# The vigilant citizen. Everyday policing and insecurity in Miami

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BOOK REVIEW

**The vigilant citizen. Everyday policing and insecurity in Miami**, by T. Jeursen, New York, NYU Press, 2023, $28.00, ISBN: 9781479816545

The police force is widely regarded as the primary actor responsible for policing within our societies. The maintenance of public order and security constitutes a core task of government which holds a monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Weber 1987: 8). According to 17th and 18th century political philosophers, this monopoly is upheld through a social contract between citizens and the state. Citizens voluntarily abstain from engaging in punitive actions against each other if the state, acting on their behalf, establishes a system to maintain the rule of law.

This social contract has undergone significant changes since the late 20th century when the responsibility for maintaining public security in many Western societies has expanded to encompass various actors beyond government law enforcement. While the police force continues to play a central role, responsibility is now shared with private security companies and citizens, on an individual and collective basis. This trend is commonly referred to by criminologists and public governance scholars as 'responsibilisation' (Garland 2002).

Within a neoliberal ideology, the concept of shared responsibility in delivering public services is generally perceived as a win-win situation; it relieves the strain on public budgets and resources, enhances the responsiveness and effectiveness of public services, and fosters the development of more cohesive and engaged communities. These beliefs surrounding the notion of responsibilisation also extend to the involvement of citizens in policing. It is believed that citizens, serving as 'eyes and ears' of the police, are more effective in detecting and preventing crime, while fostering social cohesion by watching out for each other.

Jeursen's book entitled 'The Vigilant Citizen' debunks these beliefs by presenting a compelling case study into the societal impacts of public security arrangements in Miami, Florida. This city is often described by its residents as a '*sunny city with shady people*' due to its high crime rates (p. 19). Drawing on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork in this city, Jeursen paints a grim picture in which individual responsibility for public security contributes to heightened feelings of insecurity and a climate of distrust between citizens and government law enforcement and between citizens amongst each other. Against common expectations, responsibilisation within the domain of public security does not strengthen but rather eradicates social cohesion. On top of that, access to 'outsourced' security services and their subsequent effects on citizens are distributed in a highly unequal manner.

In the introductory chapter, Jeursen presents his lens of vigilant citizenship to examine everyday acts and experiences of policing in Miami. He defines vigilant citizenship as the idea that '*as citizens, people themselves can and should deal with physical threats in everyday life*.' Vigilant citizens are characterised as being '*aware, watchful, and willing to act when confronted with feelings of insecurity*' (p. 146), an attitude visually depicted with the window blinds on the book's front cover. Furthermore, he introduces how the research centres around two interrelated aspects of policing: Firstly, how individualised experiences of fear inform public and private police officers' responses to insecurity, and secondly, how the idea of being vigilant is associated with legal and extra-legal forms of self-defence by citizens.

In the first empirical chapter, entitled 'Places and Partnerships of Policing', Jeursen sets the stage by providing a portrayal of the local context of Miami. Focusing on three districts, he demonstrates that the city is characterised by socio-spatial inequality and a high prevalence of crime and police violence. In the subsequent empirical chapters, Jeursen convincingly outlines three consequences of individual responsibilisation among citizens as well as public and private law enforcement professionals, namely: a heightened level of awareness and watchfulness (chapter 2), the willingness to own and use a gun (chapter 3), and the tendency to recontextualize violent practices through

a legal lens (chapter 4). All chapters highlight how individualised perceptions of insecurity and responsibility cultivate mutual distrust and reinforce existing (racial) inequalities. For example, chapter 2 describes how in vigilance campaigns and lateral surveillance programmes, Black residents are urged to '*break the silence*' (p. 87) already assuming crime within their communities while White and Latinx residents are simply rewarded for '*doing the right thing*'.

Jeursen observes that vigilance and vigilantism exist on a continuum in which watchfulness easily transforms into self-defence. Next to gun ownership, visualising technologies are used to weaponize against the other. Cell phones and bodycams are used to document transgressions, threatening with legal consequences for those involved. Again, Jeursen demonstrates how these responses to responsibilisation are not neutral, but they rather reproduce and exacerbate existing inequalities. For example, according to Miamians, there are 'good' and 'bad' guns depending on who owns them: '*some guns contribute to public safety, while others are seen as threatening it.*' (p. 150).

From an outsider perspective, as a European white male who had not previously visited Miami before starting this fieldwork, Jeursen is able to offer keen insights into his case. The book adopts a prose-like style with recurring characters including police officer Luz, private security guard Santos, and local hairdressers Marcus and Felix, making it an accessible read, although it is best read from cover to cover. The outsider perspective also comes with its limitations. While Jeursen notes that a national context of exclusion and segregation within the United States informs selective security practices locally, the book falls short in fully capturing the political and institutional context in which responsibilisation of policing practices occurs.

The rich empirical case study has relevance to theoretical debates in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, criminology, surveillance studies, sociology and public governance studies. This is not surprising, given the author's multidisciplinary background. However, the book fails to focus on one or two debates to engage with in depth. For example, there are evident contributions to theories on sousveillance and lateral surveillance, as well as public-private partnerships in policing and security assemblages which could have been explored more extensively. Currently, the theoretical contributions of the work remain relatively modest.

Not until the final chapter, Jeursen touches upon the question looming beneath the surface of the book: What does this mean for how we organise law enforcement within our societies? Should we, in alignment with the abolitionist movement, advocate for the defunding of the police as the main law enforcing institution and negotiate a new social contract between the state and its citizens for the maintenance of public security? Although the book refrains from offering recommendations for practice, Jeursen argues that we should at least '*resist the urge to reinforce individualised solutions to insecurity*' (p. 156). Organising public security through vigilant citizenship and private security actors would only serve to extend acts of violent and racially biased policing, without a proper framework for democratic accountability.

# References

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