

BOOK REVIEW

Automating Inequality. How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police and Punish the Poor by Virginia Eubanks. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017. \$34.99 Cdn. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-250-07431. Pages: 1-260.

Reviewed by Robert Marshall¹

Virginia Eubanks' book follows in the footsteps of earlier polemics documenting the policing of poverty in the United States.² Unlike these previous studies, and building upon her own prior work (2012), Eubanks focuses on the role of information technologies as a tool for increased monitoring and surveillance of social assistance recipients in the United States. While not necessarily employing a technologically determinist argument, Eubanks does document the impacts of moving such services online; and, the often devastating human consequences and effects of doing so. The book explores the impacts of data mining, policy algorithms and predictive risk models on economic inequality in three American jurisdictions: the State of Indiana's automated Medicaid eligibility process; Pennsylvania's Allegheny County predictive algorithm for assessing childhood risk of abuse and neglect; and, Los Angeles' coordinated entry system for the homeless. By focusing on the racist and classist effects of these networked systems, she ultimately is also asking very important questions about citizenship and democracy in America today. As Eubanks notes, since the dawn of the digital age decision making in finance, employment, politics, health care, and human services has undergone revolutionary change. And what she sets out to document is the revolutionary impacts of such changes on welfare recipients in the United States. The subtitle of her book could just have easily been "The Road from Prediction to Perdition."

While the notion of surveilling the poor is not new, what has transpired is that the means of policing the poor has changed greatly over the past few decades. The technologies of monitoring, regulating and policing not only includes digital tools; but, also includes new discourses, belief systems and frameworks. The rise of neoliberalism and new public management, plus the growth in the alt-Right's further racist and classist marginalization of the poor and working class in the United States, must be accorded significant roles in what is occurring today. Often, the debates around neoliberalism or new public management are framed in the language of rolling back the Keynesian welfare state so as to impose standards of efficiency and productivity upon the state itself and its bureaucracies. The reality, however, is that neoliberal policies are geared towards disciplining subordinate populations in order to further an accumulation strategy that inculcates a market discipline.

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² See for example the classic study by Piven and Cloward (1971), or the more recent trilogy by Loïc Wacquant (2004, 2009a, 2009b), and Gustafson (2009).

Such policies are reminiscent of the Elizabethan poor laws that differentiated between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Eubanks draws a line from the 19th century poorhouse, where the poor and working class were quarantined, to 20th century case worker investigations, and into the 21st century digital poorhouse constructed from data bases, algorithms and risk models. Suggesting that the digital poorhouse is part of a long American process, Eubanks notes that the poor have long been managed “...in order to escape our shared responsibility for eradicating poverty” (p. 21). She also notes that this continuum originates with the Scientific Charity Movement that arose in the United States in the 1870s.

The book describes significant changes that have emerged as to how the system of surveillance has changed over time. In earlier forms, the target had to be identified before the ‘watcher’ could surveil. Today in data-based forms, the target emerges from the data itself. At the same time, one should not underestimate that many of the systems under review in the book are also about restructuring the state itself. When discussing the state of Indiana, Eubanks describes then Governor Mitch Daniel’s ‘famous’ application of a Yellow Pages test to government services. “If a product is listed in the Yellow Pages, he insisted, the government shouldn’t provide it” (p. 45). These systems not only removed individuals and families from the welfare rolls, they also resulted in many state workers losing their jobs due to automation. And while not addressed in the book, we know that many of the workers let go have been women.³

I think Eubanks, in her own way, also sets out to confront the provocative question raised many years ago by Langdon Winner (1980) as to whether or not artifacts [a term used for technology] have politics. Technology is often presented, or at a minimum understood, as a neutral tool or instrument. Winner, and others such as Lawrence Lessig (1999; 2006) and Cathy O’Neil (2016), have challenged this idea by suggesting that power dynamics themselves are built into the various technologies that help to determine or shape outcomes. Lessig argued that strings of code themselves can regulate our lives as much as any legal set of rules. Code that is created and written by humans with all their prejudices, beliefs and foibles. O’Neil holds to the view that computer models are opinions that become embedded into machines, which increases inequality and threatens democracy. A more concrete illustration can be found in Edwin Black’s study (2001) on the usage of Hollerith punch cards during the Holocaust. The serial numbers tattooed on the inmates began as punch card identification numbers. As Eubanks writes “the classism of racism of elites are math-washed, neutralized by technological mystification and data-based hocus-pocus” (p. 192). She concludes, however, that “[h]igh-tech tools have a built-in authority and patina of objectivity that often lead us to believe that their decisions are less discriminatory than those made by humans. But bias is introduced through programming choices, data selection, and performance metrics” (p. 194-195).

³ For two early interventions on this point see Lee and Hobbs, 1996 and Longford, 2002. See also Beyeler and Annesley, 2011, and Findlay, 2015.

One of the pleasures in reading the book is learning of the author's journey of discovery as she comes to confront some of her own beliefs. She discovers contrary to the tenets held in the digital divide debate that the poor and working class are more tech savvy than usually given credit for. Technology was becoming ubiquitous in their lives but not in a way most of us would, or could, imagine: in the welfare office; in the criminal justice system; and, for those with work, in the places of low waged employment.

Methodologically the book provides ample space for those who have engaged with the various systems to tell their own stories. What is repeatedly heard are words such as "fear," "frustration," "exasperation," "discriminatory," "undemocratic," "unforgiveable," and "dehumanizing". As Eubanks writes "It's crucial to listen to those who are their primary targets; the stories they tell are different from those told from the perspective of administrators and analysts" (p.178). "At the heart of this book" she writes "are the stories of those who inhabit the digital poorhouse in Indiana, Los Angeles, and Alleghany County" (p. 219). Over three years she conducted 105 interviews, attended family court sessions, observed a child abuse hotline call center and attended dozens of community meetings. She talked with caseworkers, policy-makers, program administrators, journalists, scholars and policy officers. As well, Eubanks engaged with those organizations who closely worked with the families impacted by the three systems under review. She interviewed administrators and analysts; and, in the process discovered that they earnestly believed they were helping those in need. This raises the important question of how to balance the belief that the system helps with the reality that it does not? Eubanks notes that in her interviews with technologists and administrators the belief amongst them that "...new high-tech tools in public services increase transparency and decrease discrimination" (p. 168). The process, however, can often be counter-productive. Her evidence suggests families that are targeted as 'high-risk' by algorithms may very well lead them to withdraw from those networks that provide services, supports and a sense of belonging to the community.

Noting that a book can be an invitation to conversation, and at the same time a call to action (p. 219), in the concluding section, Eubanks turns her attention to 'what is to be done' in order to dismantle the digital poorhouse. Drawing upon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" sermon delivered on 31 March 1968 in which he condemned the impacts of the emerging technological revolution, she returns to his call for a poor people's campaign. Further Eubanks stresses "...the most important step in dismantling the digital poorhouse is changing how we think, talk, and feel about poverty" (p. 204). The result would be building empathy and understanding among the poor and working class to 'forge winning political coalitions'. Only then can mobilizing grassroots power to disrupt the status quo occur. As formal policy proposals Eubanks concludes with a brief discussion of a universal basic income (UBI); and, a Hippocratic Oath for the data designers, engineers and administrators - an oath of non-harm for an age of big data. A repeated refrain throughout the book is that while these systems were first designed for the poor, they will eventually be used on everyone. "We should all care about the digital poorhouse because it is inconsistent with our most dearly held collective values: liberty, equity, and inclusion" (p. 193).

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