Book Review

Review of Pallitto, Robert M. 2020. *Bargaining with the Machine: Technology, Surveillance, and the Social Contract*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

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Breigha Adeyemo

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA
badeye3@uic.edu

There are growing concerns among academics and in society at large about the increasing threat to democracy, and particularly the freedom of choice promised through it, brought on by the ever-expanding surveillance state. As surveillance increasingly becomes normalized and entrenched in our everyday lives, and because technology is so central to much of what we do, it is reasonable to ask: What is at stake (for individuals and society) as we opt-in to technologies? How much of such surveillance is actually voluntary? Do the benefits of technologies (such as ease) outweigh their effects and costs? These are the types of questions that Pallitto addresses in *Bargaining with the Machine: Technology, Surveillance, and the Social Contract*. The book examines the choices that bring individuals to engage with technologies and, more importantly, asks us to consider if individuals have any choice at all in such technological engagement. Using bargaining as an analytical frame for further understanding human-technology encounters, Pallitto considers how our engagement with technology might be understood as an irresistible bargain (in other words, no bargain at all).

The “bargaining” analysis of technology that Pallitto presents represents a particularly convincing approach to thinking about human-technology encounters. While he derives the concept of bargaining from classical economic theory, understanding individuals as bargaining subjects allows us to focus on the cognitive deliberative processes of individuals, such as how they come to decide on whether or not to engage with a particular artifact, as well as to evaluate those decisions based on expected versus actual gains and losses. Additionally, the concept of bargaining suggests a rational, calculating subject. Pallitto proposes four guiding questions that help to structure inquiries regarding technological choice as a form of bargaining. These questions are: “Who is doing the bargaining?” (3), “What is the balance of bargaining power?” (6), and “What is surrendered and gained? What are actual versus perceived gains and losses?” (6). Each of these questions ultimately help show that individuals’ ability to bargain freely is limited.

Because the book is written in an accessible way and not saturated with jargon, anyone interested in the paradoxical relationship between technology and politics would benefit from reading the book. Readers will gain insight into the limited choices we have in technological engagement even as our encounters with technology are often framed as free choice. As Pallitto asserts, “The classical liberal notion of the freely bargaining, rationally choosing agent doesn’t quite work to describe a situation where bargaining is

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compulsory, where people can choose among oft-replicated options but must choose something—they cannot refuse to bargain in the first place” (54). Pallitto draws on personal experiences with technology as well as the experiences of others. He also discusses a range of technologies, including platforms (such as Amazon and Google), accelerated air travel programs (such as TSA pre-check in the US), and customer loyalty programs.

The book is also well-organized. First, it guides the reader through various types of human-technology encounters as bargains. Through highlighting various characteristics of technologies, such as convenience, efficiency, ubiquity, and obscurity (Chapters 2 and 3), as well as the interconnectedness of the world we live in (Chapter 4), Pallitto shows the varying degrees to which our technological choices are not simply based on free choice but are actually structured and conditioned in particular ways. Second, the book discusses various forms of resistance that have emerged in response to surveillance technologies, including countersurveillance, encryption, cryptocurrency, cash transactions, and surveillance art (Chapter 5). Pallitto urges us to consider why avenues of resistance are not explored more often and how we can exhibit agency in the face of seemingly irresistible surveillance practices.

Finally, Pallitto assesses the state of the social contract (Chapter 6), which he describes as “the larger-scale bargain structuring modern societies” (90). His discussion of consumer desire within the social contract is particularly compelling as he critiques the role of consumer desire in reproducing, at least to some extent, consent to a surveillance society. As Pallitto contends, “The force of consumer desire, and the way desire has been mobilized by platform owners and other profit-seeking firms, is part of the reason why people make bad bargains or fail to object to arrangements that are no bargain at all” (117).

While the book overall provides interesting insights into human-technology encounters and the larger political and social framework in which those take place, Pallitto does not explicitly situate his work in the context of others in the fields of political science, surveillance studies, or science and technology studies (STS). It is important for readers to grasp how Pallitto understands his work connecting to the work of other scholars who are also discussing surveillance, technology, and their relationship to liberal democracy. Furthermore, Pallitto’s argument could have addressed inequalities in bargaining. For instance, when individuals are presented with bargains, are the options or “terms of agreement” the same for everyone? Do some individuals suffer greater harm for certain bargains and for choosing to engage with particular technologies? How and why? These are questions that also could have been addressed in the book.

Throughout the text, we see the paradox of bargaining time and time again, the tension between freedom and agency in surveillance societies that presents itself in various ways. We see how some bargains are so exploitative and wrought with unequal power relations that they are not bargains at all. Overall, Pallitto urges us to consider (and even question and resist) the obstacles we face to free choice in the face of the machine.