Book Review

Review of DeBrabander, Firmin. 2020. *Life after Privacy: Reclaiming Democracy in a Surveillance Society*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

170 pp. CA\$28.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781108811910.

Deborah Komarnisky

Carleton University, Canada
deborah.komarnisky@carleton.ca

Privacy rights are part of the foundation of a free and democratic society. Privacy defines how individual citizens function in society and how citizens relate to each other, private capital, and governmental organizations. Firmin DeBrabander boldly states in his new book, *Life After Privacy: Reclaiming Democracy in a Surveillance Society*, that “Democracy—liberty—is impossible without privacy” (ix). Individual privacy is our link to liberty and freedom within a democratic society. As DeBrabander contends, our relationship with privacy is paradoxical; we demand privacy from the state but, at the same time, we accept social surveillance by powerful social media corporations.

As DeBrabander was finalizing his book, COVID-19 was spreading throughout the world. In the preface of his book, DeBrabander responds to the pandemic by noting that various governments around the world were developing digital surveillance tools with powerful capital to monitor the movement of citizens and the spread of COVID-19. This will have an impact on our individual liberties and our privacy both during and after the pandemic.

DeBrabander provides an intriguing discussion linking privacy, surveillance, personal liberty, and democracy. He argues that state surveillance is part of a “tenuclular oligarchy” of an overreaching democratic government while powerful capital operates digitized surveillance as the “Big Other” in society (13). In this regard, “Surveillance undermines our ability to think for ourselves, to live our lives in a unique fashion, as we see fit” (22).

This book is an easy to read, accessible discussion framed around the debate of whether privacy “is a universal aspiration and an enduring, consistent value or institution” (76). The author challenges the reader to reconsider the concept of privacy and how we frame ourselves in the digitized world. Do the concepts of democracy and privacy work together to protect the individual or are they competing concepts with opposing objectives? As DeBrabander argues, “Democracy requires that privacy be protected, because it nurtures an independent spirit, and emboldens citizens to experiment, with their travels as with their thoughts” (5). However, during COVID-19, our democratically elected governments are extending their tentacles of power in collaboration with the “Big Other” to further track citizens under the guise of protecting the population.

Komarnisky, Deborah. 2021. Review of DeBrabander's *Life after Privacy: Reclaiming Democracy in a Surveillance Society*. *Surveillance & Society* 19(1): 140-142.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s), 2021 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](#)

DeBrabander's book is of interest to anyone intrigued by our online digitized confessional culture mediated by social media corporations. Our confessional culture is where citizens willingly divulge personal data on, for example, social media websites. As the author argues, "A striking feature of the digital age is that we, individual citizens—eager consumers and avid social media users—hand over personal information to those who watch us" (11).

The author attempts to defend our desire for privacy by asking, "Why do invasions of privacy upset or disconcert us? Or rather, why ought they?" (22). He responds to the questions: "Because we value our autonomy, which demands that our privacy be protected" (22). However, this response ignores the power imbalance between users of social media and the powerful corporations who control access to social media and the collected user information and data. Further, DeBrabander does not consider factors such as an individual's need for social belonging, which may influence why we are willing to give up privacy in favour of accessing social media.

Individualism and private property are linked since they are individual rights used to define relationships in society. DeBrabander looks to John Stuart Mill in his analysis, arguing that individual rights are significant in a democratic society. As an individual right, privacy is framed as a relationship between individuals in society: "Privacy becomes synonymous with a kind of comfort and domestic security; and historians argue, it focused on the family as a moral refuge amidst society at large" (89). Within a democratic society "the government is a principal threat to privacy. However, it certainly makes sense that weak—or absent—government makes privacy untenable; how can you hope to enjoy your private realm amidst anarchic chaos?" (79). DeBrabander comments on the perils of a weak government, yet privacy is just as threatened under a strong government where individual privacy rights are diminished with governmental tentacles reaching into the daily lives of the citizens.

When considering privacy, "retailers aim to make their data collection, prediction, and promotion efforts 'frictionless' and 'seamless'" (39). This is framed as "privacy self-management" (42) where individuals take responsibility for their individual privacy. DeBrabander argues that we are living in a surveillance economy where social surveillance by both the government and private corporations dominate our social structure. He looks at the example of smart technology, where we live in a smart home and our lives are monitored—smart lightbulbs monitor our electricity consumption and smart coffee mugs will alert us when we consume our allotted dosage of caffeine. At work, our productivity is monitored through our computer use and the smartcard technology that we use to enter the office.

The origins of privacy can be found in the Christian tradition where "The personalism of Christianity invokes an individual relationship with God; this relationship also demands a personal emptying" (87). Our pursuit of happiness and individualism are at the root of our desire and aspiration for privacy. Within a democracy, DeBrabander argues, "citizens must be permitted to think, say, and do whatever they wish, and pursue whatever makes them happy—no matter what the disapproving majority thinks—provided that they do not obstruct other individuals in their pursuits of happiness" (96). Privacy and personal freedom go hand-in-hand within the pursuit of ultimate happiness. DeBrabander looks to Hobbs, Locke, and Rousseau to define the concept of the social contract where individuals are independent in their pursuits. Within the postmodern social contract, the desire for privacy and happiness are prominent features driving our social desires.

DeBrabander poses the question: "Does rational autonomy offer a sufficiently nuanced account of personal and political freedom?" (131). The right to privacy is a fragile right, constantly shifting in a democratic society. DeBrabander responds stating: "My main task here has been to consider the prospects for political freedom when privacy is endangered if not extinct—which the digital age promises. Specifically, I wanted to see if or how democracy might survive in these straits since critics claim that privacy is absolutely necessary for democracy to function" (159). Regulations are used to solidify the rights of individual citizens in the digital age; however, governments and corporation test the limits to privacy within the structure of a democracy.

In his conclusion, DeBrabander outlines a call to action stating: “We citizens will secure our privacy, such as it is, when we empower ourselves by combining forces and energies, channeling our strength, and expressing our will to any who would subdue or control us” (163). Are we ready to take up this call to action? The author asks us to consider whether privacy is a universal aspiration. Our time to find a balance between privacy and social surveillance in the age of digital capitalism is quickly running out. If privacy is our aspiration as citizens of a democratic state, we are failing to achieve this aspiration. The emerging post-pandemic world is moving closer to the Orwellian vision outlined in *1984*, where individual liberty and democracy are put aside as we willingly submit to state sanctioned surveillance and as we acquiesce to digitized surveillance by private capital and the “Big Other.”