Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Björklund, F. and O. Svenonius, eds. 2013. *Video Surveillance and Social Control in a Comparative Perspective*. New York and London: Routledge

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This is certainly a timely and relevant book in the field of Surveillance Studies, more specifically concerning the study of video surveillance in open areas. The present volume stands out as one of the most accomplished ‘research reports’ of its kind, especially considering that it resulted from a research project carried out between 2008 and 2010—the West-East Video Surveillance Project—and that it brings together a collective work which aims to compare three countries: Sweden, Poland and Germany.

One of the added values of the volume edited by Björklund and Svenonius lies in the emphasis of their adopted perspective on the study of video surveillance directly linked with their own academic background as political scientists, in particular the analysis of discourses and practices from an institutional perspective, once they consider—in my opinion correctly—that ‘Institutions are the sites where cultural and historical narratives are reproduced, where norms are created and enforced, and where collectives exert control over individuals’ (p. 5). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, despite the political science standpoint, the discussion around the interconnection between politics, discourses and practices of video surveillance within these three countries is traversed by a legal, historical and sociological analysis, which definitely enriches the debate, avoiding the common entrenchment in one-dimensional approaches.

The book opens with a chapter, whose reflection upon ‘Video Surveillance in Theory and as Institutional Practice’, introduces the two distinct parts into which the rest of the volume is divided: Part I, entitled ‘Comparative Studies’, is comprised of three chapters where the comparative dimension amongst the three countries under analysis is present throughout; Part II, on the other hand, offers specific ‘Case Studies’ in the form of essays that focus on video surveillance from specific viewpoints and centred on a country or a city. The comparative approach is significant since, as the editors observe, ‘When researching surveillance, sensitivity to context is of particular importance, precisely because surveillance is so intimately related to statehood, citizenship, and civil liberties’ (Chapter 1, p. 9).

Despite the geographical proximity of the three countries in question, the role played by video surveillance and its interpretation diverge from one setting to another, as Part I clearly shows. Chapters 2, 3 and 4, by Fredrika Björklund, Ola Svenonius and Patricia Jonason, respectively, are particularly effective in their interpretation both of the existing discourses around the use of video surveillance and its relation with the political histories of each country (namely the histories of repression and totalitarianism in Poland and Germany, in contrast with the absence of a similar phenomenon in Sweden), as well as of

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matters regarding the protection of privacy in the European context, questioning whether we are moving towards a uniformity in terms of practices and models of regulation in this domain.

Turning to specific case studies, Part II includes two essays on Poland, the first of which, by Wojciech Szrubka, tackles the broader 'question of trust', while the second deals specifically with the system of CCTV in open areas in the city of Warsaw, which according to its author, Paweł Waszkiewicz, is 'the biggest in Poland and comparable to the largest in Continental Europe' (p. 159). We also find a chapter by Eric Töpfer that problematizes the issue of open-street CCTV in Germany from the point of view of privacy protection. Elfar Loftsson closes this part with an analysis of public surveillance in Sweden from an institutional perspective.

Also noteworthy is the attention paid by this volume to the different dimensions of video surveillance in each of the three countries, as well as to another aspect that is often ignored: the subjectivity and ambiguity that are inherent to the terminologies and concepts that operate in this domain. When we use a common language, such as English, the specificity of certain terms is often lost in translation at the national level. One of the examples frequently brought up throughout the book is the term 'privacy'. In Swedish, for instance, it is corresponded by *integritet*, but this in turn can also be translated into English as integrity, thus completely altering the arguments that can be summoned to support it (a similar thing happens in Portuguese with the notions of safety and protection, which are both termed protection; see also Klauser 2009). The implication of these distinctions is especially reflected in the production of laws regulating video surveillance, and subsequently in their interpretation.

Another relevant point brought out by this volume, as in similar works that focus on national cases, is the fact that as social scientists we seek to situate within a social and historical framework the surveillance policies adopted in a given country. In other words, given the need to consider video surveillance as a political measure—regardless of the arguments invoked, which vary widely as this book clearly shows—we tend to assume that countries with a history of repression or dictatorship are more likely to elicit a negative response by the population. This volume shows that in fact it is not so—the Polish example being especially unsettling in this respect—a fact which had already been established in other contexts, such as in Minas Samatas' work on Greece (2004, see also Haggerty and Samatas 2010) or Chiara Fonio's work on Italy (2004).

As an end note, I should mention the relevance of the collection under which this book appears. Routledge Studies in Science, Technology and Society has increasingly become a reference name for the publication of surveillance scholars worldwide.

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