
Review

Life after privacy: Reclaiming democracy in a surveillance society

Firmin Debrabander

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Because generosity is a virtue for a critic, let me begin by saying that *Life After Privacy* offers a provocative thesis that, as far as I know, is entirely novel among books on the subject. And it does so in clear and occasionally surprising prose. However, since honesty and close attention are also a reviewer's duties, I am obliged to report that this argument takes some effort to reconstruct and appears to rest on a series of non sequiturs, strawmen, equivocations, begged conclusions, rhetorical questions, and unsubstantiated claims. Nevertheless, the book is interesting for how near it comes to making an explicit argument in favor of the surveillance society.

First the central claim whose boldness and originality cannot be denied. Debrabander begins in the same place as virtually every other book and article on the subject: 'privacy is on life support, and the prognosis is dim' (p. 95). Yet he argues that the appropriate response is essentially to give up on privacy altogether and 'find a way to thrive' in its absence (p. 95). If this view sounds defeatist, that is because it is. It is also a bit odd, since at various points in the book, Debrabander acknowledges that contemporary violations of privacy are in fact bad. One is surprised to read that we 'have little choice' but to submit to corporate and state surveillance, especially in a book whose later chapters urge us to revivify of our powers of democratic self-government and association.

The first two thirds or so of *Life After Privacy* are meant to motivate the argument about giving up on privacy by a series of strawmen and non sequiturs. Two are particularly important: that political philosophers and activists should stop defending privacy because (a) nobody knows what it is, and (b) nobody cares.

It is common for writers on privacy to remark that no one knows what it is. A lack of conceptual clarity is a fine justification for offering one's own view of the matter. This is not Debrabander's tack. We do not know what privacy is, he argues, and that makes it very hard to defend, perhaps indefensible. The book offers little support for this claim other than assertions from the rhetorical 'we' and the



existence of philosophical debates over privacy's scope and value. Yet from the fact that in the end 'it may be impossible to arrive at a concrete and specific definition of privacy,' Debrabander concludes that it may be 'pointless to keep trying' (p. 34). Another instance of curious resignation in a work of philosophy.

The book's frequent citation of news items covering the perennial uproars over privacy violations would seem to contradict the claim that nobody knows what privacy is, as well as the idea that nobody cares about it. Interestingly, the fact that privacy violations continue apace despite such frequent outrage (and ensuing regulation!) is taken as evidence in support of the claim that citizens do not really care in the end. The implicit premise here is that the problems we do care about sufficiently get resolved or go away, but obviously that is not how it works. Again, it is possible that everyone is wrong to be outraged, but that is not Debrabander's argument. Rather, he thinks that we should give it up and focus on other, more important aspects of democratic life, like reinvigorating local associations and the agonal public sphere. The assumption that we cannot care about both things at once runs throughout the book.

In his discussion of 'confessional culture' and its connection to individual and democratic well-being, Debrabander touches terrain that others, including Bernard Harcourt (2015), have trodden. A comparison with Harcourt is particularly instructive. Harcourt's argument against the overexposure of contemporary life draws upon a critical historicization of concepts and practices of privacy. How we tend to value privacy, he claims, shifted, like so much else, with the rise of the political, economic, and ideological developments broadly termed neoliberalism. This gives one explanation of how today's stereotypical teen can care deeply about privacy but also feel compelled to expose more and more of her life: she sees it more like a commodity than a fundamental interest, and as long as she can dispose over it as she wishes, even to the hilt, there is no problem. This would also seem to explain the overwhelming focus in the philosophical literature on the value of control.

Life After Privacy demonstrates the merit in Harcourt's historicization, most strikingly in Debrabander's strange commitment to placing the diminution of privacy and rise of surveillance beyond the reach of the political. We 'have little choice' and 'must plan accordingly' for life under surveillance (p. xi). This is not necessarily a failure of politics; it is, however, a failure of thinking. To understand the rise of the surveillance society as happening in a realm other than that in which political action also takes place—a realm of unstoppable corporate actors like Target and FICO, somewhere beyond the reach of human agency—is to misunderstand, at a fundamental level, the object of study.

Debrabander's depoliticization of surveillance is especially striking given that the last third of his book is essentially a call for invigorated democratic self-government. It is here that the book's argument shifts into a form that, while not stated explicitly, may shed light on the motivation behind the framework of mutual



exclusion and resignation given at the outset and defended, as it were, over the opening chapters. It is here, too, that the book-length argument attains its greatest coherence. For there appears a strain of thought that gives one the impression that the author's attitude toward the rise of the surveillance society is not one of resignation but welcome.

Like Harcourt, Debrabander seeks to connect contemporary privacy mores and the political economy of surveillance to the health of liberal democracy. However, they reach opposed conclusions. While Harcourt worries that '[t]he liberal ideal—that there could be a protected realm of individual autonomy—no longer has traction in a world in which commerce cannot be distinguished from governing or policing or surveilling or just simply living privately' (p. 26), Debrabander draws a different lesson, namely that we would be better off without that liberal ideal and the social arrangements like privacy that support it.

Debrabander lays blame for a host of contemporary political ills, as well as 'a troubling eruption of tyrannical passions' like 'greed, lust, even sadism' (pp. 133-34), at the feet of 'liberal democracy' and its protected sphere of personal freedom. This sphere is bad precisely for the reasons Harcourt finds it valuable: it permits individuals to act freely beyond the disciplining gaze of surveillance. 'Left to our own devices', writes Debrabander, 'desire mushrooms, and dominates—and politically, divides' (p. 135). Privacy is bad because '[t]he sense that we are alone and unwatched, or anonymous . . . prompts us to indulge sometimes dark passions' (p. 134).

Here the book's discussion of surveillance meets its caricature of liberalism: the latter's rights-based protection for varied modes of life is undermined by the disciplining power of surveillance. And it is here that an earlier, long, and rather inapposite digression on the stoics and early Christians begins to make sense, since contrary to most thinking on the effects of omnipresent surveillance, Debrabander finds not tyranny but liberation in such a scenario: liberation from 'tyrannical' desire. This appears tellingly in a misreading of one of Aristotle's most famous lines that is so blatant it makes a reader wonder if he has discovered one of those notorious esoteric texts. The line is the one from *Politics* Book I about how a human without need of a polis would be 'either a beast or a god.' Debrabander reads Aristotle not, as is typical, to be making a point about the logo-political nature of the human creature, but rather as marking out as un-human anyone whose passions are undisciplined by social pressure of the surveilling gaze. Such a one must either be sub- or superhuman because 'he succumbs to his passions wholly, or is miraculously resistant to them' (p. 135). The implication is that we ought not only to accept but to want surveillance so that others may check our passions and make us human.

The book's apparent nostalgia for a culturally unified past; its critique of liberal democracy as overly individualistic and with 'no inner resources to stymie moral decline' (p. 134); its extended digressions on stoic and Christian virtue; its long



attack on ‘safe spaces’ and alleged viewpoint intolerance on college campuses; it all amounts to a sort of communitarian argument in favor of surveillance without an explicit statement of its thesis. We are left, at the end of the book, with an argument both more radical and more coherent than the one presented in its opening chapters. Resistance is futile, it says, this time not in the voice of one resigned to being overwhelmed by an indomitable power, but in the voice of one hoping for it.

References

Harcourt, B.E. (2015) *Exposed: Desire and disobedience in the digital age*. Harvard University Press.

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