

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE: A TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL MIRAGE

Video surveillance is the system designed for the remote surveillance of a given space using closed circuit TV (CCTV) cameras. All sorts of material are available, including fixed, pivoting, and miniature cameras, equipped with a zoom or an image intensifier, and so on. Technical set-ups vary enormously, ranging from a single camera linked to a monitor and a video recorder to CCTV control rooms capable of visualizing images from several dozens of different cameras, and even including the resources of home automation devices linking cameras to home TVs, for the occupants of “high security” residences.

Considerable technological advances have been made over the last decade, especially with the shift from analog to digital systems and the attendant increased storage and treatment capacities for the images collected. At the same time, political interventions and discourse on the subject have also changed considerably in France. In the 1990s the government merely adopted a statutory framework defining norms for the development of such systems in urban public spaces. Its action led to the implementation of *département*-level committees in charge of enforcing the regulations established by the Ministry of the Interior services.¹ In addition, it actively promoted a criminological doctrine expounded by English-speaking authors, “situational prevention,” aimed at reducing the opportunity to commit offenses rather than acting on potential offenders. This

doctrine rapidly replaced the traditional social prevention objectives and in practice made security technologies central to urban and residential development operations, including techniques for increasing the effort demanded for offending (locks, fences, etc.), techniques increasing the risks run by offenders (alarms, video surveillance, etc.), and techniques to reduce profitability (marking of goods, etc.).² As might be expected, the security technology market was soon flourishing, especially the video surveillance market, with a turnover of 490.3 million euros in 2003, compared to 224.4 million in 1993 (+ 118%).

Strangely enough, local governments showed no enthusiasm for video surveillance until the late 1990s. Only about sixty communities resorted to them for monitoring public places. In other words, the immense majority of the people who ran these systems did so for clients in private places (shopping centers, banks, firms, residences, and so on) or simply used them for their own devices.

With the right back in power enduringly, and after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the fight against terrorism came to the forefront in official rhetoric on security/safety, and video surveillance was soon viewed as an “all-purpose machine,” capable of preventing the risk of attacks and urban uprisings, dissuading undesirables, identifying terrorists and offenders, supervising police officers’ work on the streets, reassuring people, and so on. This time, local communities kept pace; either out of conviction, imitation, or for lack of imagination, all invested massively in these technological systems. Sixty districts were filming streets in 1999, and over 600 at the end of 2006, a 1,000% increment in less than a decade. Moreover, regions and *départements* gave financial support for plans to

equip facilities such as transportation and schools in particular. The Île-de-France region, for instance, which had already devoted 30% of its safe public transportation budget to video surveillance between 1998 and 2002, went on to spend over 70% on it between 2003 and 2007.

FRAGMENTARY ARGUMENTS

Can continuously installing more technical surveillance devices constitute a security policy? The answer is already partially contained in the official statements voiced throughout the mass media in 2007, inasmuch as these reveal the underlying incoherence of the plan developed by the ministry and its inconsiderate fascination with CCTV.

On July 8, newly elected president Nicolas Sarkozy stated in an interview to the *Journal du dimanche* that he had asked the Ministry of the Interior “to think about a far-ranging plan to equip our public transportation networks with cameras” to fight the terrorist threat. On July 26, Minister of the Interior Michèle Alliot-Marie announced her decision to “triple” France’s existing video surveillance capacity “as soon as possible,” so as “to protect the French people against the terrorist risk and against some risks of violence.” To “cover as much of the territory as possible,” she said, it was indispensable to work toward “better networking” of the different systems already in existence, among which she mentioned the Paris bus and subway system (RATP), the railroads (SNCF), local communities and department stores. On November 9, the minister gave further details on her objectives in an official speech: “My ambition is both quantitative and qualitative. On the quantitative side, I want to triple the number of surveillance cameras on

the streets in two years, going from 20,000 to 60,000. On the qualitative side, I want modern systems, giving the police access to the images collected by municipalities and by the managers of major public places such as transportation systems, shopping centers, sports facilities ...” Before that, the minister had been careful to explain what her motivations were: “The efficiency of video surveillance in significantly improving security in everyday life no longer needs to be proven. It has been clearly demonstrated by experience in other countries, and especially in Great Britain with the elucidation of child killings and terrorist crimes. Local experiments corroborate this day after day. Now we must admit that our country is lagging behind ... An estimated 340,000 cameras have been authorized in accordance with the 1995 Act, but only 20,000 are in public places.”

Is France lagging behind? If we stop at the systems reported to the prefecture in the framework of the 1995 Act, which is to say, the systems operating in public places or in “private places open to the public” (shops, sports facilities, etc.), that might almost be believable. From 1997 to late 2006, prefectures issued nearly 78,000 authorizations to install video surveillance systems, representing over 340,000 cameras.³ But if we focus on actual equipment, of which the ministry feigns ignorance, the figures make one’s head spin: 400,000 video surveillance systems are presently installed in France, representing two to three million cameras. The reason is that prefectural authorizations are only required for a fraction of systems, the rest being composed of material equipping businesses, schools, individual and collective housing, and so on, to which the law does not apply and which the administration therefore does not count. This equipment does nonetheless affect the “everyday

security” of the people who live in those places or attend them daily to work, travel, or study—an everyday life not entirely composed of “child killings and terrorist crimes,” as the minister would suggest. Given the number of systems already working, the argument of a camera deficit to justify new investments seems fallacious, unless we look at the ministry’s acknowledged goal: to convince private security agencies and municipalities to extend and/or modernize their technical equipment so as to increase the efficacy of the police forces, whose performance in their preventive urban security mission is quite mediocre.

Protecting the French people against the risk of terrorism? Here too, we might find the argument convincing had video surveillance already proved effective. The repeated attacks on public buildings (gendarmerie, tax collector’s offices, etc.) in Corsica in spite of their surveillance camera systems seem to argue against this. A report by the General inspection of the administration (IGA), ordered in August 2005 by the Ministry of the Interior to study the impact of video surveillance on the fight against terrorism in France actually corroborates what we already knew: “The fight against terrorism should not be a mere alibi for equipping whole sectors of the daily-life environment without any in-depth reflection on the utility of these devices. Such reflection should not exclude any question, and more particularly, the question of the real contribution of video surveillance to the deterrence of terrorist acts. Video recordings have proved useful for investigation purposes, once an act has been committed ... It is not at all clear how the mere presence of cameras can deter a group of terrorists, determined and prepared to die in the doing, from committing their acts. In point of fact, whereas the ability of the British to rapidly obtain

images of the terrorist commando [in London in July 2005] has been boasted, it is also noteworthy that video surveillance did not, alas, deter those terrorists from acting.”⁴

Moreover, as to the utility of the recordings for investigation purposes, it should be said that the highly publicized successful cases are the exception, for the task is immense and tremendously exacting. A camera films everything within its field of vision, irrespective of any specific causative relation, and collects huge amounts of material; that is, since a single device films 25 images per second, yielding over 2 million images per 24 hours, a system comprised of twenty-odd cameras records several dozen millions of images in a single day! The outcome is that viewing provides much more information than is demanded by the purpose of the system. In actual practice, this raises serious problems for investigators and for operators monitoring the screens. Mike McCahill and Clive Norris report the example of the British police searching for the perpetrator of several bombings in London in April 1999: close to 1,100 videotapes containing over 25,000 hours of footage were viewed by some fifty detectives employed for ten days before they succeeded in identifying the suspect.⁵

Can one claim to “fight the terrorist risk” using video surveillance and at the same time “cover as much of the territory as possible”? The ministry of the Interior makes that claim, very audaciously, whereas its top advisers clearly assert the opposite, in writing. Here again, the IGA report is highly instructive: “A policy of broad coverage is not a recommended orientation for the coming years; the definition of high-priority sectors is more in keeping with the legal system, budgetary constraints and operational needs... First, given our legal system, broad cover-

age is not in keeping with the full exercise of civil liberties. Financially speaking, this would be an extremely expensive solution, one which contradicts the proper use of public monies which may be employed to fight terrorism in other ways, especially through intelligence. Operationally speaking, the police antiterrorist strategy would not necessarily be strengthened by very broad territorial coverage. While too many cameras do not actually kill the images, they do kill the possibility of intelligibly exploiting such an overabundant spate of images.”⁶ The author of the report concludes, logically, with a call for establishment of a hierarchy of priorities and for rational use of these systems so as to target specific places. He certainly does not seem to have been heard. This necessity actually greatly exceeds the framework of the fight against any terrorist threat, as shown by studies conducted by British scholars over the last fifteen years.

THE NEED TO DEFINE OPTIONS

It is, indeed, in Great Britain that professional researchers have developed methods for evaluating video surveillance systems and conducted many field investigations.⁷ These studies are tremendously valuable inasmuch as practically no research of the sort has been done in France.⁸ Now, these scholars unanimously point out that placing cameras in urban public space does not suffice to prevent offending. Why? For many reasons, but we will concentrate on two of them here.

First, much behavior is unforeseeable. This is the case, for instance, for impulsive acts (by violent or aggressive individuals). The presence of cameras has never dissuaded drunken youths from fighting outside a bar to defend their “honor.”

Other acts cannot be detected by a video operator monitoring a wall covered by screens. This is true in particular of premeditated action by “professional” offenders such as pickpockets who are accustomed to taking into account the existence of alarms and/or detection devices.

Next, to use a technological metaphor, we must realize that the intrinsic properties of video surveillance are a far cry from those of an unguided ballistic missile. It would actually be more correct to place CCTV in the washing machine category: several programs are available, but the owner can only use one at a time. Video surveillance may indeed serve several types of activities (deterrence of some acts, assistance to local patrolling, assistance in securing proof, handling of fear of/concern with crime within the population, and so forth), but it is inconceivable for a same system to permanently serve all those objectives at the same time, with the same intensity and the same operators doing the monitoring.⁹

It is in the best interest of the security wares business to encourage the idea that video surveillance is an “all-purpose machine” to make sure that potential investors will continue to support installation projects. But once the cameras have been positioned, this confusion has rather disastrous effects. Operators then find themselves all alone, obliged day in and day out to discriminate between people and events so as to define an order of priority and decide how much weight to give to the rules defined by the private or municipal agencies who employ them, those of the police officers with whom they work on a daily basis, and the public authorities that financed the material.¹⁰ This is not to say that video surveillance is of no utility in managing urban problems, but that precise, realistic

objectives must be defined and the efforts targeted if they are to produce significant results.

Following a study of thirteen different sites (town centers, residential areas, car parks, etc.), M. Gill and A. Spriggs point out that “the installation of large numbers of cameras provides no additional benefit. Numbers of cameras are not as important as their being strategically placed so as to view as much of the intended target area as possible.”¹¹ Similarly, a study conducted in the Montreal subway concludes that the equipment program is a failure, pointing out that what is decisive in so huge a space is less the quality (or the number) of cameras than their distribution: “The cameras were sprinkled over 13 subway stations, and in each station cameras were distributed quite independently of the actual topography of crime. Concentrating resources in fewer stations but targeting those clearly showing a preoccupying level of crime would have been more effective.”¹² This again postulates analysis of the problems dealt with and accurate definition of objectives prior to the deployment of the devices.

A DIRE LACK OF THOROUGH ANALYSIS

To account for the limited efficiency of video surveillance in preventing urban offending, M. Gill and A. Spriggs also point to the defective institutional context in which those systems were developed in Great Britain. Funding programs (*CCTV Challenge Competition*, *Crime Reduction Program*, and others) encouraged towns to acquire CCTV but required no real diagnosis of the situation or justification of their need for it. For generic reasons, they say, video surveillance is viewed as

virtually an end in itself: “planners had so much faith in CCTV’s efficacy that they saw little need to justify its installation...”

Whereas faith (ecstatic, sincere, or feigned) in the power of technology is equally shared on both sides of the Channel, it is encouraged on the French side by the striking absence of documented, critical evaluations. This absence is particularly regrettable since the deployment of these systems throughout urban spaces represents a potential threat to civil liberties and is paid for by the money of tax-payers who might legitimately demand periodic assessment of the relevance of this expensive equipment. This is regular practice nowadays for health, social and educational facilities, why shouldn’t the same be true for security systems?

Upstream of this, the communities that completely or partially finance these systems are no more demanding than the British in examining the adequacy of the tool to its cost and its satisfaction of people’s needs. The IGA report describes the situation (on p. 8) in rather disillusioned terms: “Most of the time, the network [of installed cameras] is poorly conceived and lacks strategic vision... It is as if the main purpose of installing cameras were to furnish a visible response to complaints; it enables the outfitter to communicate on the means implemented or the very short-term results, with no overall analysis of the problem involved and the response provided. The inauguration of a network of thirty cameras covering a disorderly neighborhood, then of a wall covered by TV screens manned by a staff of more or less numerous and competent operators stands in for a state-of-the-art security policy.”¹³ In short, the situation is disastrous. But the author of the report refrains from delving into the causes.

CONCLUSION

Actually, the main reason for this situation is the role played by consultants and other self-proclaimed specialists who abound on the security market. Public action is polluted by these peddlers of wares and services, more intent on keeping their lucrative business going than on promoting the general interest, and whose simplistic analyses are produced to substantiate their client's beliefs or representations.¹⁴ The second reason is the attitude of elected officials who are uneager to enlarge the circle of actors susceptible of participating in the construction of knowledge about the city and its disorders and in the development of projects taking the interests of the entire population into consideration. The installation of a video surveillance system is discussed behind closed doors, where thinking about ways of fighting offending is almost exclusively done by the authoritarian administrations (the justice system, police and gendarmerie). This leaves little room for critical reflection on their own functioning, the relevance of the means employed, and the ways of evaluating concrete action. Local elected officials no doubt find this advantageous, since they can show their constituency that they have done something, and hope to obtain additional technical equipment. Nonetheless, the pernicious effects of this stance are already evident, especially in those derelict neighborhoods where the feeling of having been abandoned is stronger than ever.

The last reason is the irrational belief that the use of technological tools is necessarily a source of progress in the management of human affairs. That a technical innovation be attended by utopian or ideological discourse on the supposed societal upheaval it will produce is not in itself surprising.¹⁵ We

have witnessed that recently with telematics, micro-computing and the internet. The same thing is happening now with video surveillance, supported by the same kind of discourse (the ideal of transparency, of omnipotent devices, the necessary renunciation of protecting privacy, etc.).

What is far more surprising, on the other hand, is the persistence of the same discourse over the years, even once video surveillance has been put to the tests and has clearly shown its limits as a public security tool. To the point where some elected officials presently confess, extremely discreetly, that these systems must be put to other uses—among which “locating homeless individuals” and “assisting the road maintenance department”—so as to cover investments and not lose face. This does not however preclude the question of whether the technological mirage is on its way out.

NOTES

- 1 See the October 17, 1996 ruling on video surveillance adopted in application of the January 21, 1995 Act relative to security.
- 2 See, especially, R. Clarke, “Les technologies de la prévention situationnelle”, *Les Cahiers de la sécurité intérieure* 21 (1995), 101-113.
- 3 Source: Ministry of the Interior, *Rapport faisant état de l'activité des commissions départementales*, DLPAJ, (2007, unpublished), 6.
- 4 Ph. Melchior (ed.), *La vidéosurveillance et la lutte contre le terrorisme*, Résumé, unpublished, (IGA, 2005), 14.
- 5 M. McCahill & C. Norris, *CCTV in London*, 2002, Working Paper n° 3, “Urban Eye” European Research Programme (available on line at the same name website).
- 6 Ph. Melchior (ed.), *La vidéosurveillance et la lutte contre le terrorisme*, op. cit., 12.
- 7 For a synthetic analysis of these studies, see E. Heilmann, “La vidéosurveillance, une réponse à la criminalité ?”, *Criminologie* 1 (2003), 89-102.
- 8 With one noteworthy exception: S. Mariotte (ed.). *Évaluation de l'impact de la vidéosurveillance sur la sécurisation des transports en commun en Région Île-de-France*. Final report, (IAURIF, 2004).
- 9 With the exception of monitoring of car parks, where the nature of the facilities (closed and not very large) facilitates the work of operators whose sole aim is to protect parked vehicles.
- 10 See C. Norris, G. Armstrong, *The Maximum Surveillance Society. The Rise of CCTV* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).
- 11 M. Gill & A. Spriggs, *Assessing the impact of CCTV*, (London: Home Office Research Study n° 292, 2005) (on line on the Home Office website).
- 12 P. Tremblay, R. Grandmaison, “Évaluation des effets de la télésurveillance sur la criminalité commise dans 13 stations du métro de Montréal”, *Criminologie* 30 (1997), 93-110.

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- 13 Ph. Melchior (ed.), *La vidéosurveillance et la lutte contre le terrorisme*, op. cit., 8.
- 14 On the role played by these specialists, see L. Mucchielli, “L’expertise policière de la ‘violence urbaine’”, *Déviance et société* 4 (2000), 351-176, and R. Vargas’ instructive documentary film, *Marchands de sécurité*, Arte prod. (2002).
- 15 See, in particular, P. Flichy, *L’innovation technique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995).