



## London—watching out for you

A recent visit to London reinforced my view that the global metropolis would be a particularly unpleasant place to live. It takes the worst aspects of cities, the crowds, dirt, wealth and control and expands on them. It exists in its own bubble, hovering over the country it rules though often despised by it. Had London remained just the biggest English city it would still be ugly (as all English cities must) but it would be forgivable.

Instead, it has always been an imperial city. It grew rich and fat as the heart of the British imperial project. Its buildings were constructed as offices of a world empire. The monuments lining the streets and filling the squares celebrate the slaughter and enslavement of millions. Its museums filled by the plundering of other cultures. The palaces inexplicably still house a royal family.

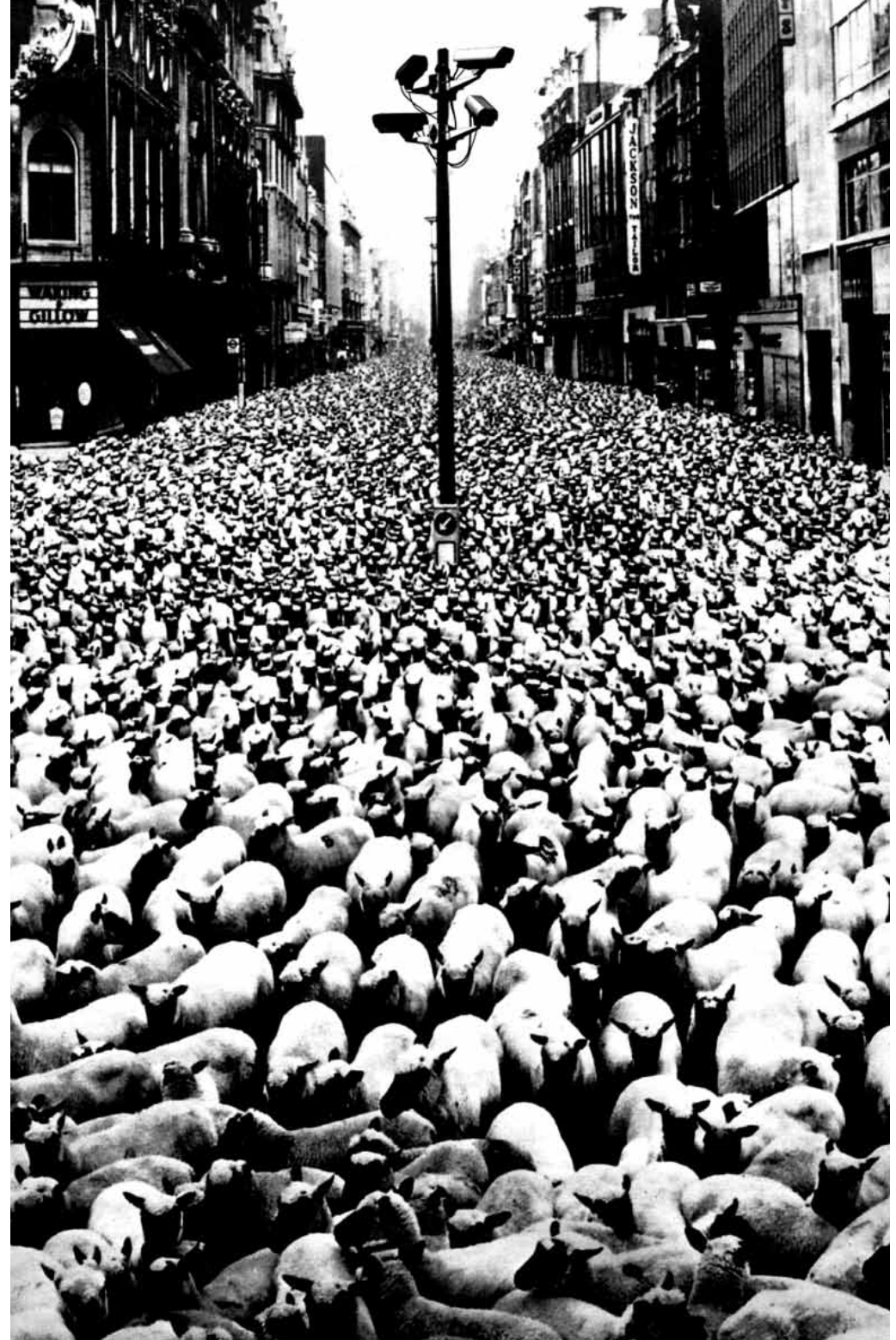
With the collapse of British pretensions to rule the world, London broke with its political past and headed to a financial future. It is now the city for the rich, the poor can only gaze in wonder (or disgust). The future which is being prepared across the world, the future of mass 'security', financial elites and empty materialism, is already London's present.

Even before you are in the country you're being watched. White lights spin around the lens of a bank of cameras hovering above the heads of joyless passport control officers. Later, three semicircular protrusions from the roof of the bus are watching. Six cameras watch the area as I sit down to eat a sandwich. There are big cameras and small cameras, cameras that look around corners and cameras to watch other cameras. At almost any point in central London you can normally see, and be seen by, at least two. Being watched by a multitude of not-so-subtle cameras, and an awareness of that fact, is a constant of life in England.

There's a constant flow of people, a great mass forming an unbroken line that never stops. Rushing lines snake underground, passing through man-made valleys of concrete and glass, along the streets, even seeming to glide through the air as they cross the river. You get the impression that no one lives their life here, everyone just temporarily joins the great flow of bodies and goods. The myriad of languages symptomatic of a place floating in a globalised world with little connection to its geographical and historical surroundings.

The old symbols of power, the church spires and parliamentary turrets, are now mere footnotes to the towers of glass which shoot up from the City—the new power changing the landscape. Below, the streets are clean despite the lack of rubbish bins. Few posters, little rubbish, no writing, no slogans. Only adverts, security warnings and legal notices break the grey silence of the architecture.

Huge shops resemble the old factories. The flexible and precarious staff fulfil their little part of the operation. One worker guards the changing rooms, another rolls out new stock and another sweeps the debris of broken clothes-hangers in a great wave across the floor. Floor upon floor is packed with people hurrying about. The atmosphere hot, sweaty and uncomfortable. The only difference now of course being that this seething crowd of people are consuming, not producing.



Every so often a disembodied voice hails a warning. 'Unattended luggage will be removed by the security services'. 'Report anything suspicious to the police'. The same messages of vigilance and warning cover the walls. Keep Left, Keep Right, Buying flowers from people at the traffic lights is illegal, No playing music in the streets. The doors of the shopping centres carry little stickers telling the disobedient that exclusion zones are in effect and they can't come in. Full size stickers of cops adorn shop windows in the event a real one or a camera isn't around to watch you. Just in case you get a little creeped out by this there's another poster to reassure you. All this monitoring and security is for your own safety. 'We're watching out for you'; so I guess there's no reason to worry.

