Drones over there, total surveillance over here

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The big story buried in all the commentary about the US government's drone policy is that the old algorithm of the liberal state no longer works. Focusing on drones is almost a distraction, if it weren't for the number of men, women and children they have killed in only a few years. What we should focus on is the deeper condition that enables the drone policy, and so much more, and that is the sharp increase in unaccountable executive power, no matter what party is in power.

The 1960s and the 1970s saw the making of laws that called for the executive branch of government to be more responsive to basic principles of a division of power and accountability to citizens. Many of its owners were curtailed by the legislative. With Reagan, Clinton and especially Bush-Cheney, many of these laws were violated under the claim of a state of exception due to the “War on Terror”.

What we are facing is a profound degradation of the liberal state. Drone killings and unlawful imprisonment are at one end of that spectrum of degradation, and the rise of the power, economic destructions and unaccountability of the financial sector are at the other end.

The massive surveillance apparatus built up over the last 10 years is the domestic companion of the overseas drone killings. It is one outcome of this deep decay of the liberal state. While much is not known about either, we know enough to recognise its potential for enormous abuse. What is known is that there are at least 10,000 buildings across the US, with a massive concentration in Washington, DC, engaged in ongoing surveillance of all of us residing in the territory of the US. Surveillance and counter-terrorism activities employ about one million professionals with top level secret clearance. One estimate has it that every day over two billion emails are tracked. And on and on along these lines.

The basic logic of such a surveillance system is that for our security as citizens we are all being surveilled, or potentially so. That is to say, the logic of the system is that we must all be considered suspect in a first step in order to

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ensure our safety. Who, then, have we the citizens become, or turned into? Are we the new colonials?

The source of this excess of executive power is a foundational distortion at the heart of the liberal state. The liberal state was never meant to bring equality of opportunity and full recognition of all members of the polity. Inequality was at its core since its beginning - between owners of the means of production and those who only had their labour to sell in the market. But even so, the so-called Keynesian period throughout much of the west engendered a prosperous working class and an expanding modest middle class. It was a partial democratising of the economy. In the 1980s, this began to disintegrate.

In the 2000s, just about all liberal democracies were in sharp decline, with growing inequality, weakened unions, impoverishment of the modest middle classes, and an enormous capture of the country’s profits by the top layer of firms and households. This is all captured in a couple of numbers found in the US census: In 1979, the top 1 percent of earners in New York City received 12 percent of all the compensation to workers in the city, a reasonable level of inequality in a complex economy such as is NYC. (This share excludes non-compensation sources of wealth, such as capital gains, inheritance, etc.) In 2009, the top 1 percent received 44 percent - a level of inequality that cannot be good for the city's economy.

At its most extreme, this combination of massive surveillance and savage inequality may be signalling a new phase in the long history of liberal democracies, one where the executive branch gains power partly through its increasingly international activities. Over the last 20 years and more, this incipient internationalism has been deployed in support of developing a global economy and fighting the "War against Terrorism"; thus the big-bank bailout is not so much a "return of the strong nationalist state" as some would have it, but rather the use by the executive branch of national law and national taxpayers' money to rescue a global financial system.

This is a kind of internationalism. Pity it is being deployed for this. It is possible that these new international capabilities of the executive branch might be reoriented to more worthy aims - climate change, global hunger, global poverty and many others requiring new types of internationalisms.

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