Book Review

Surveillance schools: Security, discipline and control in contemporary education

Emmeline Taylor

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hants, 2013, x+129pp., £37.50, ISBN: 978-1137308856

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This book pursues its thesis with great panache. The thesis is that ‘Surveillance Schools’ have emerged in capitalist, neoliberal societies and that the consequences have been almost exclusively negative. A small primary study and a large volume of secondary literature are drawn on to try to warrant the thesis.

Surveillance schools make use of modern technologies to track children and their activities. These modern technologies include CCTV, fingerprint identification and RFID (radio-frequency identification) chips. The main focus of Taylor’s discussion, however, is on CCTV. Neoliberalism refers to the ‘retraction of non-market social entitlement, deregulation of the economy, and the privatizing of state functions, institutions and public space’. (p. 88). Symptomatic of the ‘neoliberal regimen’ is the ‘criminalization’ and ‘corporatization’ of surveillance schools.

Taylor’s primary study was undertaken in 2006. It focused on three secondary schools in the North of England. The precise methods used for data collection and analysis are not explained, although the data collection clearly involved talking to pupils and teachers who are quoted quite extensively.

Taylor finds children who dislike their school CCTV system. They do so in particular when it covers in their toilets and changing rooms, which have been private spaces where children could withdraw and recover when distressed. Taylor cites children who claim that the capacity of CCTV to catch them on camera is easily evaded, for example by covering their faces or by choosing to behave in deviant ways in places they know not to be covered by the cameras. She quotes children who believe that the scope for monitoring is so limited that the chances of any rule infraction being observed and followed up is small. However, at the same time Taylor refers to a case where CCTV was evidently able to track down one pupil who hid the shoes of another as a prank. CCTV is presented as iniquitous in its control of what does not warrant control and ineffective in controlling what needs to be controlled.

Beyond schools, Taylor rues what she sees as the ‘pernicious portrayal’ of youth as ‘yobs, thugs, sick and feral’. This portrayal becomes, ‘solidified in techniques of exclusion, marginalization and criminalization all of which are augmented by disproportionate surveillance’ (p. 68). She attributes this development to ‘the ascendance of global capitalism and the transformation of the urban economy from a public good to a corporately defined space.’ (ibid.).

This book is a good read. It will certainly reinforce the views of those already holding negative views of CCTV in schools in particular and of the use of surveillance technologies in schools and elsewhere more generally. More solid evidence, however, will be needed for many of its assertions if they are to persuade those without pre-commitments. Taylor's own fieldwork looks very interesting but details are scant and those given are of children's perceptions of the effects of CCTV rather than evidence of its actual effects on their behavior. Moreover, I am not sure that the sources drawn on always carry the arguments advanced. For example she refers to Armitage *et al* (1999) to support her contention that, 'Evidence of displacement has been found in most CCTV evaluations' (p. 47). In fact there is no evidence in Armitage and colleagues to support the displacement hypothesis. Indeed on page 244 in relation to their own study, the authors state that, 'There was no evidence of spatial displacement' (p. 244).

The last paragraph should not be taken to indicate any general endorsement of CCTV, only that arguments either way need to be supported by robust evidence. And more of that is needed.

Reference

Armitage, R., Smyth, G. and Pease, K. (1999) Burnley CCTV evaluation. In: K. Painter and N. Tilley (eds.) *Surveillance of Public Space: CCTV, Street Lighting and Crime Prevention*. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

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