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Towards a Critical Political Economy of Surveillance and Digital Authoritarianism

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Article abstract

In this short piece, we suggest some directions for considering the interrelated questions of postcolonial authoritarianism, platform capitalism, and surveillance. We first put forward a three-level model of contemporary digital authoritarianism, which argues for a prism of discourses, practices, and infrastructures, before we turn specifically to the political economy of contemporary capitalism. Here, we shift the focus away from only either state and/or the individual and the conventional entities in between, to consider the new platform actors driving authoritarianism and digital surveillance in the twenty-first century.

Surveillance & Society

Dialogue

Towards a Critical Political Economy of Surveillance and Digital Authoritarianism

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Abstract

In this short piece, we suggest some directions for considering the interrelated questions of postcolonial authoritarianism, platform capitalism, and surveillance. We first put forward a three-level model of contemporary digital authoritarianism, which argues for a prism of discourses, practices, and infrastructures, before we turn specifically to the political economy of contemporary capitalism. Here, we shift the focus away from only either state and/or the individual and the conventional entities in between, to consider the new platform actors driving authoritarianism and digital surveillance in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

In 2017, this journal published a large special issue on "Surveillance and the Global Turn to Authoritarianism" (Wood 2017). One of the issue's most notable aspects was that its basic assumptions were challenged in several ways by authors in the issue, in particular by Ahmad and Mehmood (2017), who argued that the concept of a "turn" to authoritarianism was not really applicable to much of the Majority World, a vast area whose political genealogies derived from the "imperial effects" of European colonialism, which meant that nation-states such as Pakistan had always been doomed to authoritarianism.

While much of the editorial for that issue was concerned with developing a general theory of surveillance and authoritarianism (Wood 2017), and indeed with arguing that levels of surveillance did not necessarily correspond in a simple and linear way to levels of authoritarianism, the question of colonialism and authoritarianism, and the relationship of postcolonial authoritarianism to surveillance, were acknowledged but left aside to be further theorised.

In this piece, we suggest some directions for this latter enterprise. We first put forward a three-level model of contemporary digital authoritarianism, which argues for a prism of discourses, practices, and infrastructures, before we turn specifically to the political economy of contemporary capitalism and shift the focus away from only either state and/or the individual and the conventional entities in between, to consider the new platform actors driving authoritarianism and digital surveillance in the twenty-first century.

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Towards a Theory of (Digital) Authoritarianism

In Figure 1 (below), we have summarised the ways in which authoritarianism has been conceptualised across levels and disciplines. Political Science and related disciplines tend to theorise authoritarianism in its *political form* and emphasise the state, party politics, election procedures, political competition, and similar as central units of analysis. For example, typologies of authoritarianism were developed in the twentieth century to explain emergent regimes in South America. Affected by the dominant modernisation theories of those decades, these categories shifted the conceptual focus from political mobilisation to the level of modernisation and categorised authoritarian regimes into traditional, populist, and bureaucratic forms, each corresponding to various levels of modernization (O'Donnell 1973). With further development of independence movements and formation of new regimes in former colonies, a spectrum was developed, ranging from pseudo-democratic to semi-democratic systems (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989). However, by the turn of the century, it was increasingly clear that democratisation might not be the final stage of political evolution. The stability of these regimes forced scholars to talk of semi-authoritarian systems that "are not imperfect democracies striving for improvement but regimes that seek to maintain the facade of democracy while avoiding the political risks inherent in genuine competition" (Ottaway 2003: 3). Accounting for such deliberate flaws in democracy paved the way for theories such as competitive authoritarianism, which highlight the use of democratic processes within otherwise authoritarian systems (Levitsky and Way 2010).

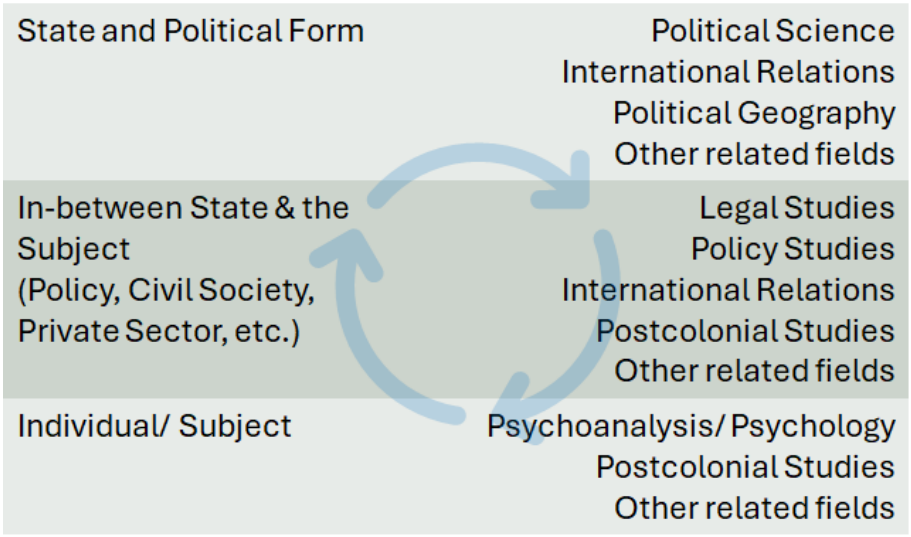

Figure 1: *Authoritarianism conceptualized across levels and disciplines.*

At the individual level, the Frankfurt School's scrutiny of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et. al. 1950) took a socio-psychological approach to authoritarianism. Contrary to their contemporaries who looked for the origins of totalitarianism (cf. Arendt 1951), the Frankfurt School focused on the reasons why the working class did not revolt against the ruling class and instead accepted fascism as a reasonable option. A similar subject-level engagement is Deleuze and Guattari's psychoanalytic discussion of microfascism (cf. Guattari 1984). This approach resonates with postcolonial psychoanalytical accounts that scrutinise the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, for example through mimicry (Bhabha 1984) or the colonisation of self (Nandy 1988). Finally, in between, there is a wide range of work between the state and individual levels focusing on policy development, civil society and resistance movements, and emerging stakeholders such as Big Tech companies (which we discuss in the next section).

One theme across all of this work is that authoritarianism is rarely discussed in its entirety. The mammoth task of theorising authoritarianism has engaged several generations of critical theorists, exemplified by the

work of the Frankfurt School, but the difficulties do not end with questions of scale. The dynamic nature of governance in the last decades has blurred the lines differentiating authoritarianism from democracy. The practice turn in the studies of authoritarianism attempts to overcome this problem by extending the discussion of authoritarianism to authoritarian practices in democratic regimes. However, the resulting distinction between "illiberal" and "authoritarian" practices (Glasius 2018) falls short in describing the profound changes witnessed in political forms and global political discourse. Others have focused on authoritarian assemblages extending beyond the nation-states and geographical borders, engaging a wide range of actors, technologies, policies, etc. (Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019; Topak 2019). Assemblages prove to be powerful descriptive tools for analysing dynamic entanglements. Yet, they are weaker in producing normative categorisations or identifying systemic attributions.

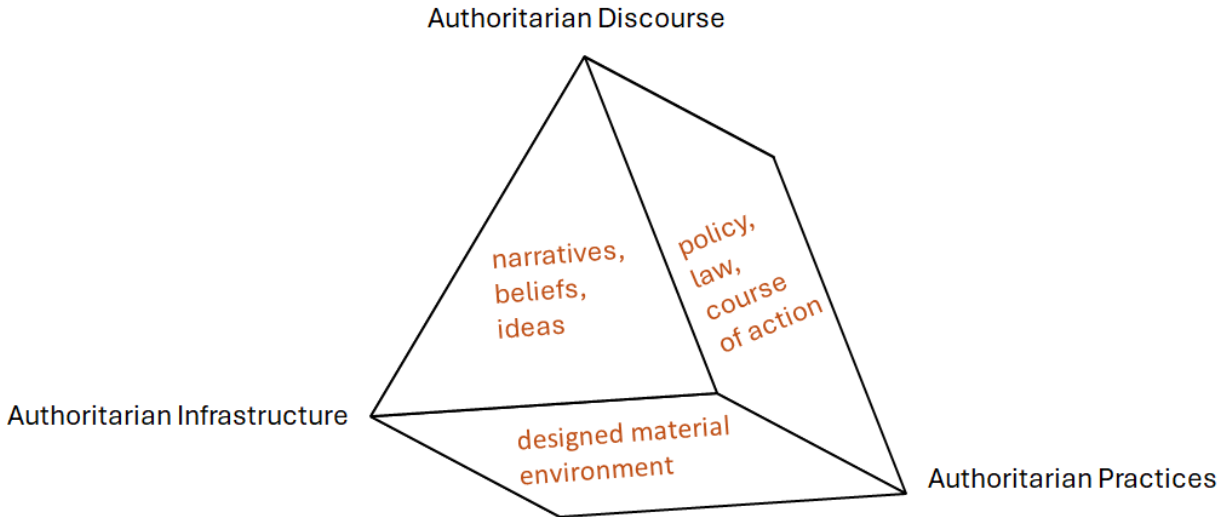

Figure 2: *The prism model of authoritarianism*

Consequently, we offer a prism through which authoritarian systems could be seen (Figure 2). The prism is composed of:

- Authoritarian discourses: narrative, beliefs, ideas
- Authoritarian practices: policy, law, course of action
- Authoritarian infrastructure: the designed material environment that underpins discourses and practices

Although these dimensions contain larger conceptual areas, we believe they offer a perspective from which authoritarianism and its components can be better understood. Importantly, a system should include all these aspects in order to be defined as authoritarian. As a result, we reject the assertion of Mitchell Dean (2024: 17) that "there can be no categorical distinction between authoritarian and liberal government." The misreading of different Foucauldian concepts, especially the conceptual disarray between power, coercion, and discipline, makes such theories weirdly alien both to surveillance studies scholars and, more importantly, to the lived experiences of millions of people under authoritarian regimes' rule. The prism helps us to differentiate between systems in which democratic self-determination, participation, and resistance are possible, and systems in which authoritarian entanglements prevent, control, or pre-empt such responses.

Two ideas are key here: firstly, co-production and the interlinkages between the three dimensions; and secondly, the relationship between the material and the non-material. The question of authoritarian infrastructure in particular becomes more salient in a datafied world, where digital infrastructures such as China's Great Firewall or Iran's National Network curb access to free global internet. These authoritarian systems demonstrate a digital development dilemma (Akbari 2025), wherein digital infrastructures that can be potentially progressive, participatory, or liberatory are designed in a way that facilitates the integration of surveillance and control. While much has been written about fascist architecture or borders as sites of authoritarian practices, we emphasise the importance of the infrastructural dimension, not only as a space where authoritarianism is practised but also as a material network that facilitates, leads to, and is part of an authoritarian system.

However, despite the advantages of this prism in offering a holistic approach to how authoritarianism can be understood, it does not in itself specify the actors involved. The reason is twofold. Firstly, the actors move dynamically between these different spheres and pinpointing them to one dimension is impossible. Secondly, traditional political actors such as politicians, policymakers, voters, civil society members, etc. are no longer the only determinants of political decision-making and engagements.

Digital Political Economy and Emerging Actors

What does the digital change about authoritarianism? The digital transforms the three dimensions of the authoritarian prism we previously discussed. In many cases, authoritarian systems/states simply make use of the affordances of new digital tools. As much as digital technologies have not been liberatory (Diamond 2010), they are also not authoritarian per se. Despite the media outcry in Western/Northern countries, research has shown that the use of technology for authoritarian purposes is context-specific and is not limited to authoritarian technology providers. In his book, *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet*, Gagliardone (2019) shows how Chinese companies follow the market's demands and each state's requirements in offering surveillance technologies. In another report (Roberts 2023) with case studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia, supply chains of surveillance technologies are traced back to the US, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, and China. Authoritarian regimes are not the only agents of authoritarian surveillance.

Authoritarian surveillance emerges out of the unprecedented power bestowed by data capitalism upon states as knowers/watchers and not only exacerbates already existing authoritarian systems but also opens up authoritarian possibilities in democracies. The current digital/datafied political economy disrupts ordinary power/knowledge constellations to a degree that redefines how we conventionally understand democracy. Far from being a diffuse assemblage of components, through a materialist lens, it is very clear where authoritarianism is located. Very little attention has been paid to the internal dynamics of capitalist corporations as authoritarian structures (cf. Akbari 2022); indeed, in many neoliberal castings of global political economy, an abstract "market" was proposed as a liberating structure counterposed to the intrusive, constricting, and authoritarian state. The origins of neoliberalism as a school of economic thought indeed lie in this opposition from a segment of capitalism to growing fascism in the 1920s. However, that early inspiration soon gave way to what Quinn Slobodian (2018) terms "the Geneva School" of neoliberal thought, whose fundamentalist market-centric philosophy in fact had more use for the state, insofar as it enabled the advantageous functioning of the market, but no use for the democratic constraint of the state. As Slobodian (2018) shows, for Geneva School neoliberals, democracy is a potential hazard to the market, and when there is a conflict, it is democracy that has to be constrained or even eliminated. Thus, when this neoliberalism emerged as the ready-made "solution" to the crisis of capitalism in the 1970s, via the machinations of Milton Friedman and the "Chicago Boys" in Chile, it was not opposed to authoritarianism but working hand-in-hand with General Augusto Pinochet's regime. It is also in this period that Foucault (2008) identified neoliberalism, in his contemporary lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, as not simply an

economic philosophy but as a "new governmentality," a new way of doing government that required new disciplinary measures and new subjectivities.

In surveillance studies, while many have accepted Gilles Deleuze's (1992) characterization of "control society" as the post-panoptic condition, there have been few attempts to consider Foucault's own version of post-panopticism, neoliberalism. There has been a long debate in governmentality studies on both "authoritarian liberalism" and "authoritarian governmentality" (see, e.g., Dean 2002). Mitchell Dean (2024) has claimed that he cannot find authoritarianism in Foucault's casting of neoliberalism. This is not wrong, but it is hardly surprising considering the time that Foucault was delivering the lectures that constitute *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008). One has to look at more recent writing on neoliberalism (e.g., Slobodian 2018), in addition to Foucault's (2008) much earlier analysis, to discover its authoritarian core, or more accurately its complete uninterest in the preservation of democracy and popular participation.

Deleuze's (1992) observations on the temporal origins of "control society" in cybernetics and computing from the 1940s to the 1960s and the crisis of the institutions in the late 1960s fit perfectly with the global economic crisis in the early 1970s that saw the end of the golden age of capitalism, and of the Fordist mode of capitalist production, and the beginning of the neoliberal era. Control society and neoliberalism in that sense are not just coterminous, they are interconnected. It was the revolution in logistics and telecommunications that afforded a new kind of connected capitalism and then a faster, digitally enabled capitalism that gave rise to platforms. As Alex Galloway (2006) argued in *Protocol*, the apparently decentralised and networked character of this new communicative economy was in fact structured in very strict, vertically hierarchical ways. Around the same time, one could observe the same combination in the platform corporations that began to dominate this landscape. With their ostensibly flattened hierarchies, with open offices, free food, games, and leisure integrated into the everyday work life of the company, they appeared open and participatory. However, the structures of ownership and reward systems were vastly skewed in favour of a very small minority of executives and shareholders (or increasingly private venture capitalists), leading to an unprecedented concentration of personal wealth in their hands. Their whims and personalities increasingly defined the sociotechnical imaginaries of those platforms and generated an almost neofeudal deference to them as visionary leaders. However, we would reject the broader neofeudalism or technofeudalism arguments (see, e.g., J. Dean 2024; Durand 2024; Varoufakis 2024) as insufficiently engaged with global realities and the entire history of colonial capitalism and overly focused on a narrow Euro-American political economic history. Instead, we agree with Evgeny Morozov (2022: 38) that "dispossession and expropriation have been constitutive of accumulation throughout history," particularly "the extensive use of extra-economic means of value extraction on the non-capitalist periphery." Thus, we follow Jeremy Gilbert's (2024) view that the emerging era is simply a new regime of capitalist accumulation. We understand this regime as involving platform corporations as authoritarian structures.

These relate to the conventional nation-state in four basic ways. The first is platform corporations conjoined to the nation-state, for example, either in new wealthy post-colonial states like Singapore or the United Arab Emirates, where techno-nationalism and a corporatist state model work hand-in-hand, or in traditional empires, for example, China, which is becoming, in effect, an authoritarian platform empire. The second is existing platforms as vehicles for a new kind of government, for example, the networked global community able to take on the functions of government that Mark Zuckerberg proposed of Facebook in his "Open Letter to the Facebook Community" of 2017 (Rider and Wood 2019). The third is platforms as launchpads for a takeover of existing governments via the electoral system or (quasi-)coup. One can see this emerging in events as seemingly disparate as the data manipulations of Cambridge Analytica, Bukele's election in El Salvador as a charismatic, blockchain bro grasping at the traditional reins of government, and most recently, Elon Musk's effective purchase of a central and defining place in Donald Trump's second government, without the conventional responsibility or accountability attached to government.

This forms a bridge to the fourth form of authoritarian platform corporate relationship with the nation-state, and the one that is potentially the most perilous: the creation of new platforms as explicit replacements for the government. One emerging example is the Praxis "network state," a blockchain-based accelerationist global post-smart city initiative, with an undisguised white supremacist vision "to restore Western Civilization and pursue our ultimate destiny of life among the stars" (Praxis 2024). The increasingly obvious link between blockchain and authoritarianism is particularly fascinating and concerning. Blockchain culture is ostensibly defined by decentralization and flattening of economic hierarchies, however David Golumbia (2016, 2024), described it as intrinsically authoritarian. In *The Politics of Bitcoin* (2016) and *Cyberlibertarianism* (2024), Golumbia argues that right-wing ideology is bound-up with the digital. For example, liberal media in the US saw Elon Musk's fascistic outbursts on Twitter as a "turn" or new (e.g., Mac 2024), but Golumbia's (2016, 2024) historical work shows that it is the internal politics of tech corporations that have driven the "global turn to authoritarianism" and not the turn that has only belatedly begun to affect tech CEOs. For example, Musk's unprecedented new position has been achieved through a white supremacist, misogynist, authoritarian campaign, which was particularly effective amongst young, white men who had been radicalised via social media platforms (Stanaland 2024). These platforms are the products of the same platform capitalist model that has enabled Musk to emerge as simultaneously the richest human being who has ever lived and an "anti-establishment," "anti-elite" symbol of rebellion.

It is no accident that, for Elon Musk, the immediate utopia is the Mars colony, a project whose technological dependencies and challenges of extreme environments appear to mandate a highly selective society; tight, hierarchical organization; and total social and environmental surveillance as a foundation (cf. Grove 2021). It is also a kind of release: the "final frontier" is an ostensibly guilt-free version of settler-colonialism, a genuine tabula rasa, but one to be built on the backs of people left behind on an Earth in polycrisis. The Mars colony is therefore the speculative apogee of a new totalitarian-colonial vision of total surveillance to be achieved by the alignment of the states with the goals and values of platform corporations.

Conclusions

In this short essay, we have revisited the "global turn to authoritarianism" with a critical eye. We have shown that most contemporary theories of authoritarianism have moved away from broad "big theory" explanations so much that they are now "small theories" about methods of digital repression and not any more about "authoritarianism" per se. However, we argue that the further transformations of digitization and datafication of capitalism that have taken place following the combined decolonization, developmental, and neoliberal turn of the 1970s mean we must address new spaces, forms, materialities, and *systems* of authoritarianism. Consequently, we have offered a three-level model of contemporary digital authoritarianism, which argues for a prism of discourses, practices, and infrastructures. The key characteristics of the prism include the co-production of the dimensions, the interlinkages between the material and the political, and the concurrence of all three dimensions for a system to be identified as authoritarian. The paper adds to the perspective an unconventional analysis of the new authoritarian actors: the platform corporations, their CEOs, and investors. In doing so, we return the digital to authoritarianism—not as a mere new tool but as a technology of governance that redefines conventional ideas about nation-state, democracy, or even authoritarianism.

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