Book Review

Larsen, Beatrice von Silva-Tarouca. 2011. *Setting the Watch: Privacy and the Ethics of CCTV Surveillance (Studies in Penal Theory and Penal Ethics)*. Oxford: Hart. 226pp. Hardback £47.00, ISBN 978-1-84946-084-2

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Dating as far back as the mid-1990s, when British scholars started to question the spread of surveillance cameras in their country, studies on CCTV has become one of the most established areas of enquiry in Surveillance Studies. We now know that the gaze of cameras is far from neutral and suspicion is socially constructed to reflect the assumptions of those manning the system (Norris and Armstrong 1999), that operators develop strategies to ease the burden of long working hours when, for the most part, not much happens so that cameras are not watched at all times (Smith 2004), and that the use of CCTV for preventing access to public space to specific categories of undesirables is common in several European countries (Mork Lomell 2004; Fonio 2007). What the works mentioned above share with countless others is the belief that cameras negatively impact on the individual's right to privacy in public space and that, as such, the exponential growth in the diffusion of open-street CCTV systems signals a progressive shift towards a more and more controlled society.

In *Setting the Watch*, Larsen opens this assumption up for scrutiny, seeking to investigate if and how it can be said that the proliferation of video surveillance represents an infringement of the right to privacy in public space. In order to do so, she first develops a theory providing a rationale for privacy claims in public to then move on to investigate whether CCTV violates them. This is followed by a thorough examination of the possible justification to this infringement to be found in the crime prevention capacity of cameras and by a final series of recommendations on how CCTV systems should be implemented and managed in order to minimise their impact on people's privacy.

The most interesting elements of her analysis are found in the decision to frame the issue of privacy in public and its normative foundation in terms of anonymity, and in the fair appraisal of the effectiveness of CCTV provided in Chapter 3. With regards the former, the author is clear in her separation of privacy from anonymity—defined as the “unidentified and impersonal existence we mostly lead when we are in public” (24)—and in identifying the key issue at stake in the right on the part of individuals to be only subject to cursory attention when outside. This becomes particularly important when the audience we appear before not only comprises fellow citizens, but authorities too, as they are not bound by the social conventions prescribing what Goffman—one of the few sociological references to appear the book—called civil inattention. When authorities are involved, it is precisely because of the deeply unbalanced nature of the relationship between observed and observer that it becomes necessary to provide the right to anonymity of the individual with a normative foundation, so as to provide protection from the possibility of abuse.

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In order to decide whether crime prevention objectives can justify the limitation of a person's right to anonymity, Larsen also presents evidence on the effectiveness of CCTV. She identifies three possible dimensions along which surveillance cameras can be used to curb crime—early detection followed by police intervention; increase in the likelihood of apprehension and conviction; and deterrence—and her review of existing research leads to the conclusion that CCTV can only be effective when used against specific kinds of crime, in very specific locations and always in conjunction with other measures. While this is certainly not news for those with prior knowledge on the inherent difficulties involved in trying to gauge whether or not surveillance cameras 'work', the synthetic presentation the author gives is an excellent reminder of the lack of sound conclusions on the matter—a fact often conveniently silenced in the public debate surrounding CCTV.

The most important element to keep in mind while reading the book is the legal background of its author. This provides the work with its most apparent strengths: specifically, the thorough examination of what privacy comes to mean in public and the different perspective used to analyse the phenomenon of open-street CCTV overall mean that the book can be seen as an original contribution to an established and well-researched field. At the same, the legal orientation is also evident in how attention is focused almost exclusively on the normative dimension of CCTV, so that the vast gulf that exists between legal norms and actual practices is never crossed. This is why the questions the author wishes to answer—what are the principles that lie at the heart of video surveillance? What kind of guidelines needs to be put in place to prevent abuse? What kind of training do operators have to acquire?—essentially leave unaddressed the interactional and political issues that are at the heart of the social processes behind the workings of any CCTV system. While this is coherent with the goal of the book, this is certainly different from the sociologically-oriented analyses on cameras that are far more common currency in Surveillance Studies.

If anything, the book would have benefited from further clarification of its context. The two countries that provide most of the examples quoted in the book are the United Kingdom and Germany, but this choice is inherently problematic as they can arguably be placed at opposite ends of the surveillance/privacy spectrum, with most other European countries—if we decided to limit our attention to the EU—likely placed somewhere in the middle. The author then reserves the final section of the book to a series of recommendations that, if adopted, might lessen the impact of CCTV on anonymity. While this is coherent with the analysis carried out in the book, it is not always clear where these guidelines are aimed and at times the impression is given that the framework developed by the author should be ideally applied not only to Britain, but to other countries as well. However, the lax regulation of CCTV that is the case in the UK is not common in continental Europe, so the overall argument could have benefited from a clearer enunciation of its scope.

In spite of the above criticisms, the book is an interesting addition to the literature on open-street CCTV systems that will be most appreciated by those with a mainly legal interest in the topic. Because it also offers quite a wealth of descriptive details on surveillance cameras and the state of the art of available technology, it is a good introductory text that could be useful for students and those not thoroughly familiar with existing literature on CCTV.

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