour attack in December 1941 and the subsequent entry of America into World War II, the quarantine of Japanese-Americans led to the internment of Japanese-Americans on account of national security. The Census Bureau allegedly provided aggregated data of the Japanese Americans to the War Department. It resulted in the internment of 1,00,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast (Electronic Privacy Information Center, n.d.).

In the 20th century, racial science lost its legitimacy, and consequently, census categories were defined more in terms of socio-economic dimension; racial nomenclatures were simultaneously retained. Census surveillance also took a positive turn when it began to respond to the aspirations of blacks who demanded racial equality. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, census surveillance was geared to provide welfare services to the black community by enumerating data on poverty, unemployment, education and health statistics of the African American population. Welfare policies were further strengthened by the New Deal Programme of President Roosevelt and President Johnson's Great Society Programme. The affirmative action policies from the time of President Johnson regularly used census figures to map the progress of blacks, Hispanics, and women in the field of education and employment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established in 1965 to enforce federal laws that made it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age, disability or genetic information. It uses the census data to highlight achievements and deficits of state policies in promoting racial equality and diversity (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.).

VI. CONCLUSION

The census was the first political technology of mass surveillance. Census as a form of biopolitical surveillance was based on statistical science, but the enumeration practices were also influenced by other discourses like state security, identifying the normal population, biological racism, eugenics, commercial interest, medicine, immigration, welfare, etc. In the United Kingdom, the census played a vital role in the process of nation-building. Initially confined to assessing the surplus population and industrial production, its scope widened as new data was collected about social welfare, public health, and

insurance. In the United States, the census was used to institutionalise slavery, which was encoded in the Constitution of America. With the rise of biological racism in the mid-19th century, the census became an important instrument of subjecting the African American community to state surveillance. In the case of Chinese immigrants, the census was used for ethnic categorisation, and during World War II, census data was used to quarantine Japanese Americans on grounds of national security.

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