

Book Review

Surveillance and Democracy in Europe. Ball, Kirstie, and C. William R. Webster, ed. (2018) Routledge studies in surveillance. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group,

Surveillance and Democracy in Europe is a contribution from *Increasing Resilience in Surveillance Societies (IRISS)*, a European project on surveillance sponsored by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme. The project came to an end in 2015 and the volume reviewed here is a rewritten version of the final report.¹ The two editors, Prof Kirstie Ball and Prof William Webster, are both well-known and esteemed authorities in the field of surveillance studies, with research interests in areas such as activism, organizational behavior, policing, public administration and more. As a scholar with a huge interest in the field, this reviewer had high expectations to the book. However, these expectations which were not completely met, and I will in this review focus on both the strong, as well as some of the shortcomings of the book.

Surveillance and Democracy in Europe focuses on what (public) participation means for surveillance, and what this in turn means for democracy. The book is well-written, well-structured and succinct (it manages to cover a lot of ground on the approximately 120 pages). The volume covers three types of surveillance practices (named “cases” in the book), which are explored through European cross-jurisdictional comparisons: Automatic number plate recognition (ANPR), consumer credit scoring, and neighborhood watch schemes.² Although this comparative approach is aspiring to generate a more universal and theoretical framework, the book does not contain any deeper discussion on neither the comparative approach, nor the external validity of the empirical findings. The authors argue that the empirical cases inform the theoretical encounter between participatory theory and surveillance studies (p. 11). A perfectly legitimate approach, but also a more challenging one.

The introductory chapter argues for the relevance of participation theory for the study of surveillance, followed by a brief introduction of the cases. The central research question guiding the book regards how surveillance and participation “enacts each other's limits” (p. 3), when surveillance becomes the main method to “get things done” (ibid.). This wording is borrowed from Huysmans (2014), and while being part of the original report, it is more prevalent in the book. The underlying argument is that by observing participation, we can identify examples of increasingly normalized surveillance practices that generate effects that are essentially undemocratic (by violating fundamental rights).³

The second chapter discusses surveillance theory from a participatory perspective, and locates it in the wider research domain of surveillance. The key message is that participation theory provides surveillance studies with a new vocabulary. This new analytical language focuses on concepts like challenging surveillance, negotiation, institutional choices, and vested interests. There is a need “to understand which [participatory] mechanisms are best suited to which contexts” (p. 26), in order to create successful citizen

¹The report can be found here: <http://irissproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/D3.2-Surveillance-Impact-report1.pdf>.

²The comparisons vary between each case. For example, the ANPR case includes Belgium, Germany, the Slovak Republic, and the United Kingdom (UK); the credit scoring case includes Austria, Italy, Hungary, Norway, and the UK, and finally the neighborhood watch includes Austria, Germany, Spain, and the UK. UK is the only jurisdiction that remains constant throughout the cases.

³The authors borrow the terminology of “harms” caused by surveillance as suggested by, *inter alia*, Wright and Raab (2014).

participation. The goal is not defined explicitly, but it seems to entail reducing the harms of surveillance to citizens, and to empower citizens to engage in a more profound form of democratic governance.

The third chapter introduces the empirical cases at length. The balance of attention is tipping towards credit scoring and neighborhood watch, while less attention is paid to the ANPR case. This reviewer struggled to understand why this chapter was not integrated into the three empirical chapters, which would have made more sense since the descriptions in chapter three do not interact at all. As in the subsequent findings chapters, the presentations are presented in a *country-by-country* style, while the comparisons are just briefly described in-between the sections.

Chapters 4–6 present the empirical cases and constitutes the core of the book. In the various chapters, the reader is guided through the politics of surveillance (regarding each type of surveillance case), from the distinct national examples. These chapters provide a plethora of empirical instances where surveillance practices have been introduced without taking into account negative effects on ordinary citizens and/or certain communities. Among the more fascinating examples we find some gripping descriptions of ANPR in the UK, the different understandings of neighborhood watch in the UK *vis-à-vis* countries with authoritarian legacies, data protection in Norway, and credit blacklists in Austria. The empirical chapters are applying a pretty descriptive voice without adopting a more analytical language. Instead, the theoretical take-away from each chapter is distilled into the conclusions which are specially written for the book.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and presents a roadmap for future research. The merits of the participation theory approach, the authors argue, is that it “highlights the role of wider vested interests in the way surveillance unfolds” (p. 118). And furthermore, that it shows how surveillance – given the right participatory mechanisms – can be exercised on equal footing between the watchers and the watched. The conclusions do not expand much on the results, or seek to develop a theoretical account based on the empirical data, but rather summarize the different cases, and argues for the theoretical importance of the approach. One could here have expected a more pronounced chapter that picked up some of the threads from chapter 2 and engaged the reader in a discussion on participation and surveillance. In its current form, the reader is left with few answers to how we should conceptualize, for example, participation, negotiation, and vested interests with respect to more contemporary issues, like surveillance capitalism, big data, and new surveillance technologies like the Internet of Things. All in all, while this book is both well-written and thought-provoking for an audience interested in participatory mechanisms, it would have benefitted from a more assertive aspiration in developing the participation theory in a surveillance studies context.

In addition to this overall review, this volume raises quite a few interesting conceptual and methodological questions around the notion of participation, of which some are not fully covered in the book. First, the book does not discuss the notion of democracy at length. This is surprising as it is in the title (perhaps a reflection of the publisher rather than the editors?). It is almost as if the authors assume that participation and democracy are synonymous. On p. 22, the authors state that “Participation is seen as an essential component of democracy, and its quality and depth indicate the health of a democratic system.” By and large, this is as much as we learn about democracy in the book (besides the occasional use of “democratic” as a descriptive term, as in “democratic participation”). There is a weakness that the book does not address that different notions of democracy lead to different criteria and models for democratic participation. “Surveillance and *Participation* in Europe” would probably have been more suitable title. One can only speculate whether participation theory, as presented in this volume, is more focused on human and political rights rather than democratic governance? Does the exercise of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, or the right to privacy, by default imply participation in surveillance? Individual

human and political rights are essential cornerstones of democracy, but they are only indirectly related to other core values, such as e.g. equality in voting, democratic deliberation and access to decision-making. In fact, history provides us with examples of enlightened, albeit absolutist, monarchs safeguarding the rule of law, and individual human and political rights, without representing a democratic polity. The book lacks a conceptual discussion on democracy.

Secondly, the theoretical chapter goes at great lengths to anchor the participation framework in the academic surveillance studies, and its attempt to juxtapose surveillance with the creation of the modern “State” (Dandeker, 1990). The argument is that surveillance has yet to be observed through a participatory lens which would benefit our understanding of surveillance generally. Consequently, the approach draws a trajectory from the industrial revolution, and the early attempts (by capitalism, the State etc.) to secure control over organizations, infrastructure and nations through various surveillance practices and techniques. This is probably a stretch too far. While participation indeed has become a key aspect of surveillance in the twenty-first century, in particular with the advances of social media, the development of the modernist surveillance practice and technique, including the practice of objectifying, it is by no means the only way we may understand participatory surveillance (Ibid.). The pre-industrial peer-to-peer surveillance practice offers us a much more nuanced vantage point for recognizing participation and surveillance. In the rural village, peer-to-peer, or social, control was constant and rested on the whole community’s participation in the local legal system, and to report deviant behavior to either secular or religious leaders of the community. Ironically, the surveillance system of the Soviet Union built to a large extent on similar participatory mechanisms. One example is the practice of the “People’s Court” (the court of first instance in USSR), as described by Gabdulghakov (2018). Another example is the extensive system of peer monitoring developed by the Soviet secret services that became almost self-propelling (cf Applebaum, 2012). The argument is that if one wants to read participation into the history of surveillance, a far better viewpoint would be the pre-modernist understanding of surveillance, and the suggestion that peer-to-peer mechanisms of control have resurfaced in the shape of the current hyper-technical social media landscape. This also reflects the empirical selection of cases for this book, which does not seem to be adapted to the reality of contemporary surveillance. The practice of neighborhood watch stands out among the three cases in the book as the one predominantly aligning to participation. In many ways, this practice has more in common with the very basic (and yet effective) systems of control that were adopted by authoritarian regimes in Europe during the 19th century to maintain control in various localities, rather than contemporary forms of surveillance on various digital platforms.

This leads us to the final point of the discussion: the practice of participation. In the theoretical chapter, the authors discuss many forms of participation, and what participation could look like, in a surveillance context. However, this discussion is detached from the actual content of the following empirical chapters. The introductory theoretical chapter (two), contains a discussion about social media participation, including different types of interventions and mechanisms for citizen involvement. However, the subsequent empirical chapter (4–6), which are meant to exemplify how participation and surveillance interact, focuses on modes of institutional control that seems badly suited for such a theoretical exploration. Instead of highlighting conceptually different ways that participation functions vis-à-vis surveillance, the cases seem to have been selected based on other parameters. The question here is whether the synthesis of the knowledge generated in the empirical chapters provide enough substance to warrant a generalization on a higher level (both theoretically and geographically). The fact that there is no proper discussion motivating the empirical sample of surveillance practices, which countries to include, let alone the selection of empirical data, affects the validity of the empirical and the theoretical arguments.

The absence of methodological and theoretical clarity affects the possibility to define (and delimit) the notion of participation. Participation is exercised by citizens, groups, and even government agencies

(the case of Norway) who are engaged in legal procedures against planned surveillance measures. If legal processing corresponds to participation, would that not mean that participation in this context is a synonym for *resistance*? Resistance, in turn, has constituted a core aspect of research on surveillance since for many years.⁴ Is participation synonymous to both democracy *and* resistance? This question remains unanswered throughout the book, which feels a bit unsettling given the book's framing (which is the chief contribution given the dated empirical examples).

In short, this reviewer was slightly underwhelmed by a book with a very noteworthy title. However, the book makes a significant contribution to our body of knowledge, and this reviewer is looking forward to a volume on *Surveillance and Participation*.

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⁴See e.g. the works listed under "Resistance" in *Surveillance Studies: A Reader* (Monahan & Wood, 2018).