

**Book
Review**

Fosher, Kerry B. 2009. *Under Construction: Making Homeland Security at the Local Level*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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Most treatments of homeland security dwell upon contentious policies and policymakers, the cultivation of public fears, or the intensification of surveillance. This book, by contrast, attends to the messy everyday practices of emergency planners trying to make cities “secure” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In this ethnography, Kerry B. Fosher takes as her research field site the many meetings of the emergency planning community of Boston, Massachusetts, which includes firefighters, police officers, emergency management technicians, city planners, public works truck drivers, and others. The process of trying to ensure effective communication and coordination among members of this diverse group presented a significant challenge for the actors involved, which is documented in this study. Aside from official policies, which according to Fosher are often disconnected from the realities of people working on the ground, coordination and communication occur through many formal activities – such as planning meetings, emergency drills, education sessions, and demonstrations of equipment use – as well as through informal networks. In these settings, people experiment with ideas, muddle through, try to figure out their responsibilities, and solve problems. It is at the local level, Fosher argues, that homeland security truly takes form.

For an ethnography that is explicitly geared toward anthropology audiences, though, this book contains surprisingly few passages of thick description or interpretive analysis. According to Fosher, that is entirely by design. For the protection of her informants and the protection of the public, she chose not to divulge specific cases of security threats or vulnerabilities, or – with very few exceptions – even the words of her informants. Moreover, to avoid the risk of being compelled to reveal her sensitive data by means of freedom of information requests or legal subpoenas, she “chose to destroy all copies of certain field records, a step it is unlikely other researchers would need to take” (55). Fosher is also concerned about insulating her informants from critique and maintaining their trust, which is apparently tied to her admission of “a certain amount of ‘going native’” (59). For an interested reader, however, these safeguards can prove frustrating. For instance, there are many provocative claims, such as the one that private industries are reluctant to participate in emergency planning meetings for fear of having their intellectual property compromised (82), but there is no evidence (examples, quotes, stories) given to persuade one that such claims are true.

It is certainly not the goal of *Under Construction* to contribute to conversations in the field of surveillance studies, so that should not be held against it. Readers of *Surveillance & Society* may nonetheless be interested to know about the ways in which this book touches upon surveillance topics. Fosher does briefly discuss some forms of gathering intelligence, screening cargo and airline passengers, and guarding

sensitive sites with video cameras, but she eschews characterizing these as “surveillance” because her informants do not do so and because the word has negative connotations. She writes:

I have deliberately avoided using the term “surveillance”... [because] the term has come to connote something more sinister than the observation of a person or group. While I don't want to diminish people's concerns about increased surveillance of individuals and groups for perhaps less than laudable reasons, I also want to be able to talk about daily activities in the homeland security community without having to distinguish among the popular conceptions of surveillance, video surveillance cameras, and disease surveillance (106).

Although people involved in the provision of homeland security may be reluctant to see some of their everyday activities as surveillant, for this reviewer it is the quotidian and even disinterested nature of surveillance practices, rather than the “sinister” overtones, that lends them power and constitutes surveillance societies.