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BOOK REVIEW

Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban High School

by Kathleen Nolan, Princeton University

University of Minnesota Press, 2011

232 pp. pb edition

[Kindle edition reviewed]

Review: *Police in the Hallways: Confronting the “Culture of Control”*

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Michel Foucault's (1975) examination of the power of surveillance includes a disturbing question:

The practice of placing individuals under “observation” is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures. Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labour, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts in normality, who continue and multiply the functions of the judge, should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?

Over the four decades since this observation, U.S. public education has experienced an accountability era built on increasingly invasive observations of schools, teachers, and students that also include a cultural embracing of *no-excuses* ideologies. Kathleen Nolan examines one aspect of that evolution in her ethnography of an urban high school that adopted a zero-tolerance policy as well as a pervasive police presence in the school.

Nolan's *Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban High School* (2011) presents an examination of urban youth that reminds me of Patricia Hersch's *A Tribe Apart* (1999)—although where Hersch includes rich and extended detail, Nolan grounds her work in scholarship that her ethnography both supports and complicates. Where Hersch is trapped in middle-class norms, Nolan peels back the complicated hegemony of society and its institutions.

Confronting the Culture of Control

Writing about his 2011 baseless arrest during the London riots, Daniel Edu (2012) explains:

Every black kid is told the same thing: "You have to try harder in life because you're black." My mum was the first one to tell me this, and then a white teacher gave her version of it at school: "You're smart, but there are two routes for you: crime or a career. And as a black boy you should try to be different," she said.

Then, Edu describes how his view of the police developed during his youth:

As I got older the answer became clearer. With that cheap tracksuit, trainers and hoodie came routine stop and searches. Weekly, sometimes daily, if I walked with my black friends. But with that came a weird sense of pride. I thought that if the tracksuit pissed the police off I'd keep wearing it and it seemed that being black to them was like showing red to a bull. But one month in prison, eight weeks on an electronic tag and the possibility of spending five years in a jail quickly turned any sense of pride into fear.

This confessional reflection by Edu intersected with my completing Nolan's *Police in the Hallways*, which followed on the heels of my reading Stieg Larson's Millennium Trilogy (made popular in the U.S. with the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [2009], being produced as an American film).

One of the trilogy's main characters, Lisbeth Salander, is a case study in social norms creating contexts that drive perception. Throughout the three novels, Salander's history and behavior are carefully assembled for the reader against how Salander is manipulated and judged from many different perspectives throughout her life.

In the context of a police state and social norms of justice and authority, Salander's behavior is either incomprehensible or evidence of mental deficiency, derangement, or criminality. For those having read the novels, of course, the truth about Salander is that she is neither randomly violent nor unethical; in fact, Salander is compulsively ethical. She has developed stringent guidelines for what is just and unjust, and she has taken it upon herself to serve as judge, jury, and executioner

(of sorts). In the climactic court case of the trilogy, a character called Palmgren, who knows Salander and her history, explains the context of Salander's behavior:

"Our client on principle does not speak to the police or to other persons of authority, and least of all to psychiatrists. The reason is simple. From the time she was a child she tried time and again to talk to police and social workers to explain that her mother was being abused by Alexander Zalachenko. The result in every instance was that she was *punished* because government civil servants had decided that Zalachenko was more important than she was." (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, 2010, p. 733; [emphasis added])

What drew me to Salander most directly is her embodiment of the power of institutions to impose onto humans the shackles of justice in the name of justice. Salander, like journalist Mikael Blomkvist, another main character in the trilogy, must work above and around the law in order to maintain her ethical groundings.

Ultimately, the enormous weight of evidence unmasks the corruption of agents of social institutions (secret police, lawyers, psychiatrists) and justifies Salander's distrust and refusal to cooperate with official authority. Through mere observation, Salander is cast as deviant, an Other, due to her looks, doubly damning since she appears different from most people and then different from the expectations for women, and her behavior is repeatedly throughout her life *associated with her own agency*, without regard to the context that provokes that behavior.

Salander became more than a fictional character for me as I read Nolan's ethnography of a high-poverty urban high school that has incorporated permanent surveillance techniques, including metal detectors and police in the hallways. Nolan (2011) details and then concludes that the nearly seamless blending of school and justice system has created not a school-to-prison pipeline, but something far more corrosive:

These findings highlight that, although the oft-used metaphor of the school-to-prison pipeline is helpful (and real), the lived experience of many students at UPHS can be better understood through a nuanced description of daily life rather than the pipeline metaphor. Despite a valuable body of scholarly literature on the subject, not all students in these schools are going to prison. In fact, the majority will not likely spend significant time behind bars. To gain sufficient understanding of the everyday life experience of students at the school, it is useful to highlight a more mundane but pervasive phenomenon: how the lives of impoverished urban students are managed by a complex interpenetration of systems. The school, where they are by law required to spend most of their day, becomes an auxiliary to the criminal-justice system. These findings show that urban youth get subjected to levels of surveillance and repression that are not the same as long-term incarceration, but nonetheless, as the school merges with an ideology of street policing, the courts, and even the prison, a particular culture of penal control becomes an aspect of everyday life at school and beyond. (Kindle Locations 983-989)

These urban youth learn, like Salander and Edu, that the exact agents of power who surround them—administrators, teachers, police, judges—are not to be trusted, and the result is that student after student experiences not just school discipline but criminal discipline due to how they react to the circumstances that are created for them and around them. Nolan (2011) explains:

Despite the trouble it caused students, there was an important ideological dimension to their refusal to comply with law enforcement. Their contestations during interactions with police and agents contained within them a decisive critique of disciplinary practices. Policing practices, especially the demand to see ID, conflicted with students' sense of justice and fairness and their imagined ideal of schooling." (Kindle Locations 999-1001)

The culture of control Nolan recognizes and catalogues in this urban high school is an intensified version of the larger culture of control that typifies America, or at least the American middle-class that both accepts and perpetuates the nearly perpetual social surveillance that allows their idealized middle-class cocoon to exist—a cocoon of safety and the freedom to amass and protect possessions—while also denying that same freedom to some Others. Part of the culture of control involves the blurring of public institutions as one cohesive mechanism for controlling certain populations, such as urban African American and Latino/a youth.

Nolan's work is an important and possibly essential read for all stakeholders in public education. This ethnography contributes to a wide range of issues currently at the forefront of education policy and reform, including the following:

- Nolan's nuanced and detailed exploration of teens of color who come from predominantly impoverished backgrounds rejects the marginalization and stereotyping common in political and public discourse about people

trapped in poverty. The students in this urban high school are situated in their lives and the school, both of which are permeated by the police gaze and messages about these teens as criminals. Nolan shows that a *culture of control* in the school creates a reciprocal dynamic in which all people in that culture embrace and perpetuate behaviors in the students that trap them in a continual state of penal control.

- This work examines and ultimately challenges the effectiveness of zero-tolerance policies, a police presence in schools, and mechanisms such as metal detectors in schools. Despite the preventative intent of these policies, Nolan's study appears to show that they create a criminal class instead of preventing one. The students in this urban high school, despite their intentions and strong qualities, exhibit hopelessness and a disturbing sense of being trapped that are both being perpetuated by the culture of control in their school.
- While Nolan's ethnography is an important look at assumptions and stereotypes about poverty and people living and learning in poverty, her work also forces the reader to confront race, which is too often avoided for discussions of poverty. The racial inequities in school punishment are significantly paralleled by the disproportionate incarceration rates by race in the U.S. Nolan finds problems with the school-to-prison pipeline metaphor, but she doesn't discount it, especially as it informs a debate about race and inequity in the U.S.
- These qualitative data and the conclusions drawn by Nolan reinforce the profound connection between social inequity and educational inequity (Thomas, 2012). As well, her work discredits the no-excuses ideological claim that poverty doesn't matter and that ZIP code does not predict educational outcomes. While Nolan's conclusions suggest specific education policies including zero-tolerance practices—such as metal detectors, banning hats because they are related to gang identification, and a pervasive police presence in the school—must be reconsidered, her ethnography is also a powerful challenge to no-excuses practices being championed in the charter school movement from corporate reformers, notably the Knowledge Is Power Program ([KIPP], 2012) charters that enforce a culture of control as well as a message of individual responsibility regardless of social circumstances.
- Finally, and possibly most importantly, Nolan ends her book by carefully outlining why and how current accountability policies are mis-serving those students most in need of public education, the urban students of color living in poverty at the center of her research. Standards- and test-based education practices ask less of these students, not more, and the teach-to-the-test pedagogy commonly found in urban schools serving a high-poverty population fails to provide students with the type of education they envision and want for themselves. Nolan (2011) argues that

In urban schools, we often find a predominance of high-stakes test preparation and highly controversial, often scripted programs in reading and math, limited focus on other content areas, and often none at all on art and other kinds of enrichment. Even when district leaders attempt to institute more student-centered approaches, such as cooperative learning or writing workshops, teachers find them very difficult to implement effectively, given myriad institutional constraints. Subsequently, too often we find bored, alienated, and indignant students who at times cannot fully articulate their indignation, but they usually indicate somehow that something is dreadfully wrong. These students may reach the ninth grade not fully prepared for high school-level academic work. As a result, they are often confronted with teacher-centered instructional practices and content to which they lack full access. (Kindle Locations 2323-2327)

Traditional and teacher-centered pedagogy driven to transmit static content to passive students, Nolan argues, must be replaced with critical pedagogy seeking social justice.

Broadly, then, Nolan's *Police in the Hallways* forces the reader to consider how the line between the police state in and out of school has become blurred in some children's lives. It is a harsh lesson about how middle-class norms mask a cultural willingness to subject *other people's children* (Delpit, 2006) to institutional policies and messages that no middle-class or affluent parents would accept for their own children:

In a grossly inequitable school system and stratified society, punitive urban school disciplinary policies serve the interests of the white middle and wealthy classes, as poor youth of color are demonized through the discourses of zero tolerance and subjected to heavy policing. (Kindle Locations 2391-2392)

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