Balancing the Books
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Weighing the Risks

Danger should be measured empirically and thwarted imaginatively

Against Security: How We Go Wrong at Airports, Subways, And Other Sites Of Ambiguous Danger

By Harvey Molotch
Princeton University Press
278 pages, $35

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

In light of the 9-11 attacks, the housing bubble, and too-big-to fail banks, calculating risk may well be the most important -- and daunting – challenge of the 21st century.

As we act to protect ourselves against risks and evildoers who really are out there, our judgments are often irrational. We overestimate the dangers of air travel and rarely think about the odds of a fatal car accident. We don't realize that eating a meal is more perilous than sitting on a toilet in a public restroom. And, according to Harvey Molotch, a professor of sociology and metropolitan studies at New York University, we assume that government officials have effective tools to keep us safe, even though, more often than not, they are "operating from the seat of their pants."

In Against Security, Molotch takes aim at a "command-and-control" approach to subway and airport safety, flood protection, and the war on terror. He makes a compelling case that security requires "considered judgments based on empirical evidence cleansed of anxieties of fear and vengeance." And he suggests specific changes, small and large, to enhance safety without diminishing civil liberties or the everyday enjoyment of life, that deserve our attention.
Molotch demonstrates that many security measures are costly and ineffective. The "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign of New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority, and the hotline number advertised by the MTA, produced no credible information about terrorists, and many false alarms, and stimulated some people to target individuals against whom they had a grudge. The "vast airport apparatus" of machines and guards and a growing list of contraband items may or may not be "security theater," intended to increase anxiety and deference to authorities. But, Molotch reminds us, has it stopped "a single incident of mayhem"? And the construction of flood walls, levees, and dams in Louisiana has created the illusion of safety among people who should have been advised to relocate.

Equally disturbing, security measures produce sometimes irritating, sometimes disastrous unintended consequences. Closing down public restrooms because they are "security risks" imposes difficulties for tourists, vendors, taxi drivers, and others who make their living on the streets. Designed to prevent cheaters from jumping over or crawling under the subway turnstile, high-entry (HEET) models complicate emergency evacuations and hamper police officers from responding, for example, to platform shootings. Security measures have also pushed some Americans to drive instead of fly, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will get into an accident.

Molotch emphasizes that security is best understood as a design problem. Delivered with a mordant wit, his solutions reorient our thinking about security. Molotch advocates unisex public bathrooms, with a urinal zone; for subways, an honor system, with random checks and stiff penalties for nonpayment; an end to racial and ethnic profiling (given the low payoff and the injustice); and, most controversially, the abandonment of parts of New Orleans.

He also insists that we attend to the mundane: better signage, ventilation, and lighting in subway stations; devices to place luggage at floor level in airports, with a motorized incline to take them to the screening apparatus – and bars where passengers can tie and untie shoes.

Most important, Molotch reminds us that security bric-a-brac does not deter by its mere existence -- and that systems work better when people are not "desperate or resentful." And he shares with us this sobering thought: If we do not resign ourselves to the occasional bad outcome, including even death, we will be "sitting ducks for any program, policy or action" that promises security, no matter what it costs and what inconveniences and irritations it entails.

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