



Surveillance & Society



Book Review

Monahan, Torin and Rodolfo D. Torres (eds.) *Schools Under Surveillance: Cultures of Control in Public Education*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press.

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School safety is of concern to the American public in general. Parents, students, teachers and staff want safe places where they and their children can study and work. *Schools under Surveillance* sheds light on the complexities of the culture of control in the public education system. Editors Monahan and Torres have collected thirteen essays from researchers studying surveillance and discipline in contemporary public schools in North America, mostly in the US, offering a brilliant guide to this topic. The contributors are American academics with different disciplinary backgrounds. The topics they address are wide-ranging, and include privacy and human rights issues, the cultural politics of race in urban education, new disciplinary orders in the carceral school and the security cultures and everyday resistance to school surveillance.

Overall, the book presents a pragmatic and multi-disciplinary approach to the issue of surveillance and discipline in contemporary public schools. This volume's interdisciplinarity makes the collection a provocative and stimulating reflection on cultures of control but also provides a brilliant overview of creative forms of resistance. Public schools, in particular in the US, are now among the most surveilled spaces, but perhaps because of this, are also creative spaces for resisting surveillance mechanisms. Teachers and students resist in different ways and not just through acts of sabotage but also through forms of artistic performance.

This volume is important for several reasons. It collects fruitful essays theorizing the implications of contemporary arrangements in school surveillance and discipline. It demonstrates the dangerous linkages between faith in markets, public fear and the rise of cultures of control. Indeed it is in this fertile neoliberal domain that omnipresent surveillance has developed. The essays in the book also offer powerful explanations of the various meanings of contemporary mechanisms of control, including their effects on public education.

The book is divided into five parts. Part one reflects on the new disciplinary orders that have developed in American public schools. Part two focuses on two aspects of the business orientation of neoliberal schools: on the one hand, how the public school is a business which produces security tools; and on the other hand, and more disconcertingly, how schools are becoming a market for purchasing student data. Part three, "Security Cultures," charts the motivations behind school shootings and the national security priorities that have followed in their aftermath. In part four, the authors analyze educational accountability in a neoliberal surveillance state, exploring the dangerous combination of privatization and centralization of control occurring in the field of education. Finally, in part five the authors explore how students and teachers try to resist school surveillance.

Many of the chapters raise the issue of how school security policies have consequences and effects for everyday life, including how various mechanisms contribute to a culture of control. The authors point out in varying ways the contrast between the perception that school security needs are quite grave while the statistics suggest that school violence may not be such a pressing problem. Despite this, the culture of control continues to expand, transforming the school into a hyper-surveilled space. This is particularly true in America. From a European perspective, particularly from an Italian perspective, this sense of fear, and the needs for security seems less pressing. The Italian public school (more than 90% of the schools in the country) are not at all “the most surveilled space” and the fear of school shooting is almost non-existent. For this reason, this book is doubly important for non-US readers who are apt to be unfamiliar with such developments. The essays paint cruel but brilliant pictures of the US public school and its culture of security, making the US context accessible to those in other nations. Those outside North America will be surprised to encounter US public schools where metal detectors, standard tests and digital checkpoints are ordinary parts of school administration. As such, the book reveals the dangerous direction in which the rest of the world may be headed.

Several themes recur throughout of the book. One is that surveillance is much more than simply monitoring, watching and recording individuals and their data. “Surveillance is a privileged form of modern knowledge production, organizational management, and social control” (p. 13). Surveillance is an interaction of power that creates and advances relations of domination. In practice, surveillance is a mode of governance, one that controls access and opportunities. Another recurring theme is the critique of using surveillance as a means of “social sorting,” as to discriminate between groups who are classified differently. This is a particularly acute issue for racial minorities who are disproportionately subjected to contemporary school-based surveillance. This example demonstrates how control mechanism can be applied differently and with different effects. A final theme worth noting that lurks below the surface of the book is the influence of neoliberal values and neoliberal dispositifs on the growth of the cultures of control.

Schools under Surveillance powerfully describes the accountability regime in American schools and the play of surveillance in this regime. The book should be central reading for those engaging in empirical and theoretical work in surveillance studies and should be of particular interest to those studying public institutions.