Abstract: The passport is not simply a sign of citizenship and identity that governments (and some international organizations) issue or individual agents that bear or interpret those documents, the passport is an object that acts. The document itself has material agency - it makes certain things and politics possible, and plays an active role in the global mobility assemblage.

Introduction

"Let others check our papers" - M. Foucault.

“There are objects everywhere” – B. Latour.

The passport is a key artifact in the global mobility assemblage, understood as the dispositif of population in circulation. In addition to the more traditional story of a legal-socio-political regime that is based on domestic laws concerning citizenship, mobility and immigration, international standards about identity documentation and travel and frontier formalities, and a set of beliefs and behaviors about mobility -- supplemented by a refugee regime that tidies up the loose ends of those excluded from the nation-state system, this story includes the role of the physical infrastructure and objects of that regime. Following the work of Aaltola, for example, on the hub-and-spoke pedagogical structure of global civil aviation illustrates the way that the

---

1 Archival research for this project was conducted in 2002 with the support of the American University in Cairo and again in 2004 with the support of the University of Ottawa.
actual physical infrastructure of air travel routes have an effect in the kinds of travel possible, educate the traveller and create a particular imagination of the global.\textsuperscript{2} Indeed, the organization of the airport causes particular kinds of subject-positions.\textsuperscript{3} It is not simply that the passport makes this configuration of global mobility possible, but that the passport is a crucial physical part of the infrastructure that acts. If we decenter the human and stop viewing material only in terms of how they serve the human, then we see the way that passports and ‘data-doubles’ relate to the material infrastructure and the human, how the passports themselves circulate and act.\textsuperscript{4}

This paper builds on two literatures: the first from science and technology studies and its interpreters in political and social theory; the second from critical literature on mobility from human geography and political science. The work of Latour and Callon, Law and Bennett, have been engaged more seriously in political and social theory.\textsuperscript{5} Latour argues, for example, that the production of scientific truths is dependent on an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors. The microscope, in his powerful examination of the laboratory, has an effect on what kinds of data is recorded, and represents some facts over others.\textsuperscript{6} Law make a similar and powerful argument about causality, in which he argues that the actual empirical and ideational arrangement of things, people, and power is ‘messy’ and that efficient causality can never

\begin{footnotes}
\item[6] Latour, \textit{Science in Action}.
\end{footnotes}
capture the way that politics works. Within political theory and international relations, we can point to a number of very interesting articulations of this theoretical perspective. Bennett examines the Northeast blackout of 2003, and argues that there is a dispersed and heterogenous network of agential sources that includes the non-human: ‘electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields.’ My primary argument is that passports are such a technology that effect both its bearers and its interpreters.

The second literature is the more specific to global mobility regimes. Others have written on the passport, and its central role in the governance of mobility. My own previous work on the passport attempted a Foucauldian analysis that examined the passport as a solution to a number of problems of government. The passport was one tool that governments and individuals used to articulate the conditions of possibility for protection and claiming rights. I argued that the passport was a governmental tool that (1) constituted, classified, and managed particular populations in relation to their political, economic, social, and biopolitical utility for the state and (2) the relation between the status and identity represented by the documents and the claims that they represent were both made possible and fundamentally undermined by the discretion that is essential to the system. Governments had used identification and authorization functions to police the legitimate means of violence, public health, and mobility. Had Security, Territory, Population been published at the time of writing, then it might have been a useful framework for...

---

illustrating the way that security is related to circulation.\textsuperscript{11} Foucault argues that the mode of security is an ever-expanding dispositif for the management of circulation, the circulation of ideas, of capital, of goods, of people. And, in the contemporary era, Bigo has highlighted the circulation of unease through risk management by security professionals.\textsuperscript{12} The contemporary global mobility regime is made possible and structured through the object of the passport. The possibility of a passport makes certain kinds of identity interpretable and verifiable, rights claimable, border control examinations possible, and certain circuits of mobility more or less easy. For example, if there is a passport that can be linked to a body-dossier-identity, then the document can be examined to make a decision about the bearer. The legal requirement for a passport for (the vast majority of) international travel is only possible if there is a large bureaucracy that can make, process, and validate passports: in the absence of the Passport Office, there can be no passport; equally, there can be no Passport Office without the passport. The passport also makes possible certain kinds of neurotic subjects: citizens who are anxious about their ability and authenticity of producing themselves as subjects that are readable as rights-claiming bodies.\textsuperscript{13}

What power or agency does the passport exercise? The passport validates and structures claims to rights, and so it acts. What is the difference between the claims that the passport or rather that the modern standardized passport acts and the more modest claim that the passport makes something possible? Saying that the passport is part of an assemblage in which emergent


causality is ontologically different from a more technological-driven claim that retain human actions are only made possible by a set of technical factors. I would argue along with both Bennett and Latour that in the case of the identity complex, the passport not only makes things possible, but also acts - we are able to make meaning from the passport and really make meaning of ourselves through the object of the passport in fundamentally different ways than we were able to when passports were simple letters. The passport photograph gives rise to a new kind of anxiety – a new neurosis for the citizen – that our face will be read against us. Because the passport photo is always one that ‘doesn’t look like me.’ The passport photograph creates a new grounds for identification: the presupposed isomorphism of the body to itself, the representation to the body, and the identity to the body and the representation. It makes new kinds of authentication possible and creates the possibility that for the first time, one cannot prove one’s own identity. The evolution of the modern biometric or machine-readable travel document demonstrates this point clearly. The technical standards that render identity data into machine-readable code opens up a new space for political action: data-doubles interact with security algorithms and risk profiles in entirely novel and unpredictable ways. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak details this:

… I was supposed to take the airplane from Heathrow on Sunday. Air Canada says to me: ‘we can’t accept you.’ I said: ‘why?’ and she said: ‘You need a visa to go to Canada.’ I said: ‘look here, I am the same person, the same passport… ‘ Indian cultural identity right? But you become different. When it is from London, Indians can very well want to jump ship to Canada; I need a visa to travel from London to Canada on the same passport, but not from the United States. To cut a long story short,[...] I had to stay another day, and telephone Canada and tell them that I could not give my seminar. I said

---


to the woman finally before I left, in some bitterness: ‘Just let me tell you one small thing: Don’t say “we can’t accept you” that sounds very bad from one human being to another; next time you should say: “The regulations are against it”; then we are both victims.’\textsuperscript{16}

It is precisely the assemblage of the MRTD passport and the airline information system that prohibits Spivak’s journey from England to Canada, even though the same assemblage permits that same Spivak to journey from the US to Canada on the same airline with the same passport.

Methodologically, can we distinguish the agency of the things and the agency of the humans? The materialist argument would be that we can, but only when we have an emergent understanding of causality. The agency of the passport can be seen at a key moments in the evolution of that assemblage: the introduction of the photograph to the passport. This article examines that focusing event through archival work, based on records at the Public Records Archive.

**Passport Photos**

During and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, there was accelerated change in the assemblage of tools and agents for managing mobility. Important structural dynamics of that period include the break-up of large empires and the creation of new nation-states in Europe, the presence of large numbers of refugees who posed both a political and public health risk, and new international organizations that asserted authority (Nansen Org. for refugees, League of Nations,

With the proliferation of state borders and a growing concern over mobile populations, the passport became a more centralized tool of national and international governance, rather than a convenience or inconvenience for travel of the transnational elite and increasingly upper-middle classes. In this period, the passport becomes a standard part of the travel/mobility assemblage that helped concretize identity certification, affirms state capacity for both identification and border policing, and expands the domain of action in which the state can act. But crucially also, in addition to being a way for states to define and manage its population, the passport influenced the way that national subjects understood themselves.

One of the most important moments in this construction of the post-War mobility assemblage is the collision of photography and the passport. Before 1915, portraits are not connected to identity documents, despite the availability of daguerreotypes in British metropolitan areas throughout the latter half of the 19th century, the invention of modern film in the late 1880s and the wide availability of the Kodak Brownie at the turn of the century. The portrait photograph is available and standard before the passport. The integration of the photograph into the passport coincides with invention of the standardized passport, which is both mandatory for international travel and made accessible through a more systematized bureaucratic application procedure. There is a moment of flux that is a good focus point: between 1915 and 1922 – as the UK passport was being developed, but before the League of Nations Technical SubCommittee had formulated international norms for the passport. During this time, the passport photograph acts in the creation of a particular international mobility regime.

---

17 Nevzat Soguk, States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999).
In 1914, passports are single folded sheets, sometimes with an attached photograph of all kinds.\(^{18}\)

The identifiers are narrative – the passport photograph is not yet trusted as a technology for identification. For example, descriptions include:

- Age
- Height
- Forehead (high, ordinary, oval, slightly receding)
- Eyes (colours – blue, green, brown, including grey)
- Nose (large, straight, roman)
- Mouth (straight, firm, large, ordinary, medium, thick lips)
- Chin (round)
- Colour of Hair (Brown)
- Complexion (Fresh, pale, peachy, dark)
- Face (oval, thin)

By 1915-1916, Form “A” includes a requirement for a photograph, but they are random (some are seated formal portraits, one with a wooded background, others more full-face).\(^{19}\) At the end of 1916, there is a fold-out passport of 5 by 2 panels, with a blue binding, embossed with a gold coat of arms and passport on the outer cover. Passport photos start to be regulated: full face, no hat or head-covering (except in the case of ‘nuns, rabbis,’ doukhobor women\(^ {20}\), East Indians’).\(^ {21}\)

There is a lack of standardization of early photographs in the early archive (and indeed with early identifications). The Passport Office initially does not require a particular kind of photograph or issue a standard document. Some of the key norms that the passport photograph make possible are absent: there is no imperative to name each individual, or to have a standard photo, or to associate one document with exclusively one person, or to make passports valid for more than one trip or longer than two years. Wives, children and domestics are often included in a British


\(^{19}\) Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 1916. Application for Passport. PRO: FO 737/24

\(^{20}\) An exiled group of Russian Orthodox Christians whose women wore head covering.

nationals’ application – indeed adults could even have non-familial children placed on their passport for particular journeys with parental consent. Indeed, as late as the 1930s, one could be issued a ‘Junior Collective Certificate’ that acted as a group passport for ‘approved parties of students, boy scouts and girl guides.’

For example, one passport is issued in 1915 to a woman, her unnamed children, and an accompanying anonymous nanny. The photograph included in the application (but not the document) is a family portrait without the nanny. Refusals are made on bases of morality and politics - but not identity: a woman of ill-repute, for example, who the officer suspects is travelling to engage in dance. Over the space of a couple of years, the Passport Office comes to integrate the photograph into the passport document itself and the passport application form, but slowly and with skepticism. The passport does not come in book form until 1920. The purpose of the passport is clearly indicated in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s 1921 circular Passports and Visas: “the primary object of the passport is to constitute official proof of the national status and identity of its holder, for purposes of either travel or of residence abroad.”

They are valid only for two years, and for a particular named set of countries.

The photograph relies on both a technology and a set of reading skills - it is a representation and a claim to representation. But the turbulence of the collision of these technologies of identification comes in midst of the First World War. The integration of the photograph into the passport

---

26 Paul Fussell, Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the War (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980): 24-31
application form demonstrates this turbulence: in the form of 1916, the photograph is given a space, but it is corroborated by physical descriptions of the photograph above. Space for a photograph is complemented by narrative descriptions: nose, face, complexion, brow, eyes, etc. The passport application form uses but also resists the photograph - it incorporates the photograph as a representation/identification of the individual, but it asks for a narrative corroboration. This narrative corroboration is also defined in Passport Office circulars, directions for ‘visible distinguishing marks’ is provided: ‘(a) only marks visible while wearing ordinary clothing are to be described, (b) only permanent marks are to be described, i.e. do not describe beards, moustaches, baldness, eyeglasses, tattoo marks, or warts… (e) use the word “missing” rather than “amputated” or “cut off” …. (g) use the word “irregular” to describe deformities, e.g. a broken nose is described “nose irregular”. A hare lip is described as “upper lip is irregular”. (h) use the word “defective” to show an underdeveloped arm, leg, foot, hand or feature, e.g. “right ear defective.”’ There is a double-move: the passport makes the document and the body identifiable to itself, but there is also a self-limiting recognition that the photograph does not perfectly represent the body.

The application form was settled by 1921, and included ‘duplicate small unmounted photographs of the applicant (and wife if to be included)… one of which must be certified on the back by the recommender.’ The two primary authenticators of identity are the declaration by a ‘responsible British subject possessing one of the following qualifications, vis: British official, resident

---

27 This is similar to other countries. My great-greandfather has a laissez-passer from the governor of Venice to go from Trieste to Belgrade in 1919, which includes: build, hair, eyes, nose, mustache, beard, colour, and space for a photograph.
British merchant, banker, minister of religion, barrister, solicitor, physician or surgeon’, and a photograph, which is also signed by the guarantor. 30

The passport photo size is later standardized.31 By 1948, the passport application form A includes specific instructions about the photograph: ‘a recent photograph… must be taken full face without hat, and the photographs must not be mounted. The size of the photographs must not be more than 2 ½ inches by 2 inches or less than 2 inches by 1 ½ inches. The photographs must be printed on normal thin photographic paper and must not be glazed on the reverse side.’32

There is a concern that the photographs not come from “slot machines.”

At this time, then, the passport photo makes possible and necessary a reading of the person and their image.

Conclusions

Standing in line to renew my Canadian passport, I overheard the following argument:

‘Ma’am, I’m not putting down [on your passport] that your hair is blue’ - Passport Canada Official.

‘Is my hair blue?’ – Blue-haired woman

30 Ibid: 14
‘Yes’

‘Well?’

‘It’s not naturally blue, is it? I’m not putting down that your hair is blue.’

‘Are you going to ask every woman in here what her natural hair colour is?’

‘I’m still not putting down blue.’

This moment illustrated the neurotic citizen-subject produced by the passport photo: the government official is anxious that the narrative description of the photo will undermine the authenticity of the document, even though the photograph will accurately present a blue-haired woman; the woman is anxious that the passport be consistent with itself. In both cases, the anxiety is produced by the passport – and in the case of this woman will persist. The passport photograph – particularly in the age of biometric passports in which individuals are instructed to have a ‘passive’ face – continually speak against their authenticity.

The connection of the image of the face and the narration of the body to the government of identity and mobility puts new forces into relation with emergent results. Even in a pre-digital era, the presence of the photograph causes as many problems as it presumes to solve: first in terms of standardization and then interpretation. The questions of interpretation persist even in modern forms of biometrics.\(^{33}\)