
This report discusses the final version of the thesis “Reassembling Airport Security: An Actor-Network Theory Account of Security Production”, submitted by Sarah Komasová at Charles University Prague’s Institute of Political Science and to be defended on 22 March 2019. The final version of the thesis has been revised in response to reports on the draft version, including my own report. It comes with an additional Word document with activated “track changes” mode and a separate document that details the revisions that have been undertaken between the draft and the final version of the text.

Rather than summarizing the contents of the thesis and going through the full text in detail once more, I will in this second report limit myself to an engagement with my previous comments (in *italics*) and Komasová’s responses to these comments.

1. Relevance of the topic, relation to existing literature, contribution of the dissertation

*Unfortunately, she does however limit herself to exclusively reviewing the literature that specifically deals with airport/aviation security. I would recommend to also situate the dissertation vis-à-vis more recent tendencies of incorporating ANT and other STS approaches within IR. This would allow Komasová to position herself within the discipline, and also to back up her theoretical and methodological choices.*

Komasová also briefly discusses what it means to use a *non-IR theory for an IR dissertation*. This point is key and should in my opinion be expanded upon. Particularly with regard to the fact that more and more IR scholars have started to use ANT and related approaches to study international politics and practices, there is an interesting debate about whether IR and ANT would actually be compatible in terms of their conceptualizations of politics, their levels of analysis, etc. Engaging with these debates would also resolve some of the limitations that Komasová sees for her own work at the very end.

*I would encourage her to make a bolder statement about the (well justified) decision to use ANT at the beginning of section 1, rather than being almost apologetic about it at the end of the section.*

These interrelated comments have been taken up and discussed at several points throughout the manuscript. Notably, the introduction (pp. 4ff) now takes up the question what it means to incorporate a non-IR analytical framework and discusses some of the relevant IR literature that has already taken on this task. During the new sub-section 1.6 on “International Relations and ANT”, Komasová discusses the challenges that arise from
the use of ANT within an IR thesis. She gives a detailed account of the (presumably) different notions of politics and power, levels of analysis, and ensuing possible methodological issues. The discussion leads her to the conclusion that there is in fact no fundamental incompatibility between the disciplinary framing of her research question and the interdisciplinary ways in which she decides to tackle that research question. In summary, the revisions undertaken with regard to the relation between IR and ANT allow Komasová to take on a much clearer position among an emergent literature at the intersections between IR and Science and Technology Studies.

2. Research design

ANT, it seems at times, is both a blessing and a curse for Komasová. While she (rightfully) highlights the strengths that the theoretical framework provides in accounting for heterogeneity and empirical “messiness”, she also admits that it offers little guidance as to how to put these insights to work. Moreover, the review of Latour’s extensive work on ANT reveals that some elements and concepts will not actually be needed for the scope of the dissertation. A more focused discussion of ANT and empirical research would help here – and notably a discussion that speaks less through Latour himself by the use of many lengthy quotes, but one in which Komasová prioritizes and uses her own words.

In response to this comment, Komasová has decided to revise and streamline section 1 (particularly sub-sections 1.1 through 1.5). Subsequently, in the final version, the theoretical framing of the analysis has shed some of its rather irrelevant discussions, and presents Latour’s work in a much more straight-forward fashion that is already geared towards its later application.

3. Empirics

The first one refers to the role of technology and other non-human elements in the chain of security production. ANT is a framework that is specifically suited for a more in-depth engagement of the ways in which security technologies become part of the translation from insecure to secure, as it highlights the relations between heterogeneous elements across the network. The analysis provided by Komasová falls a bit short here. For example, at several points throughout the text, agency is mentioned as a key concept in ANT and how non-human agency plays a role in the chain of security production (for example prominently on p. 69). It is however seldom explicated and substantiated. What does it mean when agency is produced within a network of actants? How does such a form of technologically mediated agency speak to the strict legal framework that underpins airport security, and most notably the notion of (exclusively) human agency and accountability for security that this framework presupposes?

Komasová has in the final version of the text chosen to tackle the question of agency throughout several passages, mostly as part of the empirical analysis. In my opinion, an even more concerted discussion of agency in conceptual and theoretical terms beforehand would have provided a stronger foundation for these discussions, as it would have enabled Komasová to place the work done by security “actants” even better within the situational context of the checkpoint and its overarching rationales and logics. She does however pick the question of agency up once more during the conclusions (particularly pp. 186ff), explicating how “technological agency importantly frames the passage of the security checkpoint” (p. 187) in terms of the evaluation and ensuing “separability” of the flow of passengers and goods. In summary, the text now teases out one of the particular analytical strengths of ANT in a much clearer and straight-forward way.
[The] relative neglect of the technological specificities and details also speaks to larger questions of the social construction of technology, as advanced by STS scholars. With relation to section 5, I think it would be worthwhile to explore how threat imaginaries, risk conceptualizations, specific security solutions, etc. become designed into technologies that then unfold specific effects in relation to other parts of the network of airport security. Providing more depth here would also help to further contextualize the creativity that goes into translation processes, as they encounter unforeseen situations and materialities. Komasová already does a good job in foregrounding these contingencies, but I believe this could be strengthened even further.

Komasová added some depth to the discussion of different screening technologies throughout section 3.4.2 and its sub-sections, now engaging in more detail the modes of translating threat imaginaries (for example hijackings or bombings) into quantifiable and measurable materialities (for example forbidden objects that are indicated by material or chemical characteristics) that can then be subjected to detection and intervention (for example through body scanners, metal detectors, or sniffer dogs) that we find at the airport. Throughout section 5, this expanded engagement with some of the theoretical arguments that are pertinent within the SCOT literature does however unfortunately not become fully applied to the analytical part of the thesis. I believe here would have been some additional opportunities for further exploring how the concept of translation empirically becomes multiple and unfolds sometimes unforeseen consequences and effects (for example when a metal detector detects implants or piercings, or when a body scanner detects a urine bag – thus rendering non-suspicious materialities as relevant for security).

My last point concerns the way in which the passenger is conceptualized. Obviously, this is a complex and multi-faceted role, as the passenger is part of the airport assemblage and just as well part of the translation processes that we encounter along the chain of security production. However, at the same time, the passenger is throughout these translations subjected to an objectifying logic and is, from a managerial rationale, seen as the passive (yet at times recalcitrant) potential threat object that must be rendered secure. Moreover, the passenger is of course a customer, and as such necessary for the commercial success of aviation in general, and particular airports and the businesses within them more specifically. These ambiguous and partly contradictory roles of the passenger eventually create the cross-pressures of speed, convenience, and security that Pete Adey has described.

I believe the text would strongly benefit from a stronger reflection of these roles and how they affect security politics and security practices at the airport. I think the empirical material has a lot to say about the ambiguity of the passenger, and a stronger engagement with this thematic could also be the key to really integrating the interviews that Komasová conducted with passengers in an analytically more productive fashion. As it stands right now, I was under the impression that the value of the perspectives provided through these interviews was not always clear. In other words: why do we need to know what passengers think of the chain of security production? Do their experiences matter when it comes to the overall rationale of translating insecure individuals into secure ones?

More in-depth accounts of the role of the passenger in different contexts within airport security have been added at several points throughout the text.

4. Style, language, grammar

This is a quite sensitive issue. Overall, the dissertation would benefit from a careful process of proof-reading and language editing. Being fully aware of (1) the fact that probably none of us are native English speakers, (2) the fact that research is not poetry, and (3) the fact that this is a draft text, I have to say that the manuscript was a tough read. There are plenty of grammar issues, typos, truncated sentences, etc. that could have easily
spotted and corrected. I would strongly recommend much more care here, and to have the final text of the dissertation proof-read/copy-edited by a native-speaker.

Style, language, and grammar have been much improved.

5. Comments to individual issues

I believe the methodology section would benefit from an even more in-depth description of the empirical field research. Particularly the immersion within the security screening training program is a unique selling point of this dissertation, and should be expanded upon: how was access to such a usually heavily restricted area negotiated and achieved? Which specific perspectives did this kind of immersion open up? What kind of drawbacks were there? Was the choice of open vs covert research pondered, and why was the decision to conduct research openly made? Many more questions could be asked here. Overall, I think a more reflective and personalized account of the experiences made in the field would strengthen the text and provide the reader with more contextual detail.

This point has been thoroughly addressed, now teasing out the strengths of Komasová’s empirical research in a much clearer fashion.

“Division” and “mobility” are throughout the text identified as distinct logics that inform different parts of the chain of security production. A Foucauldian perspective would strongly disagree here and rather argue that movement and the sorting of mobile populations mutually constitute each other. While Komasová touches upon this relationship briefly, I think it would benefit from some more in-depth discussion – especially given the distinct analytical treatment of the categories that she opts for.

This has been addressed at several points throughout the text.

6. Conclusions of the evaluation, recommendations

This is already a good thesis that comes with a promise to make a timely contribution to ongoing challenging debates at the intersection of IR and STS. However, in order to be able to cash in on that promise and turn this thesis into a very good one, there remains some substantial work to be done.

Comparing the draft version and the final version of the manuscript, it becomes apparent that significant work has went into revisions and all major points of critique have been addressed. Particularly the theoretical framing, the relation between the research and larger trajectories of IR work incorporating the STS toolbox, as well as Komasová’s own positioning within the field have been explicated in a much clearer and straightforward fashion, laying the foundation for the already outstanding empirical data collection and analysis. Referring to my own previous comment that “there remains some substantial work to be done”, I consider this work taken care of. I therefore recommend the dissertation for defence.

Dr. Matthias Leese