Passports: identity and airports

Passports:
Identity and airports

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Contents

Introduction

We are all familiar with passports, but what can a sociological analysis tell us about these everyday objects? This free course, *Passports: identity and airports*, explores how the passport became a commonplace item and how material objects, such as the passport, have come to mediate modern air travel. Passports may seem like unremarkable everyday objects, but they've played a crucial, and often surprising, historical role in shaping the relationship between individuals and the social worlds in which they live. One place where we use a passport is at the airport, which we'll explore as a case study later in this course.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course DD308 *Making social worlds*.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the historical and sociological context of how passports became commonplace
- identify ways in which passport regimes are used to sort, categorise, order and classify populations
- consider ways that the passport can produce racialised subjects
- understand how the passport has become a staple of security in the modern airport
- understand the role of matter and the material in making social worlds by using the airport as a case study.

1 The passport system


Figure 1 UK passports

Passport systems have a long and varied history. They're probably the most widespread and enduring example of a 'regime of identification'. The term 'regime of identification' refers to systematic efforts made by administrative bodies and governments to identify and register their populations. The regimes we'll study in this section had some very different aims, but they share some common consequences. In particular, through identifying their populations, social worlds decide 'who is who', creating new categories which formalise who 'belongs' and who 'does not'.

Now watch the video below which considers the history of various objects used to identify individuals. As you watch, consider the following questions:

- What different organisations have sought to identify people?
- What different devices have been used to aid identification?
- Who was identified and why?

Video content is not available in this format.

The passport – history
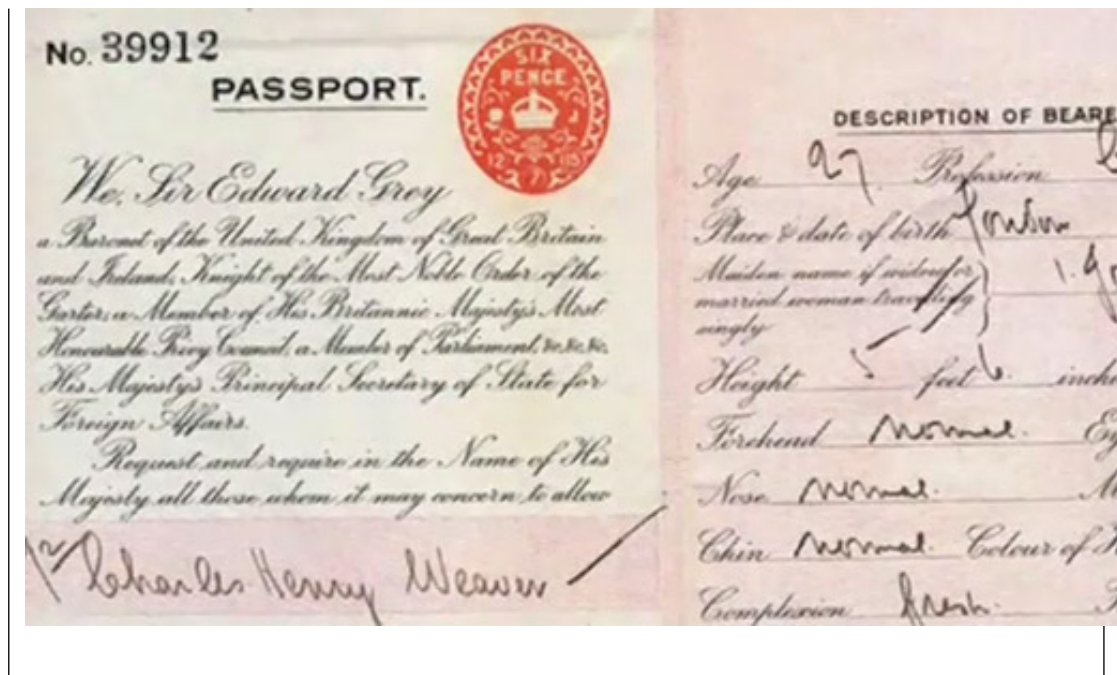
1.1 Passport regimes – inclusion and exclusion

Figure 2 Komagatu Maru

We will now look more closely at the different ways in which passport regimes have functioned historically to meet social needs to regulate conduct. In the case study of early twentieth-century Canada to follow, you will see how a passport regime has been used to register individuals as part of a distinct social population. However, this process constantly leaches into efforts to categorise, sort, order and classify. At a minimum, identification and registration of individuals involve decisions about who is in and who is out. These decisions have been made on a variety of grounds including place of birth, ethnicity, race, class and – in some circumstances – gender. Categories such as race, class and gender often interact to produce sometimes subtle and sometimes overt processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Watch the video below, which is taken from an interview with sociologist Radhika Mongia, then complete Activity 1.

Video content is not available in this format.
Interview with Radhika Mongia

Activity 1

Answer the questions in the box below. When you have finished, read the following feedback.

1. In what ways might passports produce racialised subjects?
2. Is it more difficult for some people than for others to become attached to a new territory?
3. Which groups of people were most subject to exclusion from Canada?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. Radikha Mongia suggests that passports not only mirror but *produce* race. This is quite a difficult argument but her analysis highlights the role of passport regimes in formalising and codifying national identities that were explicitly racialised. Thus passports create new forms of identity such that an individual is no longer simply from the Punjab but becomes the bearer of Indian national identity. In an international system which imposes different visa and admission requirements on different nationalities, passport regimes reinforce racialised national identities.

2. Passport regimes make international migration,with attachment to new territories and national identities, more difficult for some than for others. The furore surrounding the Komagata Maru incident illustrates the influence of the media in

drawing global attention to what the Canadian government saw as the problem of non-white immigration.

3. Mongia states that Indians were excluded from Canada, and refers to the Komagatu Maru incident. More generally, she states 'the Canadian government simply wanted a white Canada'.

2 Passports and the airport

Figure 3 Airport

By now you should have an idea of how different objects have been used for identification purposes and how passport regimes are operated. You should also have had a chance to see how passport regimes have impacted on the lives of some individuals. In this section, we will be looking at the one place where we all use a passport – at the airport.

Now watch the video below which looks at the airport and the use of the passport within it, then attempt Activity 2.

Video content is not available in this format.
A sociological analysis of the airport

Activity 2

The video analyses the airport using the concepts of:

- Security
- Conduct
- Attachment.

In the boxes below, write some notes on how the video uses these concepts to analyse the airport. (You may wish to watch the video again.)

Security

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

- Surveillance is essential for modern airports.
- Airports constantly rehearse for emergencies.
- Passengers are all treated as a potential threat.
- The passport is central to controlling security via use of 'gateways' and 'choke points' (points of congestion, like boarding gates).

Conduct

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

- Conduct at airports is closely monitored.
- 'Choke points' and 'sorting processes' control the flow of planes, baggage, passengers and crew.
- Internationally recognisable signs comprise an interface that manages conduct and movement.

Attachment

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

- There are simultaneous processes of attachment and 'un-attachment'.
- There is sense of airports being 'un-attached' to geographic location.
- They are also however pre-attached to the generic place of 'the airport' terminal.
- Airports are built around different forms of attachment:
  a. security technologies
  b. pleasure
  c. consumption.

http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/passports-identity-and-airports/content-section-0 Tuesday 6 August 2019

3 *Aviopolis*

Figure 4 Mumbai airport

You'll now look at an extract from the book *Aviopolis: A Book about Airports* by Gillian Fuller and Ross Harley (2004). *Aviopolis* is a critical study of airports and their place in social worlds. Using images and texts, it shows how information, architecture, people and machines are converging in the urban form of the airport. The extract combines cultural theory, schematic illustrations, technical photographs, and discourse to explore the airport as an ever-changing temporary city that could be anywhere.

Activity 3

You should read the extract now:

'Anatomy of an airport', from Fuller, G. and Harley, R. (2004) *Aviopolis: A Book about Airports*, London, Black Dog Publishing, pp. 16–49.

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4 Airports: the social, the material and the hybrid

Figure 5 Speed bumps ahead

We have seen how the airport can be analysed using the concepts of security, conduct and attachment. But the airport can also be used to explore the **sociology of matter**.

The sociology of matter investigates the relationship between the social and the material, natural world. Are material objects primarily shaped by their social uses? Or does their material form in fact shape the social uses that spring up around them? The sociology of matter approaches these questions and the case study of the airport will explore them.

In a moment you will watch an extract from 'Materiality and the airport' that explores the sociology of matter by looking at the airport from two different perspectives:

- the **social**
- the **material**.

The meaning of these will be clarified in the video by looking at examples from the airport.

Also during the video, look out for the following two sociological concepts and how they are used in the analysis:

- delegation
- scripting.

Now watch the video below.

Video content is not available in this format.
Materiality and the airport

Within the context of the sociology of matter, **delegation** refers the idea of getting material artefacts to stand in for the work of humans – it means being able to find a material agent or device to 'act at a distance'. **Scripting or prescription** refers to the use of material artefacts in order to configure users – to attempt to control humans via the use of material artefacts. Whether intentionally or not, the design of a material technology embeds particular expectations of purpose, context, practice and use.

4.1 A material analysis of the airport

Figure 6 Towards passport control

You will now have the chance to apply some of the insights gained from the previous section to objects commonly found in the airport.

Activity 4

In this activity you'll be examining two objects – the passport and the baggage scanner – in light of the analysis. To help you do this, consider the following questions for each item:

- What work has to be done if the object in question is present?
- What work would have to be done if the object in question were not present?
- What is being delegated?
- How (if at all) is this object configuring or scripting the person using it?

Then make some notes about them in the boxes below.

1. The passport

> *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

Now watch the following video where these questions are posed and answered for the passport. (Don't worry if your answers were different to ours.)

Video content is not available in this format.

The passport

2. The baggage scanner

Now watch the following video where these questions are posed for the baggage scanner.

Video content is not available in this format.

The baggage scanner – questions

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Now watch the following video where these questions are answered for the baggage scanner. (Don't worry if your answers were different to ours.)

Video content is not available in this format.

The baggage scanner – answers

4.2 Airports and hybrids

This analysis has constantly been hinting at the fact that it is impossible to separate humans from the material objects and artefacts that surround us all. This is why some sociologists think it makes more sense to talk about 'hybrids'.

You should now watch a second extract from 'Materiality and the airport' that discusses hybrids in the context of the airport.

Video content is not available in this format.

Airports and hybrids

Much of the analysis of materiality or matter that you have just watched was based on the writings of social theorist Bruno Latour. Please take some time to read the Latour chapter extract below. Pay attention to the way that Latour is concerned with the distribution of competences (such as agency or morality) between humans and non-human material artefacts. He uses an example that you have already come across (of starting a car without a seat belt) but he also introduces another example from everyday life – the door.

Activity 5

You should read the extract now:

'Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts', from Bijker, W. E. and Law, J. (eds) (1992) *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, pp. 225–58.

Conclusion

In this free course, *Passports: identity and airports*, we have been looking at passports and airports as a sort of token with the power to 'open up' the social world to closer inspection. In the first section, we looked at the history of passports as one of the most enduring examples of a regime of identification. Identifying the individuals that make up a given population is one of the fundamental tasks of any social order. This task involves passport systems directly in shaping the technologies and practices necessary to secure the social world. In identifying and registering populations, passport systems are entrenched in the business of defining who 'belongs' and consequently who 'does not'.

In the section that followed, the emphasis was on the role of matter and the material in the social world of the airport. The social world of the airport demonstrates how closely interwoven the social and the material are – so close that separation can be difficult. For some sociologists, these tightly folded connections between the material and the social, between the human and the non-human, mean that it makes more sense to speak of hybrids rather than either humans or artefacts. How humans interact with material objects – and how material objects shape human behaviour – are therefore important questions for sociology.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course DD308 *Making social worlds*.

Acknowledgements

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Extracts

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