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AN AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY TOLERANCE TOWARD STATE AND CORPORATE SURVEILLANCE IN SWEDEN, PORTUGAL AND ESTONIA[1]

UMA PERSONALIDADE AUTORITÁRIA PARA O SÉCULO XXI: TOLERÂNCIA À VIGILÂNCIA ESTATAL E CORPORATIVA NA SUÉCIA, PORTUGAL E ESTÔNIA

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Abstract: What role does the historical legacy of totalitarianism or authoritarianism vis-vis global techno-cultural developments, embodied in generational experiences and values, play in the formation of attitudes toward contemporary state and corporate surveillance? Based on survey data and focus groups from Sweden, Estonia and Portugal, this paper discusses predictors for tolerance toward both state surveillance and corporate dataveillance.
Keywords: Surveillance; Authoritarianism; Totalitarianism; Dataveillance; Privacy.

Resumo: Qual é o papel do legado histórico do totalitarismo ou do autoritarismo, em relação aos desenvolvimentos tecnoculturais globais — incorporados em experiências e valores geracionais — na formação de atitudes perante a vigilância estatal e corporativa contemporânea? Com base em dados de inquéritos e em grupos focais realizados na Suécia, Estônia e Portugal, este artigo discute variáveis preditivas de tolerância tanto à vigilância estatal quanto à datavigilância corporativa.
Palavras-chave: Vigilância; Autoritarismo; Totalitarismo; Datavigilância; Privacidade.

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INTRODUCTION

As surveillance studies scholar David Lyon (2001) argues, all societies are, in one way or another, surveillance societies. However, their surveillance regimes, that is, the ways in which their surveillance apparatuses are organised, the reasons for monitoring the populations, and the technological means of surveillance, also differ among them. Some are authoritarian, while others are totalitarian in their organisation of surveillance, but even democratic countries have their specific form of surveillance apparatuses, and taken together, they represent different varieties of such surveillance regimes. These regimes also change over time; some slowly, adapting to new surveillance technologies, other abruptly due to rapid societal transformations. Even so, also in those surveillance societies that change, there will be cultural remnants, memories and experiences inscribed in the minds and bodies of those populations who have lived under them.

While surveillance as a phenomenon has up until the advent of web 2.0 been studied with a focus on state surveillance, today, with the interconnected internet and the vast penetration of the lives of media users by data-collecting media, state and corporate surveillance have converged. Gradually changing from the 1980s and onwards (see, e.g. Clarke, 1988; McCoy, 1991), the same technologies that are used by state institutions for the surveillance of deviant behaviour, crime prevention, terrorist threats, and similar tasks, are today used to capture "the digital consumer". In terms of data collection, there are today no major differences, although the aims with data collection and extraction differ.

Against this background, one might ponder what role the historical legacy of totalitarianism or authoritarianism play in the formation of attitudes toward contemporary state and corporate surveillance? Considered in relation to global techno-cultural developments, embodied in generational experiences and values, it appears interesting to analyse whether past experiences of very manifest state surveillance (Soviet, dictatorship Portugal) will impact on attitudes to corporate dataveillance today. Based on survey data and focus groups from Sweden, Estonia and Portugal, this paper discusses factors that predicts or privileges tolerance toward both state surveillance and corporate dataveillance, something I will relate to traits usually characteristic of an authoritarian

personality. In addition, then, the article will give some theoretical reflections on what might produce an authoritarian personality in surveillance capitalism, obviously referring to Theodor Adorno and his colleagues work on the authoritarian personality in the post-Second World War era (Adorno *et al.* 1950). It takes point of departure in generational attitudes towards state and corporate surveillance (dataveillance) in the three countries since we assumed that people brought up under manifest surveillance regimes in Soviet-occupied Estonia and dictatorship Portugal would have different approaches to both state and corporate surveillance. Importantly, the project collected data based on the historical conditions of the three countries (Sweden, Estonia, Portugal), and was not specifically looking for an authoritarian personality. However, after having concluded our research, we can see signs of such personalities in our material.

First, the paper gives an overview over the contemporary media landscape, with a specific focus on the mechanisms underlying surveillance capitalism, or data capitalism. I will argue that the degrees to which people are critical (or not) to the surveillance regimes of data capitalism impacts on the rise of possible authoritarian personalities. Second, I will give some empirical examples from our study of attitudes to state and corporate surveillance among two generations in Estonia, Portugal and Sweden. Third, the paper reflects on the possibilities for a re-appearance of authoritarian personality in the 21st Century – also related to autocratic tendencies in many countries around the world, and the degrees to which people accept authoritarianism.

BACKGROUND: THE INTEGRATION OF SOCIETAL SPHERES IN THE AGE OF DATA CAPITALISM

Contemporary surveillance, both state and commercial surveillance, occur in a tightly integrated datafied media landscape. This field of 'industrial cultural production' is the landscape that makes data capitalism possible. Data Capitalism is the present form of capitalism, succeeding merchant capitalism (mercantilism), industrial capitalism, information capitalism (Castells, 1996). It can be defined as the 'a system in which the commoditization of our data enables an asymmetric redistribution of power that is weighted toward the actors who have access and the capability to make sense of information' (West, 2019; 2020). Data capitalism is cantered around the data profiling

and tracking integrates all spheres of society, not only media and communication organisations, but also retail, consumer goods and services, financial markets as well as key societal domains such as health care, education and public administration (Christl, 2017).

Thus, in the age of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015), state and social media surveillance have converged technologically, using the same internet infrastructure to capture media users and monitor state security. With the spread of smartphones, laptops and mobile and personal media, the social spheres that can be subsumed monitoring practices have multiplied to include who, when and where consumers and citizens are communicating. There are in fact few occasions in which we are not surrounded by digital media and communication technologies.

In a recent essay, media philosopher Charles Ess (2025) argued that 'we fall in love with the technologies of our enslavement', an argument he pursues with reference to, among others, Neil Postman's (1985) famous critique of the medium of television in "Amusing Ourselves to Death*"*. The question of enslavement is interesting, and connects to authoritarianism, which is tightly connected to enslavement, tolerance of subsumption under surveillance regimes, and submit to power. Some people thus fall in love with their enslavers, the leading figures in the tech industry – Musk, Zuckerberg, Bezos. What is more, these tech barons with their enormous wealth and economic powerthat to large extent control the means of symbolic power in society are to increasing extent intertwined with political power. As such we can see the rise of a new type of 'oligarchisation', where economic, political and symbolic power overlap.

RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF SURVEILLANCE EXPERIENCES IN ESTONIA, PORTUGAL AND SWEDEN

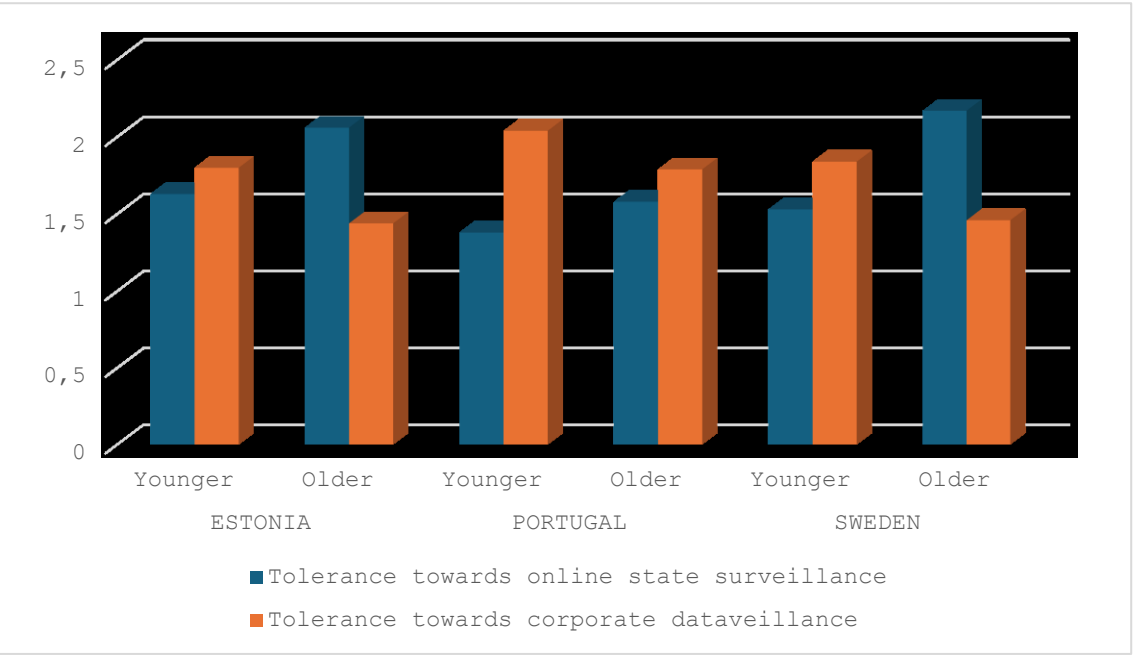
As part of a larger project on the role of experiences of state and corporate surveillance for attitudes to social media surveillance and other forms of extraction of people's digital traces online, we mapped tolerance towards state and corporate surveillance and identified the predictors for that tolerance. We also constructed an 'authoritarianism index'. The larger study used a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative, nationally representative survey with qualitative focus group and individual

interviews (for details on the methodology, see Bolin *et al.* 2023; Bolin; Kalmus; Figueiras, 2023). The online survey was conducted between September and November 2020 in Estonia, Portugal and Sweden in 2 age groups: one born between 1946-1953, and one born 1988-1995. The reason for choosing these age groups was that we wanted to compare experiences among citizens having grown up under totalitarian and authoritarian surveillance regimes in Soviet-occupied Estonia and dictatorship Portugal, with a younger generational cohort, having come of age after re-independence of Estonia and in post-dictatorship democratic Portugal.[3] Focus group and individual interviews were made in late Spring to early Winter 2021, and were conducted mostly online.[4] For this paper, only the survey data is used.

Based on the quantitative was constructed two indexes: one on 'Tolerance towards online state surveillance'[5] and one on 'Tolerance towards corporate dataveillance'.[6] In figure 1 we can see the national distribution regarding the degree to which the respondents have tolerance towards state surveillance.

[3] The sample was in total 3221 respondents: 1094 in Sweden, 1083 in Estonia, 1044 in Portugal.
[4] A total of 15 focus groups were interviewed, plus 16 individual interviews (in total 71 participants).
[5] This index consisted of five indicators (1 – fully disagree ... 4 – fully agree) (Cronbach alpha = .89): I do not mind that state authorities have access to my data on social media; The state authorities have every right to monitor their citizens' online communication; to prevent terrorist attacks; to prevent violent protests or riots; to prevent foreign intervention (e.g., in elections). The state authorities have every right to monitor their citizens' digitally (use drones, apps, geolocal positioning) to prevent the spread of diseases.
[6] This index consisted of seven indicators (Cronbach alpha = .77): I do not mind that private corporations have access to my data on social media; (*1 – fully disagree ... 4 – fully agree;* I am happy for companies to collect and use my personal information if… (*0 – doesn't apply to me; 1 – applies to me);* I get a personalised service in return – like a weather update on my phone (based on my location); They use it to show me adverts or information that might be more relevant to me; They use it to send me relevant special offers/discounts for products/services they think I might like; They are clear about how they will use my information; I can choose to opt-out at any point, and they will stop using my data; They reassure me they will not share my information with other companies.

Figure 1 — Tolerance towards surveillance by countries and generation groups[7]



Source: Author's Elaboration (2025).

We see from Figure 1 that the older generation is more tolerant towards state surveillance in all countries (blue staples). However, we can also note that the older Portuguese respondents are less tolerant than the young Estonians, and roughly on the same level as the younger Swedes.

Reversely, we can also see that the younger generations are more tolerant towards corporate dataveillance. However, we shall also note that older Portuguese generation is similar to the young Swedish generation when it comes to state surveillance.

In a next step, we can ask what factors predict this tolerance towards state and corporate surveillance, and what role what we call a 'pro-authoritarian attitude' work as a predictor for tolerance towards surveillance[8]. In Figure 2 is accounted for the main predictors.

[7] Index means.
[8] The pro-authoritarian attitude was constructed out of two propositions posted in the questionnaire, both of which could be indicated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): Our country needs a strong government that will move us in the right direction; Instead of needing 'civil rights and freedoms' our country needs one thing only: law and order.

Figure 2 — Main predictors of Tolerance towards state and corporate surveillance[9]

Tolerance towards online state surveillance: PREDICTORS Tolerância à vigilância estatal online: PREDITORES	Beta
Tolerance towards corporate dataveillance	.258
Trust in state institutions	.204
Importance of privacy	-.196
Pro-authoritarian attitude	.173
Age group (0-1)	.122
Support to freedom of expression	-.089
Adjusted R^2	.208

Tolerance towards corporate dataveillance: PREDICTORS Tolerância em relação à vigilância de dados corporativos: PREDITORES	Beta
Tolerance towards online state surveillance	.263
Mobile device usage skills	.115
Functional diversity of internet use	.114
Trust in the media	.094
Digital skills	.079
Age group (0-1)	-.075
Support to freedom of expression	.066
Importance of privacy	.064
Adjusted R^2	.184

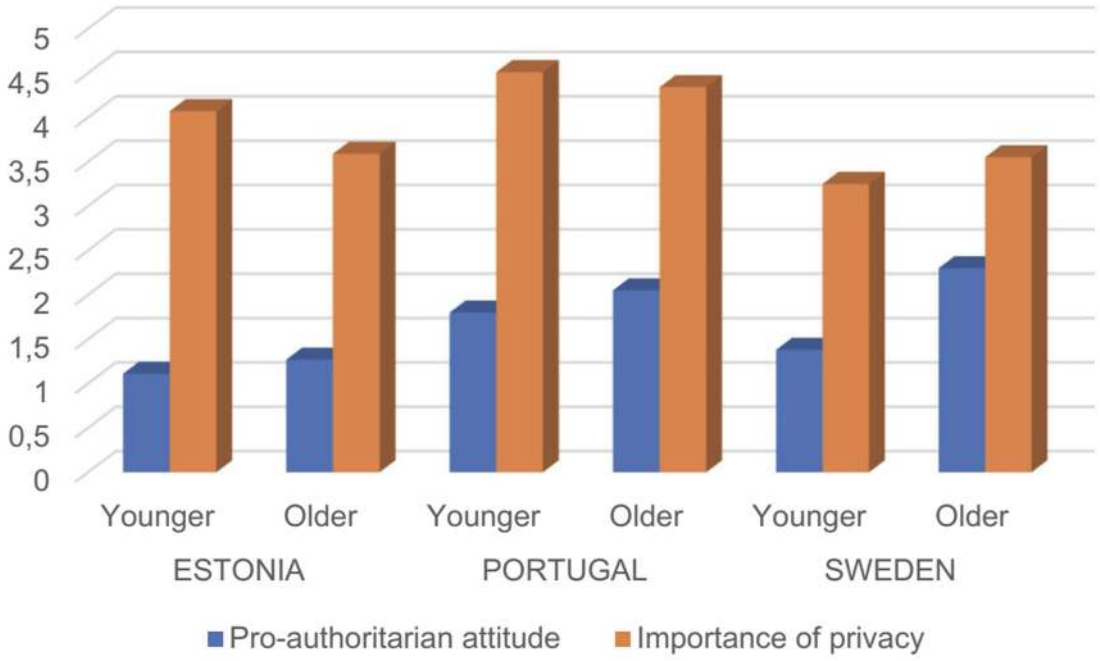
Source: Author's Elaboration (2025).

As can be seen from figure 2, the pro-authoritarian attitude works as a predictor for tolerance towards state surveillance, but not for corporate dataveillance. As a predictor for state surveillance, it is coupled with tolerance towards corporate dataveillance, trust in state institutions, and older age.

Tolerance to corporate surveillance thus correlates with a relaxed attitude to state surveillance. As the 'privacy paradox' assumes that being sceptic towards state and corporate dataveillance is based in a protective stance towards one's privacy, we should expect tolerance towards surveillance to correlate negatively with privacy concerns, that is, if one is tolerant to being surveilled, one is also less concerned about one's privacy. We thus ran these two parameters against one another, which is accounted for in Figure 3.

[9] Linear regression models; standardised regression coefficients; $p<0.001$.

Figure 3 — Pro-authoritarian attitude and privacy



Source: Author's Elaboration (2025).

Figure 3 also shows that the younger generational cohorts in Estonia and Portugal have less pro-authoritarian leanings and are more concerned about their own privacy, whereas the opposite is true of their older counterparts. This pattern, however, is not repeated in Sweden. We shall also note that the pro-authoritarian attitude in Estonia is lower among both generational cohorts that the young cohorts in Portugal and Sweden. Pro-authoritarian attitudes are thus more rare in post-totalitarian Estonia compared to Sweden and Portugal.

As a summary of our findings, we could say that tolerance towards online state surveillance was more characteristic of the older age group, being predicted by trustful, obedient, and less individualistic attitudes towards state authorities and institutions. Tolerance towards corporate dataveillance was, on the contrary, more characteristic of the younger age group, being predicted by active and self-confident online media use and trust in the media as institutions. We could also see that the older generations in all countries were marked by a stronger pro-authoritarian attitude (although the differences between the younger and older generation in Estonia was less prominent compared to the other two countries).

Tolerance towards state surveillance indicates a willingness to be subsumed the authority of the state, conformism, and an adherence to traditional values, much in line with some of the traits identified by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues (cf. Ekström & Belfrage 2025):

> a. Conventionalism. Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values. b. Authoritarian submission. Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup. c. Authoritarian aggression. Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values. d. Anti-intraception. Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tenderminded. e. Superstition and stereotypy. The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories. f. Power and "toughness." Preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis upon the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness. g. Destructiveness and cynicism. Generalized hostility, vilification of the human. h. Projectivity. The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses. i. Sex. Exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on". (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 228).

Our material, however, does not allow for any firm conclusions, as we have not included many of the traits characteristic of the authoritarian personality in our survey. A closer analysis of the qualitative interview material might, however, reveal such features.

CONCLUSION

In their opening statements of "The Authoritarian Personality", Adorno and his co-authors stated that

> The major concern was with the potentially fascistic individual, one whose structure is such as to render him particularly susceptible to antidemocratic propaganda. We say "potential" because we have not studied individuals who were avowedly fascistic or who belonged to known fascist organizations. At the time when most of our data were collected fascism had just been defeated in war and, hence, we could not expect to find subjects who would openly identify themselves with it; yet there was no difficulty in finding subjects whose outlook was such as to indicate that they would readily accept fascism if it should become a strong or respectable social movement. (Adorno *et al.,* 1950, p. 1).

In the same manner, we would like to emphasise that we do not argue that there are openly authoritarian personalities among our respondents in Estonia, Sweden or

Portugal. However, we wish to point to traits we have been able to identify, that points to a potentially authoritarian personality.

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