Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Boersma, Kees, Rosamunde van Brakel, Chiara Fonio and Pieter Wagenaar. 2014. *Histories of State Surveillance in Europe and Beyond*. London/New York: Routledge.

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Understanding history supposedly helps to understand the present. This does not mean there are always causalities to observe, but Surveillance Studies' fixation on the contemporary all too often neglects the historical perspective—and not just to explain the emergence of a technology or theoretical concept, but history as a field of its own. The editors of the volume want to fill this gap and provide the research community with a number of accounts with a historical perspective. Most notably the contributions have a wider geographic range, while the time span they cover is rather similar across all articles, i.e. the mid-19th to the mid-20th century (with a few exceptions). As they primarily look at state surveillance, this time frame is not coincidental. State surveillance as a form of state governance is tied to the development of the bureaucratic nation state. State surveillance in many cases is achieved by bureaucratic means, such as identity card systems, registries and the governmental need to keep records. These records, an idea that became a common feature of states in the early 19th century, were later rendered into surveillance measures or supported other surveillance technologies to fully flourish.

Surveillance societies are information societies. And although the latter term only began to achieve some prominence with the advent of computers in the 1960s, it becomes clear from many of the contributions here that this is indeed where surveillance has its base and beginning, i.e. if we agree to the use of Lyon's definition of surveillance as systematic, routine collections of personal data to manage populations (my paraphrase here), which the editors use as a basic concept. This means surveillance emerged with the modern, rational nation state, as Giddens has pointed out earlier (1985). Surveillance is used as an "empirical window" by the editors to witness how people and their data are being processed. And indeed, as almost all of the contributions show, modernity, modernisation and the urge to manage and ultimately control populations were the major drivers behind the ever expanding field of surveillance technologies from paper ID-cards to national registries that still make up the basis on which contemporary 21st century surveillance is being built on—even if it has rapidly developed beyond the imaginations of 19th century bureaucrats by now.

The book is split up into three sections that cover theory and perspectives on the topic in part one, analyses of Big Brother surveillance in the 20th century, and finally an assembly of articles on ID-cards in different geo-historical settings, from Belgian colonies and World War One registries in Canada to the

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Spanish ID-cards of today. The book is closed with an afterword by Gary T. Marx, as lucid and fresh as ever, however, not strictly on the topic of the collection, but rather a more conceptual piece on the orderings of surveillance.

The first article represents the core of the whole book: Edward Higgs' "Further thoughts on The Information State in England... since 1500", in which he recapitulates what he has been saying on surveillance histories in many other publications. It is the perfect lead-in to the whole volume and if you read nothing else, this piece should be mandatory. It provides the reader with a conceptual frame to study information states and regimes and reflects on a few terms and analytical concepts. It is followed by an article by David Lyon, in which he does not tell the reader too many new things, especially not those that know his work. He uses the ID-card to situate surveillance historically—an issue on which he has also edited a worthwhile collection (Bennett and Lyon 2008).

Part two concentrates on national histories and the development, use and consequences of surveillance. What these examples have in common is that they are all coming from so called post-authoritarian countries, i.e. Spain, Portugal, Greece, Poland and Brazil. It has to be noted that Germany is not part of this book, which can only be considered as a major neglect. But I am not sure whether this was a deliberate decision by the editors; I rather believe that socio-historical research into these matters is not placed high on the agenda. And from my personal knowledge, there is little to no sociologically-informed research into the history of the Stasi and their regimes of control and surveillance. This is a research gap that should urgently be addressed by others in the future, especially by Germans themselves. All articles in this section are written by nationals of the respective countries, which provides a deep and a highly critical analyses that perfectly illustrate Higgs' arguments and show how surveillance regimes develop beyond record keeping and eventually have a legacy that can still be felt today, albeit in often very subtle and unusual forms and disguises. All authors combine a unique knowledge of "their own" state with a broad knowledge of the surveillance discourse and are thus worth the effort, even beyond the frame of the by now and long ceased authoritarian regimes.

The third part consists of five articles on ID-cards as surveillance measures. Those scholars with the surveillance literature may wonder, as did I, why those have to be in here, when there has been a whole volume published on this topic in 2008 (see Bennett and Lyon). But as it is, only one author appears in both publications—the genuine historian of Surveillance Studies, Scott Thompson, who extensively wrote on various matters of national registrations and other forms of surveillance in purely historical contexts and thus has already provided the research community with a conceptual framework. In this volume here he talks about national registration in Canada between 1917 and 1947—spanning two world wars and accordingly conscription measures during wartime. Others discuss the legacy of ID cards in Spain (Galdon Clavell and Ouziel) or the colonial past of Belgian ID-cards. With this exception, colonialism is of no concern to this volume, which could be seen as a deficit, as colonialism provides a major source for discourses on surveillance, impacting on such aspects as identity, ethnicity, the making of geographical regions, indeed whole countries and cultures (and cultural artefacts) that have been created (to avoid the misleading term "invented") and have lasting and often devastating effects to this present day. van Brakel and van Kerckhoven give a hint at this, when talking about the categories of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda that are clearly colonial constructions, but known to everybody who listens to the news and is made to believe that these ethnic categories descend from real people and represent something essentially cultural. What they do represent in the context of surveillance is that they have a legacy with deadly potential and have become a fact beyond any discourse of construction and invention. Other colonial histories could have highlighted these aspects in more depth.

In conclusion: This volume provides a worthwhile reading on the history of surveillance, but can only represent a beginning of such a perspective. It provides an array of exemplary cases that stimulate further thought and research in such a perspective. The chosen "empirical window" has been opened little bit, but

there is still room for more analyses, especially if it goes beyond ID-cards and registries. Although there are many examples and cases presented, such research seems to be lacking a concept of conceptual framework. This does not mean that there has to be just one, but besides Higgs such work has not been undertaken by the others. There are, however, a multitude of arguments and results that could be used as starting points for a larger historical debate that could impact on Surveillance Studies as a whole. This collection contributes to such a debate that hopefully does not stop here, as surveillance may indeed be a very good empirical window to study the social histories of present day societies that in the face of technological hysteria all too easily forgets history or renders it irrelevant.

References

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