"Nation" as watchword: The politics of cultural surveillance in Romania

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Foucault and Bentham, or "(not) seeing is believing"

In a conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot from 1977, Michel Foucault[1] addresses the theme of surveillance in a twofold manner: as a specific practice[2] related either to the "gaze" or to "opinion, observation and discourse".[3] Foucault describes surveillance primarily by reference to Jeremy Bentham's famous *Panopticon*,[4] a Fourieristic utopian theoretical model of an "Inspection-House", designed specifically for penitentiaries, where the prisoner was put under total surveillance by a precise arrangement or disposition of space that precluded any form of escape from an all-seeing Eye, the "inspector".[5] The gaze of the "inspector" becomes the all-powerful instrument of control, without the need of guards, weapons or material

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[1] Michel Foucault, "The eye of power" in Colin Gordon, ed. *Power/Knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1977): 146-165.

[2] See the Foucauldian term "practice" related to prisons as explained in Michel Foucault, "Questions of method" in Graham Burchell *et al.*, *The Foucault effect. Studies in governmentality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991): 73-104 [75]: "In this piece of research on the prisons… the target of analysis wasn't 'institutions', 'theories' or 'ideology', but *practices*… the hypothesis being that these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, described by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances… but possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and 'reason', it is a question of analyzing a 'regime of practices' — practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect. To analyze 'regimes of practices' means to analyze programmes of conduct which have both prescriptive effects regarding what is to be done (effects of 'jurisdiction'), and codifying effects regarding what is to be known (effects of 'veridiction')."

[3] Foucault, "The eye of power", 153.

[4] See Foucault's description in "Panopticism", Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault reader* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1984): 206-213.

[5] The "Panopticon" is a series of *Letters* written from Russia by Bentham between 1768-1787, addressed to a "friend in England", and two *Postscripts* from 1790 and 1791. The first French edition of the *Panopticon* edited by Étienne Dumont was published in 1791 and printed by the order of the Legislative Assembly. See Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" (*Panopticon letters*), in: Miran Božovič, ed. *The Panopticon writings* (London: Verso, 1995): 29-95 and "Postcript I" in same: 97-114.

restraints in general. It is, in Foucault's opinion, the reverse of the "principle of the dungeon": "daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection".[6] The mechanism of the *panopticon* is total or, in any case, strives towards totality,[7] because it ensures a surveillance that would be "both global and individualising, while at the same time separating the individuals under observation".[8] The system by which Bentham tried to gain the attention of his contemporaries relied on a very seductive formula of minimal costs with maximal output: "a superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost".[9]

Bentham's texts about the *panopticon* drew little attention to mainstream academic scholarship until their rediscovery by Foucault in his famous *Surveiller et punir.*[10] However, the specific feature of Bentham's penitentiary project in his times was the possibility for the "Inspector" of seeing the prisoners without being seen.[11] As Muriel Schmid[12] remarks, Foucault draws on Bentham's neologism to create his own noun, "panopticism", while innovating upon it, at the same time:

> *Panopticism* will designate a set of disciplinary arrangements that will take place inside an architecture of surveillance and corresponding to precise criteria: individual confinement, total visibility, constant surveillance, these arrangements being set with the purpose of amending the guilty.[13]

However, Bentham's *Letters* offer more insights on the problem of panoptical surveillance. According to Miran Božovič's[14] way of addressing the issue in his introduction to Bentham's *Panopticon*, this utopia presents, as Bentham acknowledges, "a new mode of obtaining *power of mind over mind* (my emphasis), in a quantity hitherto without example".[15] The possessor of this

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[6] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge,* 147.
[7] See Bentham, *The Panoticon writings,* 31.
[8] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 146.
[9] *Ibid*. 155.
[10] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, *naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
[11] Bentham, "Panopticon", 45: "The essence of it consists, then, in the *centrality* of the inspector's situation, combined with the well-known and most effectual contrivances for *seeing without being seen*".
[12] Muriel Schmid, "La mascarade des coupables: le jeu des masques dans *Le Panoptique* de Bentham", in *Laval théologique et philosophique* 60, 3 (2004): 543-556.
[13] François Boullant, in Schmid, "La mascarade des coupables", 547.
[14] Miran Božovič, "Introduction: 'An utterly dark spot' ", in Božovič, *The Panopticon Writings*, 1-27.
[15] Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, 31.

power is the "inspector" that has "invisible omnipresence".[16] Another interesting fragment is Bentham's "Fragment on ontology",[17] where Bentham speculates about an "ontology of fictions". He is less interested, as Božovič states, in the difference between fiction and reality than in exploring the effects of fictions upon reality itself. The general idea behind the *Fragment on Ontology* is that through fictitious entities, reality is endowed with "logical-discursive consistency".[18] In the case of the panopticon prison, the reality of the panopticon is kept alive not by a fiction as such, but by an "imaginary non-entity", which finally *seems* to be either the "inspector" himself, the omnipresent Eye, or even "God" himself, but really is *nothing*.[19] Because, if the perfect condition of omnipresence or omnivisibility to others is invisibility, than the perfect actor of omnipresence or omnivisibility would be *nothing*. Not being *present* in any way, it would be really perfect invisibility. The "entity", which is "invisible and omnipresent" is described by Bentham as "an utterly dark spot" in the mechanism of the panopticon. Božovič shows that Bentham separates between two classes of fictions: fictitious entities and imaginary non-entities. The fictitious entities have an effect on reality "despite the fact that they do not exist", while the imaginary non-entities "precisely because of the fact that they do not exist". Thus, the imaginary not-entity keeps the reality alive "through its very non-existence" — "if it were to exist, the reality itself would disintegrate".[20]

In the end, Bentham's panopticon is a theatre of surveillance, as long as the surveyed really believe that they are surveyed by an omnipresent force. In Bentham's sense, it is also a theatre of punishment, as long as the moral impetus under the *panopticon* describes as imperative the moral

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[16] Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, 45.

[17] *Ibid.* 115-158.

[18] Božovič, *The Panopticon Writings*, 2.

[19] *Ibid.* 17: "Although the inspector may completely abandon surveillance, from this moment on, each prisoner will believe that the inspector is preying upon him — whereas in truth, each prisoner, is only preying upon himself. Thus, discipline is internalised, while the inspector himself has become superfluous. In this way, then, the impression of the inspector's invisible omnipresence and the idea of constant surveillance are produced in prisoners' minds. Thus, through the illusion of the all-seeing gaze of the dark spot in the lantern, God has been constructed and, in a single move, the last of the skeptics has been, as it were, converted. There can now no longer be any doubt: in the eyes of the subjects of the universe of the panopticon, the gaze of the dark spot *is* the all-seeing gaze of God, the spot in the lantern *is* God himself. Like any God worthy of the name, the inspector may, from his moment on, turn his back on the universe of the panopticon and peacefully devote himself to his book-keeping; from now on, the universe of the panopticon is perfectly capable of running without him".

[20] Božovič, *The Panopticon Writings*, 2.

"reformation" of the inmates, as well as the moral education[21] of the viewers:

> In the execution of punishment, which serves principally as an example for the innocent, we must seize every opportunity to fascinate their gaze: 'lose no occasion of speaking to the eye'

writes Bentham. Thus, for Bentham, the key member of every well-composed committee of penal law is none other than "the manager of a theatre" who would, of course, know how to attain the greatest effect from the staging of punishment.[22]

Bentham himself is convinced that one can attain the modern utilitarian scope of the legal disciplinary system, which is the reformation of the individual and not the punishing itself, as well as the deterrence of the others by means of an illusion, which is the illusion of punishment, as long as the act of punishment is *believed* by the prisoner to be real and the moral reformation of the individual prisoner or the deterrence of others on the outside is the real effect of a fictional cause:

> It is the idea only of the punishment (or, in other words, the apparent punishment) that really acts upon the mind; the punishment itself (the real punishment) acts not any farther than as giving rise to that idea. It is the apparent punishment, therefore, that does all the service, I mean in the way of example, which is the principal object. It is the real punishment that does all the mischief.[23]

Could it be that, in the ideal case, the work of surveillance that Bentham calls for can be done simply by *persuasion*?[24] Surely, at the level where the prisoner

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[21] On the influence of utilitarian moral principles upon Bentham's panoptical utopia, see Muriel Schmid's description of the Panopticon in the context of the judicial reform at the end of the eighteenth century, in Schmid, "La mascarade des coupables" in *Laval théologique et philosophique* 60, 3 (2004): 543-556.

[22] Božovič, *The Panopticon Writings,* 7.

[23] Jeremy Bentham, *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988): 193, quoted in Božovič, "Introduction", 4. See also Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings,* 34.

[24] We are not debating here the established scholarly meanings of the term "persuasion". We use "persuasion" relying only on its most general meaning, that of a "process of guiding or bringing oneself or another toward the adoption of an idea, attitude, or action by rational and symbolic (though not always logical) means": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persuasion. We will, however, not agree with the idea that fear only could be the prime mover of the entire surveillance effect on the prisoner, since the effect of persuasion is much more complex than the fear-induced paralysis effect on the person confined.

is simply swayed by the *apparent* omnipresence[25] of the "inspector", to be surveyed means to be persuaded by the presence of surveillance. Another element, which appears in Bentham's *panopticon* story, might confirm the "obtaining of power of *mind* over *mind*", (my emphasis) which is obviously a persuasory power: the episode of the "Chapel", which has to be installed into the penitentiary-house, since it assures "regular devotion" and "religious instruction".[26] Thus, the power of the *gaze* is completed by the power of the spoken Word — a Word that comes from the speaker's *voice*, which also resonates through a "pan-optical" arrangement.[27] Surely, Bentham envisioned this as a moral instrument of reform. Religious devotion is a symbolical device that reassures the real effect of the inspector's gaze.

Nevertheless, this staging of a near-to-complete *simulation* of reality addressed to the consciousness of the prisoner (through sight and sound) can also be read as the staging of a mechanism of control that really captures the mind of the person confined in the "inspection-house". Where does the *simulation* end for the minds of its audience? Is there any place for the willing adherence of the resident of the *Panopticon* to the program of moral reformation? There is one step from Bentham's panoptical illusion to the phantasmagorical world of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that captures consciousness through sight, sound and meaning.[28] Walter Benjamin indicates the "apparatuses of phantasmagoria",[29] such as the *Panoptikum*s (*Panoptikum* is the German term for "wax-museum") that were used during the nineteenth century to attract and dazzle the eyes of the masses. Is it possible that the early Fourieristical utopias of the early nineteenth century, such as the *Panopticon*, which obviously carried with them ideas of social reformation,

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[25] Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings,* 45: "I flatter myself there can now be little doubt of the plan's possessing the fundamental advantages I have been attributing to it: I mean, the *apparent omnipresence* of the inspector (if divines will allow me the expression), combined with the extreme facility of his *real presence*".

[26] *Ibid.* 97.

[27] *Ibid.* 98: "A speaker cannot be distinctly heard more than a very few feet behind the spot he speaks from. The congregation being placed in a circle, the situation, therefore, of the chaplain should be, not in the centre of that circle, but as near as may be to that part which is behind him, and, consequently, at the greatest distance from that part of it to which he turns his face".

[28] In one of the fragments of his *Arcades project*, the Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin discussed the panoptical devices as referring to the *Panoptikum*, the wax-museum, which he envisions as a museum of early modern optical illusions emerging as a manifestation of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the nineteenth century: "The wax museum [*Panoptikum*] a manifestation of the total work of art. The universalism of the nineteenth century has its monument in the waxworks. Panopticon: not only does one see everything, but one sees it in all ways", in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades project* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999): 531.

[29] Benjamin, *The Arcades project*, 534.

were simply made real and transformed into everyday "myths" imposed on society,[30] or "phantasmagorias", as Benjamin contended?

After this detour, we will return to Foucault, considering his balanced outlook of the Enlightenment way of thinking, including its utopian projects.[31] As shown at the beginning of our study, Foucault mentioned surveillance as related either to the gaze or to opinion. He linked the emergence of the political problem of opinion in modernity with the French Revolution and its endeavors into addressing the problems of a new justice, which would punish the wrongdoers with the basic end to preventing them from further wrongdoing. Opinion would be the watchful eye of the new regime, "by immersing people in a field of total visibility" where this visibility "would restrain them from harmful acts". In the regime of opinion, "each comrade becomes an overseer", as Bentham argued. Behavior and thoughts are routinely scrutinised and put to test in such a "regime" of opinions:

> This reign of 'opinion', so often invoked at this time, represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective gaze…[32]

This does not mean, however that this technology of scrutiny by the use of the watchful eye of public opinion is totally innocent and that it secures the freedom of its addressees in every circumstance. As Foucault explains, only the Enlightenments' most brilliant and honorable minds believed that opinion "could only be good", being the "immediate consciousness of the whole social body" or "like the spontaneous re-actualisation of the social contract". They overlooked the fact that words are dependent on "the real conditions of possibility of opinion", and that the "media of opinion" is "a materiality caught up in the mechanisms of the economy and power in its forms of the press, publishing, and later the cinema and television".[33]

"National" identity as cultural surveillance

In worst cases of political repression, the opinion is shown as "public", yet it is

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[30] *Ibid.* 916: "The total work of art represents an attempt to impose myth on society; (myth being, as [Max] Raphael rightly says [in *Proudhon, Marx, Picasso* (Paris: Excelsior, 1933): 171] the precondition for *œuvres d'art intégrales*)".

[31] Foucault explains best his critical "historical ontology of ourselves" in his "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault reader* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1984): 32-51.

[32] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 154.

[33] *Ibid.* 161-162.

merely an "illusion of power", it has no power of itself.[34] Romania from 1945 to 1989 represents one of these worst-case scenarios. We will also try to focus our argument on a crucially important notion, the notion of "nation", and upon the opinions that circulated during this period around the terms "nation" or "national" in the Romanian political culture and, especially, in the particular field of culture. Our thesis, explained very briefly, is that the term "nation" is a powerful political and cultural symbol that functioned and still functions sometimes as a watchword: as a testword, a password, a *shibboleth*, a word whose meaning is only shared by the members of a certain community and turns into — precisely because its meaning is exclusive and discriminatory — an instrument of (cultural and political) surveillance. Usually, a watchword is a prearranged reply to a challenge, and this is what distinguishes exclusivist, ethnic nationalism from liberal nationalism.[35] This kind of watchword acts as a watch-word. A watchword is like the gaze of the "inspector" — it is virtually *unseen*, that is, uncritically acknowledged, when it is summoned almost involuntarily by a person or a group of persons, it is moralising, it watches over, it silences, it demands conformity and obedience from its listeners. Its spokesperson, in his own turn, becomes a watcher himself, a sentry that calls for this unseen watchword, which acts like a gaze.

At well as in the case of other East European nations in the nineteenth century, the term "nation" is crucially related to Romania's history of political development from a series of Principates vassal to the Ottoman Court at the beginning of the nineteenth century to an independent state at the end of the century, a state formed in 1959 from the unification of the Principates of Wallachia and Moldavia. During the period of the shaping of the Romanian state, the Romanian "nation" was also formed as a cultural (exclusively intellectualistic) symbol. At the very beginning, the political identity of the State went hand in hand with the cultural identity of the "Nation".[36] The State represented the Nation as a whole. However,

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[34] *Ibid.* 161.

[35] For a discussion on "nationalism" that is beyond our scope here, see Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Fantasies of salvation: Democracy, nationalism, and myth in post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 71-81. See also Katherine Verdery's distinction between two main relationships implied by the term "nation", a "citizenship relation, in which the nation is the collective sovereign emanat-ing from common political participation" and "a relation known as ethnicity, in which the national comprises all those of supposedly common language, history or broader 'cultural' identity' ", in Katherine Verdery, "Nationalism and national sentiment in post-Socialist Romania", *Slavic Review* 52, 2 (1993): 179-203 [179].

[36] For the description of the cultural history of the term "nation" in Romania, I rely on Katherine Verdery's book, *National ideology under Socialism. Identity and cultural politics in Ceauşescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

concerning the nation's political identity, in the nineteenth century there have been several disputes between various groups (generally Conservatives and Liberals) concerning the political orientation of Romania, disputes that moved quickly into the cultural arena, splitting the cultural life between a traditionalist, autochtonistic faction and a liberal, Westernised group. Thus, due to political disputes, Romanian culture acquired a "split" cultural identity: on one hand, a so-called "original", "Eastern" core identity and, on the other hand, a "Westernised", so-called "surface" identity.[37] At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, this cultural split acted as a catalyst for a cultural "root-searching" that generated, in the end, a nationalistic, retractile cultural ideology, sometimes fostering xenophobic and anti-Semitic ideas. The nationalistic cultural trend which translated afterwards into politics — beginning with the 1920s – 1930s — encouraged the increasing of the authoritative power of the king in the 1940s and right-wing indigenous extremism during World War II. Ethnical political and cultural nationalism, as Verdery suggests, culminated in the xenophobic, isolationist nationalism of the Ceauşescu regime. As well as the autochtonistic identity, the so-called "European" identity has been shaped in the writings of the nineteenth century intellectuals even before the formation of the Romanian state in 1859. This kind of European identity moved into politics, since the forefathers of the Romanian state, the nationalistic liberals of the 1850s, were also Romania's top intellectuals. For over 150 years, Romanian politicians continued to envision Romania as a nation, which was either part of a European Commonwealth, or an ethnic, autochtonous nation. This vision was passed on to the Romanian people, which has been involuntarily, naturally considered as being conscious of and aspiring either to its European roots or to its "core" ethnic ideology.

In cultural terms, the Ceauşescu-era ethnocentric and xenophobic nationalism polarised the cultural elites between two main groups, similar to the groups of the nineteenth century: the autochtonists and the Westernisers. Communism in Romania became indigenised in the 1970s, after Ceauşescu's

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[37] The Romanian philosopher Titu Maiorescu is famous for his theory about the modern Romanian society of the nineteenth century envisioned as a system based on "forms without substance". In his case, the modern institutions of nineteenth century Romania are seen as inadequate forms in a society which was overwhelmingly agrarian and mainly autochtonistic. The argument appeared during the nineteenth century political and cultural dispute concerning the modernisation (*i.e.* Westernisation) of Romanian society. Maiorescu argues for a different approach of the issue of implementing institutions in accordance with an aligning of the traditional "substance" with the Westernised form. The historian Lucian Boia argues that this debate lasted for almost a century, until it was disrupted by Communism. See Lucian Boia, *History and myth in Romanian consciousness* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2001): 33 ff.

retreat from the Soviet sphere of influence on the occasion of the Prague Revolution in 1968. Fearing the influence of the Soviets, Ceauşescu drew his wild card: nationalism. He speculated upon the early nationalism of the Romanians, which was still there even after two decades of frightening Communist oppression. This way, he appropriated first the national sentiment of a massive part of the people, which were already politically and culturally alienated from internationalist Marxism. He transformed this nationalism step-by-step into an oppressive doctrine.[38] He created his own personality cult by using an ethnic nationalism oriented mostly towards "glorious" moments and personalities of the Romanian history. He designated himself as one of these "glorious" figures in Romanian history. The cultural field absorbed very quickly this form of nationalism controlled by the State. The autochtonists became the "protochronists", supporters of a "unique" and "multi-millennial people", that was deemed as the "true" nation of Romanians, by excluding, of course, the "aliens", who were the members of the minorities.

The discourse about the "nation" quickly became totalitarian in its nature and a form of cultural surveillance: intellectuals who did not share enough "enthusiasm" for the new concept of the Romanian "nation" were stigmatised overnight and considered "traitors", "unworthy of being called Romanians" or "enemies of the working class".[39] The process of cultural surveillance of the "patriotic" intellectuals continued well after 1989, as the official declarations of some political leaders show.

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[38] We should also keep in mind that surveillance in Romania did not rely only on "soft" persuasive measures such as those described in this study. The surveillance work was based also on a powerful and formidable apparatus of surveillance which belonged to the secret police, the well-known *Securitate*. We should also remind ourselves that intellectuals who did not comply "peacefully" with the ideological demands were put under constant surveillance and were harassed by the officers of the *Securitate*. Often they were forced into exile, put under house arrest, even subjected to brutal force, incarceration or constant police interrogations. Also, a huge network of civilian "spies", recruited from all strata of the society supported this apparatus of surveillance with a vast amount of information. Especially during the last period of Communism in Romania, this enormous intrusion of the *Securitate* in all areas of life (public or private) really created the impression that the surveillance was "omnipresent". For further details, see Dennis Deletant, "The Securitate Legacy in Romania" and "The successors of the Securitate: Old habits die hard", in Dennis Deletant and Kieran Williams, *Security intelligence services in new Democracies. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001): 159-262.
[39] Disturbing details about the methods of stigmatisation are described at length in Verdery's *National ideology under Socialism.*