Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Review of Eubanks, Virginia. 2017. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. New York: St Martin's Press.

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Automating Inequality opens with Virginia Eubanks recounting her family's experience of being "red-flagged" for medical insurance fraud after her partner suffered a violent assault. This story highlights the stresses of navigating medical care in the United States and, equally, how professional, middle class families are advantageously positioned to manage such a crisis. This snapshot of her personal troubles appeals to middle class readers' empathy and invites them to extend it to those whose struggles with intertwined bureaucracies of medical care, welfare, child, and housing services affect their health, quality of life, and, sometimes, survival. It also exemplifies Eubanks' journalistic style, which humanizes the people whose stories punctuate three regional case studies of how digitized poverty management tools impact diverse populations of poor, working poor, and unhoused people. This style enlivens her examination of computerized systems, making the book surprisingly accessible for the non-technologically inclined. These stories are integrated with details about the design and deployment of algorithms and databases to illustrate why we should not assume technology is objective or rely on it in place of human judgment, which makes the book equally suitable for more technically inclined readers who may be unfamiliar with sociology. And criminologists, in particular, may be interested in Eubanks' framing of digitized systems as mechanisms of policing, broadly construed. Although the book is not written in a scholarly style, it draws on document-based research and interviews. To this end, academic readers will be interested in the short methodological afterword.

A chapter on the historical treatment of the poor in America provides a contextual grounding for Eubanks' conceptualization of the "digital poorhouse"—a contemporary conglomeration of surveillance, information storage and sharing, and decision-making systems that continues the moralistic and punitive legacy of the poorhouse and, more than socially excluding, now also isolates the poor. This retelling problematizes scientific charity and the institution of welfare, locating the origin of systems that track and profile the poor in the eugenics movement and related framings of the poor as unreliable, untrustworthy, and worthless. In-depth examinations of digitized systems implemented in Indiana (various cities), California (Los Angeles), and Pennsylvania (Allegheny County) then serve to elaborate Eubanks' historically grounded argument that the digital poorhouse facilitates intrusive surveillance, scrutiny, and criminalization of the poor. Because each case study and academic-style analytical discussion are each featured in different chapters, the book is best read as a whole.

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The first case study chronicles the state of Indiana's "streamlining" of welfare and medical insurance through digitization, which endeavoured to diminish inefficiencies and paperwork but has instead increased exclusions. The Indiana case illustrates how automation can replace human decision-making and compassion—for example, when those needing services are denied or cut off through failure to cooperate with notices, decision-makers will default to the information available in the system, even if would-be clients provide proof of eligibility or system error. While Indiana's automated system surveils and discriminates through a narrow and apparently incomplete selection of information, the coordinated entry system governing homeless services in LA demands that unhoused people supply a broad range of personal information—including medical history, risk behaviour, and even a photograph—that is then made available to medical and social service organizations as well as the police. Narratives of how some of Eubanks' interviewees came to be homeless meaningfully underscore their humanity, their ordinariness, and the ways they are targeted for and through surveillance, criminalized, and in turn deterred from using services that the coordinated entry system provides. The final case study, of a child welfare database in a Pennsylvania county, highlights a key difference between the digital poorhouse and its earlier incarnations: records, once entered, can be stored virtually indefinitely. As Eubanks details, the child welfare database contains not only records of child abuse and neglect (broadly defined and overlapping with indicators of poverty) but parents' psychological and criminal history and other data (including spurious reports) reaching as far back as parents' own childhood, effectively marking for more surveillance and intervention families who have experienced generational poverty.

Through these case studies, Eubanks unpacks the failures of automated systems and their role in reproducing class and racial inequalities as well as the framings of the poor that perpetuate them, highlighting how surveillance, dataveillance, criminalization, and neoliberalism intertwine in the lives of the poor. Equally important to this contribution, however, is Eubanks' centering of class—something seldom seen in contemporary academic scholarship. Although Eubanks' analysis is in keeping with intersectional approaches insofar as she examines the co-constitution of race and class and the particular ways class intersects with gender and disability, she attends to these intersections while teasing out the nuances of class—as a socio-economic status, as a set of culturally distinct practices, as an object of symbolic and structural violence, as a locus of struggle but also of organizing and resistance. For example, she highlights how popular and political representations created stereotypes (such as the welfare queen) and undermined cross-racial solidarity amongst the working classes, and how they continue to perpetuate perceptions of the poor as unable to manage money and unfit for leadership, diverting more funding and donations to organizations headed by middle class professionals than their peer-led counterparts. This attention to class allows for a rousing critique of middle class apathy regarding the plight of the poor, and of how the separation of those characterized as deserving from those coded as risky belies a deeply entrenched moral/class hierarchy. Importantly, Eubanks also acknowledges recent and contemporary social justice movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, that mobilize diverse groups of people and draw links between social and economic inequalities and policing.

Automating Inequality focuses on barriers to healthcare and social services in the United States, however the book's insights about how neoliberal responsabilization works in tandem with technological processes to erode the social security net will be valuable to readers in other countries—for example, in Canada, where the availability of government healthcare makes medical expenses far less pressing a concern but coincides with other social resources such as workfare that have a decidedly neoliberal and increasingly punitive character. As digitization increasingly accompanies neoliberalization in social service provision, international readers may view this book as an eloquent yet disturbing cautionary tale.