General

Veiligheid en burgerschap in een netwerksamenleving

Security and citizenship in a network society

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Hans Boutellier, Ronald van Steden (eds.), ***Veiligheid en burgerschap in een netwerksamenleving*****, Uitgeverij Boom, Amsterdam, 2008, ISBN 9789054549918, 326 pages**

The book *Veiligheid en burgerschap in een netwerksamenleving* (Security and citizenship in a network society) ensued from the research programme 'The Security of Citizenship' at the VU (Free University of Amsterdam), where Hans Boutellier holds the Frans Denkers Chair. This book, edited by Boutellier and Ronald van Steden, brings together contributions in which various authors reflect on developments in Western society, based on their particular disciplines. The book is based on the idea that our society is no longer a vertically structured society, but rather should be seen as a horizontal and therefore network society. All the writers agree that these new and often rapid developments call our usual conceptions of social reality into question. After all, we live in an era of unprecedented complexity. Things change faster than our capacity to understand them. Although not all the contributions are equally strong, each text examines what specifically has changed or is in the process of changing. Some contributions provide a historical overview, in which the transition from a stable, orderly society to a fluid society is exposed in an almost tangible way. There are contributions about such topics as victimhood and the perception of insecurity, the relationship between media and security, security in the public space, nodal policing and citizen participation in security projects.

While every contribution examines what precisely has changed or is in the process of changing, and something does this in minute detail, the book (as a collection of all contributions) refuse to engage in the more fundamental debate. In other words, the book stays neatly within the lines of Enlightenment philosophy, which, precisely as a consequence of what the editors call a network society, is now under pressure. As the introductory article indicates, the book seeks out the complex of reasons that underlie the changing role of the state. And it is exactly this insistence on a causality that causes this collection to pretty much fail in realizing its ambitious objective. The book stubbornly clings to the 'safe' conceptual categorizations and certainties of the rational and functional ideas of man and society, so that the sweeping empirical observations remain stuck at the descriptive level and there is virtually no in-depth examination. After all, a radical transition like that being shaped by the network society, but which is also shaping that network society, requires a different way of thinking, that is if we want to comprehend what is happening. A horizontal, complex reality, after all, dispenses with the usual concepts of 'autonomy', 'the individual, 'the group' and 'the social'. [1]

It would therefore have been interesting to explain what epistemological concepts and conceptual frameworks have come under pressure and are probably no longer tenable (at

least not for long). The reader would then have been confronted with the boundaries that any discipline has to contend with. The same observation can be made regarding the responses of government and the management of security. In other words, however correct it is to the observation that the world around us is changing, this collection refuses to submit the (scientific) production process to the same observation. As a result it clings to the objective position of the scientist who makes pronouncements as an observer about a reality that is presented as objectively knowable in the majority of the essays; or to the policymaker and the institution that stand outside the social and societal dynamics, evaluate them, devise projects and prescribe the needed solutions. It is precisely this kind of self-reflection that is lacking in this book, so that it blunders into the pitfalls of modernism.

In the process the book largely ignores what typifies late modernity: the recognition that the subject has lost control. He is, as Michel Maffesoli suggests, a character in a tragedy who, as in the old Greek tragedies, is prey to all sorts of dynamics over which he has no control. [2] According to Maffesoli late-modern society consists of an amalgam of subcultures, which not only absorb and fragment the individual, but upon which the individual also leaves a significant stamp. This is a paradoxical idea of man and society, in which the emphasis is no longer on stability, balance and control, but on instability, movement and transformation: precisely the elements that are expressed in a network society. In late modernity the egocentric paradigm is replaced by a *lococentrism*. After all, it is no longer the individual who determines his life, but the *locus*, the hub at which he finds himself and which he has to a significant extent helped to shape, without being able to exercise control over it. Linear thinking is replaced by non-linear thinking. In concrete terms, this means that Entity A plays a role in the construction of B, which plays a role in the construction of C, which plays a role in the construction of A. There is no design or blueprint for this network. It emerges and maintains itself in existence self-referentially. [3] Social engineering and control are an illusion.

What does this mean in terms of security and citizenship? According to many, Western society has evolved into a risk society, in which risk analyses, prevention strategies and precautionary principles occupy an important place. Social problems are often reinterpreted as security problems and addressed with drastic measures. The perspective of the risk society, however, is a too limited, too narrow and too rational concept. People, after all, are far more flexible and changeable than the concept of the risk society presupposes. The modernist concept (which the risk society is) tends to construct 'criminality', 'risk', 'insecurity', 'society', 'individuals' and 'citizenship' as separate phenomena, ignoring the non-linear interactions out of which the phenomena arise. The focus is then placed on 'the rational', 'the autonomous', 'the functional' and 'the objective'. This implies that individuals can stand outside the social or societal dynamics and control them. This way of thinking results in the public security sector behaving as a cult, whereby the emphasis is on conformity, acquiescence and obedience. [4] Of course I am not denying that individuals can formulate certain insights about the nature of social reality, criminality, security and the like, but these are merely interpretations and actions, which themselves will generate an unremitting stream of responses from others. In order to understand these new developments, we need, as I have argued elsewhere, an interpretive methodology – indeed, *tragic* concepts. [5] This emphasizes the importance of microrelationships and interactions for understanding social reality and the transformative, and goes beyond the cognitive and the autonomous.

Of course this is not the place for me to set up a thesis on security and citizenship in a network society, let alone to expound arguments for it. Boutellier and Van Steden's book, however, invites a response. And that can only be applauded.

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Footnotes

1. P. Van Calster, 'Re-visiting Mr. Nice: On Organized Crime as Conversational Interaction', ***Crime, Law and Social Change***, 45, 4 / 5, 2006, 337–359.
2. M. Maffesoli, ***The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*** (London: Sage, 2006).
3. Calster, 'Re-visiting Mr. Nice', op. cit. (note 1).
4. P. Van Calster, 'De publieke Veiligheidssector als cult. Over "prestatie" en "presteren" als cultwaarden in de organisatiecultuur van de publieke veiligheidssector', in: A. Collier and E. Hendrickx (eds.), ***De politionele bedrijfscultuur*** (Brussels: Politeia, to be published in 2008).
5. Calster, 'Re-visiting Mr. Nice', op. cit. (note 1).

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Control, Public Space

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