Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Barnard-Wills, David. 2012. *Surveillance and Identity: Discourse, Subjectivity and the State*. Farnham: Ashgate. 213 pages. Hardback. \$94.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-3072-8.

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The problem of identity is one of the central issues of Surveillance Studies for at least two reasons. One is that many surveillance practices come in the guise of identification practices and technologies, thus putting the notion of identity centre stage empirically. Another is that from those theoretical roots stemming from Foucauldian discourse theory, so foundational to Surveillance Studies, we have learnt that surveillance, through its intricate micro-political power mechanisms, produces subjectivities and identities. How these two lines of thought and research are related, however, is not a straightforward matter at all. The key terms, surveillance and identity, tend to have different meanings in each, as well as different levels of abstraction, different relations to contemporary technological developments, different practical articulations, and different socio-political significance. But they *are* related in important and complex ways that are rendered even more opaque by frequent conflations and shifts of meaning, both in academic and general public discourses.

For all these reasons, David Barnard-Wills's *Surveillance and Identity: Discourse Subjectivity and the State* is an admirable and important attempt to chart these complexities and bring them all together in a coherent account. That this is indeed not an easy task is evidenced by the first half of the book, in which he needs to discuss the various theories, concepts, methods and issues involved, before he arrives at what are presented as the core three empirical chapters. Even these are highly analytical, theory and commentary rich pieces—where I would have loved to be shown a bit more of the empirical material he still tends to talk about rather than show. This is followed, once again, by an extensive discussion of theoretical, conceptual and political implications.

What he has accomplished by then is a very thoroughly argued and richly referenced approach to describe what, in contemporary discourses on surveillance connected to the UK government's attempts to introduce a national ID-card scheme, 'identity' has come to be. According to the author, contemporary discourses on surveillance (among which he gathers the discourses of government, the Information Commissioner's Office, (other) oppositional discourses, and those of banking and financial institutions) have construed a notion of identity that he labels a 'surveillant identity', that is, a notion of identity that is particularly 'permeable' to surveillance. Beyond the obvious tautology that this is the case because it is a notion figuring in discourses about surveillance, the author identifies a number of characteristics of this understanding of identity that render it so. For example, identity is construed as 'ontologically objective', meaning that it is something considered real, pre-existing, made up of recordable facts and data, and, significantly, having a truth value. That is, identities are either true or false, and in need of verification. They are also valuable, vulnerable to theft, and attributed by third parties rather than controlled by the individual. Moreover, they are unitary, behavioural, biometric, and 'shallow'—the latter referring to the restricted nature of what is considered to belong to 'the content' of identity.

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In trying to understand now how all this relates to the notion of identity from social theory, the question formulated at the beginning of this review, Barnard-Wills goes two ways. On the one hand, he repeatedly articulates this relation in terms of a *contrast*, emphasising above all the differences between ‘identity’ as understood within (post-structuralist) social theory, and that found within surveillance discourses. On the other hand, he performs another analysis of those discourses, asking what the *subject positions* available in those discourses are, based on the reasoning that subject positions are connected to subjectivity, which, in turn, he considers synonymous with identity.

With regard to the first, the contrast between the two notions of identity, Barnard-Wills does a great job of showing how awkward, from a social theoretical perspective, some of the uses of the term ‘identity’ within surveillance discourses are. If you underwrite the idea that identities are contingent, relational social constructs, by and large equal to subjectivity, then it is indeed rather strange to see ‘identity’ being construed as something that can be stolen, or assigned by some institution (the absurdity of the very idea of an ‘identity provider’!). As to the second, ‘identity’ as the subject positions found within surveillance discourses, the author identifies ‘the (normal) individual’ who has an interest in guarding and managing their ‘identity’ as the most dominant one. This position is then contrasted with that of the ‘criminal’, ‘fraudster’ or ‘terrorist’, with a third main position characterised as that of the ‘vulnerable’ for whom identity cards appear both as protective measure and as threat in itself.

The question the reader is left with after some two hundred pages of theory and analysis is whether we now have a full, satisfactory account of what is going on with identity in a society so preoccupied with surveillance and identity. To a large extent we do, and Barnard-Wills must be complimented for a wonderful and impressive achievement.

However, for all the subtlety and elaborate theoretical sophistication Barnard-Wills brings to the subject, and for all the reassurances that he considers ‘discourse’ to refer to something that goes beyond the linguistic, the actual analysis does remain limited to language(s), to what various parties have said or written *about* the technological practices and systems under consideration. By, in the final analysis, remaining firmly within the confines of a post-structuralist, discourse-theoretical model of identity himself, and choosing a limited set of textual sources on one particular identification system (a national ID register/card) for his analysis, he fails to address some crucial dimensions of the problem.

Identification and identity do not just happen in discourses, but, importantly, are ‘done’, or *performed*, in practices. A lot of the contingency that Barnard-Wills tries to lay a finger on, but never really gets at, arises from this. Moreover, crucial elements in these enactments of identity through practices of surveillance and identification are the digital technologies and systems, of which there are many more than just those systems that come with the term ‘identity’ attached, such as ID cards. His argument that the technologies and systems involved are not very well amenable to analysis, because social scientists cannot be asked to read computer code, is not a strong one. There are well-established methods to study and analyse technology, as material artefact, as practice and even as material-discursive construct, that do not involve reading computer code as such.

Even within his chosen theoretical and methodological frame it would have made perfect sense to include the discursive-technical constructions of ‘identity’ one finds in the technical discourses of Identity Management and engineering. He recognises this as a discourse underlying much of today’s government discourse on identity, but does not follow through on the implications of this. Had he done so, he would have been better equipped to recognise many of the seemingly awkward characteristics of ‘identity’ found there for what they are, rather than having to invoke some less convincing dichotomies (e.g. the ‘form’ vs. the ‘content’ of identity), or less relevant arguments from the history of science (e.g. criticisms of behaviourism) and political thought, or even sometimes repeating quite similar shifts and mix-ups of meaning himself, to make sense of it all. Nonetheless, an important book, and a definite must-read!