Eubanks, Virginia (2017) *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY.

Review by Gretchen Purser

Automating Inequality focuses on the automated eligibility systems, algorithmic models, and integrated databases that increasingly circumscribe the lives of the poor and working class, constricting their access to opportunities, demobilizing their political organizing, limiting their movement, and violating their human rights. This must-read book provides both a harrowing account of the design, rollout, and consequences of high-tech poverty management and a powerful condemnation of the ways in which we, as a society, view, rationalize, and normalize poverty, social suffering, and economic inequality. *Automating Inequality* exposes the dangers of techno-fetishism and data-driven policy-making, and it indicts all who embrace what Eubanks calls a 'systems engineering approach' to social problems.

According to Eubanks, the high-tech tools that have been adopted by human and social service agencies across the country are reflective of a 'digital poorhouse' that profiles, polices, and punishes the poor and working class. Eubanks anchors her book around this metaphor so as to 'resist the erasure of history and context' (p.183); she positions these new technologies not as the 'disruptors' that they are so often celebrated to be, but simply as the latest—though particularly consequential— strategy within the nation's longstanding punitive and moralistic attempt to regulate the poor.

Her account begins in the early nineteenth century, when the nation regulated poverty by imprisoning the indigent in county poorhouses with the aim of instilling within residents the moral values of thrift and industry. Conditions within the poorhouse were horrific, so as to dissuade the poor from accessing public resources. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the poorhouse was supplanted by a new kind of social reform: the scientific charity movement. This movement, deeply intertwined with eugenics, positioned each poor family as a 'case' and sought, through proper investigative methods (including caseworkers' reports and eugenics records), to sort and divide the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' poor. These intrusive techniques of scrutiny and surveillance persisted in the wake of the New Deal. The welfare rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s led to numerous legal protections for, and a considerable expansion in the numbers of, families receiving public assistance. The ensuing hysteria about welfare expenditures led elected officials and state bureaucrats to commission new technologies that promised to save money by

distributing aid more 'efficiently.' Whereas most scholars and commentators attribute the decimation of welfare to Clinton's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Eubanks argues that the winnowing of the rolls—and reversal of the gains of the welfare rights movement—began even earlier (in the 1970s), with the imposition of high-tech tools used to determine eligibility, minimize fraud, and monitor compliance.

The book is centered around three stories, all told predominantly from the point of view of the poor and working-class people targeted by, and entrapped within, the digital poorhouse. The first is a gut-wrenching story about the attempt to automate eligibility processes for the state of Indiana's welfare system. In 2006, the Republican Governor, Mitch Daniels, set out to 'modernize' the state's 'irretrievably broken, wasteful, fraudulent' welfare program, signing a ten-year $1.16 billion contract with IBM/ACS. The results of this privatization and automation experiment were devastating: millions of applications for life-saving supports like Medicaid and food stamps were denied for the infuriating, catch-all reason of 'failure to cooperate in establishing eligibility.' Although the contract with IBM was eventually cancelled and the experiment denounced as a failure—leading to a protracted lawsuit—IBM achieved exactly what the state had asked for and contractually incentivized: it found and denied 'ineligible' cases, hemorrhaging the welfare rolls. The automation system—including the hybrid system that followed—operated as a tool of 'digital diversion' (p.83), dissuading residents from applying and denying them access to the benefits for which they are eligible. By 2014 in the state of Indiana, only 8% of poor families with children were receiving cash benefits from TANF.

Eubanks next tells the story of the coordinated entry system in Los Angeles, a digital registry for the homeless. The coordinated entry system 'collects, stores, and shares some astonishingly intimate information about unhoused people. It catalogs, classifies, and ranks their traumas, coping mechanisms, feelings, and fears' (p.85). Influenced by the service philosophies of prioritization and housing first, the coordinated entry program, launched in 2013, utilizes an assessment tool called the VI-SPDAT (Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool). To access any homeless service, clients must take the survey, administered by outreach workers or service providers, and be entered into the registry. Their information is entered into the federally-mandated HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) and a ranking algorithm tallies up a score from 1 to 17 to assess their level of risk and need for housing. Despite all the fanfare surrounding the system, no amount of data will solve the housing crisis; most of LA's unhoused will never be connected with housing. And yet their data is collected and stored with little protection from the hands of the police, rendering them more visible and trackable. Coordinated entry, Eubanks writes, 'is a surveillance system for sorting and criminalizing the poor' (p.121). So, too, is it a 'machine for producing rationalization, for helping us convince ourselves that only the most deserving people are getting help' (p.123).

The third story is set in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania which adopted a risk model (the Allegheny Family Screening Tool) to algorithmically predict which children are at greatest risk for abuse or neglect. The algorithm was promoted as a way to eliminate human bias and achieve evidence-based objectivity. But, as Eubanks painstakingly points out, the algorithm is but a reflection of human bias. Let me highlight two of its most egregious features. First, it treats call referral as a proxy for abuse and neglect. This is particularly problematic because racial disparity in child welfare services is fueled by referral bias, as opposed to screening bias. Second, the

majority of its predictive variables are simply measures of poverty (i.e. use of means-tested programs like SNAP, TANF, etc.). By relying on data that is exclusively collected on families that are poor (that rely on public services, as opposed to private ones), the model engages in 'poverty profiling;' it exempts middle and upper-class parents and 'confuses parenting while poor with poor parenting' (p.158).

In this highly accessible book that should be read by scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, Eubanks calls for dismantling the digital poorhouse that will someday entrap us all. But she also calls for reshaping the cultural narrative about, and political responses to, poverty in the U.S. The first step in doing so is to build empathy and solidarity amongst the poor and working-class who are so often pitted against one another.

Reviewer Bio

Gretchen Purser is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. She also serves as chair of the board of the Workers' Center of Central New York. Her scholarship focuses on work, labor, and neoliberal poverty management in the U.S. She has published in *Qualitative Sociology*, *Ethnography*, *WorkingUSA*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and numerous other journals.