The Dangers of Security

Médéric Martin-Mazé

Reviewed: Harvey Molotch, *Against Security: How We Go Wrong at Airports, Subways, and Other Sites of Ambiguous Danger*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

In Against Security*, Harvey Molotch highlights – through various examples, including the New York subway, airports, and post-Katrina New Orleans – the way in which security agencies are increasingly replacing common sense with bureaucratic systems that, despite good intentions, in fact have numerous pernicious effects. In his conclusion, he makes a number of proposals for a more human and altruistic form of security.*

No one was able to prevent Andreas Lubitz from sending the Airbus A320 he was co-piloting for airline Germanwings into freefall in April 2015: the reinforced cockpit door cuts off anyone who has access to the aircraft controls from the rest of the plane. The International Civil Aviation Organization had made this security measure a requirement after the attacks of 11 September 2001, in order to make any intrusion into the cockpit impossible with the aim of preventing hijack attempts. Here, however, the reinforced door protected a suicidal co-pilot and enabled him to go through with this senseless act. These events, in terms of their human consequences alone, are quite exceptional. And yet the tragic irony is that it was caused by what appeared to be quite ordinary, unremarkable security measures.

After reading *Against Security*, by Harvey Molotch, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion. This book shows how security systems and agencies undermine common sense, replacing it with political spectacle and bureaucratic machines. *Against Security* criticises these measures, their rationales and their pernicious effects. While this work echoes other critical studies of security (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010), little reference is made to them. Unlike this literature, the author does not call into question the way security agencies construct and manipulate the threats that they then claim to be combatting; at most, Molotch reminds us that these dangers are often perceived in a distorted fashion, as if viewed in a fairground mirror that deforms and exaggerates the real threat. However, rather than discussing the construction of these security problems, this work prefers to suggest alternative solutions.

For resilience; against security

Security means having the ability to go about our daily business without fear of our world suddenly falling about around us (p. 3). The solutions proposed by Molotch – whether we find them derisory, irrelevant, or even grotesque – all seek to reinforce and protect this ability. They aim to safeguard it from the measures that security professionals and politicians adopt in the name of security, but which in fact destroy it, paving the way in the process for catastrophes of even greater proportions. For it is precisely this ability to go about our business that enables us to "make do", to come up with *ad hoc* solutions, to deal with the uncertainty of dangerous situations – in short, to

exhibit what now tends to be referred to as "resilience" (pp. 13–14); so much so, in fact, that *Against Security* could just as easily have been called *For Resilience*.

Such a title would be just as faithful to the study conducted by Molotch on five sites, each of which is explored in a chapter of the book. His investigations begin in a place often ignored, and even considered taboo: public toilets. The second chapter of the book provides a detailed analysis of the vulnerabilities that unequal access to these facilities engenders. This study sheds a raw light on the brutal gender segregations and violent socio-economic inequalities that can be found in public conveniences, which are also places where sexual and moral anxieties are concentrated: an ever-present fear of rape in the ladies' toilets, and and underlying or organised repression of homosexuality in the men's. While the author makes the effort here to include results from a previous study (Molotch and Norén 2010) to back up his claims, we might be forgiven for not being altogether convinced by this line of enquiry, which appears to be somewhat out of step with the book's central thesis.

This is not, however, a criticism that can be levelled at Chapter 3, devoted to the New York City Subway, and based on original empirical material from interviews with subway workers. Molotch begins by decrying the poor results obtained by the security measures imposed by the city council, essentially to show that they were "doing something" following the events of September 11th, and thus complying with the imperatives of the political spectacle, analysed elsewhere by Murray Edelman (1991). The expensive video-surveillance system touted as being able to automatically detect suspicious behaviour in the subway never reached the operational stage. As for the network-wide publicity campaign calling for passengers' vigilance, this played no role at all in uncovering any of the three attempted attacks on the New York subway in the 2000s.

In reality, passenger security is ensured every day by the measures taken by subway workers themselves – for instance, the station managers who deactivate the turnstiles at the end of the school day, so that children don't get caught up in them, or the driver who ignored official instructions from the control centre on September 11th and let passengers who had taken shelter on the platforms of the World Trade Center station to board his train. Above all, the capacity for invention that different actors bring into play in their day-to-day work lives do not disappear in situations of exceptional danger; on the contrary, they foster reflexes that can often save situations and lives. Any public security poliy should therefore aim to preserve these reflexes, which is one of the main recommendations made by Molotch at the end of this stimulating chapter.

The worrying transformation of airports

Chapter 4 extends this line of thought to the tension that exists between actors' capacity for resilience and bureaucratic security measures by analysing another space associated with transport: airports. Formerly symbols of freedom that captivated the public's imagination, these places have been transformed into security machines that seem to mistake themselves for the kind of "total institutions" described by Erving Goffman (1968). Today, getting through all the security checks at an airport is tantamout, *mutatis mutandis*, to entering a prison. These measures incite passengers to comply with the precise gestures that are required of them, rather than exercising their powers of observation with regard to what is going on around them. And yet such an attitude would be welcome, according to the author, as for checks and controls represent soft targets for potential attacks.

Furthermore, these measures are unfair and ineffective, to say the least: unfair because those passengers who have enough money can easily sidestep them. Whether by registering in a "trusted travellers" scheme or by hiring a private jet, the rich do not have to submit to searches. They are also unfair because certain travellers are more frequently stopped and searched than others: this includes passengers from Middle-Eastern countries, of course, but also any travellers who buy one-way tickets at the last minute in cash. And ineffective because these security controls have, to

date, played no role in counteracting any attacks targeting aircraft. What is more, through boredom or lassitude, the security personnel who monitor the screens of the X-ray machines let numerous prohibited objects slip through the net: liquids, bomb components, even firearms forgotten by their owners. In addition, the profiling techniques used to identify "abnormal" behaviour are easily bypassed – all it takes is to act and look "normal".

These measures are also harmful. A study by Cornell University showed that these security controls have turned off massive numbers of passengers from air transport in the US, especially in the North-East Corridor, where car travel is a viable alternative to the plane. Moreover, this same study estimated the number of people killed on the road as a direct result of not travelling by air in 2001-2002 to be 2,300 – almost as many as were killed in the 9/11 attacks.

Learning lessons from 9/11 and Katrina

After these two detailed and convincing chapters, Molotch's demonstration once again loses its way a little by considering a topic related only tangentially to the book's main subject. His fifth chapter focuses on the construction of the "Freedom Tower"[1] and the memorial to the victims of September 11th. On the one hand, the author successfully identifies what Pierre Bourdieu called "lateral possibilities": given New York's housing crisis, it would no doubt have been more intelligent to use the space freed up by the collapse of the twin towers to build apartments – and low-cost ones, at that! But, once again, this common-sense choice was shunned in favour of a political spectacle, the absurdity of which is highlighted by Molotch: this is a tower that is even higher, even more symbolic, even easier to target – essentially a "bomb-me-first building" (p. 145). At the very least, this building should have been fitted with wide stairwells since, as the author reminds us, it was the World Trade Center's stairwells that enabled the survivors to escape. Once again, simple architectural measures offer much better protection than the roadblocks and patrols which, despite their intentions, transform Ground Zero into a no-go zone.

When poorly designed, though, architectural and structural measures can put entire populations in danger. This was the case in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck – the fifth and final site studied by Molotch, in the sixth chapter of his book. Using original empirical material, the author shows that Katrina has none of the hallmarks of a natural disaster. Uncontrolled urban development and poorly considered public investments conspired to literally sink the city. In fact, the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet Canal injects water from both bodies into neighbourhoods built on wetlands, while the system of levees creates a gigantic reservoir, the evacuation of which takes several weeks.

However, Molotch focuses his attention on the bureaucratic dysfunctionality that Katrina has revealed in its wake. For example, it took 11½ days for basic aid (drinking water, baby milk, nappies, etc.) to reach local organisations, which had stockpiled supplies for only four days, in accordance with a plan established just weeks before. While certain actors rapidly realised the futility of these measures and replaced them with *ad hoc* solutions, Molotch chooses to draw our attention instead to the phenomenon of "racism by inertia" (p. 182), which in many cases undermines this capacity for adaptation. A political spectacle began to take place, in which New Orleans' black residents were described as an indigent and dangerous population, intent on pillage and violence. This institutional racism devalues the lives at stake, in the process suspending the practical reasoning necessary for organising appropriate rescue operations, with the result that a disproportionate number of the lives lost were among the black population, leading to reduced levels of confidence in public institutions.

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[1]   The official name of this tower is "One World Trade Center".

For more human, altruistic forms of security

In his conclusion, Harvey Molotch brings together the core elements of his argument and the key points of his proposals. He defends "decency by default": when unsure of what to do, it is better to opt for those solutions that seem simplest and most altruistic; in situations of danger, our reflex as fellow human beings should be to help one another. Of course, these kinds of solutions are typically dismissed, as they are incompatible with the interests of public and private security professionals on the one hand, and inherent logic of political spectacle on the other. In these milieux, the preferred solutions are more brutal and authoritarian, and ignore the complexity and fragility of human societies. Social identities – individual and collective – sit very awkwardly with the kinds of binary divisions favoured by security systems and agencies.

Furthermore, these systems and agencies tend to exaggerate the threats that they claim to be combatting. The "terrorists" arrested and brought to trial in the years following September 11th never turned out to be the "hate professionals" so often depicted by politicians and security officials. More often than not, they were clumsy amateurs (pp. 194–196) or, in some cases, even individuals manipulated by *agents provocateurs* who themselves worked for the security services (pp. 197 and 213). The real question is: will implementing increasingly intrusive measures ever deter these kinds of individuals?

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Médéric Martin-Mazé holds a PhD in political science (international relations) and conducts research on the transnationalisation of professionals and security measures. Following a doctoral thesis on the role of international cooperation in ensuring border security in Central Asia, he is now a research associate at King's College London, where his work focuses on the sociogenesis of the European internal security space.