

SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON SECURITY THROUGH SURVEILLANCE

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This article initiates a Sociology of Security. Such a field should analyze how conditions transpire for security – however defined – to surface as a value in individual and collective living, how this value comes to be articulated, and how different kinds of individual and collective experiences shape its meaning. In addition, a Sociology of Security should pay attention to how the kinds of individual and collective responses to particular understandings of security, institutions and policies put in place to this end (or lack thereof), and consequences of such practices are shaping the nature of our social world and the aesthetics of our physical environment. Specific focus is on the relationship between security and surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns related to “security” have become an intimate part of our collective life and have come to powerfully shape the nature of our social relations. Its rise in prominence through discourse and practice suggests that “security” can be such a powerful socio-cultural construct that it becomes a dominant ordering principle in social life. I refer to these dynamics as security meta-framing, a process through which other visions of ways of living are evaluated in relation to security (Bajc 2011a). As an analytical tool, security meta-framing can help us understand the interplay of forces through which security comes to influence the ways in which we relate to each other as it rises to the top of collective priorities by competing with other values of social organization in modern societies, such as privacy, human rights, or democracy. These dynamics reflect an ongoing struggle between democratic values and authoritarian bureaucratic organization on which a modern democratic social order is based (Bajc 2007a).

Through particular cultural understandings of safety and disorder, together with surveillance activities by an apparatus of security-related institutions and their operatives, security meta-framing is a struggle to shape the nature of our social world as well as the aesthetics of our physical environment. In a meta-framing dynamic, the prefix “meta” signifies a necessary hierarchy in which security dominates as a logic of thought and practice to reduce uncertainty and complexity in situations of everyday life. The intricacies of these dynamics and their cross-cultural variations can be understood through contextualized, empirically grounded research (e.g. Berda 2013; Sáenz 2013; Stampnitzky 2013). Sociology should analyze how conditions transpire for “security” to surface as a value in individual and collective living, how this value comes to be articulated, and how different kinds of individual and collective experiences shape its meaning. It should pay attention to the kinds of individual and collective responses to particular understandings of security, institutions, and policies put in place to this end (or lack thereof), and consequences of such practice.

TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF SECURITY

It is instructive to consider that the study of security has traditionally been the domain of the so-called security studies, a subfield of international relations, which developed mainly in the United States and Europe after World War II in relation to policy needs of Western governments (see Williams 2012). Within a wide variety of voices and traditions in these circles there seems

to be an agreement that while the notion of “security” does have a peculiar capacity to mobilize collective material and political resources as well as public attention, it is nevertheless not possible to derive at an agreed-upon definition of what “security” might entail. Instead, one of the central issues in this debate seems to be whether security should be the domain of the state and national defense, or should security be more broadly understood to encompass people’s concerns about economic, social, cultural, environmental, and ecological well-being. These positions tend to be juxtaposed in terms of national security versus human security. Ole Waever (1995) and others emphasize that, particularly during the Cold War, the notion of security became intimately related to the state and as such has come to be closely intertwined with institutions of state defense. For this reason, if the state or its related entities identify particular phenomena or processes as threats to security, it will likely be institutions associated with state defense which will be mobilized and their ways of reasoning and strategizing which will end up dominating over various forms of communal organizing. It remains to be studied under what conditions the power to chart paths to security in people’s everyday life comes to be tilted toward the state and state sanctioned private enterprises.

Conceptions of security vary widely because the notion is ephemeral. Security is a perception of reality by individuals, social groups, and institutions which tends to be internalized as a feeling or an emotion and politically articulated as an ideology or an agenda. Be it from the standpoint of a national security adviser or a community member, security is a perception of the social world which has profound consequences for the way we live our daily lives (Bajc and de Lindt 2011). Notions of security encompass sets of understandings of how the world works and cultural perceptions of uncertainty and indeterminacy. Security is a domain of experience in which there are embedded specific cultural assumptions of what constitutes acceptable orderliness and disorder and different sentiments about safety and potential forces of disruption. Also embedded in these widely varied notions, experiences, and perceptions of security are, on the one hand, expectations that something must be done to control uncertainty and curtail indeterminacy and, on the other hand, persuasions that technological knowledge can make such interventions possible. As a meta-framing dynamic of thought and practice, security becomes a logic according to which classification, such as terrorist, political activist, communist, enemy combatant, are invented to act on social situations with the goal of reducing, minimizing or doing away with uncertainty and complexity of social life (Bajc 2011b, forthcoming). Experiences of the past and the present necessarily shape sentiments about security and how the logic of security meta-framing translates these sentiments into practice. These dynamics are intertwined with mass-mediated cultural imaginaries (Melley 2012) and related to colonial pasts, imperial ambitions, violent ethnic conflicts, wars and military occupation, histories of racial tension, class disparities, and socially insensitive locally imposed global economic policies (Goldstein 2010). This wide variety of social contexts within which security meta-framing dynamics are inhabited with the ambition to minimize uncertainty suggests that the logic of security as meta can be applied to any social situation and with varying effects.

Underlying many of these dynamics are specialized techniques, procedures and technologies of surveillance. Indeed, in many ways, surveillance has become a policy of choice through which security concerns are addressed. The practice of surveillance in service of security is grounded in two fundamental elements, individuation and exclusionary classification, through which it becomes possible to control and order human behavior through space and time (Bajc 2007a, 2010). Individuation is so basic to surveillance that it appears commonsensical. In most every modern state, an individual is set apart from every other by family name, given name and some form of bureaucratic identification number within which are encoded identifiers such as

date and place of birth, gender, citizenship status, or even race, religion, and ethnicity. As Foucault (2008) understood, this individuation makes state governing possible. Individuation in this sense is a process of turning a social body of people into a group of individuals and then turning the group of those individuals into subjects that can be governed. Once a person is individuated in this way, it becomes possible to record information about that individual by following their life course from birth to death.

The second foundational element of surveillance is exclusionary classification, a process that works in tandem from two directions, information to categories and categories to information. On the one hand, classification makes identification and subsequent accumulation of information practical and workable. An ever-growing pile of “raw information” is not of much use unless it can be turned into data for analysis. This means that information has to be sorted out into categories. On the other hand, classification also allows for profiling, this means invention of categories based on imaginary characteristics of a social group as a whole. In this case a classification serves as an identifier of particular behaviors and individuals said to resemble such envisioned characteristics are flagged out and positioned into such categories. As Durkheim and Mauss (1963) suggested, classifications are socially constructed categories which help us make sense of the world around us. Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]) has given us a way to understand how categories come to life through the practice of tradition and daily living and that such categories are based on interconnectedness and interrelationships between living and non-living elements. Classifications for the purposes of surveillance, in contrast, are exclusionary in that human activity can be categorized into a single taxonomy. Exclusionary taxonomies and the relationships between various categories within such taxonomies are purposefully invented by various officials and operatives with the goal to control social behavior and social change through the means of surveillance.

Once human and non-human behavior is identified and information categorized, officials can devise specifications on how to respond to these classifications and the data within. At this it becomes possible to envision future behavior based on data about past behavior by thinking out activity before it happens and imagining how human action will evolve in the future. This potential to computationally imagine future human activity seems to fuel an urge to continuously collect all possible data related to human behavior and store this data indefinitely for the purposes of some future analysis. This appears to be related to a number of developments. On-going technological innovations in data storage capabilities and centralization of data-bases may well be creating a perception that any data not collected and stored for potential future analysis is a missed opportunity. Advancements in complex systems analysis and computational mathematics may similarly offer confidence that relevant regularities and patterns of relations can be identified no matter how large and complex the data-base (Castellani and Hafferty 2009). Based on such patterns identified through data-mining using mathematical algorithms, computer simulations help envision future connections between people and objects and how these may transpire in actual physical spaces (Amoore 2011). While these imaginaries are grounded in analysis of human behavior converted into data, they do not have any necessary accuracy of prediction. Nevertheless, they are used by officials and operatives to engage in what I call elsewhere “governmentality of potentialities” (Bajc 2007a:1577-1579), procedures devised with the goal to preempt future human activity from happening.

Given that this information tends to be gathered as live feed as human beings act in space and through time, speed becomes a central issue. Information is being fed simultaneously through a wide variety of sources, among them phone communications, e-mail exchanges, internet searches, banking transactions, or high-altitude spy plane, drone, and satellite images,

coupled with instant messaging from operatives stationed locally in various places around the world. Much of this data may well be sitting in centralized data bases with limitless storage capacities to be available for data-mining at some future time as various "analysts" will see fit. In other instances, as the live feed of information is converted to data and analysis produces a vision of future human activity, a sense of urgency is created with which these professionals are expected to act to preempt this envisioned human activity from transpiring. Unexpected events that result in disproportionately large effects, for example forms of terror at public events, magnify this sense of urgency to act (Bajc forthcoming; Knorr Cetina 2005). So, too, every such unexpected event helps envision possible future activity in the sense of what may happen at any time and with what effects and, no less, serves to justify on-going, systematic compilation of data as data-mining is used to reconstruct retrospectively the pattern of such an event which had already transpired.

Following Handelman (2004) and others, exclusionary classification with all that it entails is sociologically interesting for a number of reasons. In theory, first, it allows the creators to divide the world into taxonomies in such a way that each person, tagged according to the attributes of the category, can be unambiguously positioned into a single category, information related to such category accumulated methodically, and specifications devised on how to act on this information. Second, it allows for information to be separated from human beings to which it is related so that it operates with the data and makes individuals behind the data invisible. Third, this disassociation between data and individuals to which it is related, allows the data to be classified and re-classified as the professionals see fit and the analysis itself becomes the basis for the professionals to explain human behavior. Fourth, as Weber (1964) understood, training and knowledge of surveillance professionals endow them with authority and legitimacy. Last, treating human behavior as data to be classified and analyzed as new political situations may call for makes it possible for the system to process ever-growing amounts of data without systemic crisis which data overload could potentially create.

In practice, with few exceptions (e.g. Masco 2006), there is a large lacunae in empirical research about these dynamics. How do the so-called "analysts" handle individual behavior that does not fit into given categories? Who counts as an analyst, a professional, or an expert? What happens when a professional whose responsibility is to push buttons at a base in Nevada which flies a drone over a village on the other side of the world is ordered to bomb what is classified by another professional in a different location as "dangerous gathering of enemy forces" when it becomes known that the bomb fell on several hundred people attending a wedding? What are the consequences of night raids into immigrants' homes and under what conditions do such activities transpire? How are classifications that call for such response invented? Who devises specifications on how to act on such categories? How are "analysts" selected and trained? How do operatives gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public? What is readily empirically observable in the study of such expertise is a practitioner-to-scholar and scholar-to-practitioner phenomenon. Because state-sanctioned security-related activity is grounded not only in exclusion but also in exclusivity, the practice of delivering security is delegated to specially selected operatives whose access to information is based on a hierarchy called "need-to-know basis." By gaining the privilege of access, such practitioners are able to develop expertise about security-related situations through first-hand experience. This experience, in turn, makes them valuable to scholars whose access to empirical evidence is generally severely restricted. So, we observe that such individuals publish their expert experiences in academic books and journals and their work is further disseminated as academic knowledge when these individuals are offered university positions or as scholars quote such work. Academically trained scholars, in turn, are asked to

contribute their ethnographic knowledge about local cultures and psychological processes by joining security establishments on their missions to advance security in real time (Kelly et al. 2010; Steinmetz 2013). Another set of professionals with privileged access are journalists and independent scholars whose books and newspaper commentaries are also included in academic bibliographies and have become a source of knowledge for scholars. These professionals enjoy access to high ranking officials and others involved with security policy without the constraints imposed on university affiliated social scientists who are obliged to follow professional ethics of research conduct and the rules of universities' internal review board.

Important insights about the antisocial nature of surveillance in the service of security have been derived from historical studies of strategies through which colonial powers try to establish and maintain control over territories populated by undifferentiated collectivities (e.g. Bayly 1996; Hevia 2012; Mamdani 1996; McCoy 2009; Thomas 2007). This process involves penetrating a collectivity and then rapturing the strength of its kinship ties in order to weaken people's trust and allegiance to each other and make them dependent on the imperial or state security apparatus. This often means turning them into provocateurs, informants, collaborators, or soldiers of the state against their kin. Such strategies of "intelligence gathering" exploit existing or potential weaknesses, be it impoverished conditions such as hunger, unemployment, or dire medical conditions; competitive ambition such as promises for family members to go abroad for schooling; cultural rivalries that have a potential to ignite intergroup conflict; or if all else fails simply exerting pressure or threatening to take away wealth and wellbeing (e.g. Cohen 2009, 2011).

Public announcements of the kind as "Report Suspicious Behavior" suggest that a system of public participation remains indispensable to "intelligence gathering" on the part of the state security apparatus in democratic and non-democratic states alike. Indeed, research in social movements (Davenport, forthcoming), migration (Broeders and Engbersen 2007), treatment of minorities (Bahdi 2011), contemporary urban architecture and planning (Graham 2004), law (Scheppelle 2010), and public events (Bajc 2007b, 2011b, 2012, forthcoming) suggest that surveillance technologies and techniques are applied in a wide variety of social contexts and these strategies of social control have gained a global appeal. Contemporary ethnographic work shows that in a climate of continuous exposure to potential violence, be it state-sponsored terror, violent conflicts, or street crime, surveillance strategies and security justifications tend to cut deeply into a social fabric, creating mistrust of kin and neighbors and fear of open and unguarded public spaces (for example Betts 2010; Ochs 2011). Criminalization of marginalized populations deemed a threat to security, such as undocumented migrants or the poor, fuels growth of incarceration and the expansion of surveillance strategies to control these populations (Wacquant 2009). In contrast, those with the means are able to pay for their own private security and choose to be secluded within gated communities (Arteaga Botello 2011).

As security continues to dominate as an ordering principle of social life, we also observe growth of segments of population that understand the military or security-related services to be a source of living and involvement in war settings as a way of life. The experiences of those who have learned to see their fighting skills as the only reliable way to protect themselves and their kin from what they understand to be a dangerous and violent world can also be studied in areas where military installations have shaped the population in local towns and cities (Lutz 2001). Such sentiments are also related to the burgeoning of the so called private security industry which extends its services worldwide in matters as varied as installation of alarms and manned guarding of individual homes, to airport security, mercenary army, special protection of state secret services, peacekeeping, and even disaster relief (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009).

CONCLUSION

Sociology of security could offer insights into how different conceptions of security and strategies to achieve it are shaping the nature of our social life, including our understanding of democracy and collective participation in the political process (Herman 2011), our conceptions of privacy, interpersonal trust, and state and corporate power (Hajjar 2013; Solove 2011), as well as our sensibilities for the aesthetics of daily living (Despard 2012). I have proposed security meta-framing as a theoretical framework through which we can study cross-cultural variations in the struggles for how to articulate notions of safety and protection, develop tolerance for various forms of disorder, shape the nature of political process, and maintain the quality of collective living. If, as I suggest here, security is a particular kind of understanding of social reality then such a research agenda may also be able to speak to the dearth of alternative visions of the kinds of society we not as individuals but as a collectivity may want and aspire to live in.

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