Book Review

Review of Nayar, Pramod. 2015. *Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance is a conceptually rich exploration of surveillance cultures in the 21st century. Pramod Nayar engages, in a deep and sustained way, with the literature of Surveillance Studies, privacy, and cultural theory to produce an up-to-date and thought-provoking study of the role of surveillance practices in subject formation. Writing from Hyderabad, India, Nayar provides concrete examples of surveillance phenomena in his city and nation that are sometimes inflected with local specificity (such as India's biometric ID card), but also reflect global trends in surveillance that are associated with neoliberalism, such as the rise of gated communities that provide their own security and boundary enforcement.

Nayar outlines a number of subject positions associated with the age of surveillance: *vulnerable data subject*, *consumer citizen*, and *global witness*, for example. The book is organized to explore these subject positions, in a sense. The author considers: biosurveillance (biometrics and the enlistment of corporeality in surveillance); data and data subjects (sharing and reassembling data, particularly by marketers), and spaces of surveillance (access to public spaces, the rise of gated communities and private securitization).

Each of these sections draws extensively on Surveillance Studies literature. For example, Nayar utilizes Monahan's (2010) distinction between "surveillance infrastructures" and "security cultures" to discuss the systems and processes by which surveillance is conducted on the one hand, and the discourses that shape agents into willing participants on the other. Similarly, he cites Haggerty and Ericson (2000) to emphasize that contemporary surveillance regimes are more usefully conceptualized as "rhizomatic," as a "surveillant assemblage," rather than the top-down, panoptical system suggested by Bentham and later, Foucault (pg. 6).

One of the book's strengths—and a feature that anticipates the author's concluding chapter—is the sustained emphasis on the ways in which surveillance is co-produced by the entity seeking information (whether it is the state or a private actor) and the citizen-subject. A casual observer would likely see surveillance as something imposed from outside by the watcher or the data gatherer. But in a variety of ways, the subject, who is also the object of surveillance, participates in the data collection. To be sure, the subject deems it worth the exchange, whether the benefit of the bargain is greater security (pg. 63), "cultural legitimacy" (pg. 43), convenience (pg. 56) or "consumer citizenship" (pg. 151). Nayar offers the example of loyalty cards for shoppers. In exchange for material gains such as price discounts, consumers

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opt to use loyalty cards to buy groceries and other products. They know that their purchase information is being collected and stored but they choose to take part in the relationship nonetheless. Moreover, they are motivated by intangible forces as well. “To use such cards,” the author suggests, “becomes intrinsic to the very culture and habit of shopping, and thus might be read as a mode of governance through the establishment of norms and rituals of behavior” (pg. 151). This is a socialization process, but it still involves a volitional act by the consumer, who must sign up for the card and present it with each purchase.

In the final two chapters of the book, Nayar takes the reader in a different direction by sketching the contours of a kind of surveillance that allows for greater agency on the part of citizens of a polity (and, potentially, for citizens of the world). Building on his earlier discussion of “participatory surveillance,” Nayar suggests that individuals called to participate in surveillance processes could potentially utilize surveillance instruments such as cellphone cameras and social media platforms to subvert existing power configurations rather than to sustain them. Surveillance cultures encourage individuals to engage in surveilling themselves and others in a variety of ways. Subjects respond by taking up the injunction to surveil. They conduct neighborhood watch programs; they move into gated communities; they purchase identity theft protections; they share personal data online. As Nayar puts it,

Self-surveillance transforms the surveilled citizen into a willing participant in the conditions and processes of surveillance, which then asks him/her to move beyond the self. Surveillance becomes an acceptable, indeed necessary part of citizenship and generates the sense of belonging (pg. 170).

This formulation helps to explain why citizens take part in surveillance practices. But even as the processes and practices described above help to form “good” subjects who sustain unequal power relations, they might also be laying a foundation for a different kind of participatory surveillance—one that actually *subverts* those power relations.

This potential change entails a movement from participatory surveillance in its familiar form to “dissident surveillance”:

[P]articipatory surveillance also takes more *active* forms (a part of what I have termed dissident surveillance), moving outward beyond the self through the acts of mobile witnessing that we now see on TV and the digital media. Mobile witnessing converts the amateur passive spectator into a witness and helps reconstruct the subjectivity of the spectator as a *witness-subject*. Founded on assumptions about the need for visibility and transparency, such forms of participatory surveillance might be read as the public’s attempt to stay a public (pg. 170).

Witness-subjects connect to each other via the sharing of experiences that is made possible by the widespread availability of digital media. This intersubjective recognition is stimulated in part by the realization of the “shared precarity” of human existence (pg. 194). In this effort, witnesses take part in preserving the public sphere *for* the public.

One might well feel encouraged by Nayar’s suggestion that the subversion of surveillance regimes will arise from the very social relations engendered by the surveillance regimes themselves. On the other hand, there is reason to consider whether the agential shaping that encourages “consumer citizenship” (pg. 57) and safety through consumption (pg. 63) can leave space for that active, dissenting witness that Nayar imagines coming to presence out of surveillance cultures. In other words, the author does such a compelling job of outlining the subject positions generated by surveillance practices carried out by powerful state and non-state actors that we might well feel pessimistic about the space left for a new kind of subject to emerge. The individual’s decision about whether to engage with a particular form of data

sharing in exchange for a perceived benefit is a simulacrum of the larger society's potential for active witnessing and reclaiming its public sphere after its citizens have long been shaped as consumers and self-surveillants. The benefits in both cases might be elusive. While rigid determinism should be avoided in social theory, the observer nonetheless would be justified in feeling some degree of skepticism or at least caution about the emergence of the "witness-subject."

Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance will certainly generate discussion and further theorizing about its premises and conclusions, as visionary and provocative scholarship usually does. It is a timely, important and worthwhile book.

References

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