

# The Docile Minds of Perfect Societies

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Human behaviour has always been assessed and judged in some ways, be it through the most basic social interaction and benchmarking; through observation of norm abundance in transparent and less transparent ways; or, recently, through digital technologies. [Wessel Reijers](#) and [Jens van t' Klooster](#) look at social credit systems as a rule by 'carrots' and 'sticks', based on structured observation and evaluation of individual behaviour. Illustrating their arguments with the example of China's Social Credit System (SCS), they come to opposite conclusions about this model of governance. I acknowledge the merits of van t' Klooster's idea of the desert, implying that a social credit system may have positive effects on distributive justice and offer appropriate alternatives for price mechanisms in market economies. However, I ardently oppose the use of surveillance mechanisms in regulating the relationship between individuals and governance structures. As a result of three interrelated dynamics, rather than creating 'perfect' citizens, social credit systems are more likely to create calculated and passive subjects.

## Discipline by Design

First, social credit systems are tools for disciplining society. By design, they allow a centralised authority to observe and evaluate individual behaviour. Their power is in channelling human action towards the expected *award* and in avoidance of the possible *sanction*. Awareness of surveillance is central to social credit systems, as it can curtail free will and individual liberty. Just as in Bentham's panopticon, individuals have no certainty of whether they are observed at any given moment or not. This motivates citizens to regulate their conduct under the assumption that they are being watched and scrutinised. Hence, social credit systems have the potential to create 'docile minds' – an extension of the Foucauldian notion of 'docile bodies' – through normalisation of subtle surveillance and acceptance of *transparent* disciplinary mechanisms. A society composed of such 'docile minds' might lead to smooth governance and reduce conflict horizontally (among individuals) and vertically (between individuals and governance structures). If, for instance, a 'perfect society' is characterised merely by the absence of conflict, then 'docile minds' are conducive to it. These 'perfect citizens' will, however, have internalised the disciplining tools and forgotten their freedoms to such a degree that their 'perfect society' will resemble a golden cage. A prison, paradoxically. And in no panopticon, be it golden or digital, there is room for democracy because freedom is taken away by default.

## A Society of Bystanders

Second, social credit systems leave little room for valorising non-rewardable virtuous deeds or actions, but recompense utilitarian 'good' acts. [Reijers](#) rightly points out

that the core idea behind an SCS is to 'make good citizens, *qua* citizens, through promoting certain civic virtues such as 'trustworthiness', but that the problem with such an approach is the externalisation of the score to 'virtuous action'. A 'virtuous action', in itself, does not require a reputational or financial reward. Hence, any rewardable 'good deed' would represent an action of instrumental conformity. Allocating scores that do not take into account the context of individual behaviour or action vis-à-vis rules will *not* create 'perfect citizens', but rather may give birth to a society of bystanders and individuals acting exclusively on the basis of personal utility. To illustrate this, imagine two scenarios where there exists a credit system with a fixed list of deeds for which an individual receives positive and negative scores.

**Scenario 1:** Jack goes for a stroll around the neighbourhood. All of a sudden, he sees an elderly woman having a heart attack on the other side of the street. To offer her help (an action bearing no reward in terms of social score), Jack needs to engage in civil disobedience – cross the street illegally (an act for which he will receive a negative social score). Under the social credit system, Jack would be a 'perfect' citizen if he kept on walking and succumbed to bystander apathy of a 'docile mind'. Yet, would it make him less 'perfect' if he committed a non-rewardable deed of highest moral value, which however presupposed a previous punishable action?

**Scenario 2:** Jill works as a taxi driver. She does not particularly like her job and is often rude to customers (an act bearing a negative social score). However, she knows that her blood donations (an action for which she would receive credits) will even out her behaviour towards her clients. Under the rules of the social credit system, Jill is a 'perfect' citizen, even though her 'good deeds' are a matter of instrumental conformism rather than expressions of virtue.

## Slavish Behaviour

Third, sanctions inherent in social credit systems have diffuse effects and as such are likely to induce individuals to future 'slavish behaviour'. Imagine Jack from the example above. His score has been lowered because he was caught on camera jaywalking to save the old lady. For the sake of the argument let's also imagine that because of his action Jack cannot travel to visit his relatives, has a 30 per cent higher electricity bill, and he has been denied a loan. This means that not only is Jack subject to a sanction, but also it is diffused over many segments of his life. Once experienced the repercussions of his action at different levels, Jack will be more likely to 'play by the rules'. Furthermore, in a context where surveillance of behaviour has been internalised, any public assessments of the quality of governance are likely to be framed through false consciousness. This shift towards a passive and obedient individual in the relationship with a central mandating authority implies a move from a free decision-making citizen to a mere subject.

Perhaps my scepticism of the democratic potential of social credit systems is a direct outcome of my post-communist background. The lived past of surveillance by secret

service that I experienced in communist times was rather dystopian. The present digital surveillance of online activities to assess and influence market behaviour (or, as the case of Cambridge Analytica has shown, political choices) is, to say the least, problematic. The 'brave new worlds' of literary works often depict gloomy digital futures, which are a direct product of normalisation of control and coercion by a central authority. To me, this points to the fact that one will find no 'perfect citizens' inside a panopticon, be it digital or not. Rather, it will be a golden cage hosting 'docile minds' – utilitarian bystanders and passive subjects.

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