Book Review

Sofsky, Wolfgang. 2008. *Privacy: A Manifesto*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Translated by Steven Rendall. 140 pp, Hardcover, \$19.95 (US), ISBN: 978-0-691-13672-1.

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This is an interesting, thought-provoking, and intricate little book that is likely to renew and reinvigorate philosophical and social thinking about privacy. The message is eloquently stated and the case for privacy unambiguously powerful. It is not immediately obvious that there are enormously new insights in this book, but Sofsky approaches the value of privacy and the current threats to privacy with a fresh perspective and some very interesting insights. The book is troubling in the bleakness of its depiction of the loss of privacy in both the public and private sectors of modern life. Sofsky's view that people have largely been complicit in this state of affairs and relatively complacent with the result appears to have fueled his concern for privacy, his plea for people to realize the implications of their loss of privacy, and his entreaty for people to take some action. The contours of such action and the likelihood of its success in reviving privacy are not as thoroughly presented and explored as are the contours of the loss of privacy.

Sofsky begins his analysis with "a day in the life" of the surveillance society, what he terms the "traces" we leave behind and the fact that we are rarely if ever alone. He notes that although people may at times find this annoying, the modern "transparent citizen" (7) actually enjoys the fact that life is in many respects easier as a result of surveillance technologies. Sofsky observes that people have become accustomed to surveillance technologies and the concomitant security and conveniences they bring. Indeed, he argues that people do not sense that they have lost personal freedom or attach importance to the private sphere. People's conformism has enabled the domination of power and the loss of privacy. Sofsky appears here to align himself with those, most notably Warren and Brandeis, who define privacy as being left alone or as withdrawal from society. Two points seem somewhat novel in Sofsky's analysis. First, he counterpoises this definition of privacy with the modern interest in the "public staging of oneself" (9). Second, he acknowledges not only that the state and other bureaucracies have a compulsion for information but that as a result the state creates fear and mistrust, creating the problem it says it is fighting, and legitimizing further surveillance.

In Chapter 4, entitled "Freedom and Privacy," Sofsky comments that privacy is "first of all negative" (30) and aligned with the "right to be left alone" (31). He observes the importance of anonymity and the oppressiveness of social networks – again emphasizing the asocial aspects of privacy and not acknowledging a broader social value for privacy. Sofsky ends the chapter, however, noting that privacy does not just protect citizens alone but also constrains state power by focusing the state on its role to ensure freedom. This important theme is not developed further. Instead, Sofsky speaks of boundaries, walls, "territories of the self" (Chapter 5), "secrets of the body" (Chapter 6), "private spaces" (Chapter 7) – all of which are vulnerable if not indeed "ransacked" in modern society. His examples are poignant and wide-ranging, and his discussion forcefully underscores the innumerable ways in which personal lives and spaces are compromised.

Sofsky appropriately homes in on the importance of information distribution and policies in modern society. People try to represent themselves by what they disclose or do not disclose. At the same time,

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people recognize that there is information about them that is in circulation and over which they have no control. Sofsky begins to seemingly argue that what people reveal is key to the social fabric and that people could manipulate that fabric by all portraying themselves as asocial (95) – but this is not developed or tied to the possibility of resistance to information policies. His interest in the “transparent citizen” or “transparent subject,” first introduced in Chapter 1, reemerges in Chapter 9 as he analyzes the state’s interest in information which extends not only to particular individuals but perhaps more importantly to “social networks” or “the volatile intermediate realm of society that binds people together” (106). And it is not just the state that partakes in this interest but the market as well, creating “an unholy alliance of institutions [that] ensures that the individual can no longer feel free from observation anywhere” (108).

So where does Sofsky leave the reader? The last chapter is entitled “Freedom of Thought.” Surveillance and observation “cannot read thoughts” (109) and people can still withdraw into an inner, private world. However, Sofsky points out the ways in which this world is also subject to social control, influence and manipulation. What is ultimately most important in Sofsky’s analysis is criticism, social criticism that exemplifies the limits of power and the spirit of the individual. His closing sentences bear repeating:

Anyone who, of his own accord, lays down the weapons of criticism also allows his power of judgment and decision to decay. In the end, he should not be surprised by his existence as a fully transparent subject. His private sphere has long since disappeared. He always leaves behind the same traces. He no longer needs to be observed and investigated, since everyone knows what he is thinking and doing anyway. (129-30)

Sofsky’s message is likely to be effective in generating more public discussion about the myriad ways in which privacy has been lost in modern society. His book is also likely to renew thinking about the ways in which privacy is important to modern society and how it might be more effectively protected.