During the many work-related trips I have made to Ontario in recent years, I have always been baffled by the restricted way in which alcohol is purchased and consumed there. Having a healthy suspicion of all things surveillant, I often questioned sales staff at the LCBO why my postal code was demanded if I purchased any alcohol (as a visitor I wasn’t required to provide it) and why alcohol could only be bought in the LCBO, and not at other shops. As a European I found the approach restrictive, and the request for my postal code alerted me to controversy surrounding the consumption of alcohol in Ontario, the history and development of which is explored in this absolutely fascinating monograph by Scott Thompson and Gary Genosko.

The monograph charts the development of the LCBO in post prohibition Ontario. Illustrating David Lyon’s argument that surveillance grows alongside the development of the modern bureaucracy, it explains in great depth the organizational and bureaucratic processes which prompted attempts to control the drinking population en masse, and the effects of that control on the population. Noteworthy junctures include the influence of D.B. Hanna in the organizational set-up of the LCBO. Hanna came from the railway industry, noted for its deployment of control systems, described by John Beniger in the excellent Control Revolution. Economic imperatives, which eventually confounded the LCBO’s dreams of moral regulation through mass surveillance by manual reporting, led to the introduction of the IBM Hollerith punch card machine to automate the profiling of ‘risky purchasing’ by customers. This history is thus linked with other vile population control measures taking place in Europe during a similar period. And the deployment of interdiction, cancellation and prohibition notices shows how the LCBO’s surveillance system inevitably became influenced by and thus reproduced unacceptable gendered and racist discourses and legislative practices in use at the time.

It is often argued that mass surveillance is not a new phenomenon. Thompson and Genosko illustrate this unequivocally. Many of the phenomena they identify spring to mind as key trends in current practices in current-day bureaucratic and organizational practices: the function creep of surveillance by ever more inclusive listing practices (an issue raised recently by those erroneously placed on no-fly lists) and their associated cumulative disadvantages, most recently documented by Oscar Gandy in a book of the same name; the intersection of interdiction and cancellation lists with governance regimes in other areas of the state (recently seen as the intention behind the current E Borders scheme in the UK, where the aspiration is to cross reference passenger data with immigration, social welfare and crime databases); and the building of bias and prejudice into profiles – recently observed by those studying electronic consumer profiling in mass retail scenarios – to the point at which it becomes unaccountable and irreversible.
From a methodological point of view the study is almost flawless. The results of painstaking archival work coupled with statistical analyses are woven together into a narrative which simultaneously gives a wide ranging systemic view of the LCBO’s practices coupled with fine grained local detail. The authors also show how Foucauldian and Deleuzian inspired views of the surveillance societies can work together as complementary explanatory tools. The only criticism I would have is that the authors’ preoccupation with Foucauldian and Deleuzian theorisations, which are present throughout the text, detracts from the many other links which could have been drawn between their work and other in depth historical ethnographies of surveillance systems. I have already referred to Beniger’s Control Revolution, but Christopher Dandeker’s Surveillance, Power and Modernity, and Jane Caplan and John Torpey’s Documenting Individual Identity are just a few instances where greater connection could have been made between this book and the growing body of knowledge concerning the historical roots of the surveillance society and their contemporary consequences.