

Global Preventive Security and its unbearable lightness

[opendemocracy.net/didier-bigo/global-preventive-security-and-its-unbearable-lightness](https://www.opendemocracy.net/didier-bigo/global-preventive-security-and-its-unbearable-lightness)

Didier Bigo

One now plays a part in one's own protection. The institutions can help one to strengthen one's preparedness. One must not blame them if they fail despite the promise of a maximum-security programme.



Black ice. Wikimedia Commons/Kim Hansen. Some rights reserved.

Security practices and their relationship to mobility and freedom are changing. Security seems to expand globally and to reach for the future. Donald Rumsfeld is quoted as an authority who has best described the new (not so brave) world with its “unknown unknowns”. Part of the discourse of security studies participates in rendering critical approaches mainstream by reproducing, with variations, this common belief.

We want to discuss this ‘essentiality’ of security everywhere and its relation to the future. We argue that this discourse of Global Preventive Security like a GPS in search of a triangulation for tracking down the agents is *de facto* an illusion. Security is ‘sans importance’, ‘sans qualité’. It is a practical regime of justification permitting some to be sacrificed, while normalising others, as long as security is isolated and not related to freedom, popular sovereignty, access to justice, rule of law, or equality. When security is related to them, then we can see that all these activities and rhetoric are no more than a thin layer of ice. It may look so pervasive and homogeneous, but in fact has no consistency in societies that produce cracks, turmoil, magmatic liquidity.

This calls therefore for an investigation into the implications of the idea that a change in securitization practices is happening, is necessary, and will lead towards the benevolent control of all forms of flows.

How can we begin to interpret this series of diverse practices that claim to constitute an all-encompassing security: one that is global, limitless, primary, and preventive, whereas in the past it

claimed only to be national, bounded territorially, liberal, and punitive?

A book in preparation proposes a response to these pressing questions by analysing the transformation of contemporary security practices that has resulted from a protracted process of (in)securitization, cutting across different social worlds. These multiple social worlds have a tendency to de-differentiate, to become hybridized under the pressure of these assemblages of (in)security that connect, blend and seemingly homogenize them, but only superficially. As we say, this rigidification provokes cracks beneath the surface; the various social universes resist, in their own way, the transnational guilds of the professionals of management of unease that are multiplying due to these semantic, organizational and technical assemblages.

Metaphorically, contemporary security rhetoric resembles a catastrophic climate change reducing and 'icing over' the liquidity of the networks that innervate the social universes of societies, plugging the chinks between them. Icebergs of contemporary security doxa, beliefs, and dispositions clog the flows of mobility and freedom of movement and opinion that information technologies and telephony had, by contrary motion, liquefied and accelerated. Consequently the rocks of security transform information and its exchange into problems of traceability and surveillance. The liquid society is solidified on the surface through its glaciers and its archipelagos of security that wear down the day to day. Security is imbibed 'on the rocks' and forms a new cocktail.

The securitisation cocktail

This colonization of different social fields (health, insurance, risk, finance, bank securitisation), in the past kept at arms length from the coercive institutions that were the paragon of national security (army, police, customs, border guards), has led to a blending, a hybridization of different technologies of power (biometrics, visual surveillance, communication interception, digital data mining, dataveillance, profiling, sensors, location determination technologies, non lethal armaments, drones) in different terrains (counter-subversive operations, peace enforcement, crime control, border control) and the development of a para-private rationale that blends public and private in an inextricable way, creating a hybrid of power relations far removed from the official idea of an equal partnership between public and private (private military companies, security firms, industry of internal security, banking intelligence, airport security).

This colonization leaves a uniform layer of ice made up of authentication, identification, detection, monitoring, tracking, information gathering, intelligence linking, profiling categories and prediction behaviours in profoundly different landscapes ranging from healthcare, geo-science to police, intelligence services via border guards or immigration services, insurance companies and banks. This uniform and thin layer of white icy snow is also partially erasing the political differences between right and left, everybody claiming to be in favour of the implementation of these transversal techniques, and everybody observing that the younger generations love this surveillance that they can transform into fun and self-surveillance, as well as on occasion, awareness and resistance, by reciprocating the surveillance.

This changes the morphology of the different social universes in which we live once it has become established. Like a glacier, it covers over the varied mountains of the coercive institutions (army, police, judicial system, prison) and softens the highest peaks of war and police arbitrariness with a self-appointed humanitarian-military-security, declaring itself concerned with the minimalization of death resulting from combat, the protection and prevention of catastrophes, and a particular attention that must be paid to the victims when 'managing' violence in cities.

At the same time, it transforms the valleys of freedom (opinion, movement, information) by filling them with this icy component of surveillance and organising the 'paths' by which the milieu can channel and filter the slower flows more than ever. As a result we can still move quickly on well-controlled roads, but the secondary roads are cracked, and have become harder to navigate, and there, detention can become indefinite.

Glaciers have also formed in the way of “advance” customs clearance, pre-borders checks, digital authentication, which can never fully seal the borders of a country, but can filter, slow down, control in a ‘smart way’ the flow of movement. Security fills in the gaps, standardizes, globalizes, and expands in space and time by playing on predicting a future that is read as a future perfect, as a future already known.

Empirically, the police work through transnational networks that extend beyond national territorial borders, the military want to be and are involved in internal security, and intelligence services indiscriminately accumulate more and more so-called ‘raw information’ for purposes of further deeper analysis. Additionally, security as a business is flourishing and criminologists, biologists, climatologists, as well as computer engineers are called upon to intervene and predict.

Superficially, nothing seems to escape this ‘securitization’ which becomes the continuous white noise covering the heterogeneities of the social universes and affecting their shapes and boundaries. But in fact this is just a cover up for major cracks in what was called a state with its national interest, its ‘reason’ of State, its ‘secrecy’. The hybrid created by [a diagonalisation of surveillance](#) reconfigures private and public bureaucracies, links them intimately and transnationally, across borders, while breaking the roots that the state representatives, their spoke-persons of the fantasm of Unity, shared with the popular classes; a process leaving open a devastated soil of a post-ice age nurturing (once again?) a redefinition of identity through xenophobia and class wars.

Maximum-security beliefs and where they get you

Professionals of politics begin to see the results of the maximum-security beliefs they propose as the main narrative of this time of unease, and the anxiety that they help to construct as a ‘reality’. In a nutshell, this form of securitization-insecuritization that claims to be Global, Preventive, and secured itself through Surveillance, and that we may call GPS (pursuing the metaphor of its traceability), is grafting itself onto each and every practice of the different social worlds with the consequences of de-differentiating them, hybridizing them. This form of securitization (GPS) leads to the serious consequence of limiting and sometimes reversing the quasi-continuous process of differentiation that has characterized the way in which the state has slowly embraced society hitherto, through a pastoral and protective microphysics of power, inciting subjects to exercise their freedom and to adapt themselves to a certain liberal understanding.

Therefore this protective dimension of the state’s responsibility has to adjust the rhetoric. Resilience [becomes a key word](#) instead of security and risk. The individual will have to learn how to protect himself from security processes and their results. One will have to be more resilient in the face of catastrophe and also, maybe mainly, to the unknown effects of securitization practices that are conceived of as protecting and which therefore sacrifice, produce exclusion and violence. One will have to accept that these measures may be completely ineffective despite the assurance of maximum security. Similarly, one will have to acknowledge the positive role of the security operators, regardless of how this will impact on one’s fate.

This new post-liberal subject must then actively cooperate with the local and international operators, shall we say these ‘global humanity’ operators – international institutions, NGOs, banks and professional transnational guilds continually working to improve our own security, as well as a global security – in a context of uncertainty. One must understand that these trials make us stronger, freer. One now plays a part in one’s own protection, and is expected to understand that one is ultimately the only person responsible. The institutions can only help one to strengthen one’s preparedness. One must not blame them if they fail despite the promise of a maximum-security programme.

This new life of resilience is an initiation into a new global managerialism where one exists only as an isolate of a statistical category, as the unit of an aggregation of individuals (a population) and not as a human being made of blood and soul. One is ultimately defined as an ‘individual’ not because one can choose and decide through the exercise of a free will, but because ‘one’ is the result of a unique

number produced by the combination of statistical categories that analysis and surveillance techniques have established. One's freedom is no longer either positive or negative; freedom is merely what one is allotted within the bounds of the global (in)securitization process, depicted by the different guilds of professionals of management of unease, as a period of boundless peace, where 'ice white' happiness is limitless, stainless, and provides total security for all.

Who can be against it?

Security in this global, all-encompassing, de-differentiating form, is therefore part of a political programme for managing life itself, and is presented as conciliatory, standardizing, and protective. Security is seen as applying and reconciling the values of equality, justice and liberty while replacing them. Who can be against it? Security comes 'first', 'exists before freedom' and claims to manifest freedom itself, not to be its restriction.

This programme of managing life in all aspects of life is 'productive' and invents transversal techniques by transposing them to different 'terrains'. Drones become a part of the techniques used simultaneously for the war in Afghanistan, in volcanology, and in trouble spots within cities, waiting to be the normal instrument of delivery.

The connectivity and interoperability of digital technology reinvents the old video surveillance under the new name of video protection. The management of life is also the management of the present. The highland ice sheets, having worn down coercive mountains and filled autonomous spaces with surveillance, are dotted with these human-machine assemblages that mine the past and simulate the future in order to control the present.

Digital technologies purport to be the tools of this knowledge of a future perfect already known as a result of the exponential accumulation of 'raw' data. They connect, substitute, diminish and undermine the collection of human intelligence data by placing them into a larger macro-universe of global evaluations, analysing the various subtleties of social phenomena through the microphysics of individual data captured directly by the traces of the movement left by the individuals travelling between the diverse territories and social worlds, and by simultaneously denying that these individuals could speak the truth of their own identity through their own narrative of themselves.

This 'global protection-prediction surveillance' form of security reconstructs virtually the movements of groups characterized by profiles that they supposedly share, while being incapable of giving evidence with the suspicions that have been generated, and multiplying quasi-infinitely this new category of discourse even more popular than resilience: the false positives.

Through a certain form of acquiescence to the use of managerial and multi-scalar techniques, GPS security de-differentiates the different professional-social worlds by hybridizing them and imposing its logic of calculus and categorization, reducing individual lives to descriptions of data, by transforming the most qualitative aspects of our lives into quantification indexes, and by depoliticizing normative judgements by presenting them as necessary technical processes.

But, far from creating a successful programme of biopolitics controlling humankind, as suggested by various authors, this GPS security evinces a de-governmentalization process that does not operate through its own 'action over another action', but by acting upon actions still in their virtualities. Paradoxically, the project of surveillance protection retreats into its own imagined world; it abandons the world via its unbearable lightness for an unlikely future of foregone conclusion.