



Fantasy Island: a Labour Process critique of the 'age of surveillance'.

Paul Thompson¹

Abstract

While surveillance has long been recognised as part of the armoury of managerial practices in the workplace, there has been increasing claims that electronic or panoptic surveillance is a new and successful model of control. This paper explores and challenges these claims by examining in detail 'hard' and 'soft' versions of the story through the work of Sewell and Zuboff respectively, before looking briefly at recent debates on call centres. It concludes by arguing that through there has been some shift towards surveillance practices, there is insufficient evidence that a combination of electronic Panopticon and peer pressure is effective and distinctive enough to constitute a credible new model of control of the labour process. In addition, social scientists must be careful not to assume that developments in workplace surveillance are transferable to the broader social terrain, or vice versa.

Introduction

New accounts of control inside and outside the labour process are continually being generated. From the 1990s onward, by far the most popular and pervasive has been that of a shift from established direct or bureaucratic forms to surveillance, in the context of the spread of a disciplinary society. Few case studies, particularly in Britain, have been complete without a smattering of references to panopticons, normalising discourses and self-disciplining subjects.

Surveillance is, of course, nothing new. As Ball (2003 forthcoming) notes, it has always been at the heart of capitalist work and organization. One memorable photo I once saw in the Liverpool Labour History Museum showed a platform suspended over the factory floor patrolled by supervisors. Taylorist reorganisation of the office often involved a change in lay-out so that supervisors could have physical oversight of the typists gathered together from their separate locations. So, what is different enough to spark this recent intensification of interest? Part of the answer is the scale and intensity of the phenomenon, associated both with primarily with its electronic character and pervasiveness across different societal contexts (home, work, community).

¹ Professor of Organisational Analysis, Department of Human Resource Management, University of Strathclyde, Graham Hills Building, 50 Richmond Street, Glasgow G1 1XT, tel: 0141 548 3284, fax: 0141 552 3581, email: <mailto:p.thompson@strath.ac.uk>

Of equal importance is theoretical context. Surveillance has been rendered visible through theoretical lens, directly or indirectly influenced by Foucauldian frameworks, in particular drawing on ideas of an electronic or information Panopticon. The aim of this paper is not to evaluate the authenticity of the subsequent accounts of surveillance in relation to Foucault's original writings, but to examine their content and effectiveness as innovative explanations of new forms of control and organisation. It does so by looking in some detail at two contributions, from Sewell and Zuboff, at what I describe as the hard and soft ends of the surveillance story, with some additional discussion of the call centre literature.

Though critical of such perspectives, the purpose is not to dismiss the concept or the practice of surveillance. Surveillance has not only been around for a long time, it can be viewed through a number of perspectives. For example, while dubious of Dandeker's (1990) characterisation of the century as an 'age' of surveillance, his account is valuable in being historical in scope, careful and complex in its claims. He defines surveillance as the collection and storage of information, supervision of activities through instructions or physical design, and the use of information to monitor behaviour and establish discipline. It is the third aspect that has become the main focus of the claims examined here, though this is only a part of Foucault's concerns about surveillance as constructing a body of knowledge. I will argue that while there are changes taking place in the use and character of surveillance at work, it does not constitute *the* story about control at the turn of the century

Sewell and electronic surveillance in the factory

Building on previous case studies that have been described as combining Braverman with Foucault (Webster and Robins, 1993: 243), the most sustained, serious and innovative attempt to develop such a surveillance perspective within a labour process tradition has been provided by Sewell (1998). Because of that orientation it is worth giving a brief exposition of the argument before opening up a wider discussion.

Sewell claims to have identified a new model of labour process control that counters the optimistic gloss of the empowerment and teamwork literatures, whilst moving beyond the confines of traditional labour process theory (LPT). 'Chimerical control' augments existing practices through, 'the constant and supportive interaction of electronic surveillance and the peer group scrutiny of teams' (1998: 422). The former is described as the vertical dimension of control and is associated with the information gathering and monitoring capacities of systems such as JIT and TQM.

Admitting that in some ways the new practices are extensions of Richard Edward's technical control, Sewell argues that electronic surveillance overcomes its limits by moving beyond the coercive, personalised and non-rational elements of such arrangements, as well as being more intensive, powerful and unobtrusive. Examples of this panoptic discipline include the collection and display of performance data, notably about quality and error identification, which is traceable to individuals. While reference

is made to the pervasiveness of symbolic material in the form of slogans of exhortation, the most recurrent image is that of the traffic light system used to expose under-performers through 'red cards', counselling, retraining and ultimately dismissal.

He seems to have less evidence of his own with respect to teams, so relies on the well-known case study of Barker (1993) and to a lesser extent McKinlay and Taylor (1996) to make a case for horizontal control. Here, team members create the inter-subjective conditions for compliance by creating disciplinary rules within delegated authority, thus collaborating with management to identify and reward the 'good worker'. Norms are continually established and re-established around high performers, with teams trapped within the 'more relaxed' framework of discretion and standardisation. The two elements mesh in that 'rational information' on performance feeds and legitimises peer group scrutiny, with 'green cards' identifying operators worthy of attention from team members and managers. In essence this is a much truncated version of Barker's account of concertive control at the ISE corporation in which teams move from the establishment of a value consensus in the firm, through to the emergence of normative rules at micro level which pressurise existing and integrate new members, to the formalisation of those rules that in turn prescribe performance and impose self-discipline.

The implication of Sewell's argument is that such a combination solves the 'control-engage' dilemma identified by LPT and suffered in different ways by generations of managers. New techniques allow management to rationalise knowledge and work, but not through obtrusive Taylorist and bureaucratic means, whilst mobilising and manipulating the subjectivity of employees. It is acknowledged that such practices 'resemble Taylorism' in that tasks are formalised, timed and standardised (1998: 416), but the process is both more flexible and more collective. For these and other reasons, capital is no longer faced with the choice of direct control or responsible autonomy. Chimerical control provides a form of responsible autonomy which actually deepens managerial domination through surveillance and self-discipline: 'the case of Kay points to the emergence of a new disciplinary mode where nominal autonomy and a high degree of control can co-exist' (1998: 414).

Sewell's debt to Foucault is made clear and he is determined to bring the supposed benefits of the approach to LPT. The spin is, however, slightly different. Sensitive to critiques such as Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), of an image that the workplace is merely another version of the prison (1998: 424), Sewell puts the emphasis on *panopticism* rather than *the Panopticon*. That is the famous but never built system of incarceration where an observation tower allowed all inmates to be visible to warders, whilst prisoners could not know when they were being observed, thus encouraging internalisation of discipline. But neither the description nor the application of this well-trodden reading of Foucault differs in any significant manner than what we have seen before or elsewhere. The rationalising gaze and the normalising influence are still present at full power: 'panopticism represents the desire, if not the ultimate ability, to identify and capture all knowledge of the subject under a totalising instrumental rationalism' (1998: 424). The distinction between desire and ability is revealing. Sewell accepts that much of the presentation of the Foucauldian perspective has marginalised dissent and resistance. He reassures as that there are blind spots in the rationalising gaze and limits in

capital's ability to standardise knowledge and innovation. Unfortunately, this welcome recognition is somewhat undermined by the fact that no signs of such cracks in either managerial power or sources of worker dissent is found in his case study. As in previous accounts of Kay (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; 1993). 'neither vertical or horizontal surveillance appears to have been challenged in any way' (1998: 423). This echoes the finding of Barker that 'teams willingly embrace these disciplines because they themselves have created them'. (1993: 431)

Far from producing a more nuanced, scaled down version of the surveillance story, Sewell draws from sources that stretch the claims considerably. In particular he approvingly restates arguments (Tompkins and Cheney, 1985; Rosen and Baroudi, 1992) that there is a general move to post-bureaucratic modes of control that shift the locus from management to worker and from direct to hegemonic domination based on culture and shared meanings. The radical sting in the tale is that this process is manipulative and hides the real centralisation of decision-making by information-rich elites. Even broader variants of the same paradigm shift arguments are also utilised by Sewell, particularly Poster's (1990) new mode of information that replaces exploitation by manipulation of symbols. In the 'Superpanopticon', 'new technology has enabled the erection of a surveillance superstructure throughout society which unobtrusively influences all aspects of daily (especially workplace) life (Sewell, 1998:403). While these issues are somewhat beyond the territory of this paper, it is evident that inflated claims for the capacity and coverage of electronic surveillance mutually reinforce the picture of a subjugated and seduced population inside and outside the workplace.

Zuboff: a softer story?

Looking back over the literature, what is equally interesting has been the emergence of a softer version of the surveillance story. This has been primarily associated with the highly influential work of Zuboff (1988), though can be seen elsewhere, for example in the work of Frenkel et al (1995; 1998) on front line service work, which we shall return to later. .

Drawing on a small number of detailed case studies in manufacturing and service settings, Zuboff lays out two alternative futures for work and power within a common trend towards the age of the smart machine. Information technology contains a duality that allows companies to automate or informate. While the former will reproduce or deepen the old hierarchical relations and Tayloristic work design, the latter will allow employees to understand and manipulate information, imbuing work with more comprehensive meaning (6). The informed workplace resembles idealised descriptions of the learning organisation, an environment based on shared knowledge and collegial relationships, supporting play and experimentation (308).

Despite chapter headings such as 'Panoptic Power and the Social Text', this seems a long way from Foucault. Indeed the dark side of the smart machine is often described in traditional bureaucratic terms. In the paper mill, Piney Wood, as in some of the other cases, management uses the enhanced capacities of IT to deskill, centralise power and

maintain low trust relations. Quotes such as, ‘Managers here prefer closed loop control because they do not trust operators to respond properly to the computer. We want to know that it will get done. We must have certainty about that’ (251), echo previous labour process accounts from researchers such as Noble (1977). This is acknowledged by Zuboff (283). She also recognises that the new systems are used to hold managers to account financially for ‘their’ operator’s performance. Taken the effects on managers and workers together, the outcome certainly sounds like bureaucracy and reference is frequently made to rules and hierarchy, for example: ‘Management’s goal in all of this new technology is to centralise all the controls from a monitoring standpoint. Tie all the modules into one data system, and manage the entire process from one central location, eliminating the need for people as much as possible’ (engineer quoted on p. 246). Nevertheless she argues that this enhanced capacity is different and that difference is described through the familiar language of the information Panopticon.

Cedar Bluff’s Overview System allows management to accumulate, monitor and analyse comprehensive data about every aspect of production. The work environment becomes ‘saturated with measurement’ Behaviour is textualised and transparent and operators engage in anticipatory conformity to impress boss and peers. Management could focus on deviance from the norm given that everything can be traced back to the individual and data comes to be regarded as objective and distinct from the personal power of management. In contrast to Cedar Bluff, the Expense Tracking System (ETS) at another mill, Tiger Creek, took a different route. While the informing process similarly holds up a mirror to the worker so that actions are rendered visible and precise, management recognised the need for ‘intellective skills’ and critical judgement, and therefore for positive motivation and enhanced cognitive abilities. The design of IT, ‘returned that explicit knowledge to the operators, allowing them to learn and to use that learning in the service of real improvements to the production process’ (304).

In Zuboff, descriptions of the conservative intent and negative outcomes of managerial action significantly outweigh accounts of the informing high road. Yet she presents the latter as the future. This is in part because the language of the information Panopticon is simply overlaid with a consensual, optimistic glow. Referring to the intensification of horizontal and vertical visibility, she asserts that, ‘The model is less one of Big Brother than of a workplace in which member is explicitly empowered as his or her fellow worker’s keeper. Instead of a single omniscient overseer, this Panopticon relies upon shared custodianship of data that reflect mutually enacted behaviour’ (351). Additionally, managers can choose the high road because what constrains them is not structural, the disciplines of the market, but psychological, their own uncertainties and anxieties (354). Managers turn to control and disciplinary techniques when ‘authority fails, or appears fragile’ (313). The complex and often contradictory demands on management mean that the struggle for reciprocity is just too much ‘psychological effort’ and requires too much tolerance of ambiguity (323). It is not surprising that if management is primarily a prisoner of misplaced metaphors and limited vocabularies (394), overcoming the obstacles is presented almost as an act of will, dependent on ego strength and interpersonal skills (327). Managers must learn to embrace the learning organisation and Zuboff almost pleads with them to do the decent – HRM – thing. If they don’t, ‘They are

likely to find themselves crippled by antagonism from the workforce and depletion of the knowledge that would be needed in value-adding activities' (391).

The rise of the call centre

A stronger version of the surveillance story has been dramatically reinforced by the growth of call centres. The tag 'electronic sweatshop' has entered into popular discourse and neatly appears to echo both Marx and Foucault. Certainly it is incontestable that surveillance plays a strong and distinctive role in the labour process of call centres. Work of this nature is structured by the integration of telephone and computer technologies, facilitating the access and retrieval of data to manage the service interaction. In a typical environment where customer service operators (CSRs) are receiving inbound calls, they can expect to take about 120 per day. The call will be subject to strict target times for length and content, and will be electronically recorded and measured to assess speed and quality. What Automated Call Dialling does for inbound calls, power dialling can supply for the outbound equivalent, ensuring a constant supply of customers for operatives to deal with.

Manufacturers explicitly market their call centre products on their surveillance capacity (for an example see Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 20). Real-time monitoring and the collection and collation of extremely detailed statistics are used to assess individual and team performance. Performance data is frequently published with appropriate ranking. In most centres a proportion of the calls will be remotely monitored and used by management to evaluate, discipline and 'coach' CSRs.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that call centre work can be given what has been perceived as a heavy Foucauldian spin. In an influential article Fernie and Metcalf (1998) argued that call centres are where the Panopticon really comes home to roost – the 'epitome' of what Foucault had in mind. Drawing particularly on the remote monitoring they state that, 'In call centres the agents are constantly visible and supervisor's power has indeed been "rendered perfect" – via the computer monitoring screen – and therefore its actual use unnecessary' (1998: 2.9). This widely quoted comment has been much discussed and often derided, and even appears to have been quietly dropped by its authors. But compared to manufacturing, call centres do appear to be a setting where surveillance and what Ball (2002) refers to as the 'technological whip' (203) operate in much more credible way. The technical system of control is strongly embedded in the physical fabric of production and therefore appears to be more genuinely unobtrusive, as the following quote indicates.

The ACD system predicted the number of employees needed to process customer demands on a daily basis. It assigned workloads and compared daily output to chart future workload allocation and analysed employee performance. It also listed team availability as compared to branch availability, team adherence to schedules as compared to branch adherence

to schedules as well as the call's contribution to overall revenue as a percentage. (van den Broek, 2002: 51)

The possible blank spot is teams, which do not play a substantial part in the technical division of labour of call centres, hence whether there is any equivalent of Barker and Sewell's peer pressure, or perhaps CSRs using the technological whip on themselves, is more open to question.

It is harder to envisage a credible softer variant of the surveillance story with reference to call centres. The nearest we get is probably Frenkel et al's (1995; 1999). influential contributions on front-line service work. They refer to 'info-normative control being based on data objectification and employee accommodation or commitment to performance standards' (1999: 774). While, considerable constraints to and variations in the development of knowledge and skills are acknowledged, the main trends in work relations in organisations such as call centres are to a broader development of knowledge work based on increased requirements for customer focus, customised products and higher level competencies. Clearly call centres vary quite considerably according to the characteristics of product and process, though a label of knowledge work is unlikely to be shared much outside optimistic evangelists for the industry. Furthermore, despite the variation, even those at the middle and higher ends of the occupational spectrum may be subject to surveillance in order to eliminate 'unproductive time', including, for example, nurses on the end of the line at NHS Direct (Collin-Jacques, 2002).

Critique and commentary

Changes in the terrain and frontier of control take place continually and it would be difficult to deny that *some* shift towards surveillance has taken place in *some* industries. Management has available to it more sophisticated technologies that create enhanced capacities to gather and utilise information. In combination with teamworking and lean production techniques based on micro-level employee involvement, knowledge is being rationalised in a way that traditional Taylorism couldn't or wouldn't.

It should also be accepted that control is increasingly being created and sustained on the basis of both material and symbolic means, for example through the mobilisation of emotions and soft skills. This much can be common ground. Nevertheless, the evidence does not sustain the view that the combination of electronic Panopticon and peer pressure is a distinctive and successful solution to problems of managerial control. Three major question marks remain about the veracity of the surveillance argument.

First, how effective are the new measures? Sewell doesn't seem to consider that it is possible that *chimerical* control is exactly that, less an effective hybrid than a mirage: a combination more in theory than substance and one which does not necessarily mutually reinforce. The 'findings' of Sewell are not consistent with the wider evidence, particularly on teamwork. For example, he refers to the work of McKinlay and Taylor (1996) approvingly, but omits to mention that they demonstrate how easily peer group

scrutiny unravels under conditions of managerial inconsistency and employee resistance. Indeed while sympathetic to the illuminating qualities of some of Foucault's concepts, they are heavily critical of the outcomes of their actual usage: 'So seductive is Foucault's metaphor... if simply transposed onto the labour process perspective it can seriously overestimate the scope and depth of management control.. The image in these accounts is a form of self-subordination so complete, so seamless that it stifles any dissent' (1996: 470). Teamwork may alter the frontier of control in a variety of ways and circumstances, but the body of case study evidence demonstrates that conflict over managerial objectives and their implementation remains (e.g.: Pollert, 1996; Sharpe, 1997; Findlay *et al.*, 2000).

Similar problems can be identified on the question of call centres. As is now widely recognised, far from 'perfect supervisory power', studies show that employees continue to find individual and collective spaces to resist or not comply with managerial demands (S. Taylor, 1998, P. Taylor and Bain 1999, forthcoming; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; van den Broek, 2002). They manipulate the procedure of putting in codes so as to get out of the queue of calls, try and guess when they are being listened to and act accordingly, and withhold or give of their emotions as they see fit rather than according to the script. Employees have challenged management interpretation of surveillance data, particularly when having access to union support, or even taped disciplinary meetings themselves. In her case studies, Ball (2002: 211), notes that 'every collector interviewed felt that they could challenge or query any aspect of performance statistics at any time', confirming that that the objectification of data argument is limited. In addition to the points already made, we can note that despite the omnipresent 'stats', supervision was visible to employees, who distinguished between the surveillance and coaching roles of team leaders (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Finally, call centre employees can and do leave in large numbers, thus externalising their resistance. Indeed if the 'new' methods of surveillance are so effective one wonders why management are desperate to find ways of solving the massive problems of motivating and retaining employees which the industry openly admits to.

The central problem in these examples is confusion of the formal capacities of technological and managerial systems with their actual usage and effectiveness. In their useful case studies on surveillance and privacy at work Mason et al remind us that technologies are only surveillance capable and that 'the availability of a technological capacity does not mean that it is necessarily deployed' (2002: 142). The problem in the previous studies discussed is compounded if not caused by the often flimsy and flawed nature of much of the evidence itself. During the course of a very long article Sewell makes extensive claims about new control systems, management power and absence of employee resistance on the basis of two or three pages of case study evidence. Worse, those pages contain no voices of employees or any form of observable qualitative or quantitative data. This is not an aberration. Other articles using Kay electronics manifest the same characteristics (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; 1993), making some of the assertions about what 'the case of Kay shows' less than convincing. In more general terms, much contemporary Foucault-influenced writing has a massive gap between strong claims and weak evidence (see Thompson and Findlay, 1999). In a detailed and convincing critique, Bain and Taylor demonstrate similar flaws in the 'evidence' of Fernie and Metcalf, noting that, 'the omnipotent "electronic Panopticon" appears as a

simplistic, lazy and mistaken formulation' (2000: 15), Questioning the extent of case study evidence on which claims are made, as well as the existence of 'intensive monitoring', the clincher is that despite claims to the contrary, there is no sign that they talked to employees.

Barker *does* provide direct evidence of the experience of employees, but nowhere considers issues of time, place and people – in other words, the generalisability of concertive control at ISE to anywhere else. The carceral and self-disciplining aspects of teamwork is simply assumed to be part of a new generation of controls, yet the generalisability does not even stretch to Zuboff. At Metro Tel and Cedar Bluff employees used traditional peer solidarity 'to thwart management's efforts at omniscience' (352) and exerted pressure against their colleagues who were confirming *to* managerial norms (409). For all the consensual gloss, there is real depth to her qualitative evidence. We hear the voices of employees and frequently those voices express disquiet and dissent. Perhaps because of its Foucault-lite character, Zuboff has the ontology without the post-structuralist epistemology. Agency is still visible. It is precisely the removal of agency, whether managerial or worker, that is so problematic about the surveillance story. Dissolved into discourses or disciplinary practices the messy reality of everyday contestation is removed². Drawing on Giddens's critique of Foucault, Lyon observes that the 'Superpanopticon' cannot 'impose norms': 'all it can do is supply a structure, but even then, it is one within which real choices are made' (1993: 668).

Second, how new or distinctive is this form of control? Key elements of the practices have been identified by earlier researchers. For example, the 'traffic light' system, so central to Sewell, was the centrepiece of the arguments a decade earlier by Parker and Slaughter (1988) about the characteristics of lean production. However, their oft-quoted definition term 'management by stress' indicates that while the new techniques undoubtedly reinforce capital's armoury, what we are observing is primarily squeezing labour and its costs through work intensification. In other words this is more to do with a shift in the effort bargain than over-extended claims about surveillance and subjectivity. The practices are not really in dispute – the issue is the labelling. Increasingly grand labels such as ideational control are used to indicate shifts in packaging, when the evidence is often little more than displays of symbolic material around the plant exhorting greater effort. (Sewell, 1998).

The notion of the unobtrusiveness of 'new' practices is central to the wider argument, yet it is difficult to match this with any description in the article. Unobtrusive presumably means that control is achieved without appearing to do so (403-4), yet practices such as the traffic light system and performance display are characterised precisely by their visibility. It seems that any unobtrusiveness lies in the *effects* of the practices rather than practices themselves. In other words, it is because 'a profound sense of self-control' is instilled in employees (413). This leads to the quite untenable and indeed, illogical position that surveillance is only unobtrusive if it is unchallenged and management therefore does not have to physically intervene.

² It should be noted that a discourse-based analysis has the potential to see resistance, as is shown by Ball's (2002a) examination of the interpretive repertoires of call centre workers.

Of equal importance, this is not a new argument about the direction of management *strategy*. Most second wave LPT argued that a long-term shift had taken place away from direct, coercive controls towards the consensual and indirect. This is particularly characteristic of Friedman and Burawoy, and similar themes emerged among radical commentators on 1970s work humanisation initiatives. Leaving aside questions about the accuracy of such claims, a strong argument can be made that removing the ‘newness’ tag makes it hard to distinguish electronic surveillance from Richard Edwards’s conception of technical controls. As we discussed earlier, Edwards characterises this system first by the capacity of the technology to pace and direct the entire production process and second by the appearance of the removal of human authority, with its consequent objectification of control. With the addition of new monitoring potential, this strongly resembles claims for panoptic surveillance. It might be objected that this ignores peer pressure in teams. But even apart from the extremely dubious nature of the ‘evidence’ on internalisation of management norms, electronic surveillance is not necessarily linked with teams.

This can be illustrated, as noted earlier, with reference to call centres. Many do have teams, but they are largely arbitrary and extrinsic to the highly individualised division of labour. Management uses teams to try and offset the isolation of CSRs and promote higher productivity and competitive performance. There is little evidence that either managerial or peer pressure is significant or effective. In a minority of call centres, there is evidence of a stronger team structure and peer pressure, but that is a result of more greater managerial attention to cultural norms and linkage of team performance to reward, rather than an independent outcome of electronic surveillance per se (van den Broek, Callaghan and Thompson, 2002).

Third, how credible is the explanation for the emergence of surveillance as the supposedly dominant form of managerial control? Earlier we discussed critiques of LPT that attributed arguments about control being pursued for its own sake, disconnected from the wider circuits of capital. That was largely misleading, but is entirely apposite to the surveillance story. The ‘strong’ version presents the growth of new practices as part of the inexorable march of disciplinary society. In contrast, Zuboff it appears to be largely an act of will: surveillance is chosen as a crutch by the authoritarian, those trapped by tradition and the merely short-sighted. It is efficiency *or* control. What hard and soft versions have in common is that the political economy has been stripped out. Whether it is prison or fantasy island, the workplace is treated at worst as a closed system; at best the ‘explanation’ of relations between the broader social structure and the workplace leaps over some complex steps in the causal chain. In contrast, Bain and Taylor usefully remind us with reference to call centres that, ‘Neither surveillance nor control mechanisms are ends in themselves, but, rather, are the consequences of the process of perpetual benchmarking by which call centres assess their performance and ability to make profits’ (2000: 11).

Conclusion

Whether surveillance is the same as technical control or not, some of the same theoretical limitations apply. We continue to observe the myth of the removal of managerial agency and uncontested objectification of knowledge. More broadly, the panacea fallacy (Littler and Salaman, 1982) is repeated. Edward's argument that systems of control become dominant because they correspond to stages of capitalist development is paralleled by claims that chimerical control or related formulations are the new solutions for contemporary firms. It is merely moved on a 'stage'. While Edwards refers to the displacement of technical by bureaucratic control, Sewell sees surveillance as producing post-bureaucratic organisational forms. But just as in practice bureaucratic practices predated and survived technical controls, any new surveillance capacity builds on and complements the centralised, hierarchical and rule-governed nature of organisational life. As Dandeker (1990: 13) observes, the greater knowledgeability of modern capitalism is a collective rather individual property. Bureaucratic surveillance is geared both to knowledge of workers and work, and of financial budgets and the strategic co-ordination of the subsidiary units of the modern corporation. In neither case has there been any significant reversal of the bureaucratisation of control: 'The heritage of systematic or scientific management may be being supplemented but it is hardly being discarded on a major scale' (1990: 156).

Having identified a surveillance story at work, albeit of a partly different character than claimed, an important remaining issue is the extent to which it shares a script with developments in the wider society. In their comments on Sewell and Wilkinson's (1992) earlier study, Webster and Robins complain that a predominant focus on the workplace distracts attention away from the 'management of ever more aspects of social life' (1993: 250). Wisely, Sewell draws back from Webster and Robin's even bleaker notion of a surveillance society based on an electronic Panopticon that generalises Taylorism to the whole social terrain.

Moving too easily across practices on different terrains is influenced by a conceptual weakness of Foucault. Dandeker argues, as I have elsewhere (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), that 'Foucault does not draw sufficient distinctions between the disciplinary practices of different institutions within capitalism, as say, between the prison, military organisation and capitalist enterprise'. He argues that surveillance activities are features of all social relationships and need not be linked to disciplinary practices (1990: 37). While acknowledging the contribution of Foucault, Dandeker links surveillance primarily to Weber and bureaucratic rationalisation. Though there has been a major expansion of the surveillance activities of large-scale enterprises, it need not be understood through notions of disorganised capitalism or post-bureaucratic organisation. Surveillance should be seen as a central feature of instrumental rationality and in the workplace at least, best understood as a variable part of the armoury of managerial control of work.

Therefore, while it is necessary to study the similarity and differences, we should be careful of assuming that what pertains to surveillance within the workplace necessarily transfers to the broader social terrain, or indeed, vice versa. Information gathering and

surveillance at work, in the social security system, through CCTV in urban physical spaces, or of email traffic for global security issues, have distinctive actors, mechanisms and issues that cannot be credibly tied together in one overarching narrative. Nor are the issues dealt with in this paper, reflecting as they do the traditional labour process concerns of managerial regimes, control and resistance, exhaustive of workplace developments. Issues of tracking computer usage or drug use for example, have more overlap with wider concerns of civil liberties and citizenship, though whether employees perceive such practices as threat, opportunity or simply as an inevitable part of a new wage-effort bargain, will depend on the particular dynamics of organisational and social settings (Mason *et al.*, 2002: 151). Despite such qualifications, I remain confident of the broad applicability of the following conclusion. Surveillance is a tool, one that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't, one that appeals to management as means of responding to competitive pressures in some market circumstances but not in others, and one that is always negotiated and contested. It is not how a whole societal or workplace regime should be characterised.

References

- Bain, P. and P. Taylor (2000) 'Entrapped by the electronic Panopticon'? Worker resistance in the call centre. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 15(1): 2-18.
- Ball, K. (2002) Categorizing the workers: electronic surveillance and social ordering in call centres. In D. Lyon (ed.) *Surveillance as Social Sorting*, London: Routledge, 201-225.
- Ball, K. (2003 forthcoming) Elements of surveillance: a new framework and future research directions. *Information Communication and Society* 5(4).
- Barker, J.R. (1993) Tightening the iron cage: concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38: 408-37.
- Callaghan, G. and P. Thompson (2001) Edwards revisited: technical control in call centres. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 22(1): 13-37.
- Callaghan, G. and P. Thompson (2002) 'We recruit attitude': the selection and shaping of call centre labour. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(2): 233-254.
- Collin-Jacques, C. (2002) Nursing on the line: experiences from England and Quebec. Paper for the 20th Annual International Labour Process Conference, 2-4 April, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.
- Edwards R. (1979) *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. London: Heinemann.

- Fernie, S. and D. Metcalf (1997) *(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops*. Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.
- Findlay, P., A. McKinlay, A. Marks, and P. Thompson (2000) In search of perfect people: teamwork and team players in the Scottish spirits industry. *Human Relations* 53(12): 1549-1574.
- Littler, C. and G. Salaman (1982) Bravermania and beyond: recent theories of the labour process. *Sociology* 16(2): 251-69.
- Lyon, D. (1993) An electronic Panopticon? A sociological critique of surveillance theory. *Sociological Review*, 41: 653-678.
- Mason, D., G. Button, G. Lankshear and S. Coates (2002) Getting real about surveillance and privacy at work. In S. Woolgar (eds.) *Virtual Society? Technology Cyberbole, Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Noble, D.F. (1997) *American By Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pollert, A. (1996) Teamwork on the assembly line: contradictions and the dynamics of union resilience. In P. Ackers, P. Smith and C. Smith (eds.) *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism*, London: Routledge.
- Poster, M. (1991) *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, Cambridge UK: Polity Press.
- Rosen, M. and J. Baroudi (1992) Computer-based technology and the emergence of new forms of control. In A. Sturdy, D. Knights and H. Willmott (eds.) *Skill and Consent: Contemporary Studies in the Labour Process.*, London: Routledge.
- Sewell, G. (1998) The discipline of teams: the control of team-based industrial work through electronic and peer surveillance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43: 406-469.
- Sewell, G. and B. Wilkinson (1992) Someone to watch over me: surveillance, discipline and the just-in-time labour process. *Sociology* 26(2): 271-289.
- Sewell, G. and B. Wilkinson (1992b) Empowerment or emasculation? shopfloor surveillance in a Total Quality Organisation. In P. Blyton and P. Turnbull (eds.) *Re-Assessing Human Resource Management*, London: Sage.
- Sharpe, D. (1996) Changing managerial control strategies and subcultural processes: an ethnographic study on the Hano assembly line. Paper to the *14th Annual Labour Process Conference*, Aston.

- Taylor, P. and P. Bain (forthcoming) Subterranean worksick blues: humour as subversion in two call centres. *Organization Studies*.
- Taylor, S. (1998). Emotional labour and the new workplace. In P. Thompson and C. Warhurst. (eds.) *Workplaces of the Future*, London: Macmillan.
- Thompson, P. and S. Ackroyd (1995) All quiet on the workplace front? A critique of recent trends in British industrial sociology. *Sociology* 29. 4: 1-19.
- Thompson, P. and T. Findlay, (1999) Changing the people: social engineering in the contemporary workplace. In A. Sayer and L. Ray, (eds.) *Culture and Economy after the Cultural Turn*, London: Sage.
- Tompkins, P.K. and G. Cheney (1985) Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organisations. In R.D. McPhee, P.K. Tompkins (eds.) *Organisational Communication: Traditional Themes and New Directions*, Calif.: Sage.
- van den Broek, D. (2002) Monitoring and surveillance in call centres: some responses from Australian workers. *Labour & Industry*, 12(3): 43-58.
- Zuboff, S. (1988) *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*, New York: Basic Books.
- van den Broek, D., G. Callaghan, and P. Thompson, (2002) Teams without teamwork? Explaining the call centre paradox. Paper to 6th *International Workshop on Teamworking*, Malmö University, Sweden 16-17 September.
- Webster, F. and Robbins, K. (1989) Plan and control: towards a cultural history of the information society. *Theory and Society*, 18(2): 323-351.
- Webster, F. and K. Robins (1993) I'll be watching you: comment on Sewell and Wilkinson. *Sociology* 27(2): 243-252.