

A Satirical(?) Book Review of *Windows Into the Soul*

by its (the book's) Author *

Gary T. Marx

Being a conventionally somewhat unconventional kind of guy, let me offer a review of my own book. These are the backstage thoughts of a presenter and unmasker of fronts. I offer them only because of the comfort of being so far from home and because, in being retired, I have a fellowship for life. As the song says, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose". I did something similar after finishing a book on undercover police (the section on "Second Thoughts and Enduring Tensions" in a book honoring Stan Cohen, a beloved giant of the field) - <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/recent.html>.

The owner of a house or car knows its problems better than outsiders. I will write this as if it was my secret voice or alter ego, things known or suspected, but not said to others for fear of tarnishing the brass. But if transparency is good for authorities, it also ought to be good for authors. Perhaps we need lemon laws and full disclosure rules for the latter –whether out of high principle or self-interest -- the best defense is a good offense.

The observations below are offered in a somewhat playful vein, (although as Freud was reputed to have said, "there are no jokes" and he wasn't kidding). Some of the criticisms reflect enduring issues in social science in which persons of equal

* Presented at a seminar on the book at Law, Science, Technology and Society Studies VUB, Brussels with Serge Gutwirth, Tugba Basaran, CCLS, Paris; Marieke De Goede, Univ. van Amsterdam, Joris Van Hoboken, Univ. van Amsterdam and Kristof Verfaillie, Criminology VUB.

These thoughts were written as I was finishing the book. I have also drawn from the kind, insightful, and generally fair reviews at:
http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/wis_bookreviews.html .

competence and good will can responsibly disagree (in both substance and tone, that can reflect reasoned academic discourse at its best); others are satirically offered in the bad faith vein of the author didn't write the book the reviewer feels he should have; and others involve honestly felt regrets and things I would do differently if still working on the book and had endless resources and time.

An Insider's Review of Windows into the Soul

I.C. Moore

... the reading is quite dry over stretches of text, even though the insights are frequently eye-opening.

Hanna Reichel

This book is not easy reading, but it is thought provoking.

Blogger

I know this book has received positive reviews from many respected scholars. However, that is to be expected given that Marx knows, and has praised the work of so many of the reviewers via blurbs, his citations and reviews of their books or he has been their teacher or co-author. But, beyond the warm glow of crony reciprocity, there is much to criticize. If you're familiar with how Gary T. Marx writes, then this book is more of the same. Given the academic style and long, run-on sentences, perhaps you can also see why with respect to the mass media, the book has been ignored and “fell dead-born from the press”.¹

The book (even in its shortened version) with 400 pages, 50 pages of endnotes and over 700 references tries (I was warned in my graduate education as a scientist—keep it clean and direct, no emendations, no digressions, no run-on sentences, no convoluted Germanic phrasing, no literary embellishments. If it doesn't fit in the text, don't confuse the reader with qualifying footnotes that divert and muddy!)

In casting such a wide and eclectic net Marx tries to be all things to all people, yet he risks being nothing to anyone. We need the majestic intricacy of a simply defined orange or an apple, not the sloppy mélange of a fruit salad the book offers. Academic books should be uniform and consistent, not in 21 flavors. We should

honor disciplinary and methodological purity, not the watered down, relativistic octopus of ecumenicalism. The book lacks thematic and stylistic integration and consistency.

To take one example, the book rightfully gives considerable attention to the importance of immobile, reoccurring structures that channel behavior, regardless of context or history. But then this is undercut by emphasizing social process, fluidity, the give and take of interaction and change. But we are not told how particular structures might make fluidity or fixity more likely. Nor are we told how process can lead to changes in structure that will then endure for a time. Nor is there any consideration of whether a focus on the effervescent contours of process and “the dynamic aspects of interaction” can inhibit simple conceptual classifications and be the enemy of the cumulative knowledge that is the essence of scientific understanding,

While there is lip service to the theme of the four contexts, this isn't followed through on, rather these are throw away lines to fool reviewers. They make it *appear* that Marx has an argument, but really he is just an undisciplined essayist, unbounded by any method, nice tight little hypotheses or grounding in a philosophical system. It is not surprising that his editor made him cut the book so much. Marx seems incapable of tying together the array of approaches, topics and examples. Better to tell a coherent little story than an incoherent story of the universe.

Or, if as a badass theorist Marx opts for the latter, where is the grand theory or a unitary, clearly defined conceptual framework to bind it together? Even granting the need for concepts to order the cacophony, we are not told where the cornucopia of Marx' new “inducted concepts” come from, nor why they are superior to existent, older concepts. Why, for example, is “windows” the best metaphor? What about a mirror, or a microscope or a mosaic, a giant vacuum cleaner, filter or pump?

Even absent a driving theme, Marx generally slurs over whether his concepts are mutually exclusive and exhaustive, or overlap and even repeat and how they interact. He appears not to know the difference between a category and a type. Nor are we given any guidance about how to apply them (when does *surveillance creep* become *surveillance gallop*, is the telescope an example of the “*new surveillance*”?)

What kind of a book is this? It is confusing. There are ponderous tables and dimensions and hundreds of references to obscure academic books and journals,

most of which are not even noted long enough to be little remembered. But there are very few hard numbers. As the inscription over the Social Science Building at the University of Chicago states: “When you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind”.

Even worse, for a scholar in one of the oldest and most hallowed of western institutions, Marx seems to actually be having fun in writing and is (God forbid) sometimes even playful about the most serious of subjects. That is a sacrilege! Some topics deserve tears not laughter, the righteous academic to honor his or her heritage, needs to be engage and enrage, pas de rire.

Welcome to the city of hodgepodge where serious statements are followed by puns, conceptual tables sit next to cartoons, poignant personal histories are joined by rock and roll music.

The book validates the 3rd *rule of socio-dynamics* regarding how to succeed as a scholar: never use humor, sexual referents or quotes to make your point. Solemnity, esoterica, obscurity and the absence of a personal voice are the mark of the true scholar. The book fails the sleep test --If a work doesn't put you to sleep, it is probably not a work of serious scholarship. Popular accessibility portages a host of red flags for the serious scholar. To be taken seriously, scholars should write deep things with pedantic, colorless jargon, --George Orwell on “Politics and the English Language” to the contrary.

Regarding interviewing, his “relatively unstructured and opportunistic format” is good in not constraining, or planting answers for the person interviewed. But we are not told how interviewees were chosen, what or who they represent, what questions were asked, or how answers were validated. The selective reporting of interviews that Marx offers paints a picture of uniformity and tells us nothing about the correlates of variation that would permit explanation and, more importantly, validation.

Talk is cheap. Anyone throw up conceptual schemes and elaborate endlessly on their permutations --how many dimensions can (or better should), be fit into a paragraph? It would be far better to have fewer concepts and ideas and to apply them to real case studies, not fake scenarios. His supposed documentation is bootlegged by way of illustration. “For instance” is not proof! Much of it is FAKE NEWS. As Hemingway said, great writers show don't tell. The book offers “illustrations” rather than proof or application, in doing that it fails to go beyond the rhetoric of the politician.

Marx is certainly clever, maybe even imaginative, as some of the blurbs claim, but there is no way to tell if the claims of the book are right or wrong. If sociology is indeed the scientific study of society, there is no scientific way to test Marx' "findings". The so called method (sic) of "analytic induction" is just another way of saying, "trust me." Hard headed empiricists and cynics know that with that claim and \$4, you can buy a cup of coffee.

To define surveillance as a fundamental process characteristic of any living entity or to note the small ways that individuals and groups can *still* try to neutralize it, calls attention to micro-climates not yet devastated by the impending storm. There is no escape from the relentless march of the omnipresent and totalizing mediation of information technologies on our daily life. As the man said, "you can run, but you can't hide" and runners leave footprints.

Marx tells us not only that surveillance is everywhere and that it is neither good nor bad. "It all depends". But that is a cop out for those of us who have come to expect that the impassioned author of *Protest and Prejudice* and so many articles on the abuses of state power and on inequality would continue to pen engaged works.

When your house is on fire do you calmly carry out a scientific study of the water pressure, or do you sound the alarm? Where does Marx stand? He notes there are tensions here, but that's no excuse for sitting on the fence. Those who sit on fences near a fire at worse get burned and at best get splinters.

Human rights violations and the soulless surveillance machines marching to dystopia are not laughing matters. Note Einstein's observation that "technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal". To not take sides is to take sides. There is a good reason Dante's wisdom endures.

Certainly the scholar must be open to examining his or her strongly held positions. But in this case, the facts of the omnivorous, octopus-like nowhere to hide from, unrelenting force of contemporary surveillance must fill all persons of good will and clear vision with fear and trembling. The appropriate political and normative position for any scholar worthy of the name is not listing and balancing every possible point for and against such a view, but standing up and using the legitimacy of his or her position to document problems and offer solutions. If this requires a narrowing of focus to abuses rather than benefits, so be it. No scholar is

an island, even if some live on them. While there are numerous references to Marx in the book, only two of these are to KARL.

I know there are others who would disagree with my call for a more committed approach. But even Marx's contact (friend?) Rocky Bottoms, would very much agree with what I say here. However, for Bottoms, Marx' failure to take a strong position goes in the other direction. As he wrote, "Most of the social issues we hear so much about are technical problems to be mastered, not social questions to be analyzed--or worse, to be negotiated" (Windows ch. 11)

Reading Bottoms' speech to the American Society of Surveillance it is easy to imagine him saying to professors who purport to be neutral, "get off your asses in those cozy, sylvan campuses and join the real world! Wake up. Don't tell us what is wrong with society, or that you have clean hands and are above the battle. We are in the ultimate battle for our lives and our civilization, there is no room for neutrality or worse, or for attacking the very institutions that protect us. In this period of unrelenting war, we must unleash the full potential of surveillance technology and let the chips fall where they may. This is not the time to follow the social scientist's mantra of being a good listener, understanding how others make sense of the world or whining about how complicated and grey it is. NO, if you are not with us, you are against us. I even wonder if Marx wasn't coopted by Bottoms given the frequent overlap in their views and how his failure to take a position bolsters military-surveillo complex.

The book is hopelessly out of date with little or no consideration of post-Snowden changes. With such a fast moving topic better to have daily on-line revisions than the fixity of a printed book. A book on surveillance today needs to give much more attention to topics such as big data (and the misguided notion that with respect to finding solutions, correlations can easily substitute for causality and that integers do not require interpretation inspired by a degree of intuition); the merging of face recognition with far flung data bases and social media; drones (including the efforts to develop "no-see-ums")² robots, driverless cars, video-cams and policing, the internet of things, cyber-security; new biometrics (the ultimate windows into the soul) including implants, brain scans and DNA analysis; new tools for protecting information; new restrictions on the collection of bulk data after Snowden (2015 USA Freedom Act) and the subsequent abrogation of current privacy protections associated with the new *It Can Happen Here* (with apologies to Sinclair Lewis 1935) President of the USA."

Moving from alter-ego to ego and the direct first person voice of G.T. Marx:

With Tennyson's *Ulysses*, it is better to burnish in use (even if somewhat dulled and limited with age) than to rust through inactivity --"though much has been taken much abides" and "some work of noble note, may yet be done". What a blessing to have the use of the hall for close to 60 years and the confidence to critically reflect on one's work! As Michelangelo is reputed to have said late in his life, *ancora imparo* (I continue to learn). I look forward to learning today!

¹ David Hume's words of disappointment regarding the response to his *Treatise of Human Nature*.

² Consider drones that look like flies and hover like hummingbirds, "snakebots" that can slither under doors, and smart dust, micro motes and cyborg beetles (live insects) that can portage cameras and other sensors (Hudson, Mathew 2016. "What Surveillance Will Look Like in the Future" 2016 *The Atlantic*. November).