



Surveillance & Society



Book Review

Webb, Maureen. 2007. *Illusions of Security: Global Surveillance and Democracy in the Post-9/11 World*. San Francisco: City Lights.

312 pp. Paperback, \$16.95 (US), £14.99 (UK). ISBN-10: 0872864766; ISBN-13: 978-0872864764.

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The Global surveillance initiatives that governments have embarked upon do not make us more secure. They only create illusions of security. Illusions that do little to catch or stop terrorists and that ensnare the innocent, divert resources away from better initiatives, obscure our public policy debates, and betray our real personal and collective safety. (Maureen Webb, 235)

Maureen Webb's new text *Illusions of Security: Global Surveillance and Democracy in the Post-9/11 World* details the post-9/11 social moment as it pertains to human rights law, through an analysis of surveillance technologies and policing within Western democracies. The text is largely devoted to an empirical account of surveillance technologies and programs currently employed within these countries, with a general focus on American examples tied to legal human rights cases. Readers interested in detailed accounts of current surveillance policy and technologies will not be let down, while the writing style of this text also makes it approachable for those new to surveillance studies.

Maureen Webb is a human rights lawyer in Canada and proclaimed legal activist. In the past, Webb was a litigator in a key freedom of association case in Canada (*Lavigne v. Ontario Public Service Employees Union*, 1991) and has participated in cases before the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia and the House of Lords and Privy Council in the UK. At the time of publication Maureen Webb was co-chair of the Civil Liberties Monitoring Group and a founding member of the International Campaign Against Mass Surveillance, as well as being involved with Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada and other human rights organizations.

Given the author's background, it is perhaps fitting that her new text investigates surveillance technologies and programs through changes in law, judicial rulings and human rights abuses. From this entry point, Webb approaches her analysis of the material by forwarding three central themes: that a new centrality of the concepts of pre-emption and risk in post-9/11 surveillance practices have fundamentally changed governmental policing actions and the degree of transnational state integration; that these changes are dangerous to fundamental democratic legal processes; and that ultimately these changes in fact increase the risks faced by individuals worldwide. As Webb explains:

Surveillance in a world of risk preemption requires that *everyone* be evaluated as a potential suspect in order to eliminate risk to the furthest degree possible. In this paradigm, the criminal law and due process protections that have been developed over centuries in democratic societies – such as the presumption of innocence; habeas corpus and rights against arbitrary, indefinite detention; attorney-client privilege; public trials; the right to know the evidence against one and to respond; the right against unreasonable

Thompson, Scott N. 2009. Review of Webb's *Illusions of Security*. *Surveillance & Society* 6(1): 87-89. <http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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search and seizure; and the right to remain silent—are viewed as intolerable risks...the system that is currently being constructed is unlike anything that has come before...it technologically dwarfs any previous system...[and] its global reach ensures that one has to worry, not just about what one's own state might do with one's personal information, but about what any other state might do (72-73, emphasis in original).

Differences in content and writing styles facilitate the conceptual distinction of the text into four separate sections. In the first section of the text Webb's detailed descriptions read almost like a narrative style. It investigates the rendition cases of Maher Arar, Ahmad Abou El Maati, Abdullah Al Malki, Muayyed Nurreidin and Arwad Al Boushi as well as her personal introduction to the material that would eventually become her text. In telling the stories of rendition cases of Canadian citizens, the recounting of their detention, forceful deportation to third countries and eventual torture, Webb effectively conveys her theme of reduced individual security, as well as efficiently describing the complexity of the testimony given at the Arar inquiry and collected chronologies.

In the second section Webb drops her narrative writing style and reconstructs the social history surrounding the presidency of George W. Bush and the integration of "preemption" into the American doctrine of surveillance and legal policy. Webb approaches this section through the National Security Agency's (NSA) illegal wiretapping case, but quickly expands her scope to expose the role of preemption at the core of the actions of the Bush II administration. This second section is where this text is at its best. As the uncertainty over the potential actions of the Bush II administration start to subside with the ending of his presidency, and the fear infused politics of the post 9/11 social moment fade from the public memory, Webb successfully captures these feelings and shows their infusion into surveillance policy and practices, making this portion of the text not only relevant in explaining current systems but also enabling a historical understanding for those reading this book in later years.

The third section, which lays out surveillance programs in detail, covers the globalization of surveillance, biometric registration, electronic surveillance (telecommunications and financial transactions), data mining, the integration of the private sector in surveillance practices, as well as a considerable number of other technologies and programs. Considering the scope of this book, technologies and policies discussed in this section are explicated with a surprising degree of detail. For this reason this section reads somewhat like an encyclopedia, as its 108 pages are separated into ½ to 6 page portions devoted to a specific technological, political or policy subject, making it at times a difficult read due to the repetitive feel of the structure and content. Those given the time to read over this section more slowly, or those cherry-picking portions that are of interest of them will, in all likelihood, avoid this feeling and be better able to engage in the richness of the presented information. Although Webb does work to include data on European and United Nations programs, the text directs its focus on material primarily from the United States and Canada, and as such makes this portion of the text a better read for those interested in the surveillance practices of these countries.

Webb's final section explains what she feels this political and technological shift has meant, and will mean, to the ideas of democracy, freedom and security. Specifically, she questions the compatibility of currently developed and implemented surveillance programs and classic understandings of democracy, as well as the wisdom of attempting to find security with these technologies.

The main criticism that could be leveled at the work from a social science standpoint is its lack of engagement with theoretical frameworks. In the text Webb strongly forwards empirical research to investigate her arguments, making little to no theoretical references. For this reason her text is highly approachable, but it also makes large portions of the text ephemeral – as they may soon become dated due to the ever-changing nature of technological capabilities and shifts in implemented policy. Due to this fact, later readers may soon find this text purely of historical importance in that it aids to chart the development of surveillance practices between 2001 and 2007 but fails to engage with other important works on surveillance. Also, a few passages in the text could justifiably be criticized as being alarmist,

since Webb bases some of her statements on *possible* future abuses of technological capabilities, particularly when dealing with the implications of certain surveillance technologies.

That said, I found this book interesting and highly informative, and readers of this journal will find Webb's text relevant if they are seeking to become or remain informed about the development of surveillance and the preemptive model of security that took hold in post 9/11 Western democracies. Although Webb's text is not above criticism, her empirical research and attention to detail are impressive. One would be hard pressed to find a better example of a concentrated account of the current state of surveillance in America.