Security, Liberty and Justice: 1984 and the Past Present

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Abstract  Orwell’s classic book 1984 presents the dystopic vision of a regimented, over surveyed society, presided over by a totalitarian State. In this paper we draw upon several themes presented in 1984, drawing parallels with forms of regulation, surveillance and social control ascendant in contemporary capitalist cultures. We argue that three fundamental problems objected to and rebelled against in Orwell’s novel have become critical to sociological understandings of the operation of social control and the administering of security practices by the neo-liberal State. First, disassembling the dominant discourse of the ‘war on terror’, we discuss the role of (hyper) ideologies of security in constructing discrete versions of who ought to be fearful and who is to be feared. Second, we orient our attention toward the process of intensification of micro categories of the Other through which particular ethnic groups are classified as risky, rendered abject and excluded. Third, delving into the mechanics of governance, we explore recent changes in modes of policing and regulation, drawing upon the Orwellian notions of vaporization and purges. In conclusion, we warn against the tendency toward counter-modern ‘either-or’ strategies of social control and the increasing use of repressive pre-emptive security practices.
‘Who controls the past controls the future:

who controls the present controls the past’ (Orwell, 1949)

Introduction

Our aim here is to explore what we perceive to be coercive, invasive and undemocratic or illiberal forms of social control emerging through largely neo-liberal governmental forms in formally democratic States. While such topics are far from novel (see Jessop, 2002; Lodziak, 1995; Offe, 1984), we wish to approach these issues in a literally novel way, by using Orwell’s classic 1984 as an entrée into discussion. Our reading and deployment of the text is necessarily selective. We are, by definition, interested in notions of security, justice and control within 1984 that illustrate problematiques that can (or indeed can’t) be related to contemporary socio-political contexts. We use Orwell’s work to anchor a discussion of three themes. First, the incessant and extreme use of ideologies of (in)security and, in particular, the impact of discursive formations of terror on the social construction of fear. Second, the process by which outsider groups are ascribed risk identities and rendered ‘other’. Third, we explore the extreme modes of surveillance and regulation engineered by the State, several of which are vindicated with recourse to the apparently risky and threatening contemporary context - what have come to be termed ‘states of exception’. Insofar as we use the 2007 APEC forum in Australia as a vignette, it is our contention that what have been labeled ‘states of exception’ are, in fact, no longer exceptional at all. In total, we posit that these processes are central to the neo-liberal State’s attempts to secure hegemony and maintain social control; to govern through (in)security to
paraphrase Jonathan Simon’s term\textsuperscript{1}.

1984: England, Oceania

1984 is essentially a satirical and acerbic warning about the pervasiveness and dangers of surveillance and ideological manipulation. The novel describes a world separated into and controlled by the totalitarian super-states of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. Its author, George Orwell, was seeking to critique the totalitarianism inherent in Eastern regimes at the time, but also wished to warn the West about the consequences of reducing human rights and freedoms. The chief protagonist in 1984 is Winston Smith. Smith lives and works in a city with a deleted history, bedecked with posters declaring ‘Big Brother is Watching You’. The secret militia - or ‘thought police’ - are everywhere, using panoptic techniques such as two-way telescreens. These two way telescreens are simultaneously portals of information and apertures through which citizens are surveyed. The government - or ‘Party’ - controls the public through the Ministry of Truth where Winston Smith is employed to destroy and rewrite historical documents so that the Party’s versions of past and present is always congruous. Meanwhile, the brutal thought police rely on hidden microphones and anonymous informers to spy on potential thoughtcriminals who deviate from the Party’s norms and values.

Big Brother’s detested political adversary is Emmanuel Goldstein, a defector from the Party during the revolution and leader of the oppositional and subversive ‘Brotherhood’. During the daily ‘two minutes hate’ the public of Oceania are exorted to vent their spleen at Goldstein, by screaming various obscenities at images of him that are provocatively beamed out on telescreens.

\textsuperscript{1} Simon (2007) coined the term ‘governing through crime’ to characterize the way in which a law and order politics and strategies of crime control more generally resulted, from the late 1960s onwards, in crime becoming a lens of from through which many governmental problematisations were both framed and addressed.
The backdrop to such broadcasts invariably involves enemy soldiers attacking Oceania. At junctures in which Eurasia is defined as the enemy these are Eurasian, when Eastasia is the enemy they are Eastasian. The powers of Oceania ensure that it is perpetually at war with one of the other two superpowers as a way of generating an enemy and securing compliance through the mobilization of public fear. Such war has no motive other than to galvanize the public against an enemy other and to create an object to be feared and hated. In the end it matters not so much who the enemy is - in fact nobody actually remembers who Oceania is at war with at any given moment - only that they have always been at war.

Many of the phrases used in Orwell’s novel have, of course, become well recognized. Others we suggest - such as ‘unperson’, ‘thoughtcrime’ and ‘newspeak’ - can be readily applied to the neo-liberal State’s prolific and hegemonic project of securitization. Before we address these descriptors we wish to provide an observational narrative which describes lived experiences of the security measures put in place for a particular high-profile international event and the context of the discourses and legislation that wrap around the event.

2007: Sydney, Australia

From the 11th floor of a non-descript office building in the city I can hear the wail of sirens. The streets are far more sparsely populated than usual; indeed there is an eerie silence at times of the day. Helicopters hover in the available airspace and police patrol the streets in packs of eight or nine - they do not look entirely friendly. Last night the news reported that a citizen had been arrested and beaten in front of his young son for failing to follow a police directive not to cross the road against the lights. These days one can’t assume that the mundane habits of city

2 For example, ‘Room 101’, ‘Big Brother’ and the ‘Thought Police’ have become oft used terms in popular culture.
life won’t result in your loss of liberty. Everybody has a map of the excluded area of the city.

Another cavalcade passes underneath my window. The accompanying police escort is highly visible. It passes at a speed far in excess of the normal city speed limit. The newly commissioned water-cannon vehicle follows it - purchased as a direct result of growing urban unrest in recent years. The hum of the loudspeaker system fills the air as one walks past the units, perched and highly visible upon lap posts which also house other undisclosed security hardware (these are rumored to be telecommunications monitoring devices, but nobody is sure). This hardware and software commingle with the web of CCTV cameras that turn the city into a virtual scans-cape.

We are at war. Yet we are unsure who the enemy is. It is the war against terror. Terrorists and extremists apparently threaten the very fabric of liberal democracy. They ‘hate us for what we stand for’ says our Prime Minister. Yet the main front of the war appears on the face of it to be in a sovereign state that has little if anything to do with the identified terrorist ‘network’. The reasons for the war are nebulous. ‘Weapons of mass destruction’ we were told, although many seem to believe that it was in retaliation for a terrorist attack on our ally the United States. The embodiment of reasons for war emerge in the shape of Osama Bin Laden - his bearded face projects from news papers and tele-screens as the face of evil upon which our hatred is (or is supposed to be) focused. Security analysts and politicians tell us that the war is ongoing, without end and unwinnable in the traditional sense of triumphant armies and States.

Although there have been no attacks on our soil we are told to prepare. It is only a matter of time. We must be vigilant. In the meantime we are all to be the eyes and ears of the government. Report any suspicious behavior, keep the emergency numbers close - preferably on the refrigerator aside the government supplied anti-terrorism magnet. There are, after all, ‘home
grown terrorists’ lurking amongst us. Dangerous others we are told are intent on making their way to our country as ‘illegals’; nonpersons who use unscrupulous ‘people smugglers’ to get in to the country and part our boarder patrols. We have legally exercised much of our offshore areas so that, as our Prime Minister notes, ‘we decide who comes into this country’.

There is a list that names many of the leaders of these ‘radical’ groups. The list is used along with special police powers to keep such people away from the CBD. It is, after all, the annual APEC conference and the city is hosting 21 of the world’s most important leaders. Security is liberty, leadership is democracy, war is peace.

**Ideologies of Insecurity in extremis**

Contemporary discourses of terror find their ultimate political expression in the rhetoric of ‘national’ or homeland security’. Mirroring Orwell’s (1949: 7), vision of freedom as slavery, national security discourse is fundamentally about insecurity; security is, in effect, insecurity. As Zedner (2000) has argued, the ‘pursuit of security’ has become an end in itself, a *raison d’être* that is unobtainable and indefinite. The discourse of national security relies on the construction of insecurity and the omnipresence of the terrorist threat makes this possible (Agamben 2005; Bauman 2004). Nonetheless, discourses of (in)security, and the pursuit of national security engender a discursive environment where oppositional discourses are rendered ‘soft on terrorists’, naïve or dangerous. In Orwell’s terms akin to *oldthink*. George W. Bush’s hyperbolic ‘you are either with us or against us’, effectively removes the shades of grey are replaces them with black and white. *Oldthink*, like most *newspeak* terms for Orwell had both a linguistic and ideological function. By, for example, collapsing the terms ‘English Socialism’ into to *Ingsoc* the idea became reduced, and ‘melted into the mist’ (1949: 32). In many ways the term ‘war on terror’ has the same rhetorical function - complex geo-political issues become reduced to a two
sided war requiring ‘either-or’ choices and strategies. Indeed, one is tempted to further suggest that the incessant habit of claiming that the allied forces are ‘winning the war on terror’ might be seen by Orwell as a prime example of *blackwhite* (1949: 169), the habit of imprudently claiming that black is white. In *1984* the war engaged in by Oceania against its enemies is essentially infinite and unwinnable. For Orwell, there are two reasons for perpetual war. First, it is designed as a central plank in the Party’s wider hegemonic project of governing through harnessing public fear. Second, war is intended as a mode of job creation, of keeping people busy and pre-occupied at a mental and physical level. Both Hardt and Negri (2005) and Steinert (2004) have made similar claims about the contemporary ‘war on terror’, suggesting that the standard conditions of victory cannot be met.

In *1984* the present is ordered through the linguistic and visual rearrangement of the past. There are numerous ways in which this metaphor can be applied to present security situations. In the light of occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US administration has been keen to erase information about its previous financial support and military backing to Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War and the Taliban in its struggles with the Soviet military. Yet we would contend that Orwell’s fears can be extended still further. In 2008 we have gone way beyond 1984. Now it would seem that alongside the routine ideological rewriting the past the State and dominant institutions are also seeking to write us an imagined future. That future is constructed by constant recourse to ‘what if?’ questions through which catastrophic scenarios of the future become an essential component in the securitization of the present. The constellation of dominant ideologies that constitute ‘new terrorism’ and the aligned ‘war on terror’ depend upon a changing future-centric calculus of risk. Since 9/11, methodological tools of imagining the future - such as scenario testing and simulated disasters - have come to prominence and taken on wider political
significance (de Goede, 2008: 156). One of the principal strategies invoked by proponents of the ‘war on terror’ has been the presentation of nightmare scenarios. Dirty bombs in cities, intercontinental jets flown into nuclear power plants, public water supplies poisoned are, for us, ideologies of insecurity in extremis. At a lower level the everydayness of the threat is routinely reinforced. As the former Federal Attorney General of Australia Phillip Ruddock put it, ‘an attack here is feasible … safeguards are commensurate with the very significant level of threat we face’ (Parliament of Australia 2005). Such safety-centric appeals seek to play upon public fears by conjuring up a ruinous future in which benign nations are victimised by malevolent terrorist aggressors with the motif of 9/11 as a constant reminder.

In 1984 the police have mastered the skill of ‘crimestop’ the ability to identify and stop any thought that may be oppositional and therefore dangerous to the State. In Australia some legislative changes which followed the 9/11 attacks echo the rationale of ‘crimestop’. Sedition laws amended under the Anti-Terrorism Act (No 2) 2005 enable individuals to be imprisoned for up to seven years for communications critical of the established order. The Federal Government argued sedition offences revised to: prevent terrorism; protect the integrity of the electoral process; protect public order from threats posed by inter-group violence; and prevent seditious or treasonous speech in the classic sense (Arts Law Centre of Australia 2008). They also provisioned for the government to move against individuals or groups perceived as ideologically opposed to their version of Australian statehood.

**Micro Categories of Other**

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3 ‘Sedition crimes have been enshrined in state and territory based Australian laws since before federation and inserted into the Commonwealth Crimes Act in 1920. Under the Commonwealth Act, seditious behaviour that intended to: (i) bring the government into hatred or contempt; (ii) excite disaffection against the government, constitution, UK parliament and Kings Dominions; and (iii) bring about change to those institutions unlawfully, was criminalised’. 


Interactionist studies of deviance have long been concerned with the construction of dangerous others (see Young 1971; Cohen 1972; Poynting and Morgan 2007) and the ‘dramatization of evil’ (Tannenbaum, 1938). What is most disturbing in regards to the contemporary climate is the degree of abhorrence and venom with which the other is pursued and the ways in which governmental discourses have failed to adequately distinguish between the extreme Islamist terrorist other and peaceable Muslim minority groups in general. In Australia the figure of asylum seeker as queue jumper and potential terrorist, and Muslims as ‘unAustralian’ have recently constituted this Other. These threats have been dramatized in the mandatory detention of asylum seekers and in some cases, the mobilization of the armed forces to interdict and force. A case in point was the Tampa affair of 2001 when a Norwegian cargo ship rescued 430 Afghan asylum seekers and was refused permission to land on Australian territory at Christmas Island. The ship was boarded by Australian SAS personnel after the captain refused the Australian government’s directive. The government subsequently moved to excise Christmas Island and a number of other coastal islands from Australia’s migration zone, denying asylum seekers reaching these areas refugee status. Then Prime Minister John Howard’s statement that ‘we decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come’ epitomized this ‘dangerisation’ of the Other (see Albrecht in Bauman 2004: 56). In this way asylum seekers became rendered ‘unpersons’, bereft of status or rights and undeserving of civil liberties due to their potential riskiness. In application stricter immigration laws and counter-terrorism measures have lengthened the specter of surveillance that hangs over Muslim minority groups. The continued identification of Muslim minority groups as ‘suspect communities’ - alongside the

4 Although in public discourse little discretion is often exercised in identifying Arabs of a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds.
criminalization and marginalization of young male Muslims - is serving to alienate an already materially disadvantaged and politically disaffected group (Poynting et al., 2004). The stereotyping of risky ethnicities under conditions of uncertainty can lead to suspicion and distrust between those residing in *faux* categories of fearful and feared.

The threat of the future catastrophic very much depends upon the creation and sustenance of micro categories of the Other. In Orwell’s *1984* the Emmanuel Goldstein has many parallels with the hate figure Osama Bin Laden. Goldstein produces ‘fear and anger automatically’ (Orwell, 1949: 14). Further, while Goldstein is in hiding Big Brother suggests that he is working for other enemy states, ‘least one should be in any doubt as to the reality which Goldsteins’ specious claptrap covered, behind his head on the tele-screen there marched the endless columns of the Eurasian army - row after row of solid-looking men with expressionless Asiatic faces’ (Orwell, 1949: 14). Mass mediated images of Bin Laden operate similarly. Reportedly hiding in an ungovernable area of Pakistan, holed up in the Afghan Tora Bora Caves, or dead via heart failure or assassination. It has become, as with Goldstein’s omnipresence, not a matter of Bin Laden’s existential status, rather his symbolic status. Bin Laden essentially acts as a coda for ‘terror’.

**Vaporizations and Purges**

The current climate of threat has clearly propagated an assemblage of new modes of governance and security. In *1984* vaporizations and purges are manifested in multiple ways, from capture by the secret militia to brain-washing and torturing in the infamous room 101. To sketch out some contemporary comparisons, we return here to Australia and the APEC forum.

In line with its allies in the war on terror, since 9/11 the Australian government has introduced
rafts of new legislation designed to combat terrorism. Of significance is the Anti-Terrorism Bill [no2] 2005 in which the legal governance of terrorism was redrawn through an assemblage of counter-terrorist measures, including the ability to detain terror suspects without charge for up to 14 days; the introduction of a new regime to allow for ‘control orders’; increased stop, search and seize powers for police and intelligence agencies, longer prison sentences (for financing terrorism for example); broader surveillance powers; and the extension of the definition of a terrorist organization. Whilst these forms of legislation have been formally imposed to restrict the freedom of terrorists, justifiable concerns have been raised about infringements of civil liberties. Pre-emptive and preventative detention and control orders resonate strongly with the narrative of 1984. Preventative detention is designed to detain persons suspected of involvement with terrorism where there is insufficient evidence to formally charge. Detainees can be held up to 48 hours under federal law, or 14 days under state law. Control orders on the other hand can be used to impose restrictions on movement, association and communication. Under some circumstances a (un)person may be required to wear a tracking device.

In one sense the discourse that ‘the world has changed since September 11’ is deployed as a justification for a broad ‘state of exception’ (Agambon 2005). Such discourse is used to justify policies of ‘pre-emption’, the unprecedented treatment of ‘armed combatants’ at Guantanemo Bay, and the use of torture and ‘rendition’ in the service of the ‘war on terror’. However, contemporary examples of ‘states of exception’ occur frequently. The Sydney APEC conference

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5 There were thirty pieces of legislation in the first year following the 9/11 attacks alone.


7 See Fairall and Lacey 2007 for a full discussion)
is a good example of this. In this instance, particular legislation and hardware is mobilised for the duration of the event, including the suspension of rights and freedoms normally bestowed upon Australian citizens. To return to our earlier narrative, in September 2007, 21 word leaders, including then US President George W. Bush, assembled in Sydney Australia for the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Security measures for the duration of the forum (and beyond) exceeded anything experienced in Australia. These arrangements made international news with the BBC reporting it thus ‘[Sydney] is in virtual lock-down as world leaders gather for the high-profile Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC) this week’. The BBC went on to note the Security _pièce de résistance_ of the forum. The city was dissected by a ringed fence five kilometers long and three meters high complete with police checkpoints:

A 5km barrier has been erected across the city’s central business district to protect the 21 leaders attending the summit and more than 5,000 police and troops are patrolling the streets (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6977350.stm accessed 10/08/08).

This ‘state of exception’ involved helicopters and jet fighters patrolling the sky, navy ships, divers and water police monitoring Sydney Harbour and a loudspeaker surveillant system placed throughout the CBD.

The then NSW police minister David Campbell was reported as saying speakers can be used to deliver a range of messages to people in the city: ‘If there were a terrorist event or a major building fire and there were people in the streets, this is a way of giving them information’ (ABC Online 2007). This security blitz was enabled and reinforced by special legislation passed through NSW State Parliament giving NSW Police increased powers. The

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*It is telling that this system was never disassembled at the conclusion of the event.*
APEC Meeting (Police Powers) Act 2007 was declared on June 19th 2007 and included new stop and search powers, powers to close streets without public notice, powers to compel citizens to reveal their identities, powers to exclude individuals for particular areas of the city, powers to compel citizens to follow directives and power to search certain premises without a warrant. It is axiomatic to state that such legislation, particularly the listing of excluded persons - enhances the possibilities of contemporary vaporizations and purges.9

Conclusion

We would like to conclude by sounding a note of caution around current (ab)uses of security and the creeping practice of pre-emption in national security and the wider implementation of crime control. The logic of anticipatory risk has featured heavily in counter terrorism legislation through the implementation of procedures which are preventative, such as indefinite imprisonment10 of terrorist suspects, extending periods of detention without charge and control orders. These new strategies of risk control form part of a deeper trend of developing regulatory methods of ‘pre-crime’. The palette of modes of surveillance, legislation and regulation in train are reliant on fictive pre-imaginings of harm. The ideological mission of the ‘war on terror’ denotes not only an attempt to persuade the public about the legitimacy of State coercion, but also signifies a performance of security which simulates the (safe) resolution of the future in the

9 Clause 29 of the act affords power to produce Excluded Persons lists and ‘from time to time, compile one or more lists of persons (an excluded persons list) that the Commissioner is satisfied are persons who would pose serious threats to the safety of persons or property (or both) in an APEC security area during the APEC period. (2) The Commissioner may (but need not) cause an excluded persons list to be published by such means as the Commissioner thinks appropriate’ (APEC Meeting (Police Powers) Bill 2007).

10 The Commonwealth Criminal Code Act 1995 allows for preventative detention of up to 14 days without charge.
present. So far as parallels with *1984* are concerned, it would appear that the present is controlled and constrained not so much by manipulating the past, but by imagining the future (Elbe, 2008: 182). The request that citizens willingly give up their rights in the light of potential terrorist attacks is both persistent and bewildering. Citizens could be forgiven for being left, like Winston Smith, pondering whether 2+2 really can equal 5.

**References**


