

Austin Zeiderman

Book review: arts of security

Blog entry

Original citation:

Zeiderman, Austin (2013) Book review: arts of security. Public books (14 Feb 2013) Blog Entry.
© 2013 Public Books

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/48740/>

Available in LSE Research Online: July 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.



FICTION

NONFICTION

MULTIGENRE

BRIEFS

INTERVIEWS

ART & MEDIA

EVENTS

TAGS

SEARCH

Public
Books

ARTS OF SECURITY

AUSTIN ZEIDERMAN



AGAINST SECURITY: HOW
WE GO WRONG AT
AIRPORTS, SUBWAYS,
AND OTHER SITES OF
AMBIGUOUS DANGER
Harvey Molotch

Princeton University
Press, 2012

BUY

February 14, 2013 — Being “against security” would be absurd in a place like Colombia, where my research is based. People from all over the country have suffered through decades of armed conflict only to now face new threats to their lives and livelihoods. Since the mid-1980s, the capital city of Bogotá has received close to a million internal refugees fleeing violence.¹ According to one estimate, an average of 52 displaced families arrive every day.² Over the past few years, this problem has been compounded by the worst rains in recorded history. The resulting floods and landslides have displaced hundreds of thousands more, destroyed homes throughout the country, and taken several hundred lives. While the storms have temporarily subsided and the government is engaging tentatively in peace talks with the guerrillas, newly emergent criminal organizations and increasingly severe weather patterns demand that security remains an everyday concern for many.

Opposing security doesn’t make much sense even in the global North. People there have more resources to prepare themselves for future shocks, but they, too, are far from immune, as demonstrated most recently by Superstorm Sandy and the school shooting in Connecticut. Yet over the past decade, most social scientists have taken just such a stance. Objecting to state abuses carried out in the name of protection, they have criticized security campaigns in the United States since 9/11 for their deleterious effects: the erosion of civil liberties, the legitimization of torture, the production of fear, the proliferation of private contractors, the excess of surveillance, the normalization of xenophobia, and the unending wars against abstract enemies. Moreover, they have shown how security campaigns often have the inverse result of making us even less secure. Though well warranted, such critiques have offered little in the way of alternatives. They seem surprisingly content to leave the endangered to take responsibility for their own safety.

SECURITY INITIATIVES THAT FOLLOW
WHAT MOLOTCH CALLS THE “COMMAND-
AND-CONTROL” MODEL FAIL BY TURNING
A BLIND EYE TO THE TASK OF “MAKING
LIFE BETTER ALL ALONG THE WAY.”

Harvey Molotch’s *Against Security: How We Go Wrong at Airports, Subways, and Other Sites of Ambiguous Danger* is no such book. It both scrutinizes what has gone terribly wrong in the United States since 2001 and proposes an altogether different approach.

In a critical register, Molotch demonstrates how security now penetrates people’s daily lives without making them demonstrably safer. For example, his research on the New York subway, in collaboration with Noah McClain, found not one case in which the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign prevented an attack on the transportation system or its passengers. Likewise, airport security protocols have made air travel increasingly distressing while reducing our capacity to protect ourselves from potential threats. In general, security initiatives that follow what Molotch calls the “command-and-control” model fail by turning a blind eye to the task of “making life better all along the way.” As a result, they unjustly distribute suspicion and harassment according to entrenched forms of privilege and discrimination while encouraging conformist behavior and disabling critical thought. Although Molotch seems especially incensed by the daily annoyances security mechanisms create, his most damning observation is that, from counterterrorism to flood protection, the “official provisioning of safety can indeed contradict safety as actual practice.” Yet Molotch’s position on security is reflected less in his book’s title than in its constant refrain: “Something must be done.”

In a variety of domains, Molotch offers practical recommendations. These range from the comically simple—install equipment to facilitate shoe untying in airport security lines—to the undeniably sound—abandon all official forms of racial profiling. Many of his recommendations converge on the “daring alternative of just making things better,” as he puts it. Improvements in ventilation, signage, and cleanliness on subways, for example, not only provide passengers with a more pleasant experience but also enable them to secure their own safety and survival. The goal of facilitating spontaneous behavior that promotes security extends to people like subway station agents whose job involves protecting the public; authorities must respect their capability to deal with routine problems. Molotch applies the same logic to the reconstruction of Ground Zero, where he advocates “building in the assumption of common aid” by designing evacuation routes that help people to help each other. Likewise, his analysis of the disaster wrought by Hurricane Katrina highlights the bending and breaking of rules as essential to effective social and institutional responses to crisis. Here Molotch is at his best, combining keen historical awareness and astute sociopolitical critique to understand not only what went wrong but also why New Orleans should lead the way for all human settlements vulnerable to rising seas and intensifying storms.

RATHER THAN FETISHIZING THE INNATE ABILITY OF INDIVIDUALS TO RESPOND TO CRISIS, MOLOTCH PREFERS TO BUILD “ON THE CAPACITY OF REAL HUMAN NATURE, SOCIAL NATURE, TO RISE TO THE OCCASION.”

Overall, Molotch’s strategies rely heavily on his belief in “resilience.” Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper have tracked the rise of this concept from its origins in the field of complex systems ecology to its current status as “a pervasive idiom of global governance.”³ They attribute its success to an “intuitive ideological fit with a neoliberal

philosophy” that treats cycles of crisis and adaptation as natural features of the economy and society. For example, the notion of resilience makes it possible to oppose governmental protection and regulation by encouraging individuals to integrate crisis response strategies into their everyday lives. Although Molotch distances himself from the mainstream security analysts who have popularized this idea, he acknowledges a shared premise: “under conditions of uncertainty, it makes most sense to rely on strategies of resilience rather than trying to do an advance load-up of protections against particular but uncertain forms of threat.” His pessimism about predicting security threats or preventing them from materializing meshes with a strong wariness of bureaucratic authority and government institutions. But rather than fetishizing the innate ability of individuals to respond to crisis, Molotch prefers to build “on the capacity of real human nature, social nature, to rise to the occasion.” His innovation is to invest in infrastructures, both social and physical, that support collective resilience.

To realize its potential in Colombia, this approach would have to transcend the legacy of former president Álvaro Uribe, who promoted security as a “collective effort of all members of society.”⁴ His regime was known for empowering vigilante citizens to engage in popular forms of counterinsurgency and for enabling paramilitary armies to wage war against the guerrillas, but also against peasants, labor organizers, and human rights activists. These security initiatives are, of course, anathema to Molotch’s mutualistic, benevolent ones. But it would be careless not to recall this recent history when considering what collective, spontaneous, and unofficial approaches to security can mean. Molotch’s view from New York City limits his ability to anticipate and address such concerns. Nevertheless, his commitment to exploring positive alternatives advances a global debate—one that has only just begun—over the need to invent genuinely progressive arts of security.

¹ Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES), *Gota a gota: Desplazamiento forzado en Bogotá y Soacha*, (Fundación de Atención Al Migrante, 2007), p. 42.

² This estimate was made by the secretary of government of Bogotá, Clara López. See “Desplazados llegarían en masa,” *El Tiempo*, May 20, 2009.

³ Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2011), p. 144.

⁴ Presidencia de la República y Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, “Política de defensa y seguridad democrática” (2003), p. 14.