

# The Geographical Review

VOLUME 97

July 2007

NUMBER 3

## THE PANOPTICON'S CHANGING GEOGRAPHY

JEROME E. DOBSON and PETER F. FISHER

**ABSTRACT.** Over the past two centuries, surveillance technology has advanced in three major spurts. In the first instance the surveillance instrument was a specially designed building, Bentham's Panopticon; in the second, a tightly controlled television network, Orwell's Big Brother; today, an electronic human-tracking service. Functionally, each technology provided total surveillance within the confines of its designated geographical coverage, but costs, geographical coverage, and benefits have changed dramatically through time. In less than a decade, costs have plummeted from hundreds of thousands of dollars per watched person per year for analog surveillance or tens of thousands of dollars for incarceration to mere hundreds of dollars for electronic human-tracking systems. Simultaneously, benefits to those being watched have increased enormously, so that individual and public resistance are minimized. The end result is a fertile new field of investigation for surveillance studies involving an endless variety of power relationships. Our literal, empirical approach to panopticism has yielded insights that might have been less obvious under the metaphorical approach that has dominated recent scholarly discourse. We conclude that both approaches—literal and metaphorical—are essential to understand what promises to be the greatest instrument of social change arising from the Information Revolution. We urge public and scholarly debate—local, national, and global—on this grand social experiment that has already begun without forethought. *Keywords:* geofencing, geoslavery, GIS, GPS, human tracking, Panopticon.

For 220 years the Panopticon has stood as the tangible symbol of total surveillance, discipline, and control. Always it has been the utopian dream of some and hellish nightmare of others. Its initial, architectural manifestation was promoted heavily in the late 1700s. Its pure form fizzled after a few decades but left an indelible mark on social practice and discourse. A second manifestation, "Big Brother," was feared intensely in the mid-twentieth century but later accepted in many places. It left such a powerful mark on public discourse that now merely saying its name is viewed as shameless fearmongering. Today, a third manifestation is quietly making a vigorous comeback—with little public reaction.

Since the mid-1970s, scholars of surveillance studies have insisted that the Panopticon should be taken not literally but as a metaphor for surveillance of all types, with emphasis on power relationships. In this article we revert to a literal

---

\*✎ DR. DOBSON is a professor of geography at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7613. DR. FISHER is a research professor of geographical information at City University, London EC1V 0HB, England.