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Security in urban transport a matter of perceptions

Is current urban transport security policy motivated by crime and accident statistics, or are other factors in play? This is a question raised by the political scientist Ola Svenonius in his dissertation on security and surveillance in urban transport. He sees radical changes in attitudes in Berlin, Stockholm, and Warsaw.


The dissertation shows how security in urban transport has undergone radical changes over the last ten years. If security was formerly understood in terms of crime and accident statistics, today it’s rather a matter of people’s perceptions. The dissertation studies the origin and impact of this change.

Ola Svenonius argues that developments in public transport are part of a more comprehensive change in our view of security issues, where security in the form of perceptions and feelings occupies a central role.

Of course, accidents still constitute an extensive field for safety work, but this is going on in the background. Instead, feelings and perceptions are the focus of this “next generation security policy.” This is seen in all three cities I studied – Berlin, Stockholm, and Warsaw, he says.

In the three cities security policy developed in different ways. The countries’ political history affects what the broader international trend toward greater use of surveillance cameras, for example, looks like in each case. What they have in common is that when feelings of security become the central category in security efforts, this entails greater use of technical surveillance of urban transport and surrounding environments. This occurs when the security is subordinated to a commercial logic.

The dissertation reveals several things of interest both to the public and to political institutions. It shows how security becomes a discourse that lends authorities and companies nearly unlimited legitimacy regarding what measures can be taken and what phenomena might constitute a threat. At the same time, the framework for security work has become almost entirely autonomous in relation to crime statistics. The dissertation can thus be seen as part of a critical interrogation of current security politics.

There’s also an equality aspect to the altered security and surveillance practice, according to Ola Svenonius. Police work in urban transport is primarily not performed by the state police, but rather by private security firms or long-term unemployed individuals who are recruited as security attendants and supposed to “radiate” security by dint of their uniformed presence. Deviant social behaviors are classed as insecure and become a key focus in security work. Regardless of whether this is official policy or not – and there are great differences here – homeless people, drug addicts, and young people constitute the most important target groups for security work in the service of the average consumer.
The most recent cases of abuse of homeless and young people by Stockholm SL Public Transport guards are thus not examples of deviant behavior but rather a more fundamental, systematic phenomenon, according to Ola Svenonius.

Ola Svenonius is a doctoral candidate at Södertörn University and the Department of Political Science at Stockholm University.

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