Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Taylor, E. 2013. *Surveillance Schools. Security, discipline and control in contemporary education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot.

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As readers of this journal will be acutely aware, there has been much discussion devoted to new surveillance technologies and their impact in general. However, there has been perhaps surprisingly little attention devoted, neither by the media nor academics, to the use of surveillance technologies in schools, particularly not beyond the US (Hope 2009; McCahill and Finn 2010; Chadderton 2012), where the debate has been more widespread (Monahan and Torres 2010; Fuentes 2011). Emmeline Taylor is therefore one of just a few pioneers in this fledgling area of study.

School surveillance is not a global phenomenon, for example, it has been unsuccessful in Germany due to legal challenges. However, in both the US, and the UK, schools have installed CCTV, metal detectors, alcohol, drugs and weapons screening, chipped identity cards and electronic registers, biometric controls such as iris scans and fingerprinting and cyberspace surveillance including webcams. There are systems which log what a pupil has for lunch and even CCTV cameras installed in school toilets.

This is an area in which empirical data is lacking, and Taylor's book offers a rare empirical study of the perspectives of both students and staff from three secondary schools, and a discussion of the wider issues. The book has the potential to be especially important because Taylor conducted her research in England, where there is a particular dearth of discussion around surveillance schools.

Of course, surveillance has proliferated in all spaces, so what's different about schools? Equally, schools have always been spaces of surveillance, and this has been well-documented and thoroughly critiqued. Taylor argues that we have ushered in a new era in both surveillance and education: schools are different from other surveilled spaces because there is a 'semi-captive' audience for whom attendance is compulsory. Moreover, the use of cutting-edge technologies renders the extent of surveillance in at least some schools exponential.

The argument goes that such technology will make our children safer, but of course, as will be old news to surveillance scholars, it does not. There was, for example, both an armed guard and video surveillance system at Columbine School, where two pupils shot 13 people in 1999. She also draws our attention to the lack of legal regulation around surveillance schools, pointing out that, for example, in the UK, the Data Protection Act 1998 is 'inappropriate in a school setting. Head teachers are vested with the autonomy to implement any technology they desire, and they are not legally obliged to gain the consent of the parents, or even inform them' (p.100).

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Indeed, Taylor suggests that far from rendering young people more secure such surveillance threatens them in a number of less obvious ways. Firstly, it contributes to the ongoing criminalisation of schools and young people. In the context of post-industrialisation and the new capitalist economy, young people from more disadvantaged communities who would 40 years ago have worked in the manufacturing industries are facing massive unemployment as the economy polarises and social inequalities increase. At the same time, neoliberal governments are cutting social welfare, and with it the opportunities these economically marginalised young people might have had in the past to take a more academic route to the labour market, and also any safety net. In order to justify these cuts, governments are encouraging the criminalisation of poverty, which in its turn also justifies an increase in everyday surveillance and policing, with the disadvantaged as its main target. Taylor argues that 'surveillance schools' contribute to the habituation of young people to being under surveillance, to what Taylor refers to as 'penal pedagogies'. As she warns quite explicitly, the pipeline from school to workplace has been fractured, and a 'school-to-prison pipeline' is being created, particularly in the US, but also in the UK to a certain extent. Secondly, Taylor suggests young people's wellbeing is threatened by the corporatisation of schools, to which these new technologies of surveillance contribute. Security in schools is a boom industry. In fact, as Taylor tells us, a survey in the US showed the education sector as the third fastest growing market in the country. And with a population who are obliged by law to attend, and with few rights of their own, schools are ideal spaces for companies to test their new products. This comes in the wider context of the increasing privatisation of education, which in the UK includes, for example, the massive growth of academies, schools which are taken out of local authority control and sponsored by private entities. In conclusion, Taylor argues for alternatives, including restorative justice and Surveillance Studies on the curriculum.

So far, so good. However, these arguments will be familiar to scholars of education, surveillance and sociology, and Taylor's work does not provide a particularly in-depth version of them. Indeed, it is unclear who the target audience for this work is intended to be. Is it an introduction to the topic for the casual reader? Education scholars? Surveillance scholars? Education practitioners?

The descriptive nature of much of the text suggests it is intended as an introduction to the topic. However, this is belied by, for example, the sheer number of unexplained references. The Panopticon, a key concept in both Surveillance Studies and education studies, is referred to several times in early chapters with merely an instruction to expect an explanation later, the actual discussion of what is understood by the Panopticon, including a definition, only comes in the final chapters. Other references go completely unexplained. What is an ASBO? What happened at Dunblane?

For education scholars, debates around the criminalisation of youth, the privatisation of education, the function of schools as emancipatory or oppressive, are very familiar and, as mentioned, Taylor's work does nothing to extend these. Indeed, it almost feels like the book has been written back-to-front, a description of the types of surveillance and then the empirical data coming first, with little reference to theory or context, these only coming later, leaving the data curiously uncontextualised.

In fact the overwhelmingly descriptive style of the book makes it a bit of a slog, particularly in the early chapters. Throughout, there is a lack of clear author voice or systematic argument. The data from the schools, which certainly should be a headline-grabber in a field where such data has so seldom been collected, is also disappointingly descriptive. Statements are made, but implications are not fully or explicitly drawn out. For example, considering CCTV in the toilets, one child says, 'If girls are upset they run to the toilets so no one sees them. That's why you do things like that in the first place'. Taylor argues, the toilets previously represented a private domain where especially females 'can discard their public "performance"' (p.54). However, references to a wider discussion about the gender aspects of surveillance, or the importance of this public performance, are not forthcoming. Taylor's data suggests that the students are more aware of the surveillance than the teachers, and very much against the

surveillance. One child in the study states, 'If I wanted to be on Big Brother I would have auditioned' (p.57). But, again, what are the implications of this?

The theory, as mentioned, mostly comes in the second half of the book. However, these later chapters, which do go some way to examining the implications of surveillance schools, rarely make explicit connections with the points raised in the earlier data chapter. Equally, if the book is aimed at surveillance scholars, we are left unclear where Taylor stands on some of the big debates in the surveillance field, and how her study feeds into these. For example, she mentions that it has been recognised that the Panopticon has been overused as a metaphor, and the debates around a possible post-panopticonism, however, it is difficult to know what she thinks of these, and whether her data might contribute to them. On page 74 she states '...it is clear that [the surveillance school] erodes belief in democratic systems'. Although one may surmise from her descriptions that this is the case, nowhere is the debate on surveillance and democracy explicitly addressed.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly to me, Taylor mentions at several points that surveillance practices will impact differently on individuals from different social groups. Yet questions of differential experiences of surveillance according to, for example, gender and race are not addressed at all. What does this surveillance mean for bodies which are already over-scrutinised, or positioned as a threat? Did her study throw up different perspectives from females, from minority ethnic pupils, as others, including myself, have argued (Chadderton 2012, 2013; Miah 2013)? Despite providing rare empirical data, in this book these different perspectives are not considered, and more questions are left open than answered.

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