Introduction

The course explores the emergence of surveillance practices in the context of mainly European colonialism, with special focus on the Middle East. The intersection between colonialism and surveillance has a bearing upon the emergence of modern European nation states in the 17th-18th century. The course demonstrates that many of current day surveillance methods were first introduced and applied in the colonies by European powers. It was at a later stage that these hard and soft technologies were brought back to the home countries and used for the purpose of governing. The course pays special attention to surveillance as constituting territories and population and what this entails for colonial governance.

Following 9/11 the discussion of surveillance, securitization and state of exception has become common nowadays, with the work of Georgio Agamben, particularly his book Homo Sacer, providing the point of departure for much of the debate. Although he and others discussed the Nazi concentration camp and the meaning of “bare life” in the (refugee) camp, the whole issue of refugees, displaced people, and other marginal groups as residents of their home countries remained outside the main discussion surrounding surveillance studies. On the whole, surveillance studies focused on the experience of advanced countries in the West and their attempts to cope with security (mainly national security, as distinct from human security) in the aftermath of 9/11. The Third World was represented in surveillance studies at the gate of entry into the West through immigrants, asylum seekers, and other displaced people. But the Third World as sui generis remained outside surveillance discussion. And if one takes a historical view of surveillance, then the issue of colonialism and imperialism and their role in the development of surveillance techniques in ruling the colonies remains an understudied field, even though the encounter between the so-called North and South goes well beyond the fortress gates of western countries. It takes place in the Third World itself through occupation, incursion, and other indirect means of control.

If one looks hard, there is some literature on the topic of colonialism and surveillance that is not cast in the modern idiom of surveillance studies. Here I will cite few examples to get my point across. Timothy Mitchell’s Colonizing Egypt and Rule of Experts are accounts of how both the British and French aimed at imposing ‘order’ on the mind and body of nineteenth century Egyptian society by introducing surveillance and disciplining techniques in the monitorial educational system, military training, workplace environment, and the use of living spaces. It is no accident that Jeremy Bentham, who visited Egypt in the nineteenth century and advised the Turkish ruler Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, drew up plans on how to instill obedience and discipline in the Egyptian population through the use of surveillance methods. Mitchell contends that Jeremy
Bentham’s “panoptic principle was devised on Europe’s colonial frontier with the Ottoman Empire, and examples of the panopticon were built for the most part not in Northern Europe, but in places like colonial India.” Statistician and geneticist Francis Galton also worked with the British Foreign Office and local Indian police officers to develop “a system of classification that made possible fingerprinting as a means of identifying individuals.” Benedict Anderson (Imagined Communities) analyses census construction in the Dutch colonial State of Indonesia as a form of ‘feverish imagining’ which relied primarily on the ‘logic of quantification’ and ‘identity categorization’ as means for controlling the population. Bernard Cohn (Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge) describes at some length the need of the colonizing power (in this case the British in India) to develop ‘investigative modalities’ in order to facilitate the project of ruling. These modalities include “the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes and encyclopedias’. Bernard Cohn labeled these five modalities as historiographic modality, observational /travel modality, survey modality, enumerative modality, museological modality, and surveillance modality. David Spurr (The Rhetoric of Empire) who focuses on language, power, and discourse devotes three chapters to discussing surveillance, classification and resistance in colonial context.

For the British, Simon Cole explains, fingerprinting was “viewed as a tool for colonial governance,” and “the system of fingerprinting identification actually emerged in the colonies rather than in England” (Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification 2002: 63, 75). A more detailed discussion of fingerprinting in India is carried out by Sengoopta (Imprint of the Raj: How Fingerprinting was Born in Colonial India 2003). It is no coincidence that the impetus for the British to further develop a scientific method of population classification occurred in the wake of the 1858 Sepoy mutiny in which Hindu and Muslim conscripts rebelled against the British East India Company. Taking their cues from the experience in India, the British introduced ID cards in Palestine during the Arab Revolt from 1936-1939 as part of their campaign to stave off Palestinian opposition to colonial rule and illegal Zionist immigration.

Naked colonialism of the 18th and 19th century style is of course a thing of the past, but the lasting effects of colonialism in so-called post-colonial countries and continued forms of indirect rule through establishing proxy regimes in Third World countries are very much with us. I am thinking of Derek Gregory’s book (The Colonial Present) on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine to name few known places. Issues of identity, categorization and sorting of populations is at the heart of the project of ruling in these conflict zones where an assemblages of soft and hard technologies are deployed to control the indigenous populations.

The “tools” of surveillance in conflict zones and Third World countries promise to bring to the discussion Foucault’s notion of biopower (through census construction, health statistics, and survey research), the role of face-to-face surveillance, bureaucratic rules, and of course the use of various technologies of monitoring territory and individual mobility. As a matter of fact,
not unlike experiments in times past, here too these technologies are being tested and tried out in so-called laboratories of conflict zones. It behooves us to incorporate a North-South analysis in surveillance studies. The last few decades have seen the expansion of surveillance techniques to include what is referred to as the mining of Big Data.

Course Focus

Our focus in this course is to explore the role of surveillance in colonial and postcolonial context in terms of four elements: biopolitics (population management and control), control of territory (including mobility), (state) security, and the emergence of neoliberalism.

In a colonial context, the invocation of state security is frequent and is accompanied, in addition to the three elements mentioned above, with surveillance modalities that are peculiar to authoritarian and colonial regimes. They rely heavily on bureaucratic and face-to-face surveillance, as well as attempts to discipline memory, control historical narratives, and the use of time by the colonized. Violations of personal privacy and the deployment of control technology (e.g., biometrics, social media and use of Big Data) are essential features of the modern nation state. They assume special importance in colonial states where the elements of race and ethnicity dominate.

Readings:

Although books will be placed on reserve, the course relies on selections of mainly articles that address the following issues:

- The contours of colonialism and how to apply the Foucauldian framework in a colonial context, since Foucault did not deal with colonialism as such.
- Quantification, census taking, and categorization as essential tools of colonial governmentality.
- Territory, maps and mobility in the colonial context.
- Historical case studies drawn mainly from the Middle East are used to demonstrate colonialism’s use of surveillance. The West Bank and Gaza will provide examples of regions in conflict zones subject to Israeli control.

Accessing the library sources of the course are made possible by downloading articles which appear in the reading list below. You can do this yourself by using your username and password to access the library website, then go to the journal’s link and download the required article using the citation below. Required readings from books will be made available through the reserve desk. Let me know if you encounter any problems.

You will notice that the assignments are marked with asterisks. Two asterisks designate essential reading, one asterisk refers to relevant reading, and the rest that have no asterisks next to them are recommended readings.

Course Evaluation:

Students will be assessed on the basis of their class participation (20%), one class presentation that is based on material from the assigned readings in combination with the term paper (30%), and a term paper that will be submitted at the end of the course (50%).
Weekly readings are under preparation.