Book Review

Deane, Alex (ed.) (2010) *Big Brother Watch: The state of civil liberties in modern UK*. London: Biteback
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Alex Deane's book considers the threats to liberty, freedom and privacy to be found in the UK—subjects that have in recent times generated a great deal of consideration, whether it be government technologies (Whitley 2008), torture (Peirce 2010), number plate recognition (Haines 2010), or political agendas (Raab and Benjamn 2009). These works and others have helped to raise and sustain the profile of civil liberties in the UK. Likewise, campaigning organisations such as *Liberty* have been vociferous in highlighting issues of civil liberties in the UK and beyond. Deane's book sits amongst those who have drawn attention to how the UK is threatening its own civil liberties. It concentrates on many of the new laws and regulations introduced in the UK that have undoubtedly impacted on civil liberties. These laws are wide-ranging and relatively large in number and the book gives a good indication of their multifariousness. As Deane tells us, 'here is a whirlwind tour of the live issues in the liberty and privacy sphere' (p. 1), and indeed, whirlwind it is: we move at a rapid pace through issues of asylum, internet regulations, licensing laws or libel, amongst others. There are 29 listed contributors to the book and each of them deals with an issue of civil liberty that has, to a greater or lesser degree, affected the UK. Those contributing include members of parliament, journalists, barristers, academics, writers, civil liberty activists and leaders of interest groups. The range of contributors and their knowledge and experiences of issues of civil liberties is considerable.

There are telling and thoughtful contributions to this book: in particular, Norman (p. 20) gives a good overview of the origins of human rights; Snook (p. 54) writes capably on the powers to enter the home; Dowty (p. 113) raises interesting issues on children's personal data; and Booth (p. 189) presents an engaging view of the consequences of EU law-making. Nonetheless, there are also many weaknesses to the book. Firstly, it is never truly clear what this book is: is it a group of essays, is it a reference book, or is it a collection of opinions, musings, blogs or accounts? The introduction to the book is very weak in telling the reader what exactly the book is, how the book is structured and its context and themes. In addition, there is an obvious political leaning to the book, something unequivocally acknowledged on page 76 when Johnson states, 'will the cause of individual freedom and liberty be advanced under the coalition [government] after suffering so grievously at the hands of Labour over the past 15 years'. This, I feel, is the true context of the book—what will the new coalition government do to dismantle the laws and regulations introduced by the Labour government? There is also a lack of balance to many of these polemics; it would seem every law or regulation enacted by the Labour government was oppressive, harsh and cruel. There is certainly an argument for this, but I do feel it needs some perspective.

The book is also seriously let down by high levels of repetition and the brevity of the contributions. Practically all of the contributors discuss more than one the following issues: CCTV, stop and search, NHS summary care database, database state, 'nothing to hide nothing to fear,' e-borders, ASBOs,

fingerprinting school children, monitoring rubbish disposal, European Union, ID scheme, the smoking ban, 'nanny' and 'bullying'. This list of issues may seem reasonable; however, when reading about the same issue for the third or fourth time, for this reader at least, the arguments had a tendency to become tired. Moreover, too often the reader is given only a fleeting account of privacy or civil rights issues in the UK. Rather than substantive empirical discussions of what it is like to live in the UK or thorough reviews of laws and regulations, we are told about 'draconian' measures introduced by the labour government. This is a real shame because some of the issues raised pose very interesting questions that deserve greater attention. The book may have benefited from having fewer contributors, therefore affording a greater opportunity for contributors to better develop their arguments. Additionally, the structure and layout of the book could have been improved by grouping contributions into themes, for instance, CCTV, European Law or the ID Scheme.

There are a few other smaller points that I feel also need to be flagged. Deane, in his introduction refers to 'our research' (pp. 12, 13 and 16) and what it 'showed' and 'revealed', yet the reader is never given any insight into how the research was analysed, or how it was conducted. Other aspects are also carelessly referenced; for instance, Green tells the reader a person can be captured on CCTV up to 300 times a day (p.47), and references this to the Big Brother Watch website. This is a quote that should probably be considered with greater care, particularly as it is based on a fictional character (see Norris et al. 1999, 42) and also due to some of the media attention it has received (see Aaronovitch 2009). There is also a tendency in the book to sensationalise and simplify much of what is being discussed: for example, when monitoring household disposal 'neighbours are being encouraged to spy on each other to promote compliance, a sinister echo of the old communist regimes of Eastern Europe' (McKinstry, p.166); the implementation of on-the-spot fines are viewed as, 'government-sanctioned "pay-as-you-go hooliganism"' (Raab p.202); the Equality Act 2010 'treats adults like children' (Smith p.228) and finally, in concluding the book, Deane suggests terrorists 'hate us because we are free' (p.264).

There may be value and interest to be found in this book for *Surveillance & Society* readers and, as mentioned, a number of the contributions are thought-provoking. However, there is a sizeable amount of good research and literature on the state of civil liberties in modern UK and in my opinion this book is not in that category.

References

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