

Book Review

Colin J. Bennett. *The Privacy Advocates. Resisting the Spread of Surveillance*. Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-262-02638-3. £ 10.95.

While surveillance and privacy studies have expanded massively in recent years, it is notable that the political science perspective on privacy still seems to be under-developed. With the risk of exaggerating, a brief glance of contemporary privacy and surveillance studies exposes three main significant types of approaches. First, there is a strong sociological tradition which studies surveillance (and privacy) as an important feature of modernity. With a point of departure in Foucault's writing on Bentham's Panopticon, this approach produces a normative platform for a critique of the modern state. Second, there is a legal and criminological tradition for studying the regulation of surveillance and privacy in modern societies. Third, we can witness a growing interest from the fields of information systems and computer science on how to perceive and design privacy into information systems. Despite their product-oriented interests, this approach also encompasses normative standpoints.

Given the limited consideration of privacy policy-related issues by political scientists until now, there is every reason to welcome Colin Bennett's recent book on the activities and organisation of those people and groups around the world that challenge government and the industry surveillance practices. He has previously, in collaboration with Charles Raab, reviewed government activities in this field with a special focus on data protection agencies [1]. This book, which is mainly based on qualitative interviews with some of the key 'advocates' in the struggle against intrusive surveillance, gives the reader a first-hand insight into how these advocates organise their activities (and networks) and into the underlying thoughts and ideas which underpin their struggles. In addition, the book describes in detail some of the famous privacy disputes where privacy advocates have been (quite successfully) involved such as e.g. the controversy over the 'Clipper Chip' in the 1990s, protests during national census in Europe, and the numerous identity card protests around the world in recent years. These cases clearly demonstrate that the often-overlooked group of privacy advocates have in fact had an important impact in several instances, and play a more pivotal role in privacy policy than political science tends to acknowledge.

The larger picture revealed by the text suggests a number of features regarding these advocates which go beyond the empirical field per se, and demonstrate the limitations of our current understanding of policy studies. First, privacy advocates do not easily fit into the conventional (sociological) definitions of social movements as they tend to be based on more individual engagement, they can lack a common purpose, and do not usually exhibit a collective identity. The privacy advocates belong to a disparate group of activists, part-time consultants and professionals who, alone or in networks with others, challenge various forms of surveillance practice with various strategies and instruments. They do not represent a uniform movement with a strong conviction and a common cause as, for example, the human rights movement. Bennett argues, however, that this probably tells us more about social movement theory than about the privacy advocates. Also, these advocates share their often loose, spontaneous and ad-hoc oriented activities with other 'new' social movements such as e.g. the anti-globalisation movement. Second, classical political science distinctions become blurred in the field of privacy advocates between, for example, activists and political decision-makers, between the voluntary sector and private consultancy, and between academics

and advocates. The policy community of surveillance and privacy issues encompasses all kind of actors and opinions, despite the fact that there are diverging (sometimes even adversarial) policy attitudes. Indeed, this reviewer has personally experienced several times that privacy and surveillance related 'gatherings' attract a community where 'stale-mate' enemies encounter each other in an atmosphere of learning and deliberation. Third, many privacy advocates not only advance certain demands to e.g. new government regulation, but are actively engaged in designing new technological solutions for enhancing privacy, or revealing flaws in existing technologies (in particular in modern information and communication technologies). In fact, many of our current privacy-enhancing elements in modern computer software owe their origins to political struggle against attempts to intrude individual privacy. Finally, the boom in privacy advocacy has been most significant in countries where statutory privacy protection (typically in the shape of data protection) is either embryonic, or in countries with weak privacy protective governmental organisations. Hence, there is no surprise that we find most of the cases in the book in countries such as the US, Canada and the UK. As Bennett puts it, in countries with a long history of governmental privacy protection through legislation and agencies, privacy advocates are crowded out of the policy field. Equally, privacy advocates seem to emerge where they are most needed.

Although the book fills a gap in comparative studies of an otherwise distinctive social movement group in a rather 'odd' policy field, this reviewer believes there are a couple of critical issues which should be brought to attention. The book is primarily focused on the empirical findings whereas the theoretical linkage to areas such as, for example, policy studies and network governance theory is underplayed. There are only a limited number of references made to the overall political science literature, and those that are made signify a reflection rather than a point of departure for generating hypotheses. Furthermore, although there is no reason to question the author's argument that strong governmental privacy-protecting institutions, like the ones in European states, have a negative effect on the genesis and existence of privacy advocates, the book has a very strong North American empirical bias which does not fully accommodate the claim that privacy advocates are less present in Europe. One could also ask why political parties, and more specifically members of various parliaments and assemblies, are not considered by this text to be potential privacy advocates, given that there otherwise seems to be an open and flexible understanding of 'who' falls under the definition of privacy advocate. Is the *Swedish Piracy Party* which gained seats in the European parliament in 2008 a privacy advocate or not?

That being said, there should be no doubt that this book makes an excellent contribution to the otherwise meagre political science tradition of studying privacy-related issues. Beyond the academic audience this book is definitely a 'must-read' for all those people who through their daily work, or in their political activist roles, are personally engaged in privacy and surveillance related policy issues.

Reference

- [1] Bennett, C.J. & Raab, C.D. (2006) *The Governance of Privacy: Policy Instruments in a Global Perspective*, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

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