

Introducing the Centre for Privacy Studies

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

privacy, private, world, people, historical, insights, prayer, instance, withdraw, chamber, pray, chapel, research, closet, notion, withdrawal, society, sources, retreat, space

SPEAKERS

Natália da Silva Perez, Mette Birkedal Bruun

Natália da Silva Perez 00:19

Hi, my name is Natália da Silva Perez and you're listening to the Privacy Studies podcast. In this episode, I interview the director of the Center for Privacy Studies at the University of Copenhagen.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 00:32

I'm Mette Birkedal Bruun. I'm a Professor of Church History at the University of Copenhagen.

Natália da Silva Perez 00:38

Mette specializes in monastic movements from the early Christian era up until the 17th century. So she has been focusing on religious withdrawn from the world for quite a while in her research. She talks to me about how this led her to become interested in the history of privacy. And then to launch the Center for Privacy Studies.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 00:58

I began to see how withdrawal from the world and the fact that it exists in attention with engagement with the world is actually something that happens in a lot of different forms, and in a lot of different periods. And then I began to think what would be the modern, parallel to withdrawal from the world in the historical sense. And I began to see privacy as something that has to do with withdrawing from society, while at the same time being still a part of society.

Natália da Silva Perez 01:32

Privacy. It's a word that we hear a lot nowadays. So I thought that a good place to start was to ask Mette where this word came from.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 01:38

So it's from the Roman world. And it's the idea that you don't have an office. If you are, if you're a private person, you're deprived of public offices. We have it in Cicero, who distinguishes between the public person and the private person. But we also have it in Vitruvius, in the architectural treatise, by Vitruvius, where he talks about the private home, where he describes that the private home is in a way, defined also by the profession, that the house owner has. So if he is a merchant, he will need rooms for

storing his goods, things like that. So parts of the home are characterized by the owners profession. They are publicly accessible, Vitruvius says but then there are other parts of the home which are only for the family, for instance, and where you can enter only by invitation. So already in the Roman period, you had this connection between the law and what laws have to do with the public realm and the private realm, but also the space.

Natália da Silva Perez 02:57

Clearly privacy is a multifaceted topic, I asked Mette how the Center for Privacy Studies tackles research on privacy.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 03:05

Center for Privacy Studies encompasses several historical disciplines. So history of architecture, church history, legal history, history of political ideas, but also social history and cultural history. I'm very curious about what happens when several scholars from different disciplines look at one thing together. So what do they see? What do they not see? How do they complement each other? How do different disciplines supplement each other. So we sit in a corridor, all of us together in our offices, and we walk in and out of each other's offices, asking questions, making observations and sharing information. We have informal collaboration, which is what happens when we walk in and out of each other's offices and talk about the things that we see the research that we're doing. We also have more formal collaboration, which happens at meetings or at seminars, or when we invite scholars from the outside and talk with them about what they're doing and what we're doing, partly to learn from them, but also, of course, to convey what we're doing to reach a broader scholarly audience than just us at the center, something that I find particularly promising. Also, because it's really something new and something that we cannot quite foresee the outcome of, is our Challenge Seminars, where we invite scholars who work on modern issues related to privacy. So we have had a professor of economy talking about private economy. We've had a professor of biomedical legislation talking about what is privacy in that context. And we're constantly trying to confront our historical insights with insights into current issues related to privacy. And I think that is where we may see completely new and unexpected results of the Center for Privacy Studies because we really want for the historical research into privacy to inform currently, discussions of privacy. And right now we have, we are, we are exploring ways in which to do this. We are experimenting with different formats both of knowledge sharing and expressions of knowledge. And that is really something where we are breaking new ground each day. We're interested in what the ways in which the historical material may throw light on different notions of privacy and different meanings of the word privacy. I think historical research is so fantastic because it has this concrete nature in a way, because we're looking at actual historical material, we are looking at sources, we can look at sources together from different disciplinary angles. We're looking at the ways in which privacy is either mentioned as a word or described as a phenomenon in the historical sources. We're looking at, for terms to do with -priv-. So privé, privat, private, privatus in Latin. We're looking at particular words that mean, private, but then we also want to look at the modern phenomenon of privacy, we also want to look at what we consider privacy in its historical forms. And to this end, we have defined a set of heuristic zones. So we want to understand what goes on in terms of the human mind, or the human soul. We also wants to want to understand how this ties in with bodily expressions, how the body is situated in a space, which could be the home or broader the community. How this, again, is located within overarching spatial contexts, could be a nation, could be a state, could be a

society. When we look at the zones like that, we can begin to discuss more concretely what is happening at the threshold between different zones. So what is happening, we have Luther, for instance, saying in one of his manuals on prayer: "when I, when I feel the devil draws near, I rush into my, in my chamber". What happens when he moves either from his home or the public space into his chamber. What is that when he crosses, crosses that threshold into the chamber, what is happening there, what kind of privacy, if any, does he reach? At the same time, we're also looking at overlaps between the different zones. So what happens when the state wants to, or the ruler or the authority of one way or one kind of another religious authority or the political authority want to define what goes on in the home or even in the mind of the individual subject. Private chapel is a paradigmatic example of the ways in which privacy can be seen as a quality by some, and as a threat by others. Because the private chapel is, on the one hand, a place where believers may reach a particularly intense relationship with God in prayer. It's all on the other hand, also a very contested space. The religious authorities are not so crazy about the private chapel, because it's difficult to regulate the private chapel exactly because it's private, which is considered a quality insofar as it frames the believers intense devotion and meeting with God in prayer. And that is a sort of key example of privacy as a quality exactly by being withdrawn from the public space or the more common space. The believer is thought to reach a more intense relationship with God. But at the same time, the private chapel is also a difficult space for religious authorities because contrary to the public liturgical life in the church, for instance, which can be regulated, which can be controlled, which can be surveyed, things that go on in the private chapel are very, very difficult to get a hold on. There are other instances where it's only a quality or only a threat, we see very much in the early modern period that privacy is very much considered as a threat. Because things can go on in the private sphere, that are not controllable for authorities. That's interesting. It's also interesting because it's something else than what we're used to. We tend to see privacy as a quality. History is always interesting when it contradicts our perceptions. I think.

Natália da Silva Perez 10:00

For us in the 21st century, it is easy to think of privacy as a right. But I asked Mette if she found any indication of this being also the case in the past.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 10:11

I think in my sources, which would very much be religious sources, there is no idea of privacy as a right. Privacy is something you carve out, if you want to have a space where to pray and retreat from the world, to shut out carnality, to shut out sin, things like that. And so there is, there is a demand for privacy, there is a demand that people carve out privacy, or there is this idea of privacy as something that is dangerous or difficult or contested, exactly because you cannot quite control what goes on there. It can be in some of the sources, we see that privacy is a duty. Some of the English religious sources talk of the closet duty, which is the duty to withdraw into privacy in order to pray. So but the idea of right does not exist in my material in the early modern period. The particular closet duty comes from the King James Version translation of Matthew 6.6, which is the introduction to the to the Lord's Prayer, where it says something like: "when you want to pray go into your closet." So the closet duty is the duty to go into your closet each day, or at a particular moment in the day to pray. So that's a very alien thought for us today. And I think what's interesting for me about privacy is for us today, privacy makes so much sense. But sometimes when we look at historical occurrences, it's really very strange what goes on around privacy. And I think that tension between that which is very well known and very important for

us, and that which is alien, because it's steeped in a particular historical context, and therefore difficult to understand, I find that tension extremely exciting. In some of the French sources, you have this idea that the prayer must always end with a resolution. So you pray for God's grace to form a resolution as to your behavior. So the idea is that you withdraw into prayer, but then you go out into the world and enact what you have been praying for grace to be able to do. In some of the Protestant sources, you also have this idea of a direct contact or a direct relationship between the person at prayer and his or her place in the household, and the place of the household in the overall community. So there are direct links between, as it were, the closet and society. And the mindset that is cultivated or nourished in the closet is supposed to also benefit society. For me, the religious culture around privacy is extremely interesting. And that goes for the whole history of Christianity, because there is on the one hand, the sense that people must withdraw. There's also a constant interest in what goes on in this withdrawal. So there is some kind of almost voyeuristic culture, developing around withdrawal. So you have all these representations of people in retreat. You have a hagiographical representations, so representations of saints, both in texts, and in paintings, think about all these paintings of Mary Magdalene in the Grotto or Jerome in his study or Augustine in his study. So all these representations of particularly saintly people in their retreat. This also goes for funeral sermons, you want to display people in their retreat, so portray the deceased, as particularly absorbed in prayer, for instance. So preachers might invite the public to imagine the deceased person in his or her chamber, praying, I'm very, very interested in this notion of retreat which comes with a notion that this must be displayed and looked upon, really considered as a model behavior. So who are you in private? There is a sense that not only religiously, but also philosophically that retreat and private life is a place where you get insight. So both religious insight and insight as to who are you as a person, so it's, it's a place for thinking and a place for deliberations and a place for insights. But you also want to show other people that this is what is going on in your private life. There is no doubt that in the early modern period privacy, as we understand, it is very much a privilege for the richer people, for the upper crust. At the same time, you can see that, for instance, in catechisms, you have notions that you should withdraw to your chamber for the morning prayer, if you do not have a chamber, you can simply kneel. So in a way, you can achieve the same effect, which is about privacy, in the sense of being concentrated, being focused by a bodily behavior, you can kneel or you could put your hands together, you could raise your eyes towards the sky. And that would actually achieve the same thing for you, as a withdrawal into a chamber would achieve. So again, this is not at all privacy in our sense. But it is a way of making a demarcation between yourself and the rest of the world. Which would have worked even in a household with many people. I heard that John Knox, the reformer, his wife, there were so many people in the household that when she wanted to pray and be alone, she would put a towel over her head. And that would be her way of withdrawing. So to show, now I'm in my private space, I think these these different forms of demarcation are very interesting. So the idea of, of the bodily demarcation, which has nothing to do with closing a door or turning away other people, but simply making a, an invisible marker between yourself and an invisible boundary between yourself and the rest of the world. I think that's very interesting. You also have all these indications that people must withdraw, even though they're in a crowd. So what is that? How do you do that, then the body in a way becomes the demarcation between your inner self and the rest of the world. So what kind of threshold is the body actually, if you if you're, if you gather your hands together in a prayer position, that is a form of demarcation. That means that the body is making or is drawing some kind of boundary, which is very interesting. I'm also fascinated by what I've learned from my legal historical colleagues about the ways in which societies were regulated.

And one of the, I think, there the big insights was that, one thing is the law, another thing is how its carried out who is carrying it out. To what extent is it carried out, that has been very illuminating for me to think of these two different layers of legislation. So defining the law and doing the law, I think, has been very interesting.

Natália da Silva Perez 18:05

The Center for Privacy Studies focuses on the northern part of Europe in the early modern period, I asked her about if there are any plans to expand that focus to other parts of the world, or other historical periods.

Mette Birkedal Bruun 18:18

So the Center for Privacy Studies has a very rigidly defined research program. And that is simply to, in order to create a framework for the interdisciplinary collaboration, because this is already quite challenging for us, because we were, each of us was trained to do individual research. And now we're trying to work together on a daily basis. So this is something new. So we need to focus our efforts. At the same time, we really want to invest the insights that we gain within this quite narrowly defined research program, we want to invest those insights into other areas. I have been looking a little bit at how people elsewhere conceive of privacy. So there is an ongoing discussion as to whether privacy is a Western concept. So how does the western concept of privacy square with other cultural systems? Is it the opposite of for instance, the African notion of ubuntu that is one of the discussions I've been trying to look into, is it the opposite of notions of honor and shame in eastern Asia, for instance, and I'm only scratching the surface here, but I think it would be very, very interesting to get into contact with scholars who do privacy elsewhere and in other periods than ours, and to see whether it really is a Western concept or whether other cultures have other forms of being in the world or other phenomena of being drawing boundaries between individuals and society or between the household and society that are not understood as privacy but understood as something else, but maybe eventually be comparable.

Natália da Silva Perez 20:15

That's all for my interview with Mette. Stay tuned for more news about the Center for Privacy Studies in our next episodes. The Privacy studies podcast is produced by me, Natália da Silva Perez. Support for this podcast comes from the Danish National Research Foundation and from the Center for Privacy Studies. The theme music is Pyramid Folk by septahelix. This podcast is released under a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial ShareAlike license. Thanks for listening.