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RISK, COMMERCE, AUTHORITY:
TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY

Review of: Amoore, L. (2013) *The Politics of Possibility. Risk and Security Beyond Probability*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

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This book by Louise Amoore is a remarkably rich one. From the diverse worlds of risk management consulting, software design, forensics, and data visualization, Amoore examines the development of a new mode of governing that addresses emergent, uncertain, and possible futures. A central feature of ‘the politics of possibility’ is the increasingly close relationship between commercial opportunities and security threats, a relation that suggests that security and economic desires could be seamlessly integrated - for example, that ‘biometric borders’ could filter and police bad intention and the illegitimate, while also remaining open to economically viable trade and circulation (82; see also Foucault, 2007: 65). Drawing on the writings of Foucault, Agamben, Derrida, Judith Butler, and William Connolly, as well as on post- 9/11 novels and art works, Amoore analyzes the implications of such a politics for questions of authority, accountability, and critique.

Drawing out a close relationship with earlier data mining practices in the commercial domain, Amoore emphasizes that the politics of possibility could not be analyzed as a self-evident response to the events of 9/11. However, part I of the book suggests two ways in which security politics post- 9/11 have been reoriented. First, Amoore demonstrates how the very calculus of risk has

changed: no longer strictly a matter of managing known or calculable risks, what comes to matter is the capacity for action on the basis of what is not (yet) known or on what could possibly happen. For example, through a reading of the testimony of the former UK prime minister Tony Blair before the Iraq Inquiry, Amoore shows how the actual presence of weapons of mass destruction became less important than suspicion about any possible impact in the future. Or, citing Blair, ‘they killed 3,000 people, but if they could have killed 30,000 they would have’ (24). In this context, Amoore is concerned with the particular apparatus at work in the politics of possibility. She argues that the purpose of risk assessment today is not to seek a causal relationship between items of data, but to operate on and through the relation itself. Thus, in the design of security algorithms, we find ‘an ontology of association’ combined with a mathematical means of calculating uncertainty: ‘if *** and ***, in association with ***, then ***’ (59). Here, the asterisks mark an unknown value that comes into view only through its relation with other forms of data. These efforts to make inferences across data items are necessarily speculative, Amoore elsewhere writes, for they are not about who we are, or what the data says about us, but about ‘what can be imagined and inferred about who we might be - on our very proclivities and potentialities’ (61).

Across the book we find several examples of domains in which the logic of association is put into force, for instance with regard to border security, forensics, and financial tracking programs. These discussions mark some of the strongest and most developed parts of the book. Moreover, they contribute to a better theoretical understanding of how government has come to evolve around life itself. Building on Foucault’s 1978 *Security, Territory, Population* lectures at the Collège de France, Amoore points out that no longer being a clear demarcation of norm from deviation, the logic of association operates on the basis of a mobile norm, allowing for differential degrees of inclusion and exclusion. As she puts it, ‘[n]either the lightning strike norm established by the king, nor strictly the normalization of a self-governing disciplinary society, the differential curve of normality breaks subjects and objects into elemental degrees of risk such that the norm is always in a process of becoming’ (65). What follows from this understanding - and this is the second element of what has come to define the politics of possibility - is that it becomes important to examine how that mobile norm is written, and by whom. Proposing a reading of Agamben’s exception that is in fact ‘teeming with decision, judgment, cal-

cultation, and data,' this allows Amoore to shift attention to the plurality of forces that have become authorized to write the lines between normal and abnormal, safe and risky, inside and outside (46). Today, it is the private consulting companies, risk managers, and software engineers that emerge as experts in the application of the norm, yet, of them we know very little. Amoore's analysis sets out to study these private actors and the ways in which they are authorized to identify and govern exceptional circumstances.

This focus may well be motivated by dissatisfaction with some of the recent work on security that has put emphasis on the role of technology. The discussions on 'netwars' and 'virtuous war', for example, have had a tendency to depict risk- assessment systems, databases, and security algorithms in their ideal forms: as smooth and cutting- edge technologies that have the capacity to accelerate or even efface decision making (61). Skeptical of such idealized renderings of technology, this is probably also why Amoore is concerned with maintaining the notion of the decision. She argues, drawing on Derrida's writings on decision and judgment, that although the desire to act on the basis of uncertainty may seem to close off political decision, 'in fact decisions are made everywhere and all the time' (18). To reclaim those decisions - the writing of an algorithmic code, the organization of security pilot projects, stress testing - 'is to relocate the politics of an otherwise gleaming and technoscientific set of solutions'. Amoore's focus on the decision runs somewhat counter to her (loose) appropriation of the concept of the assemblage, which she uses to overcome the discourse/material dichotomy (in chapter 5) and to emphasize the contingency and instability of the constellation of forces that is at work in the politics of possibility (chapter 6). For me, following Jane Bennett's work (2005: 463) - foregrounded also by Amoore - the value of the assemblage lies in the ways in which it consciously deploys 'a distributive notion of agency', and thereby interferes 'with the project of blaming'. At the same time, as Bennett argues, the assemblage does not strictly abandon the project of identifying what Arendt called the sources of harmful effects: 'To the contrary, such a notion broadens the range of places to look for sources.' (Ibid: emphasis added).

In chapters 3 and 4 of the book Amoore is concerned with the contingent and fragile ways in which the politics of possibility crystallizes in a broad range of spaces, including the border. Here, she draws an interesting parallel between

the border writing practices of the UK passenger- information units and the commercial logics of the call center, where incoming calls are selected and differentiated according to similar risk patterns and opportunities for profit. However, concrete examples of how such practices and technologies are negotiated at the border are missing from the analysis. Indeed, in the absence of more detail on these moments of contestation or reorientation of the new risk calculus, Amoore herself runs the risk of making these developments appear smoother than they are. Consider the following citation from one of her informants:

'But the idea of these systems is that they're fully automated [...] every flight into your country and in all likelihood every flight out of your country or maybe even domestic flights. You're capturing the data, you're processing the data, you're assigning a risk score.' (88)

The question of how to relocate the politics of these 'fully automated' systems and technoscientific solutions becomes again relevant in chapter 6. Amoore is right to mark the difficulties of interrupting the contemporary politics of possibility. She asks, 'confronted by a technoscientific security politics that acts on the very basis of future possibilities, indifferent to whether they come to pass, how does one begin to map the "conditions of possibility" of such politics, or to show how things might be otherwise? Is the possibility of critique effaced by a political program that precisely takes possibility as its object?' (155). We could add: where do we locate politics when the responsibility to secure is dispersed across software engineers, risk- management consultants, or the algorithm itself? How can we question the collection of data if what counts is not the accuracy of the number, but the associations that can be drawn across data? And how can we critique contemporary security practices when they rewrite the benchmarks of cost- effectiveness and data protection? Indeed, such questions are particularly important in relation to a security politics that itself incorporates and capitalizes uncertainty and failure. As Linsey McGoe (2012: 8) points out, in today's security context, risk assessment can never really go wrong: if a predicted threat fails to manifest itself, this only nurtures the idea that the next crisis is near and that we need to become prepared. Similarly, when the expectations surrounding new security technologies and systems prove uncertain this only generates further investment, 'for more hope and hype are needed to remedy thwarted expectations'.

In an attempt to develop a critique of the politics of possibility Amoore turns to what Gilles Deleuze has termed ‘immanent life’ - ‘a life of pure potentiality comprised only of “virtualities, events, singularities”’ (157). For her, the question for critique becomes ‘how to sustain potentiality itself, how to keep open the indeterminate, the unexpected place and the unknowable subject’ (ibid). Among other things, Amoore proposes Bennett’s notion of ‘enchantment’ as an alternative mode of imagination, one that appreciates ‘the magic of future potential’. ‘To be enchanted’, Amoore cites Bennett, ‘is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’ Enchantment ‘can propel ethics’ in the sense that it maintains and creates a ‘space for novelty’ in the imagination of futures (168- 169). Two questions should be raised here. First, what does it mean for the border guard or the software analyst to be ‘enchanted’? Put differently, how does a critique that is based on enchantment actually work in the space of the control room or at the border? Second, should our critique be based on preserving the indeterminate future, the unknown, and the uncertain, if these elements, as discussed above, are themselves seized by the politics of possibility? As Brad Evans and Julian Reid (2014) have recently claimed in their provocative analysis of the politics of resilience, should our critique not be oriented toward rescuing the very idea and possibility of security?

To a large extent, the question of how the politics of possibility can be held to account remains unanswered after reading this book. Nevertheless, Louise Amoore’s *The Politics of Possibility* offers an insightful and elegant account of the emergence of a security mode that takes action in the face of what may possibly occur in the future. Further, it provides a theoretically convincing analysis of the emerging alliances between security and commerce. Such a focus is much needed in order to investigate the precise scope and effects of the commercializations that are set in motion by a security politics that is based on the possible.

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