

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**David Lyon**, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2007, 256 pp., \$US 22.95 paper (978-0-74563-592-7), \$US 64.95 hardcover (978-0-74563-591-0).

This book introduces the burgeoning cross-disciplinary field of surveillance studies. Derived from the French word, *surveiller*, meaning to “watch over,” surveillance is defined as “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (p. 14). It includes everything from face-to-face encounters to mediated arrangements dependent on a wide and ever-growing range of information technologies. Surveillance is intrinsically ambiguous. It can entail watching to enhance the care and safety of the watched (e.g., the lifeguard at the beach) or it can involve an effort to control those whose conduct is under suspicion (e.g., police on a neighbourhood stakeout) and permit discriminatory practices.

To illustrate the remarkable range and prevalence of surveillance practices, Lyon describes several contemporary institutional sites, including the military, the nation-state, the workplace, and policing. Yet, the book also highlights consumption as an additional site of surveillance (pp. 40–44). This neglected realm involves use of radio-frequency identification and customer loyalty card programs and is arguably the most routine and fastest growing domain in which the details of people’s practices are vigorously collected, analyzed, and then acted upon. Coupled with the workplace, the discussion of consumption makes clear that surveillance is a set of processes not limited to state minions watching the citizenry; it is equally at home in traditionally private spheres.

Befitting the expanding range and diversity of surveillance sites, Lyon abstains from grand theorizing, choosing instead a “tool-box” approach to explain surveillance. He sifts through a variety of theoretical traditions and specific contemporary works such as Gandy’s early work on the “Panoptic Sort,” distinguishing among those that “interpret the causes, the courses and the consequences of surveillance” (p. 47). In so doing he considers the roots of surveillance theories in the writings of Orwell and sociology’s classical theorists, the latter illustrating that although cross-disciplinary in scope, surveillance studies is a field in which sociology looms large. Lyon also appreciatively introduces significant postmodern influences on surveillance theories from the writings of Foucault, Deleuze, and Agamben, among others. A major theme here is that the Panopticon, popularized by Foucault’s influential account of Bentham’s inspection house, has become overused in surveillance studies and

tends to yield a one-sided account that emphasizes coercion and rationality. It also fails to allow for contemporary media-saturated contexts and those in which, for example, digital technologies of surveillance swarm. For a replacement concept, Lyon takes the lead of Haggerty and Ericson (2000) in embracing the Deleuzian notion of the “assemblage,” defined as “a coming together of disparate elements to create a loosely associated surveillance entity” (p. 95). For Lyon, surveillance processes are more complex, ambiguous, and open-ended than the Panopticon allows.

To interrogate surveillance systems, Lyon identifies three types of surveillance relation: face-to-face, bureaucratic file-based, and electronic interface. Intended as heuristic devices these can be found together in any particular surveillance system. These systems are seen in cities and across nation-states, and increasingly employ the newest surveillance technologies, including biometrics, face-recognition, and global positioning. While potentially and sometimes actually leading to “social sorting” (p. 99) and discrimination, this surveillance is ambiguous and is not without resistance.

A key theme of the book is the surveillant subject’s participation in surveillance and to the relations between surveillance processes and the surveilled. Surveillant subjects do not just accept their assigned roles in surveillance systems, as would those in the prison cell under the central tower’s gaze, but instead resist the gaze and reconfigure their identities using the myriad categories in which they are assigned. Furthermore, subjects often actively participate in their own surveillance and encourage the implementation of the surveillance systems brought to bear upon them. The book’s final chapter focuses on transparency, which Lyon sees as central to democracy and to sustain human dignity in the face of social sorting and possibilities for discrimination raised by the new mechanisms of surveillance and what he calls the “safety state” (p. 184). Transparency becomes crucial because surveillance can detrimentally affect people’s life chances via discrimination and sorting. Thus, Lyon outlines the limitations of privacy regulation and concerns, and encourages more scrutiny of profiling and classification processes since they are directly implicated in creating and sustaining discriminatory practices.

This is a fascinating and accessible introduction to a new cross-disciplinary field of inquiry, authored by its most prolific practitioner. Indeed, given Lyon’s voluminous work on surveillance from the early 1990s onward, much of it carried out in conjunction with the aptly named “Surveillance Project” at Queen’s University, it is difficult to imagine a scholar better positioned to introduce the field. This book will be of interest to established scholars and students active in the disciplines from which surveillance studies draws, but especially the sociology of

governance and critical strains of criminology. Given the dizzying range and breath-taking developmental pace of new and ever-mutating surveillance technologies and their “creeping” functions as they become integrated into assemblages, the book is also remarkably up-to-date. Of particular value for newcomers and appropriate to an introduction is the merciful inclusion of a glossary of surveillance terminology — like all new fields, surveillance studies has developed an insider language of “dataveillance” and “synopticons” that can otherwise quickly alienate new scholars. For these reasons policymakers dealing with privacy and data protection regulation will also find the book useful, as will privacy activists and others outside academia.

In providing an intentionally ironic “overview,” the book is superior to recent edited collections on surveillance featuring disparate theoretical and empirical writings that can easily leave readers wondering whether surveillance was an appropriate banner under which to collect them. Not so here. Lyon effectively discusses works likely encountered in very different academic contexts and fields (e.g., Agamben or Deleuze) and places them under the fresh light of surveillance studies. In this respect, the book is also theoretically and conceptually up-to-date. To be sure, some readers may be unclear on whether surveillance studies has yet fully emerged as a field in its own right, completely distinct from newer Foucault-influenced studies of governance or possibly from visual sociology or critical criminology. As Lyon notes, surveillance studies resonate with studies influenced by the concept of governmentality and my own view is there may be a bit more future work required to show why the former cannot be subsumed within the latter’s broader umbrella. For example, it is true that some scholars in the sociology of governance are already engaged in realist inquiry, contrary to the dictates of governmentality theorists like Nikolas Rose, and thus have overcome a common criticism that might otherwise distinguish the two literatures. Admittedly, this is an abstruse point and its aim is not to criticize this excellent work so much as to encourage future elaboration of the family resemblances across bodies of work that this book effectively brings to light. What is clear is that this timely introduction to an exciting emerging field of inquiry authored by a leading proponent will go far in helping this field to carve its own distinctive path. This is what superb books like this do.

## REFERENCES

- Haggerty, K. and R. Ericson. 2000. The surveillant assemblage. *British Journal of Sociology* 51(4):605–22.

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