

Surveillance Capitalism in an Age of Neoliberal Rationality

Capitalismo de Vigilância em uma Era de Racionalidade Neoliberal

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Abstract

The *Surveillance Capitalism* concept explains the capitalist accumulation logic of large digital companies in tracking internet users, extracting personal data and in changing behavior. This article aims to question the concept from a perspective that considers the participation of internet users in their own surveillance. The proposed new approach results from the conception of neoliberalism as the rationality of the contemporary capitalism that requires a new subjective order anchored in the production of a society formed by enterprise units involved constantly in the development of their human capital to compete in social relationships in all spheres of existence. Accordingly, it is believed that the online surveillance conducted by the large corporations and the expropriation of the human experience that results is only one part of the story. The other part is the perpetual search for individuals performance in relationships with others and with themselves.

Keywords: surveillance; capitalism; neoliberalism; rationality; human capital.

Resumo

O conceito de Capitalismo de Vigilância revela a lógica de acumulação capitalista das grandes corporações digitais baseada no rastreamento dos usuários da internet, na extração de dados pessoais e na mudança de comportamento. O objetivo deste artigo é questionar o conceito a partir de uma perspectiva que considera a participações dos usuários da internet na própria vigilância. A nova abordagem proposta resulta de uma concepção do neoliberalismo como a racionalidade do capitalismo contemporâneo que exige uma nova ordem subjetiva ancorada na produção de uma sociedade formada por indivíduos-empresa envolvidos ininterruptamente no desenvolvimento de seus capitais humanos para concorrência nas relações sociais em todas as esferas de existência. Assim, a vigilância online conduzida pelas grandes corporações e a expropriação da experiência humana que ela acarreta, é apenas uma parte da história. A outra parte é a eterna busca de desempenho individual nas relações dos indivíduos com os outros e consigo mesmos.

Palavras-chave: vigilância; capitalismo; neoliberalismo; racionalidade; capital humano.

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Introduction

As Naomi Klein (2008) demonstrated in *The Shock Doctrine*, times of crisis are not only obstacles, but, on the contrary, often represent opportunities for capitalism to advance in a neoliberal context. It will be no surprise, therefore, that the pandemic caused by Covid-19 will come to be a great opportunity for the growth of businesses in some economic sectors. With the increase of online social relationships during the pandemic, the current and future business possibilities are animating the large internet corporations (often referred to as “big tech”), considering that the pandemic appears to have been a significant catalyst for an increasingly digital world (D’URBINO, 2020).

The business growth possibilities for the big tech companies during the pandemic illustrates the new capitalist accumulation logic that has become possible in the context of a digital world, which Shoshana Zuboff (2015, 2019) labelled *Surveillance Capitalism*. The logic is simple: continuous tracking of internet users, extraction of personal data, and the sale to advertisers of predictions about user behavior. However, as the possibilities for profit increase with ever more accurate predictions, the latest frontier of surveillance capitalism, according to Zuboff, is the large-scale change in human behavior.

Surveillance Capitalism follows an historic trend of capitalism that involves accumulation from expropriation practices, that is, the seizure, looting or theft of something. As demonstrated by different authors in different historical contexts, such as Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, Rosa Luxemburg and David Harvey, capitalism, when not the production of added-value from the “normal” classic capital-labor relationship, is a system that extends its frontiers of accumulation to zones far beyond the market sphere using practices based on pillage and plundering of lands and human beings. In surveillance capitalism, the “theft” is identified in the extraction of our information available online, but also, as Shoshana Zuboff states, with changing the direction of our behavior for the purposes of more accurate predictions, leading the author to state, inspired by the great essay of Karl Polanyi (2001) *The Great Transformation*, that the transformation of the human experience into behavior by *Surveillance Capitalism* is supposedly “the fourth ‘fictional commodity’” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 320).

The *Surveillance Capitalism* concept developed by Zuboff (2019) obeys the author’s conception of neoliberalism, the context where surveillance capitalism can flourish. Placed in the classical and hegemonic critical interpretation by Zuboff, neoliberalism is an economic policy accompanied by an ideology imposed, externally, by the market institutions and the State on the whole of a society, which will suffer the negative effects of the social disruption. Surveillance of the internet by the big corporations and the expropriation of the human experience (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 71) will be ramifications of neoliberalism on online social relationships.

This article aims to add to the concept of *Surveillance Capitalism* a perspective that considers the participation of internet users in their own surveillance. Sharing with Zuboff the thesis that neoliberalism prepared the terrain for *Surveillance Capitalism*, however, it is questioned what should be understood by neoliberalism. Following the path initiated by Foucault (2010) and further developed by Dardot and Laval (2014), the article starts from the assumption that neoliberalism, in addition to an economic policy

and an ideology, is a rationality, the rationality of the contemporary world, the new way for contemporary capitalism. By this it is meant that neoliberalism is not only a mere continuation of capitalism, it was created to be the only possible viewpoint within a society, which must adjust to its imperatives. Accordingly, there needs to be a new subjective order, based on the company model, the consequence of which is the creation of a society formed by individuals as enterprise units. This means that the logic for competition and performance is contained in the subjectivities themselves and, therefore, all social relationships as well as the relationships of individuals with themselves are measured by this logic. This neoliberalism is, therefore, constructed “from below”, in which individuals are driven by their own desires through the pathways of liberty. Considering that we live in a society where social relationships are increasingly measured digitally and by the internet, the “online” must be analyzed from the perspective adopted.

This article is structured in three parts. In the first, the concept of *Surveillance Capitalism* is defined, along with how it fits within the criticisms of capitalism (including capitalism’s contemporary version: neoliberalism) as a method of accumulation destined to have negative effects on a society by the activities of institutions such as the State and the market. The second part discusses how neoliberalism is also a mode of government that has developed from a subjectivation model that directs the individuals of a society through their own social relationships dressed in the logic of competition and continuous performance, but without using “negative” means of domination. On the contrary, individuals are directed by their own desires, and this is the “positive” side of the power. Finally, the third part discusses how surveillance of the internet can be considered from this new perspective of neoliberalism and not only as the result of the activity of private corporations for the purpose of expropriation of human life.

What is *Surveillance Capitalism*?

Surveillance Capitalism is the concept created by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) to expose the new capitalist accumulation logic that has become possible in the context of a digital world. This “new economic order” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 9) is characterized, fundamentally, by the creation of strategies capable of generating profit from the continuous tracking of users of digital platforms by means of the internet and “claims human experience as free raw materials for hidden commercial practices of extraction, predictions, and sales” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 9). *Surveillance Capitalism* appropriates human experience using it as the raw material to be transformed into behavioral data. These data become “a proprietary *behavioral surplus*” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 14), and when fed into an advanced technological algorithm are transformed into products capable of anticipating future human behavior. Finally, these products are sold on a new type of market for behavioral predictions, “that I call *behavioral futures markets*” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 14).

The first company to appreciate the profit opportunities of surveillance of the internet was *Google*, which “is to surveillance capitalism what the Ford Motor Company and General Motors were to mass-production-based managerial capitalism” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 48). Initially, the users of *Google* provided the raw material in the form of behavioral data, collected to improve the speed, accuracy and relevance of the search results. But gradually *Google* was apparently no longer content with extracting behavioral data to improve its services and began to treat them as information opportunities for directed advertising. Accordingly, user profiles became a set of personalized information that

was subsequently sold to internet advertisers with predictions about the behavior of users. The behavioral data apparently then became the essential raw material for constructing an online advertising market and the surplus became the guarantee of exponential profits for the company. The success of the online advertising formula expanded the borders of google activity and it was no longer limited to constructing user profiles by extracting the data from search engines, but from all online actions, including the most insignificant, so as to extract meaning from them all.

The continuous search for profit by surveillance capitalists would not allow the surplus to be restricted to the world of online advertising. It was necessary to go further and also search for predictions of behavior in the “real world” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 129). In this next phase, the surveillance capitalists decided that it was necessary for the surplus behavior not only to be abundant, but also to be varied. The variation occurs, according to Zuboff (2019), in two dimensions: in extent and in depth. This means that all aspects of our lives, material or not, are of interest to surveillance capitalists: our houses, our cars, our household goods, our intimate relationships, our blood, our medical examinations, our humor, our weaknesses and our lies. All levels of our personal lives are of interest to those who seek to transform this information into data flows to produce accurate predictions.

Finally, Zuboff (2019) recognizes that the surveillance capitalists have gone even further. The intensification of the race for profits drives the capitalists to the safest way to predict behavior: molding it. These “interventions are designed to enhance certainty by doing things: they nudge, tune, herd, manipulate, and modify behavior in specific directions” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 133). There is software configured to interfere in real life situations of people and real things that change our behavior in specific directions, for example “inserting a specific phrase into your Facebook news feed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone, or shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 133) or using GPS to direct our hunt for Pokémons.

Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls the first step of surveillance capitalism, intended for online personalized advertising, the “extraction imperative”, while the two following steps the author calls the “prediction imperative” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p.132). Whatever it is called, *Surveillance Capitalism*, in any of its “phases”, is characterized by the search for profit using an old capitalist practice, whether this is robbery, extraction or expropriation of something by a joint external action between the State and the market. In this case, it is our information, available in the digital world and accessible over the internet by nation States and by digital corporations. Not by accident, Zuboff (2019) turns to the famous essay by Karl Polanyi (2001) *The Great Transformation* to make an analogy between the extraction of our behavioral data with the production of added-value from the fictitious commodities of “land”, “labor” and “money”. Following the Marxist supposition that all commodities are the fruit of human labor, the Polish author underlines how capitalism was able to create the realm of the commodities specifically by transforming the three elements that are not the fruit of human labor (land, labor and money) into commodities, the fictitious commodities. Land is transformed into real estate; human life is transformed into labor that can be bought and sold on the market; and, lastly, exchange is reborn as money. For Zuboff (2019, p. 320), “surveillance capitalism annexes human experience to the market dynamic so that it is reborn as behavior: the fourth ‘fictional commodity’”.

By bringing Polanyi into the debate, Zuboff (2019) makes a great contribution in showing how expropriation continues to be a key element for current capitalism. She identifies, for example, in the “normal” economic relationships between capital and labor that the transition from the Fordist paradigm to neoliberalism, beginning in the 1970s, signified, in practice, the closure of entire production systems and industrial relocation; the insecurity of employment and the lack of contractual guarantees; the dismantling of social protection systems; the privatization of entire productive sectors, and the transfer of their controls to private enterprise; and the globalization of the production process (HARVEY, 2007).

However, for Harvey (2011), this accumulation took place not only “within”. Capitalism in its neoliberal phase had as principal characteristics deepening what Marx (2017) called “extra-economic violence”, necessary for the expropriation of small, independent producers in the primitive accumulation of capital, which he saw restricted to the initial phase of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg (2015) had already written in *The accumulation of capital* that external accumulation was not restricted to the initial phase of capitalism. In parallel to the extraction of added-value, capitalism can only reproduce itself through the continuous pillage of the non-capitalist or pre-capitalist zones, subordinating exterior regions or social groups to capitalism, whether through imperialist practices or through the actual internal colonization of the nation States. Harvey (2011), then, takes the interpretation of Luxemburg to the limit, developing the concept of *Accumulation by Dispossession*.

This concept is of great interest, not only because it updates the issue raised by Rosa Luxemburg, but also because it aims to explain the specifically neoliberal practices of privatization of public companies, public administration, social assistance bodies, and health and education institutions. The objective is always to expand the predation domains: extending them permanently, not only into geographical zones or other social groups beyond those that are already found under the dominion of capitalism, as described by Rosa Luxemburg, it also needs to renew, deepen and extend its influence in the countries and social groups that are already under its dominion. Using State-market symbiosis, the reproduction of capitalism, accordingly, depends on increasing control over nature and society in all their aspects (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2019). It is here, in my view, within neoliberalism, that the “expropriation of the human experience” of which Zuboff (2019, p. 88) speaks must be understood, when capitalism is based on the appropriation of elements initially external to the market sphere for it to reproduce itself.

Zuboff recognizes that *Surveillance Capitalism* is an “expression of economic objectives” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 18) and can only prosper in the context of neoliberal policy and ideology (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 41-42). She also recognizes how the ideas of the neoliberal intellectual gurus, the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and his follower Milton Friedman, legitimized and supplied the intellectual infrastructure for a theory of the company and contributed to the flourishing of the cult of the mythical figure of the fearless entrepreneur whose success was a purely individual endeavor, a subject in clear opposition to any sign of connection to any collective organization (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 32-33). To understand surveillance capitalism, therefore, it becomes necessary to understand what is neoliberalism. But what should we understand by neoliberalism? Is it only an economic policy and an ideology applied to society by external institutions, such as the State and market? Who are its “entrepreneurs”? Should its meaning be restricted to this negative aspect of looting or stealing something, which is the

hegemonic interpretation and from where Zuboff takes the key expression when describing surveillance capitalism as the “expropriation of the human experience” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 88), and appears to suggest?

Neoliberalism: the New Way of the World

Clearly, neoliberalism is an economic policy responsible for the aggressive expansion of the market in different contexts formerly protected by state or public action, while simultaneously being accompanied by an ideology that aims to demonize all state or public policy and deify private property and market freedom. However, neoliberalism is also a rationality, intended not only to guide the action of those who govern, but also and above all the conduct of the governed, having as “principal characteristic the generalization of competition as the norm for conduct and the company as the model of subjectivation” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2014, p. 9).

Understanding neoliberalism as the rationality of contemporary capitalism is also the task proposed by Wendy Brown (2015) in her book *Undoing the Demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Based on Foucault's (2010) writings in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the author shows how neoliberal rationality creates a world whose main thrust is to economize all aspects of existence, from democratic institutions to subjectivity.² The term rationality indicates that neoliberalism should not be understood simply as the continuation of capitalism. Neoliberalism is the reason for contemporary capitalism or, as Dardot and Laval (2014) suggest, “The New Way of the World”, a base model historically constructed to be the general norm of life.

In fact, neoliberalism, more than being a mere continuation of capitalism and the liberal principles of the XIX century, was an historic creation. As Foucault argued, the general principle underlying neoliberalism is that which says, “We do not have to carry on with capitalism so much as invent a new one” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 167). As with liberalism, neoliberalism presupposes minimum State interference in economic activities. But for neoliberalism the liberal *laissez-faire* principle must be restricted to the market. Unlike classic liberalism, neoliberalism is located in the sphere of permanent intervention so as to enable the full development of economic activities. But this interference is not within the context of the market, but in the context of society in all its extent and depth, with the objective of making the market the general regulator for society. Neoliberalism is not government of the economy, it is government of society (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 146). Hence, it can be stated that it is not the State that limits itself in the name of liberalism, but a demand of liberalism that it becomes the foundation of the State. It is insufficient, therefore, to say that in neoliberalism the State serves the interests of the market, but that neoliberalism is responsible for the foundation of a State.

Governmental interventions aim to make “the market possible” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 146). But according to Foucault, that is not to say that the market will be the principle regulator of society, nor to say the implementation of a market economy (of commodities), of consumption, in which the value of exchange constitutes the general principle of the relationship between all things. For Foucault:

² Wendy Brown (2019), however, in a more recent book entitled *In the Ruins of neoliberalism: the rise of antidemocratic politics in the west*, adds to his analysis a moral and authoritarian dimension of neoliberalism already present in the neoliberal theory itself, particularly in Friedrich Hayek. Although this is an extremely interesting dimension to understand the current neoliberalism, we will not deepen it here because it would escape the scope of this work.

It is not market society that is at stake in this new art of government; it is not a question of reconstructing that kind of society. The society regulated by reference to the market that the neo-liberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of competition. It is these mechanisms that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society. This means that what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of competition. Not a supermarket society, but an enterprise society. The *homo economicus* sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 147).

In fact, here resides the great historical innovation of neoliberalism: the constitution of a new subjective order with the historic and anthropological creation of a new subject whose primordial foundation is the development of his or her own capital, which neoliberalism conceived as the theory of human capital. This reintroduces the labor category to the economic analysis, but in a manner totally different from that of classical economic policy, which takes into consideration the study of production mechanisms, exchange mechanisms and the facts of consumption within a given social structure and which led Marx to define it as abstract labor to the extent that it is put on sale in a market, exchanged for a wage and extracts a significant part of its value from the suppression of the whole of human reality and its qualitative variables. According to the theory of human capital, “economics is the science of human behavior” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 222). In this definition, economics is not a science for analyzing a relational mechanism between capital, investment and production in which labor appears only like cogs, but actually a science of human behavior and the internal rationality of this behavior. In the words of Foucault:

The problem of bringing labor back into the field of economic analysis is not one of asking about the price of labor, or what it produces technically, or what is the value added by labor. The fundamental, essential problem [...] is how the person who Works uses the means available to him. So, we adopt the point of view of the worker and, for the first time, ensure that the worker is not present in the economic analysis as an object - the object of supply and demand in the form of labor power - but as an active economic subject (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 223).

For the neoliberals a wage is simply income, which in turn is simply the product or return on capital and, conversely, capital is considered everything that can become a source of future income. So, Foucault asked: “What is the capital of which the wage is the income?” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 224). He answered that according to the theory of human capital, “it is the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 224). From the point of view of the worker, in economic terms, labor represents, on one hand, capital, that is, an ability, a skill, and, on the other, income, that is, the possibility of future gains.

If human capital makes future income possible, in the form of a wage, then this capital is inseparable from whoever holds it, unlike other capital. The worker is a machine, but a machine that cannot be separated from the worker, which is not to say that capitalism transforms workers into machines, alienating them. Workers are machines in the “positive” sense, because they can generate income flows. This is not treated simply as income because the machine formed by the skill of the worker is not sold casually on the labor market for a certain wage, but is capital to be invested in a company. This is not a concept of forced labor, “it is a conception of capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 225).

In fact, this is the viewpoint of neoliberalism: a society consisting of individual entrepreneurs for themselves. What is most important, however, is that the generalization of the company form “involves extending the economic model of supply and demand and of investment-costs-profit so as to make it a model of social relations and of existence itself, a form of relationship of the individual to himself, time, those around him, the group, and the Family” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 242). This means, ultimately, that for neoliberals there should be no difference between the economy and society: the investment in human capital must necessarily be an investment and a continuous self-investment in performance from the most tender age and in the most diverse social contexts so that the individual becomes the best possible human capital to guarantee his or her future income.

The historic creation of the enterprise unit shows us that neoliberalism is, above all, a way to channel human life in a direction useful to the imperatives of the new way of the world. Within the field of power relationships in a society, neoliberalism is a type of governmentality, that is, “the way in which one conducts the conduct of men” (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 186), which is not necessarily identified with the institution of “government”, but in the multiple forms of activity through which people aim to impose a specific type of conduct on a specific group of people, that is, to govern them. However, governmentality, for Foucault, goes even further: it enables self-government, that is, how people should be governed by themselves by means of their own techniques. To govern, therefore, means to govern others, but also to govern oneself.

The concept of governmentality illustrates how for Foucault (2010, 2009) there is no power that hovers over society and orders, from on high, what should or should not be done. In the case in question, the neoliberal rationality as an historic construction is such only from the starting point where a machine was created that could function automatically in different points of society, when people govern other people, and most intimately for individuals, when these same people are governed by themselves.

But this act of governing others and oneself is not “negative”, as it does not obey the logic of coercion. It is historically located by Foucault in the transformation of the sovereign society into the classical period. The sovereign society is:

[...] a historical type of society in which power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction (*prélèvement*), a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 136, translator's emphasis).

A type of society where the law is formulated as life and death (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 136), and is, in truth, much more asymmetric, which is to say that the sovereign could “either have people put to death or let them live” (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 240). From the classical period, the West witnessed a very profound transformation in these power mechanisms, “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 136) and, therefore, “there has been a parallel shift in the right of death, or at least a tendency to align itself with the exigencies of a life-administering power and to define itself accordingly” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 136), so as to guarantee it, maintain it or develop it. The power of death had along side it and as its complement, a power that is exercised, positively, over life. For the State, in a context of the development of capitalism and demographic growth, to preserve the life of the population with regard to biological existence, was a defining condition of its strength and, hence, the sovereign power “to take life or let live” is replaced by “the right to make live and to let die” (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 241).

The organization of power over life, which Foucault (1978) calls biopower, developed around two different, though connected, poles. The first is use of power at the individual level, through training the bodies of individuals: exercises and increasing skills, usefulness and docility, which represents the “political anatomy of the human body” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 139). The second is use of power on the social body as a species: the regulation of the population through birth, mortality and longevity statistical mechanisms, which constitutes “population biopolitics” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 139). For Foucault, “the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p.139).

For Foucault, “this biopower was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 140-141). However, here a very important distinction has to be made. The first pole in the development of biopower, based on a “political anatomy of the human body”, is also a normative model marked by the ideas of instruction and coercion required by disciplinary societies during industrial capitalism, in which a set of moral rules leave no space and cannot allow “darkened spaces” in the individuals who make up the societies. It is also, therefore, a power loaded with “negative” aspects for sovereign societies. Meanwhile, the second pole of biopower, the biopolitics of the population, leaves behind any vestige of the “negative” power of a sovereign society. It is a power concentrated fundamentally over life and constitutes the basis of the subjective norm of the neoliberal society, where subjects are governed not contrary to liberty, but, conversely, through it.

Given the above, it can be seen that the perspective adopted in this text is that neoliberalism is not only an economic policy followed by an ideology imposed from above, by the capitalist market, with the support of the State. More than this, neoliberalism is, in truth, a rationality that created a new State from below to justify capitalism as the only possible reality and thereby expands its accumulation possibilities. Accordingly, neoliberalism has gone far beyond presenting only “negative” aspects. It not only destroys rules, institutions and rights. Neoliberalism produces certain types of social relationships, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities. What is in play is the formation of a new type of existence in the way we relate to others and with

ourselves. The viewpoint was the construction of an enterprise society formed by individuals as enterprise units, requiring a new subjective order: the individual governed by liberty.

Evidently, the market and State institutions acted together in surveillance of the Internet so as to expropriate all aspects of our lives judged important for the wheels of capitalism to turn. But is that all? If, in the perspective adopted in this text, neoliberalism is also “positive”, creative, would it not be possible to think of internet surveillance from this perspective? If neoliberalism, as we have seen, needs a new subjective norm to justify itself, what is the role of each one of us in the production of this new order within the practices that Zuboff calls *Surveillance Capitalism*?

Capitalism and Surveillance: from Disciplinary Societies to Control Societies

To associate surveillance and capitalism is nothing new. The foundation of surveillance in the disciplinary societies analyzed by Michel Foucault (1977) in *Discipline and Punish* was the development of modern capitalism. And the surveillance practices did not occur only in the factories to create mechanisms capable of increasing production by controlling workers. Surveillance was a social mechanism created to manufacture a new subjective order that would respond to the disciplinary requirements of industrial capitalism. Initially, it was a mechanism intended for the surveillance of closed social institutions (schools, hospitals, prisons, factories, barracks), but with the objective of extending throughout society.

The paradigm model of surveillance of disciplinary societies is the panopticon, a design for prison architecture designed by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham³ to keep prisoners under constant inspection. The panopticon is characterized by surveillance from an external point, which is gradually internalized by the individuals of a specific society. As a symbol of the surveillance of the disciplinary societies, it is a mechanism that aims, exactly, to discipline. While Foucault (1977) in *Discipline and Punish* describes the progression from violent punishment practices of sovereign societies to the more “humane” punishment practices of the disciplinary societies, the objective of a panopticon utopia is that initially the individuals of a society and finally the society collectively adapt to a specific model of normalization that obeys the “negative” logic of exclusion and censure. In an panoptical society, there is no space for individuals who elude the norm pre-established as acceptable, nor for the existence, within individuals, of darkened spaces that elude this norm.

There exist, without question, panopticon effects still persisting in the society today, including in the world of the internet, as Manokha attests in using the concept of the “chilling effect” (MANOKHA, 2018, p. 228) to describe changes in the behavior of individuals in the digital context (and beyond it) when they become aware of the surveillance they are being subjected to by, for example, the revelations of Edward Snowden about surveillance conducted on the internet by the NSA. There are also the

³ Bentham was inspired by a design by his younger brother, Samuel, who was chosen by a Russian prince to design a circular factory in which the surveillance of the serfs was a primary aspect. Samuel’s design, in turn, was inspired on a visit he made in the mid XVIII century to a military school in Paris, where the space used as the students’ dormitory was designed so it was under constant inspection (MANOKHA, 2018, p. 222-223).

effects of self-censorship in the use of social networks (MARWICK; BOYD, 2010, p. 11). But as Haggerty ironically stated, “the panopticon is oppressive” (HAGGERTY, 2006, p. 23). The author was not referring to the surveillance model, but the hegemonic use of the panopticon as the theoretical reference for interpretation in studies of surveillance. In fact, other elements of the surveillance end up being under-estimated when the panopticon is understood as the only possible model of surveillance in our societies.

As shown in the recent works of Lyon (2017, 2018), more than the Orwellian surveillance state (surveillance performed by an oppressive State) or a surveillance society (surveillance radiated through society, but even so still connected to public or private agencies), in the XXI century we live in a *Culture of Surveillance*, characterized principally by the active participation of ordinary individuals of a society in the surveillance practices, which becomes part of a lifestyle, hence its understanding as culture. Surveillance is not only something external, imposed on us, it is part of the culture, it radiates throughout society and becomes something that ordinary citizens accept (consciously or not), negotiate, enter into, desire, or even resist (BALL, 2009; HARCOURT, 2015). What was previously an institutional aspect of discipline and social control of modernity, is today internalized, constituting a part of the daily reflections and the practices of ordinary citizens.

The *Culture of Surveillance* concept has the merit of encompassing the important paradigm shift that surveillance underwent in the XXI century. David Lyon (2017, 2018) recognizes that this culture was and is molded by political and economic forces and associates the changes from the world of work and production to the world of consumption. When the author cites the roles of desire and performance to explain the surveillance culture in its most characteristic form, the daily online activities on social media, it is important underline, however, that the capture of subjectivities is actually one of the most important dimensions of contemporary capitalism (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2014). In other words, it is insufficient to say that surveillance works through us, it is necessary to emphasize how capitalism functions through us.

In the same way that industrial capitalism needed to create a new subjective order that responded to its particular accumulation requirements, neoliberal capitalism also needs to create, as we have seen, a new type of subject. This new subject is situated historically, when, from the mid 1970s, the post-war Keynesian economic order, principally in the United States and the United Kingdom, saw it was facing stagnation, inflation and faltering growth, while the political order suffered pressure from groups of excluded individuals – students, youths, workers, Afro-Americans, Latin-Americans, women – who demanded rights and opportunities to participate (ZUBOFF, 2019). The new economic and social realities demanded a capitalism adaptable to the new demands for inclusion and liberty that the ideas of the neoliberal economists provided as a form of a new rationality that signified the imposition of capitalism as the only viewpoint possible for a society throughout its extent and depth.

Hence, as Foucault already recognized, disciplinary societies, born in the XVIII century, which developed in the XIX century and reached their peak in the XX century, were being left behind (DELEUZE, 1997). Also left behind was the model of social surveillance used for the creation of the disciplinary subject: the panopticon. In place of disciplinary societies, with neoliberalism emerges what Deleuze (1997) calls *Control Societies*, which required a new social surveillance mechanism that would adapt to the demands of the neoliberal rationality and its corresponding subject.

The neoliberal rationality depends on the creation of a subject who is also an entrepreneur of himself or herself, who must be governed through liberty. Hence, the control societies must make surveillance a mechanism of liberty. Surveillance as liberty can only be achieved when the individuals themselves direct themselves, through the manipulation of their desires. In fact, in control societies, “the target of the new power is the desire” (DARDOT; LAVAL, 2014, p. 288) and the surveillance is, in truth, self-surveillance. Behind the surveillance mechanisms that originate from an external point which aims “to say” to the individual, in a binary way, what must or must not be done, and which draws, in a binary way, the line between the permitted and the prohibited. Control societies mold the individuals from within. As neoliberalism is a rationality, it was created to be the only possibility within a society.

In this regard, all of the relationships that individuals establish with themselves and with others are, in some way, contaminated by the logic of competition as the norm for conduct. Hence, within this type of society, liberty is not only permitted, but encouraged, because it is a liberty that, placed in the neoliberal rationality, is already marked by the constituent power relationships of this society. Not only is it not a danger to this rationality, it constitutes, on the contrary, the means used for its perpetuation. Surveillance, in a neoliberal society, is self-surveillance, not in the sense of self-limitation, but in the sense of a perpetual search to develop human capital as a competition mechanism with oneself and the other human capital competing in the market. It appears, therefore, to be “positive”, enabling individuals to enter into its mechanisms. The words of Bauman and Lyon explain this aspect:

I believe that the most remarkable feature of the contemporary edition of surveillance is that it has somehow managed to force and cajole oppositions to work in unison, and to make them work in concert in the service of the same reality. On the one hand, the old panoptical stratagem (‘you should never know when you are being watched in the flesh and so never be unwatched in your mind’) is being gradually yet consistently and apparently unstoppably brought to well-nigh universal implementation. On the other, with the old panoptical nightmare (‘I am never on my own’) now recast into the hope of ‘never again being alone’ (abandoned, ignored and neglected, blackballed and excluded), the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed (BAUMAN; LYON, 2013, p. 26).

It would be unjust to say that for Zuboff *Surveillance Capitalism*, now in the XXI century, functions by merely updating the devices for panoptical surveillance. The author is conscious that the subtle surveillance mechanisms of the digital era do not operate using the principles of coercion and discipline typical to disciplinary societies and she aims, constantly, to separate, by means of comparisons throughout the text, industrial capitalism from surveillance capitalism. However, perhaps unconsciously, Zuboff does not signify a clear break with an old tradition of studies by which surveillance is associated with an expropriating power mechanism applied to society from an external point. This occurs because of her understanding of neoliberalism: Because she does not question that surveillance capitalism is an “expression of the economic objectives (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 18) and can only prosper in the context of neoliberal policy and ideology (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 41-42), to understand surveillance capitalism it becomes necessary to understand what is neoliberalism. And Zuboff’s conception of

neoliberalism does not consider neoliberalism as the rationality of contemporary capitalism that we present, which obstructs understanding of surveillance from its “positive” aspect, which could contribute to the understanding of what *Surveillance Capitalism* is from a new perspective, which goes beyond an expropriating power external to society.

The author continues to be bound to a hegemonic tradition in which neoliberalism is connected (only) to an economic policy accompanied by an ideology imposed, from above, on a society through the symbiosis between market and State. Hence, the digital companies, with the acquiescence of the State, practice surveillance of the internet as the condition for maximizing their profits using a policy of extraction of user data, prediction and changing behavior. This policy is accepted because it has as a shield a market ideology characterized by the demonization of the State, and by respect for “liberty” and for individualism. Hence, the digital companies can justify the activities on the internet using a cyber-libertarian logic, keeping away any form of external supervision or restriction that could limit the content of their platforms or algorithmic ordering of the information produced in their information processing, as well as exploiting the territory created by individualism to expand personalized consumption in different ways. The neoliberal policy and ideology have created a territory for practicing surveillance that in any one of its phases (extraction, prediction and changing behavior) would be theft and, therefore, a “negative” aspect connected to the removal of something, that would result, finally, in the “expropriation of the human experience” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 88), the expression used by Zuboff to define *Surveillance Capitalism*.

Surveillance of digital channels is, without question, practiced by private companies with the acquiescence of the State, and expropriations is one of its notable characteristics. But considering the contemporary version of surveillance, it would be necessary to add to this interpretation the decisive role played by ordinary individuals, like all of us, in surveillance practices to which we are subjected on a daily basis, as well as the positive aspect of these practices. As Bauman and Lyontell us, in contemporary digital life:

The condition of being watched and seen has thereby been reclassified from a menace into a temptation. The promise of enhanced visibility, the prospect of ‘being in the open’ for everybody to see and everybody to notice, chimes well with the most avidly sought proof of social recognition, and therefore of valued – ‘meaningful’ – existence (BAUMAN; LYON, 2013, p. 26).

Accordingly, as a condition of a meaningful existence, on the social networks, perhaps the most significant context in which surveillance capitalism operates, the data, before being extracted, are being produced by us. And that is not to say, like Zuboff, that “Facebook is a prototype of instrumentarian society” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 291), dominated by “the viewpoint of the Other-One, a hyper-objectification of one’s own personhood shaped by the relentless amplification of life lived from the ‘outside looking in’” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 291) and the Other is a mirror onto which we must project ourselves. Nor is it to say this is “self-objectification associated with social comparison” (ZUBOFF, 2019, p. 290). In the context of neoliberalism as rationality, the social networks are the prototype of a subjectivated society, where individuals, guided by the paths of liberty, are invited to constantly use their human capital, leading to continuous competition with the other human capital and with themselves.

Conclusion

This article aimed to question the concept of *Surveillance Capitalism* from a new perspective: the role that users of the internet themselves play in their own surveillance. This is because, as Lyon (2017, 2018) shows, surveillance in contemporary societies cannot be thought of only from the activities of institutions exterior to the society, such as nation States or the market, which act on society from without. It is necessary to consider how we all, unconsciously or not, are active subjects in the surveillance practices, above all those involving the online digital world.

If *Surveillance Capitalism* flourishes in a context of neoliberalism, it is exactly what is understood by neoliberalism that will determine the meaning of the concept. Shoshana Zuboff exists in a tradition of critical interpretation in which neoliberalism is an economic policy accompanied by an ideology formulated by the association between the State and market in search of alternatives for maximum capitalist accumulation, the consequences of which are supposedly the production of negative effects on society. Hence, for Zuboff, the surveillance of the internet is characterized by the activities of the big tech companies (with the acquiescence of nation States) in search of profits in the online world and away from it by use of tracking, prediction and behavior change, the consequences of which are supposedly the expropriation of the human experience.

This text accepts the social consequences that result from the surveillance conducted by the big tech corporations and by the State, but the conception of neoliberalism assumed goes beyond this. Neoliberalism is understood to be a rationality, the reason for contemporary capitalism, created to be the only possible viewpoint inside a society. To achieve this, a new subjective order is required inspired on the company model and its practices of performance and competition, into which enter social relationships and the relationships of individuals with themselves. In this, the individuals are governed by themselves using the power mechanisms that present themselves as positives, since they relate to individual desires and liberties. If the social relationships are increasingly measured digitally and online, this environment will necessarily be influenced by the neoliberal rationality.

The concept of *Surveillance Capitalism* will, therefore, be enriched when we consider that before online tracking, the data are “freely” produced by us ourselves in the constant search for performance and development of our human capital in competition with other human capital, above all on the social networks. Alongside unrestricted surveillance by the digital corporations, it would be necessary to recognize that there is constant self-surveillance directed at the presentation of individuals in harmony with the demands of the neoliberal rationality. And this self-surveillance goes far beyond being governed by self-censorship mechanisms intended to establish clear boundaries between the permitted and the prohibited. On the contrary, the government of others and oneself in neoliberalism is guided by boundaries flexible to the demands of liberty.

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