



## **"See it. Say it. Sorted." Control Society and the Many Faces of Care**

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In late January 2019 I travelled by train from London Gatwick Airport to Brighton to attend a conference on "Fascism? Populism? Democracy? Critical Theories in a Global Context"<sup>1</sup>. At a regular interval, a display accompanied by a corresponding voice recording appeared on the train's screens advising passengers to report anything they deemed wrong, unusual or suspicious to the British Transport Police. "If you see something that doesn't look right, speak to staff or text British Transport Police," passengers were instructed. Whatever it should be, Transport Police would be taking care of it. "We'll sort it out" – thus the ad's full-bodied promise. While the ad's text left open what kind of irregularities, inconveniences, disruptions, threats or even dangers were at stake – from rubbish on the floor to broken toilets, coffee being spilled on seats to loud music, left luggage or even verbal and physical harassment, much is conceivable – the accompanying image, reminiscent of a still image from a black-and-white film, spoke with great clarity. In its foreground, on the darkish left side, train passengers are shown the head and shoulder of a male person, unmistakably racialized as non-white by the depiction of his facial features and hair. The image insinuates that he is attempting to enter a room which he is not supposed to enter as the door's sign unmistakably signals "No Entry." In contrast, in the brightly lit background, to the right side of the picture, passengers get to see an only shadowy, barely recognizable female person passing by. The image's message leaves no doubt as to who its addressee is. It is the female – and her potential protectors? – in the back of the picture to whom the message is directed. And this in two ways that, at first glance, seem to contradict each other. While she is called upon to become active, to observe her surroundings attentively and to report the unusual, implicitly she is at the same time constituted as an object of concern. She needs to be taken care of and be protected against the suspiciously acting (foreign?) male.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fascism? Populism? Democracy? Critical Theories in a Global Context", University of Brighton, Boğaziçi University Istanbul, International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs, January 23-25, 2019. Further information on the conference at [criticaltheoryconsortium.org](http://criticaltheoryconsortium.org).



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Now, since coming from Berlin and about to participate in a conference on the decline of democracy, the global rise of authoritarianism and its possible relationship to fascism, it occurred to me that this was perhaps too blatantly obvious a coincidence. Did I read too much into the ad? Did I see ghosts where there were none? While I tried to focus on the conference book of abstracts, the ad, however, continued to stir rather troubling thoughts and associations. Calls to report to police anything allegedly suspicious or to denounce even neighbors, family members and friends were a common practice of the Nazi regime. Such denunciations played an utterly devastating role in the persecution and annihilation first of all of Jews, Sinti and Romani, and the cognitively and physically disabled, i.e. all those the Nazis had declared "unworthy of life"; but also of gays and lesbians, communists, social democrats, and others who had, in various ways, opposed the Nazi regime or had hid Jews or helped them to survive. Reporting presumably suspicious facts to the police and the secret service was also an inherent feature of everyday life in the German Democratic Republic during the state-socialist regime. But as logical and seductive as these kinds of historical analogies may seem at first glance, I called myself to order, they are also too simple and in fact misleading. The UK is, after all, a democracy and not an authoritarian state, let alone a fascist regime. So, what exactly was worrying me? Why, I was wondering, did I find it wrong or at least troubling to be reminded that I should take care of my surroundings, be heedful and pay attention to my fellow citizens and their behavior?

Here, Gilles Deleuze comes into the picture. His famous, only five-page long "Post-script on the Societies of Control," written in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and first published in 1990, might be useful to understand my worries. At the time of his writing, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Deleuze diagnosed the slow disappearance of the model of disciplinary society, which had reached its height at the century's outset. Control rather than discipline, Deleuze forcefully argued, would be the signature of societies to come. Hence, forms "of free-floating control," Deleuze continues, taking up Paul Virilio's term, would rather sooner than later replace "the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system" (1992: 4). Now, way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can safely say that we have made quite some progress here, though maybe in a slightly different way than Deleuze had imagined. For though control is the signature of our time, discipline and what could be called ruling by morality has not disappeared. Rather, control and discipline coalesce, they reinforce and stabilize each other. Potential sites, de-



vices and agents of control have both been multiplied and set free. Moreover, since September 11, 2001 and the ensuing "War on Terror," those of us living in the global North in particular have been trained and disciplined in, as well as subjectivated through, oftentimes openly racist securitization practices and routines. In general, in the name of securing "our" freedom, militarization, the policing of civilian life, and what we could call a politics of zoning and surveilling has dramatically intensified. Moreover, securitization and the ever-growing security-industrial-complex go hand in hand with the biopolitical production of two distinct moral collectivities: those constituted as endangered and thus worthy of care and protection, and those deemed to symbolize danger, thus considered unworthy of protection. Worthy and unworthy of protection: a dichotomous classification that runs along colonial-racist, class-specific, dis/ableized, gendered and heteronormative patterns of order.

Seen in this light, the British Transport Police's both racializing and (hetero-)gendering call to observe and report thus not only comes across as an entirely normalized endeavor in control societies – a common form of address that has become business as usual. It is, however, not only an example of the type of free-floating control which Deleuze envisioned but exemplifies the ways in which these modes of control rest on forms of moral classification seemingly specific only to disciplinary societies. For the Transport Police's call does indeed not only illustrate a form of control proper to "control societies" in Deleuze's sense, that is control that no longer functions within the time frame of a closed system (like the attendance clock in a factory) and that can and does happen anywhere at any time. A form of control that is not bound to a particular enclosure, neither specific for a particular purpose nor to a defined institution, thus of almost universal suitability. It is also a mode of control still dependent on political regimes of gendered and racialized morality developed in "disciplinary societies", a type of society which sociologist Peter Wagner (1995) calls "organized modernity". And yes, while we are indeed constantly reminded to look out for unattended baggage at railway stations, airports and shopping centers, to take care of our security, fasten the seat belt in public buses, to not cross the street when the traffic light is red, to look out for pickpockets and drug trafficking, to pay attention to littering and loitering, to wrongly parked cars, and, above all, to suspiciously behaving fellow citizens, we are also constantly urged and trained to take moral decisions. While we share our most intimate moments and whereabouts with transnationally active corporations, while we are encouraged to document and report our calories burned, steps taken, words written, exams conducted, (social media) friends and likes gained, to report the hours we slept, laps we swam, and miles we flew, we are encouraged to measure what we cherish and to cherish only that which we measure. Without exception, all of us have thus become part and parcel of a highly flexible, mobile and adaptable culture of control that documents "the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant", as Deleuze notes (1992: 7). Practices and routines with which we will not only never be finished in "control socie-



ties", in which we wholeheartedly and most freely participate, but that encourage us to actively reproduce patterns of distinction and selection saturated with power and morale.

What thus makes this so frightening – and maybe Deleuze paid too little attention to this – is how securitization ties into the resurgence of a morally charged racism. "See it. Say it. Sorted." is hence not only emblematic for the model of control society, but it is also an element of a *dispositif* that articulates a racist moral mission staged on the field of gender and sexuality. All of us taking this train are positioned within this *dispositif* as either a potential trouble-maker or as the ones legitimately cared about. And all of us are reminded of a moral duty. The duty to safeguard and defend those we consider as belonging to 'us' against the foreign-looking and suspiciously acting male. It is a *dispositif* that constitutes objects of concern – public order and morality, national security, Western values, European borders, autochthone women\*. An ensemble also that brings into life different moral collectives with distinct obligations of care and responsibility. An ensemble, in other words, that organizes who belongs and who does not, for whom we feel morally responsible, for whom we feel empathy, who is worthy of our attention and who is legitimately vulnerable, who deserves recognition and to whom it can legitimately be denied. A *dispositif* that mobilizes morally charged us/them dichotomies feeding into a racist everyday consciousness and based on knowledge co-produced and secured by the state and in the practices and institutions of all social functional systems. If it is the case that this is the kind of knowledge people use in order to make sense of the social conditions and demarcations as well as the political and social struggles in which they are positioned – knowledge that serves them as a guideline for their moral actions – we need to ask how we respond to the moral demands articulated in the British Transport Police ad. In short, how do we relate to the respective ensemble of norms, the inherently violent moral codes that are brought to us by the Transport Police? And in what ways do we follow or oppose the moral instructions for action? Do we see it, say it, and have it sorted for us?

### Works Cited

- Deleuze, Gilles (1992). "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59: 3-7.
- Wagner, Peter (2012). *Modernity: Understanding the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press.