

Little Brother

Date

Issues of state surveillance and suppression of dissent have been topics of debate that have become increasingly relevant to the world of non-conventional security threats. Problems with state and individual security have unfortunately provided states with the perfect tools and excuses to exercise and expand draconian control over their people, even in countries where individual liberty has historically been paramount. *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow discusses intense issues of state power, dissent, privacy, surveillance, and resistance while staying true to the expectations of a novel written for young adults. These themes, even when discussed within the premise of a young-adult novel, are serious enough to be compared to and analyzed for relevance to the greater threats to American democracy and liberty. When analyzed for overarching political arguments, *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow can be connected with a potent argument about creating and perpetuating problems regarding state power and surveillance worsened by the deliberately created fault lines between individual liberty and national security.

Little Brother by Cory Doctorow discusses state power and shows a group of gutsy teenagers trying to resist it. The primary political argument that connects with other smaller arguments is that unmitigated state power infringing upon individual rights is not only immoral but also nightmarish and unconstitutional. Doctorow has written the stories of four teenagers arrested for simply being in the vicinity of a terrorist attack on San Francisco.¹ These teenagers are held without charges, harassed and interrogated for days before being released. Even after the release, the state continues to surveil them and monitor their activities. When teenagers try to protect their individual liberty and privacy, the state spends whatever resources are needed to bring the teenagers and their whereabouts back under the control of the state. The protagonist even tries to escape hiding and raises the issue with the mainstream media until he is “arrested” again and tortured before getting released on bail.

¹ Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother* (Tor Teen, 2008).

Even though all the teenagers who were originally picked up and then attempted to resist state surveillance have all been released towards the end, they are all permanently scarred from the encounter and none of them can go back to living the way they did before the attacks. This shows what unchecked state power can do. Doctorow has shown that power and those who wield it in America have created the system to benefit a select few and put the rest of Americans in the perpetual danger of losing their individual rights and freedoms when the state sees fit.

The idea raised in the book that too much power resting with the state can be dangerous for the liberties of the citizens can be connected with themes of a flawed democracy in America. Giving the Senate the ability not only to decide the future and nature of all legislation but also to allow a minority in the Senate to hold the legal right of a filibuster is widely understood as a direct attack on the democratic freedom of the people of America. Thomas Geoghegan in “Abolish the Senate”, is of the view that the senate is depriving the American people of the true power of their vote by allotting seats regardless of the population strength of each American state. To him, the system that disallows the simple existence of ‘one person, one vote’ in America prevents the country from becoming a true Republic and should therefore be resisted and abolished.² The argument in this article also revolves around the idea that the state has the power to decide the futures of the American people, with the people being rendered rather irrelevant to the intricacies of policymaking. Representatives in the House are the only people who are truly depicting the states based on population. This links with Doctorow’s argument about state power because it is also about a system that is disenfranchising its own people and aiming to disconnect them from all avenues of power and authority. It is apparent here that when the state begins to assert a

² Thomas Geoghegan, “Abolish the Senate”, The Baffler, September 2020, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/abolish-the-senate-geoghegan>

monopoly over power within its borders, it alienates and marginalizes its citizens. This is inherently problematic and may even turn into an existential threat for the state because the state, in reality, derives all its power from the people.

The novel gives a detailed political analysis while building the argument against state surveillance. It also provides the readers with a complete playbook and details on acting when state power infringes individual rights. Through the friends, Marcus, Darryl, Vanessa, Jolu, and Angela, Doctorow provides the readers with a comprehensive account of the many ways in which state surveillance can be resisted. Marcus is shaken by the fact that federal investigators picked up him and his friends without any regard for their civil liberties. Even after having spent several days under interrogation for simply being near the crime scene of the terrorist attack, Marcus comes to discover that the federal agency is still surveilling him and his friends without their knowledge or consent. This infuriates him and sets him and the other teenagers along the path of resistance.¹ This resistance against state power and the idea that a system built for the powerful will always protect the powerful has always existed in the American psyche. This is seemingly one of the very few positives which can be picked from the book. It teaches a path of resistance to those Americans who do not wish to part with their liberties in the name of security and therefore connects them with the millions who came before them and resisted state power that infringed upon their rights. This passion for righteous dissent and the refusal to go along with the rules simply because they were written and promulgated by those in power is one of the truest American legacies. Malcolm X and his fiery spirit when denouncing the workings of the state in Washington DC can be connected with this representation of resistance and resilience by Doctorow. The speech by Malcolm X called “The Ballot or the Bullet” made in 1964 is relevant today and can be linked to any text or story built around the idea that the state must resist undue power exercised. “I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and

call myself a diner.”³ The simple idea that those who are being marginalized and whose individual liberties are at risk must resist is present in both the book and the speech.

There is an adequate amount of dystopia in *Little Brother*, which suffices to warn the readers regarding the disadvantages of undue state surveillance under the guise of security without making it sound too much like an allegory about the present. The book serves as a warning along the same lines as the Orwellian masterpiece *1984* by explaining in painstaking detail why security concerns can lead the American state to overstep the boundaries which have been delineated by the American Constitution centuries ago. It shows that the state will keep coming up with new ways to assert and maintain its control and hegemony over the people. Doctorow talks very succinctly about how a state may use the changing situations in the world to find new reasons for asserting and expanding more and more control over its citizens. In the novel, the state uses the terrorist attack and the imminent threat of more terrorist activity to surveil its citizens. To the protagonists in the book, their privacies are important, and infringement of those privacies by the state without their knowledge or consent is a serious violation of their civil rights and individual liberties. The state quotes that security threats make it impossible for them to avoid surveillance. For them, the people must forego privacy if they want to be safe and secure under the protection of the state.¹ However, it is clear that Doctorow is actually warning about the state using unconventional security threats as an excuse to broaden and deepen its surveillance. This can also be connected with the reality that the state still uses disenfranchisement tactics to prevent certain people from voting. The simple fact that voter suppression still exists in America and that political parties still have the power to use state machinery to prevent certain communities and social

³ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”, April 3, 1964,
http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/malcolm_x_ballot.html

identities from voting is ridiculous today.⁴ It is, however, real and connects perfectly well with the ideas described by Doctorow in the novel.

Therefore, *Little Brother* clearly makes an overarching political argument against state surveillance. The book also builds several smaller arguments regarding increasing state power, righteous resistance to this power, and how a state may adapt to increase its power. This argument is adequately backed with logic and is convincing and practically applicable to the current scenario.

⁴ Matt DeRienzo, "Voter Suppression Never Went Away; the Tactics Just Changed," *Public Integrity*, October 28, 2020, <https://publicintegrity.org/politics/elections/ballotboxbarriers/analysis-voter-suppression-never-went-away-tactics-changed/>

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