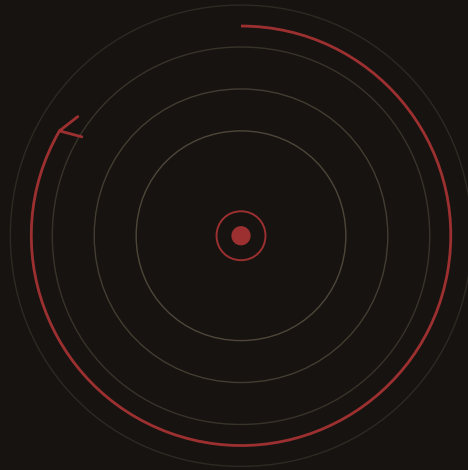




THE ONOPTICON

Recognition, Feedback, and the Closure of Modern Power

A MANIFESTO FOR THE REALITY PARADIGM

HAKKI TAN

ORCID 0009-0008-8582-3132

“The Reality Paradigm is not a paradigm of
truth;
it is a paradigm of reality.”



I

THE QUESTION HAS BEEN ASKED AT THE WRONG PLACE

We have been taught to look for power in institutions, laws, platforms, databases, corporations, police forces, markets, and governments. We have been taught to ask whether surveillance is increasing, whether algorithms are biased, whether privacy has been lost, and whether artificial intelligence has become too powerful.

These questions are necessary. They are not sufficient.

The decisive question is not whether a system records us. Modern life depends on systems of record. Health records make treatment possible. Civil registries make legal existence possible. Payment systems make participation in economic life administratively possible. Education, law, mobility, welfare, identity, insurance, and communication all require forms of recognition.

The problem does not begin when a person is recorded.

The problem begins when the systems that record the person cease to remain separate.

The problem begins when the layers of recognition are composed.

The problem begins when what is known in one domain returns as a consequence in another.

The problem begins when the subject can no longer identify the institution, procedure, or point from which to object.

This is the Onopticon.

II

THE ONOPTICON IS NOT A DATABASE

The Onopticon is not a camera.

It is not a platform.

It is not a social-credit system.

It is not a corporation.

It is not Palantir.

It is not the state.

It is not artificial intelligence.

Any of these may become part of it.

The Onopticon is a regime of composition.

Here, *onoptic* does not refer narrowly to visual surveillance. It names the pre-structuring of encounter through recognition, classification, and feedback.

The Onopticon emerges where layers of pre-recognition — health, law, payment, education, security, mobility, profile, property, energy, and environment — are joined within a feedback decision circuit. In that circuit, fragments of life are translated into a common operational language. The person is matched across domains. A category is produced: risk, eligibility, priority, suspicion, debt, health status, mobility status, target status.

The category returns.

It returns to movement, payment, access, work, insurance, housing, treatment, security, or energy.

The Onopticon does not merely observe the subject.

It prepares the field in which the subject will encounter the world.

III

RECOGNITION IS NO LONGER INNOCENT

Modern power does not need to forbid everything.

It needs only to determine the format in which things may become real.

A right that cannot be translated into a recognised document can disappear.

A person who cannot be translated into an approved identity can become inaccessible.

A movement that cannot be rendered legible can become suspicious.

A claim that cannot enter the correct administrative language can become inaudible.

A life that cannot be processed can become ungovernable — and therefore excluded.

Recognition is therefore not merely inclusion.

Recognition is also the power to decide what counts as existing.

This is the translation threshold: the point at which only what can enter the system's format remains real to the system, while the untranslatable is treated as absent, invalid, dangerous, or disposable.

The history of modern power is, in part, the history of this threshold.

IV

TWO PATHWAYS OF ONOPTIC POWER

The first pathway is access-conditional recognition.

The subject must enter the system in order to receive treatment, travel, work, transact, study, own, inherit, borrow, communicate, or survive. Recognition becomes the condition of access.

The second pathway is compelled categorisation.

The subject does not enter the system. The system acts upon the subject. A legal, police, military, financial, or administrative apparatus converts the person into a category regardless of consent: suspect, alien, debtor, member of a dangerous class, target, illegal, non-compliant, high-risk.

These pathways are different. Yet they increasingly meet.

The person may enter through the gate of service and later be processed through the gate of coercion.

The citizen may enter as a patient, customer, traveller, or user — and emerge governed through a profile whose consequences were never consented to.

V

THE REGIME IS CONSTITUTED IN THE CIRCUIT

A layer is not the regime.

A health record is not the regime.

A credit score is not the regime.

A border database is not the regime.

A smart meter is not the regime.

A police file is not the regime.

Each may be necessary. Each may be useful. Each may also become coercive within its own domain.

But rupture begins only when the layers are composed.

The circuit is the decisive form.

A circuit exists when access, translation, correlation, categorisation, and feedback close upon the same subject. It exists when a result produced in one domain returns to alter the subject's conditions in another.

The issue is not whether data are centralised. Data need not sit in one room, one agency, one cloud environment, or one company. The circuit can be distributed. It can be dispersed across public institutions, private vendors, security agencies, data brokers, insurers, lenders, platforms, and objects.

The power of the circuit lies not in its centre.

It lies in the fact that its parts can close upon the same life.

VI

THE INTEGRATOR POSITION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE OCCUPANT

Power does not reside only in institutions. It also resides in positions.

The integrator position is the operational site — sometimes visible, often distributed — where records are accessed, translated, correlated, turned into outcomes, and returned as action.

Its occupant may be a ministry.

Its occupant may be a contractor.

Its occupant may be a public–private consortium.

Its occupant may be an interagency security architecture.

Its occupant may be a commercial platform.

Its occupant may be no single actor at all.

The name changes. The function sequence remains.

This is why the decisive question is not simply who holds the platform today. The decisive question is whether the sequence of access, translation, correlation, decision, and feedback can continue after the occupant changes.

A company may leave.

A contractor may be replaced.

A protocol may migrate.

A network may split.

A new system may be built as a replica of the old one.

Where the function survives substitution, the position survives the occupant.

The Onopticon is therefore not exhausted by any firm, institution, or state.

VII

CLOSURE IS NOT FATE

The Onopticon is not inevitable.

Power does not become closed simply because power is evil. That explanation is too easy, too abstract, and too weak.

Closed arrangements are often cheaper.

They externalise accountability.

They use ready-made secrecy.

They shift the burden of proof onto the subject.

They diffuse responsibility across institutions.

They allow each layer to say: “We merely recorded.”

They make appeal expensive, slow, fragmentary, and lacking a clear institutional address.

Closure is an asymmetry.

Where no counter-pressure is engineered into the architecture, closure often becomes the path of least resistance.

But this also means closure can be resisted.

Access logs matter.
Explanation rights matter.
Correction rights matter.
Judicial review matters.
Sunset clauses matter.
Auditable systems matter.
Interoperability without opacity matters.
A right of appeal that can actually change outcomes matters.

The alternative to the Onopticon is not the destruction of infrastructure.

It is infrastructure whose power remains contestable.

VIII

THE SUBJECT IS EXPOSED BY COMPOSITION

The individual does not usually consent to an Onopticon.

The individual consents, submits, or is compelled one layer at a time.

As patient.
As taxpayer.
As borrower.
As traveller.
As user.
As worker.
As resident.
As customer.
As citizen.

Each encounter appears separate.

But exposure is not separate.

The subject is assembled across the layers into a profile that no single act created and no single consent authorised. The subject is then judged in the language of individual responsibility for consequences produced by an integrated system.

This is fragmented consent, integrated exposure.

The subject is made responsible for a world prepared before the subject entered it.

This is Homovictimus: the person deprived of the material conditions of agency, yet held answerable as though those conditions had remained intact.

IX

THE ENVIRONMENT IS BECOMING THE GATE

The old gate was visible.

It was the office, the border, the registry, the bank, the checkpoint, the court, the school, the police station.

The new gate disperses into the environment.

The house records.
The vehicle records.
The road records.
The meter records.
The phone records.
The lock records.
The camera records.
The wearable records.
The insurance device records.

And when feedback is established, these objects do more than record.

They act.

The vehicle does not start.
The lock does not open.
The meter disconnects.
The service is denied.
The route disappears.
The price changes.
The category becomes material.

The environmental a priori begins where the conditions of encounter cease to be merely institutional.
The world itself becomes a field of recognition, classification, and enforcement.

The map no longer represents the territory.

The map becomes the territory's operational behaviour.

X

THE HISTORY IS NOT ONE APPARATUS BUT ONE TRANSFORMATION

The history of modern power is not the uninterrupted history of a single secret machine.

It is not a story in which the same institution has ruled for three centuries under different names.

It is the history of a transformation.

The bond between record, legal status, classification, and material enforcement has changed form.

In colonial administration, that bond appeared in concentrated, personal, administrative, and often openly violent forms. Land, labour, status, movement, and punishment could converge in the office of an official, an administrative bureau, a commandant, a settlement officer, or a police authority.

The colonial archive was not the digital circuit.

But it contained historical pre-forms:

- the translation of life into administratively actionable categories
- the extinction of what could not be documented
- the conversion of identity into legal destiny
- the linkage of record to movement restriction
- the union of tax, labour, punishment, and status
- the weakening or absence of effective avenues of appeal.

The difference is decisive.

Personal-administrative composition was local, discretionary, fragile, and tied to the people who exercised it.

Ontological composition is scalable, substitutable, durable, and capable of acting across institutions.

Rupture does not reproduce the old form unchanged.

It renders analogous relations between classification and enforcement portable, repeatable, and infrastructural.

XI

THE STATE IS BOTH FEEDER AND EXPOSED

The state is not simply the enemy of the subject.

Nor is it merely the victim of external systems.

The state produces the layers from which public life is built: registries, legal categories, health systems, payment systems, security systems, public services, standards, and infrastructures.

This capacity is not inherently oppressive. It is also a condition of collective life.

But when the integrator position is occupied elsewhere — by a commercial contractor, an external network centre, a security alliance, a financial architecture, or a distributed infrastructure — the state can cease to be the reader of its own records.

It becomes a data supplier to an ontology it no longer controls.

It produces the data.

It supplies legitimacy.

It supplies legal authority.

It supplies users.

It supplies infrastructure.

But it sees the world through someone else's ontology.

This is the feeder-exposed state.

For peripheral states, this condition is sharpened by sovereignty-critical layers: financial addressability, health certification, development finance, security infrastructures, technical standards, and communication systems that cannot easily be refused without risking sovereign function itself.

The state enters because it must govern.

It becomes exposed because the conditions of governing have already been organised elsewhere.

XII

THE PERIPHERY DOES NOT MERELY DEPEND; IT IS PRE-PROCESSED

Dependency is not only a matter of resources leaving one place and accumulating in another.

It is also a matter of decision horizons being processed before decisions are made.

A peripheral state may formally decide.

But it may decide within a field pre-structured by externally occupied positions.

Its financial routes may already be formatted.

Its security options may already be ranked.

Its health certificates may already be recognised or refused.

Its development paths may already be encoded in conditions, standards, and interfaces.

This is a priori dependency.

It is not the disappearance of sovereignty.

It is sovereignty exercised inside a field whose conditions have been prepared elsewhere.

And escape is not automatically liberation.

A state that exits one network may create another.

A new outside may reproduce the architecture of the former centre.

The former periphery may become a centre for those below it.

This is scale recursion.

The point is not that exit is impossible.

The point is that exit must be judged by the form of the position it builds.

XIII

NOT EVERY INTEGRATION IS A REGIME

This manifesto does not condemn interoperability.

Not every integration is domination.

Not every database is a regime.

Not every public system is an Onopticon.

Not every technology of coordination destroys freedom.

The decisive issue is whether integration remains contestable.

A system can be open.

A system can be auditable.

A system can be reversible.

A system can preserve multiple routes of access.

A system can limit feedback.

A system can keep categories from returning as automatic fate.

The question is not whether systems are integrated.

The question is whether integration closes the subject's world.

XIV

THE ONOPTICON MUST BE NAMED BEFORE IT CAN BE CONTESTED

The first task is diagnosis.

A society cannot resist a circuit it cannot see.

The Onopticon remains difficult to name because no single institution contains it. Each layer appears legitimate. Each actor appears partial. Each decision appears technical. Each outcome appears local. Each failure appears individual.

The subject is blocked by a system that no one admits to governing.

The state is exposed by a system it helped to build.

The environment acts through objects that appear to be neutral tools.

Naming the circuit does not end it.

But without naming it, every injury appears accidental, every exclusion appears administrative, every closure appears isolated, and every subject is told that the problem lies in a personal failure to comply, adapt, document, achieve the required score, qualify, or appeal.

The Reality Paradigm begins from a refusal of this fragmentation.

The layers are not the whole.

The institution is not the whole.

The platform is not the whole.

The state is not the whole.

The individual decision is not the whole.

The circuit is the whole that must be made visible.

XV

THE TASK

The task is not nostalgia for a world without institutions.

There has never been such a world.

The task is not technological refusal.

Technology is not the source of the problem.

The task is to prevent recognition from becoming enclosure.

To prevent classification from becoming destiny.

To prevent infrastructure from becoming an authority without an identifiable address of appeal.

To prevent the environment from becoming a silent executor of decisions made elsewhere.

To prevent the subject from being held responsible for a profile produced without a single moment of meaningful consent.

To prevent the state from becoming the data supplier of an ontology it no longer commands.

To preserve the possibility of a viable outside.

The Onopticon is not everywhere.

But wherever layers close into an unanswerable circuit, it is already beginning.

The task of theory is to identify the circuit.

The task of politics is to interrupt it.

The task of institutions is to ensure that no system of recognition becomes a circuit that leaves no viable way back into social life.

