Book Review

Review of Schuilenburg, Marc. 2015. *The Securitization of Society: Crime, Risk, and Social Order*. New York: New York University Press.
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The Securitization of Society holds the promise of putting some empirical flesh on the bones of the new theories concerning the “governance of security” that have emerged to challenge older paradigms in the sociology of crime, policing, and social control. The aim is to develop an innovative approach to security and insecurity. For decades now, sociologists have recognized that social change and continuity are difficult to diagram with precision and have therefore struggled to describe things like “social order” and “security.” I agree with Schuilenburg that existing theories concerning nodal security governance seem rather vague, obscure, and overly optimistic (45-49) and that empirical research would be helpful in clarifying the perspective. *The Securitization of Society* sets out to do just that. However, although the book is empirically rich, it is less clear how far it practically advances earlier theoretical debates about the nature of nodal governance.

The Securitization of Society tries to explain how the trope of security has spread like a virus throughout the social body affecting a host of social institutions. This trend is understood to be a product of contemporary social conditions that have “engendered a drastic change in the position of the government, as well as security as a public commodity” (29). The book repeats the refrain that “security is no longer exclusively in the hands of the government” (30) and that “the government is slowly losing its (partly assumed) monopoly on security” (52) amidst the “fragmentation of the state monopoly on the policing function” (82). Yet the police are there, a “ghostly presence”—to steal a term from Walter Benjamin—in all four of Schuilenburg’s case studies. These case studies are based on 132 interviews, supplemented with *in situ* observation and documentary analysis involving many different institutional actors. These are listed as “damage experts, police functionaries, municipal civil servants, insurers, members of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, energy suppliers, housing associations, policy staff, security guards, shop keepers and other authorities” (165). In terms of research access, that is a considerable achievement. The portraits of the different security assemblages are clearly drawn and offer many empirical insights that are in keeping with the extant literature (even if put in innovative theoretical language).

The author concludes on the basis of his fieldwork that, with the process of securitization, “there is stronger interference by the government in everyday life” (82). The reasons why this might be so are obviously going to be complex. The answers that Schuilenburg articulates in the second part of the book—titled “From Panopticon to Patchwork Quilt”—are all the more so as he labors to excavate a theoretical

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vocabulary from the disparate works of Foucault, Deleuze and Tarde. Over the course of three chapters—titled “Securitization,” “Assemblages,” and “Molar and Molecular,” the author fashions his own lexicon for talking about security assemblages. He gives a lengthy and lucid account of Foucault’s thinking to make the point that power is always relational. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, he argues the contemporary security assemblages ought to be conceptualized in a manner commensurate with the fluid and rapidly changing social dynamic (153-154). He believes that Deleuze’s metaphor of the rhizome is useful in this regard because it “works on the basis of the tension between forces, a tension that cannot be determined and is therefore not representable” (101). He argues that:

forces cannot work independently of one another. A force cannot exist without another force. Between forces there is a field of tension or a differentiating element that cannot be claimed or discarded. Only in their effects are these forces perceptible. (119)

A lot of energy is devoted to elucidating the difference between the “molar” and the “molecular” because “what happens at an individual level is always in relation to the social field of which that person is a component” (147). By thinking about power relations and the “conceptual middle” that lies between the “molar” and the “molecular,” Schuilenburg wants us to think about how to investigate “‘what is happening’ without reducing this in advance to fixed orderings or overarching structures” (161). In other words, and unlike, for example, Brecht, he does not want to talk crudely about power. As an alternative, he instructs his readers to think of the molar-molecular distinction as “conceptual spectacles” by which to study continuity and change in security assemblages; one lens focuses on fixed characteristics and the routine character of activity, the second on “deviating series of interactions among authorities” (161). This summary cannot fully encapsulate the author’s point-of-view, which is nevertheless important to appreciate because theory has consequences.

The centerpiece of the book—titled “Among People”—contains chapters describing four different security assemblages. These are diverse. The first is a multi-agency initiative including municipal authorities, the electricity company and the police aimed at combatting marijuana cultivation. The second is a programme involving the insurance industry and the police intended on reducing the opportunities for road transport crime (primarily commercial vehicle theft). The third concerns the activities of so-called “urban intervention teams” made up of municipal authorities, social welfare workers, housing association managers, police, youth care workers and others who proactively intervene in the lives of families and communities in order to promote public safety and security. The fourth is a co-operative venture involving primarily small business owners, but also municipal authorities and police, aimed at addressing anti-social behaviour, theft and nuisance in the central city area of The Hague, the capital city of the Netherlands.

The crux of *The Securitization of Society* concerns the extent of displacement of “the State” as the principal actor in the governance of security. Overall, the findings echo similar conclusions arrived at by Stan Cohen some years ago, as Schuilenburg points out (214). Thus with securitization, the control continuum is actually expanded via net-widening and intensified by mesh-thinning. All four case studies present examples of interventions that are, in many ways, “less unique than they appear to be at first sight” (215). Many of the descriptions of organizational processes and practices are, as the author admits, redolent of earlier work on multi-agency co-ordination (189). An echo of the early sociology of deviance concerns the institutional friction between agencies and actors struggling to co-operate in the fight against cannabis grow-ops (173-175), which eventually resolves as inter-institutional solidarity is forged united against “a common enemy” (179). Another example concerns the interactions between police and the insurance industry, which has been the subject of considerable prior research. In this instance, it is interesting to read one of Schuilenburg’s police respondents remarking: “The police think that *the* insurers actually exist. But they don’t exist at all, no more than *the* Dutch police exist” (191). In the terms developed in the book the point is that, looked at up close and in particular, power relations between “the

state” and “society” that are “molar” look “molecular.” Having read the case studies, I felt better informed about some of the action “on the ground” in the Netherlands but remained unconvinced that all of the theorizing represents a significant advance on our understanding of the changing morphology of governance under present historical conditions.

The final part of the book—titled “The Era of Invisible Fissures”—offers a sustained consideration of the city as an “archipelago of enclaves” (252) engendered by “the desire to exclude undesired persons” (258). Here, the “new security techniques are all about traceability and algorithmic profiling, instead of imprisonment of individuals and normative consciousness of subjects” (265). The author advances an unnecessarily complicated metaphor and asserts the “right to *terroir*” (276), while distinguishing between citizens, denizens, and margizens (278–281). What is happening, even in the Netherlands, is that urban space is being cut up into a patchwork quilt shaped by the imposition of security measures in which different categories of persons enjoy different experiences of security and insecurity. In Schuilenburg’s opinion, “an important cause of this development lies in the “depoliticization” of democracy (282). In a world run by “an army of spin doctors, PR figures, and opinion pollsters” (282), “security is problem management” and “efficient solutions are confused with good solutions” (283). Schuilenburg ends up, perhaps where he should have started, by observing that the practice of security in our society is “no longer based on the pursuit of equality” and that, “one day, the word “citizenship” will have disappeared from our vocabulary” (285). Meanwhile, security is “changing from a defensive concept to an offensive one” (290) and every security assemblage “has its own operational power” (292). Because “security is too important to leave exclusively to the police” (293), the author suggests it is more important to understand security assemblages as relational processes that are self-organizing, and to see that the “steering power of this relational process is therefore never outside the assemblage” (292). In last instance the reader can only concur that this “provokes questions concerning the democratic control of various circumstances” (299).

Years ago, Clifford Shearing (1981) argued that process of social control and social ordering cannot be understood by thinking exclusively about political processes while ignoring “subterranean mechanisms.” Observing how those working within the occupational subculture of policing draw distinctions between the deserving public and “the scum,” Shearing averred that what he called “liberal social control” was an institutional hypocrisy. Shearing argued that at the macroscopic level, liberal democracy promises legal equality, but subterranean processes in the maintenance of power ensure that social conflicts manifest at the micro-level become pretexts for social control thereby legitimating the work necessary to reproduce capitalist relations of domination. Schuilenburg can best be understood when read as an up-dating of this perspective, and one which draws attention to the “molecular reality” of clashing institutional interests, problems of trust, and other practical difficulties that arise in multi-agency interaction and that occasionally warp the process of social ordering in certain respects.

What I find valuable in the case studies of hybrid security assemblages are the many examples of rules as tools in the hands of knowing social actors, revealing the governance of security to be a rule *with* law system. That allows for a politics of law, but that is another story. The theoretical parts of this book are, to my mind, needlessly complex. I do not think that the book achieves a clear and plausible explanation concerning the seeming omnipresence of the security trope in our contemporary society. Neither does it help us imagine how to bring security practice under a semblance of democratic control, which many of the purveyors of security governance theory have been hoping for. Whilst making many interesting empirical and historical observations, this book does not provide the cognitive glue to bind theories of nodal security governance into a substantive new paradigm transcending prior thinking. It is philosophically gestural—giving flight to a rich multiplicity of interpretations and considerations—rather than analytical and capable of articulating reasonable grounds for action. The theory of power articulated here is evasive and cannot help us imagine how to restrain everyday policing practice in the name of security. It is impossible, Schuilenburg concludes, for anyone to “get a grip on the matter” (301). That

would seem to indicate that neo-liberal security governance is a rudderless enterprise, a far from optimistic conclusion indeed.

References

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