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ARTICLE

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Engagement all the way down

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks about the practices and forms of critique afforded at the intersection between Science-and-Technology Studies and the critical study of security politics, by drawing on the work of Isabelle Stengers. Can engagements with practice generate effective forms of critique? How does the attention to materialities and the fine-grained analysis of technical practices, that typically accompany STS-inspired research, feed into ways of practicing critique? How can the analytical attention to 'little security nothings' be translated into critical agendas?

In addressing these questions, Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers serves as an inspiration, not just for her philosophical writing on the situated nature of critical thinking, but also for her own experimental politics and engagement. A key message of the paper is that critical practice is "engagement all the way down." The article thinks through the ways in which the work of Stengers and her companions can be put into practice in qualitative critical security research. It builds on Foucault's rejection of the separation between theoretical, universalist knowledge on the one hand, and practical knowledge on the other. It emphasises the processual, uncertain and practical aspects of critical thinking. It identifies the notions of following, leveraging, joined risks and paying attention as key, concrete pathways of engaged critique.

KEYWORDS

Critical security studies; science-and-technology studies; critique; financial security; Isabelle Stengers

Introduction: the trouble of critique

In February 2017, I was invited to participate in an Expert Roundtable discussion on the topic of countering terrorism financing at Dutch Parliament.[1] Questions before the Roundtable included whether the pursuit of terrorism financing is effective, whether new or different policy initiatives were needed, and what we can learn from the approach of other countries. As an academic researcher of these topics, I regarded it my duty to participate in the Roundtable discussion, even if I was not keen on public exposure in this contested domain. Apart from academic contributors, the Roundtable consisted of speakers from the banking sector, the Financial Intelligence Unit, the National Bank, the secret service and a few others. All speakers were questioned by Parliamentarians, who, on the whole, asked well-informed questions. They sought to understand the lack of measures of effectiveness, and the implications for privacy and civil liberties. Some of them seemed to be looking for recommendations for more active policy agendas; others were primarily interested in privacy concerns. In addressing their questions, I saw it as my task to temper the political expectations of financial data-analytics, draw out privacy concerns, and to 'translate' my conceptually informed academic critique to language audible in a policy context, without simplifying the problems.

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At the time, I had spent about fifteen years studying this policy domain and regarded it to be a complex policy field with little effectiveness and serious societal fallout. I consider the very notion of 'terrorism financing' to be problematic, and see it primarily as a problem space that allows innovative modes of financial data-sharing. Terrorism financing as a problem space pushes the boundaries of law, advances financial transactions data-analysis, and has discriminatory effects. Indeed, I considered myself to be a staunch *critic* of the ways in which the ostensible pursuit of suspect monies has accelerated financial surveillance and financial exclusion, primarily of faith-based Muslim organisations (de Goede 2012). In my scholarly work, I try to develop a critical perspective on terrorism financing, by 'putting [its] foundations into question' (Burgess 2019, 97).

During the Roundtable discussion, it became clear however that I was not the only one critiquing financial data mining. Though perspectives ranged, a number of professionals in the field voiced their own objections to data-driven counter-terrorism and financial transaction analysis. In fact, as the proceedings unfolded, it was clear that my own perspective was close to that of the Dutch Banking Association, which expressed scepticism of transactions profiling in the context of terrorism, and signalled a lack of effectiveness of current regulations. The day after the Roundtable discussion, the Dutch Banking Association approached me for an interview for their online Magazine, to which I agreed. My comments on the privacy impact of counter-terrorism financing and the negative effects of financial exclusion and derisking were duly published on their website.[2]

However, in the months that followed, I found myself reflecting on questions of engagement and critique. How did my agenda of critique become connected to the position of the financial industry? How did I find myself unexpectedly allied with the banks in a time when society is still struggling with the continuing fallout of the credit crisis? Were the bankers genuinely interested in dialogue and learning, or did they merely try to evade costly regulations, seeing my professional credentials as a way to help 'validate politics in the … common interest' (Jahn 2017, 69)? Was it right to contribute to the website of the Banking Association as an expert voice if it ended up according legitimacy to the industry's own agenda and critiques?

I remembered and reread Bruno Latour's piece on critique, in which he reflects on the ways his critical work on scientific facts has become appropriated, and how he became accused of facilitating climate sceptics. Certain strands of constructivism and Science-and-Technology Studies (STS) seem to provide fertile ground for the popular debunking of science. Latour addresses the challenge of critique after constructivism, and asks:

> What has become of critique when DARPA uses for its Total Information Awareness project the Baconian slogan Scientia est potentia? Didn't I read that somewhere in Michel Foucault? Has knowledge-slash-power been co-opted of late by the National Security Agency? Has Discipline and Punish become the bedtime reading of Mr. Ridge? (Latour 2004, 228)

Authors in the broad field of STS have a long tradition of public engagement and policy orientation. Key figures like Brian Wynne and Shelia Jasanoff straddle the divide between academia and policy practice, and offer valuable reflections on the public credibility and engagement of 'science' (e.g. Wynne 2001; Jasanoff 2004). In this vein, Naomi Oreskes has recently issued a call for 'presentism,' encouraging historians of science to engage 'significant debates in the world we live in, debates to which we have something distinctive to add' (Oreskes 2013, 606).

This paper asks about the practices and forms of critique afforded at the intersection between STS and the critical study of security politics. Can engagements with practice – as the one described in this opening example – generate viable and lasting forms of critique (also Salter 2013)? How does the attention to materialities and the fine-grained analysis of technical practices, that typically accompany STS-inspired research (Bourne and Lisle 2019; Hoijtink and Leese 2019; Lindskov Jacobsen 2020; Walters 2014; Weber 2016), feed into ways of practicing critique? How can the analytical attention to what Huysmans (2011) has called 'little security nothings' be translated into critical agendas?

The opening example is just an illustration: the objective of the paper is not to make sense of personal experience but to ask more broadly about the relation between the analytics rendered

possible in STS approaches, and the practices of critique and engagement that are central to Critical Security Studies. The central challenges to which this paper speaks, are at least threefold. First, to contribute to the ongoing project of a 'critical International Relations' that moves beyond a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Austin 2019: 216; Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019). Second, to reflect on the challenges of articulating academic critique in ways that have traction with communities of practice – and, reversely, to reflect on what such involvement with practice might mean for a critical project. Third and most centrally, to develop a plea for engaged critique based on STS sensibilities. STS-inspired approaches offer detailed analyses of the technologies and practices of security. They offer ways of anchoring critique on the *inside* of practices, finding room for manoeuvre in a seemingly oppressive world around us, and affirming the notion of the critic as an engaged doer rather than a detached judge. Though the opening example raises the question of engagement with practitioners, the remit of the paper is to think about STS and critical practice more broadly, through rejecting of the bifurcation between 'ideal critique' on the one hand, and real 'transformation' on the other (Foucault 1981, 33).

A key message of the paper in this context is that critical practice is '*engagement all the way down*' (Stengers 2019: 19, emphasis added). The nascent engagement between STS and security studies has been dominated by readings of the work of Latour (de Goede 2018; Salter and Walters 2016; Walters 2014; but see Aradau 2010). Drawing on the work of Isabelle Stengers, as well as Donna Haraway and Annemarie Mol, this article seeks to broaden the conversation. Stengers in particular serves as an inspiration, not just for her philosophical writing on the situated nature of *all* critical thinking, but also for her own experimental anti-GMO politics and engagement. Stengers articulates (some of) her thinking through her concrete practical experiences with anti-GMO politics in Belgium and France, where she became engaged in demonstrations and court procedures. While sympathetic to anti-capitalist GMO critiques and profoundly concerned about the catastrophic destructions of the natural world, Stengers also resists the notion – articulated by some in the anti-GMO movement – that the 'sciences are, by definition, serving capitalism' (Savransky and Stengers 2018, 138). Such systemic condemnation leaves little room for manoeuvre inside practices and ultimately pays little *attention* to the complex constellations of science and the knowledge economy, according to Stengers. 'In that sense, the GMO event was very important,' says Stengers,

> because there were scientists who were siding with activists, adding their own charges against GMOs … If I speak of an event, it is because all protagonists became more intelligent because of the others, together with others, all actively learning about the kind of world we live in. This is one of the reasons why it made experts hesitate and stammer. (Savransky and Stengers 2018, 139)

Agendas of denouncing can sometimes be politically strategic but rarely offer viable or rich *critiques*. For critique requires care, engagement, and paying attention. It requires the critic to stay with the trouble, examine it, and acknowledge its contradictions. Thus – following Stengers and others – the paper discusses critique as part of a complex, ongoing, *practice* of political engagement and experimentation, the outcomes of which are never certain. Thus, one might (temporarily) find oneself in unlikely and uneasy alliances.

The science-and-technology of security

This paper seeks to 'stay with the trouble' of contemporary security politics and its ethical challenges (Introduction, this volume). It seeks to move beyond what Haraway (2016, 3) calls a 'game-over attitude,' because assessments of apocalypse and despair 'can and do discourage others, including students.'[3] Instead, 'staying with the trouble' entertains the (ethical) complexities of security practices. What would it entail to 'stay with the trouble' of contemporary security dilemmas? It would involve moving beyond the binary debate on security as a positive or negative value, towards a pragmatic and situated approach, that generates attentiveness to 'actual situated

security practices in context and using this to make conclusions about the value of security in that particular case' (Nyman 2016, 823).

The engagement between STS and Critical Security Studies offers empirically rich examples of such critical attentiveness, including, for example, border policing (Dijstelbloem and Pelizza 2020; Bourne and Lisle 2019), weapons technologies (Shah 2017; Saugmann 2020), and data mining and biometrics (Bellanova and Gonzalez-Fuster 2013; Lindskov Jacobsen 2020; Weber 2016). These studies offer novel approaches to studying security practices, for example, by analysing how human and nonhuman actors are enrolled and associated to normalise or to contest particular security technologies, and by showing how publics are (not) constituted around security questions (Monsees 2019 and 2020). However, the redeployment of STS concepts and tools to sites of security also raises considerable questions. STS studies have traditionally focused on sites of research (laboratories) or sites of practice (hospitals) that are less centrally focused on security questions (but see Jasanoff and Kim 2009; Suchman, Follis, and Weber 2017). How may STS be appropriated, revised and rethought to critically study sites of security (e.g. Best and Walters 2013; Leander 2016; Salter 2015)? How can we redefine and rethink the conceptual terminologies of STS to make them attuned to researching controversies in the profoundly political domain of security (Walters 2014)?

One of the challenges of bringing STS to bear on security sites and practices, is the question of *critical politics*: what concepts of politics and critique accompany these approaches, and how may these be revised or appropriated to a critical analytics of security? While STS is not Critical Theory in the conventional sense, it has enabled researchers to unpack institutional cultures, question tacit knowledges, and 'make a fuss' (Stengers and Despret 2014). However, some have argued that the flat ontology of STS tends to mask the power hierarchies and structural inequalities of global politics (Toscano 2012). If we focus on unpacking what Huysmans (2011) calls the '*little* security nothings,' how can we ultimately grasp the systemic logics of *big* security politics? If 'all actants are on the same footing: both large and small, both human and non-human,' as Harman (2009, 15–16) writes about Latour's work, how can we come to the denunciation of powerful structures that underpin (commercial) security complexes (Hoijtink 2014)? Koddenbrock (2015, 246), for example, questions the critical potential of the attention to 'little devices, instruments and things' that accompanies STS-inspired work. He makes the argument that the attention to 'fluidity [and] contingency … inhibits attempts to think big, to assert stability, totality and structure.' Instead, asserts Koddenbrock (2015, 245), we need a 'totalizing strategy of critique [to be] able to tackle the capitalist social whole *as such*.' In contrast, STS-inspired work steers away from totalising moves; it offers a critique that is decidedly less sure of itself (Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann 2019).

In order to unpack further the critical praxis afforded at the intersection between STS and Critical Security Studies (CSS), it is useful to start with the partial ways in which Foucauldian modes of critique have been appropriated in CSS. CSS is animated by an agenda of critical intervention and analysis. Foucauldian thought has been crucial to at least part of this field: many authors have taken inspiration from Foucault's injunction to 'make strange' existing normalities and technologies, in order to open space for thinking differently (Foucault 1989). Thus, CSS resists the assumption that security exists as an unmitigated and objective good, but enquires into the partial and political ways in which securing is constituted and how dynamics of in/security affect groups differently. CSS draws on the 'experimental lineage' of critical approaches to International Relations, that have done much to interrogate 'boundary making as a dominant practice in the reproduction of the modern international' (Huysmans and Nogueira 2016: 300–301; also Shapiro and Alker 1996). Literatures in CSS (broadly defined) thus offer substantial *critique* of the state of contemporary security: they show how policing practices are intertwined with racial violence and discrimination (Hoenke and Muller 2016; Jaffe, 2019); how risk-based warfare belies violent, racialised and gendered targeting practices (Wilcox 2017; Suchman 2020); and how the war on terror has given rise to exclusionary and discriminatory interventions in the name of security (Heath-Kelly 2012).

However, there is another aspect to Foucault's work that has received somewhat less attention in CSS literatures, but that was fully part of his political thinking. Foucault himself was immersed in

practical campaigns for prison reform, collective letters and manifestos, pamphlets, protests and other modes of critical engagement (Macey 1993). When explicitly asked, in 1981, about the viability of working with government, Foucault stressed the double nature of such involvement and said: 'We've got to get out of this dilemma, either you're for or you're against. Afterall, you can be opposed and still stay involved' (Foucault 1981, 33). Some of Foucault's work developed active agendas for change through experimental research groups – for example, the collective work on the memoirs of Pierre Rivière, which explored the interplay 'between the legal and the psychiatric' (Macey 1993, 250).

Foucault's experimental and engaged work was not incidental to his thinking, but central to his rejection of the separation between theoretical, universalist knowledge, on the one hand, and practical knowledge on the other. All knowledge, in Foucault's analysis, is practical knowledge, situated in its historical context and arising from practical experimentation. Foucault offers the term 'specific intellectual' to think through the form of critique that arises from and acquires its authority through practice and practical knowledge, instead of normative positioning. The 'specific intellectual speaks out ... on the basis of sectoral knowledge' – for example, Atomic science or carceral practice (Macey 1993: 269; Galison 2004). Said Foucault:

> I don't think that one can oppose criticism and transformation, 'ideal' criticism and 'real' transformation … *Reforms are not produced out of thin air*, independently of those who make them. One cannot not take into account those who will have to manage this transformation. (Foucault 1981, 33)

This position challenges the division of labour – commonly held in International Relations – whereby theorising is understood to offer the promise of 'political contestation,' while 'empirical studies,' on the other hand, are problem-solving with the capacity to shape policy (Jahn 2017, 64). Foucault's specific intellectual is not a lofty, detached figure who delivers universalist critiques, but a grounded, expert figure who engages the 'possibility of constituting a new politics of truth' (Foucault 1980, 133). Foucault points to the multiplicities and duplicities of critique, and the fact that 'there is no Great Refusal' (Foucault in Amoore 2006).

The grounded and specific nature of critique as articulated by Foucault also gestures towards the *embodied* nature of critical practice – even if that is a theme insufficiently developed in Foucault's own work. Tellingly, one of Foucault's examples of a specific intellectual was J. Robert Oppenheimer, who spoke out against the very atomic bomb he helped create (Galison 2004) – rather than, for example, figures in the Algerian resistance movement whom Foucault encountered in his years teaching there. Feminist and decolonial literatures have done a much better job here: they have long recognised the embodied nature of critique and the fact that some 'are not allowed *not* to have a body' (Haraway 1988: 575, emphasis in original). Embodied knowledge claims – of women, of non-Western voices – are not easily nor often inscribed with the transcendental quality that belies scientific or rational knowledge (for example, Bilgin 2016; Harding 1986; Bhambra and de Sousa Santos 2017). This also necessitates reflection on my own privileged position to be able to appear before a Parliamentary Roundtable in the first place as an 'expert' voice. For Haraway (1988, 583), however, situated knowledge claims are *more* responsible because they acknowledge their historicity, instead of trying to negate it, and this means that they can be called to account.

The rejection of the bifurcation between ideal critique and practical transformation has to date been insufficiently acknowledged in IR and CSS. CSS literatures have succeeded in questioning normalised technological security practices, but often stop short of the recognition that critique itself is a *doing* (Villumsen Bering and Bueger 2017; Walters 2014). Even when critical approaches challenge the bifurcation between ideal critique and real transformation, they could do more to analyse the 'practical patterns of interaction between research and practice' (Bueger and Villumsen 2007, 417–418). Moreover, not always does the literature recognise the multiplicities and duplicities of critique, and the fact that 'there is no Great Refusal' (Foucault in Amoore 2006).

Beyond the academic literature, moreover, the present conjuncture requires recognition of Foucault's practical modes of critique – for at least three reasons. First, we are confronted

with the political challenge of holding accountable in the face of complex technological controversies and composite political agency, which resist a 'moralized politics of good and evil' (Bennett 2010, 38). Contemporary politics is marked by complex, transversal problems, that are not easily contained within spatial or temporal boundaries. They entail distributed effects and responsibilities. They are marked by profound unpredictabilities concerning their future harms (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2001). In this context, it is important to recognise the 'dense web of practices in which scientists and politicians partake' (Bueger and Villumsen 2007: 418; Villumsen Bering and Bueger 2017).

Second, there is a need to acknowledge the profound ambiguity of political positioning, challenging the distinction between 'ideal criticism' and 'real transformation.' Critique can cannot lay claim to a position *outside* of the practices it aims to challenge. Louise Amoore and Paul Langley have called attention to the ambiguous, uncertain and conflictual space of civil society politics – challenging notions of Global Civil Society as an inherent 'force for good.' Amoore and Langley propose to analyse spaces of protest, critique and civil society as 'ambiguous, open to contestation and often contradictory' (Amoore and Langley 2004, 102). They insist on the need to develop ways of thinking about the 'contradictory relationships with the global political economy [in which] we all find ourselves,' such as

> The individual who is a member of Amnesty International while simultaneously holding portfolio investments in a number of large multinational corporations … the Visa cardholder who joins Reclaim the Streets. (Amoore and Langley 2004, 106)

Indeed, elsewhere Amoore discusses the problematic politics of the search for a 'common foe' or a 'great Refusal' (Amoore 2006, 257–258). She offers ways to think about the multiplicities and duplicities of critique.

Third, and following logically, it is important to move beyond a politics that assumes (critical) positions to be programmatically fixed. Our political traditions ask that we fix positionalities in place and render political programmes predictable. The demand – from power and radicalism alike – is that we are 'with or against.' It is understandable that critique seeks 'resolution and certainty' in the face of the world's complex problems. But, as Debbie Lisle has argued, this is in tension with the 'difficult and demanding' task to 'keep [critique] open, pluralistic, and hospitable to new ideas' (Lisle 2016: 419., 418). The key point here being that (critical) politics is profoundly unpredictable. Political resistance and critique are themselves contingent processes, the outcome of which cannot be fully known before one engages.

A practice of critique

Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers – and her philosophical companions – may contribute to exploring the affordances of the encounter between STS and CSS in relation to thinking critically. Stengers' writing is substantial, and I do not here claim to be an expert in her philosophy, nor to be able to do justice to its many aspects. But her work as a practically engaged philosopher serves as an inspiration to further pursue the question of critique at the intersection between STS and CSS. It offers fruitful thinking and concrete starting points to build on Foucault's notion of specific intellectuals, but also to push beyond. In fact, Stengers builds on Foucault's calls for an 'experimental' critical attitude, which 'put[s] itself to the test of reality … both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take' (Foucault, quoted in Stengers 2019, 2). With a parallel to 1990s debates on anti-foundationalism in International Relations that debated whether politics is 'interpretation all the way down' (Brown 1994; Doty 1997), Stengers (2019, 19) proposes that critique is 'engagement all the way down.' This section outlines possible contours of engaged critique as offered in the work of Stengers and others, to think through the ways in which these can be drawn upon for a critical analytics of security.

First, Stengers (2019, 7) talks about critical thinking as a process – not a fully formed, completed position, but an 'inchoate' practice, that is always anchored in a concrete event (like the GMO protest) – or what Stengers calls a 'questioning situation' (Stengers 2019, 10). There is no safe or stable outside position from which to launch criticisms, but rather, critical thinking is 'immanent to the problematic events and encounters that force one to think' (Savransky 2018, 7). Consequently, Stengers proposes a critical analytical attitude that seeks to escape the trap of rejecting *versus* ratifying, but that is primarily about following. It entails a notion of politics which 'does not give the specialist the power of judging, but only the possibility of *following* the construction of the salutations that every collectivity brings to the problem' (Stengers 2000: 60, emphasis in original). To be sure, this resistance to the power of judging articulated by Stengers does not mean that she claims the possibility of a 'value-free' approach. Rather, we should read it through her reliance on Deleuze, who offers a contrast between judging and evaluating. Where *judging* comprises a 'moral attitude' that appeals to 'transcendent values (Good/Evil),' *evaluating*, on the other hand, is thought to be 'an ethical attitude that experiments with the qualitative and intensive difference between modes of existence' (Zourabichvili 2012, 77).[4]

To further explore what such a move to 'evaluation' might mean, consider Annemarie Mol's approach to suspending judgement concerning critical-philosophical questions, like the question 'what is justice'. Such questions, Mol writes (drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot) traditionally demand normative answers and schemata. However, what happens if we suspend answers, and postpone judgement concerning what is good or bad justice? Instead, can we 'listen and follow which ways of justification are current in a specific field, how these are mobilised and how these relate to each other' (Mol 2000: 13, my translation)? Such a 'philosophy in the wild' reforms normative transcendental questions into practical, everyday, situated evaluations, that ask which ways of doing exist and which are silenced (Mol 2000). Again, the suggestion is that evaluation, rather than a judgement, offers the more viable mode of critique. Closer to CSS, Nyman (2016, 832) suggests we develop a pragmatist approach to security ethics, which calls for the 'need to conduct a detailed empirical enquiry [of security] to see how different actors use it in different contexts and how individuals experience it, asking what do different security practices do.'

Second, what matters to critical analysis, for Stengers, is not to *believe* but to *practice*. Political critique is an uncertain, adventurous, engagement, not (primarily) a normative positioning. As Stengers put it during a public debate: 'commoning' is a verb not a position.[5] It is a communal process, a collective doing, the outcomes of which are uncertain. For Stengers (2019, 18), it means 'participating in an ongoing, adventurous, unguaranteed, but generative process of making sense in common.' As Savransky (2018, 6) summarises Stengers' philosophical intervention: it entails 'an earthly, experimental, and gripping sort of affair.' Thus, Stengers invites us to shift registers: from understanding critique as primarily a normative commitment or an ideological position (which then, secondarily, has to be put into effect), towards a focus on political engagement as a mode of practice itself. Consequently, the question is not so much, 'can practice theory be a theory of critique?', but more, 'what happens when we think of critique as a practice, as a mode of practicing?'

Third, if critique is a process of engagement, a communal doing rather than purely a normative positioning, its outcomes are uncertain. When we critique, or engage, we do not know what it will bring, according to Stengers (2019, 13), it demands 'casting our lot with some ways of living and dying and not others.' This seeks to shift the terrain of critique: from battling through 'pregiven positional structure(s)' to 'a dynamic evaluation' (Massumi 2010). Again, this draws on earlier understandings, particularly by Homi Bhabha, who introduces a temporal an processual element into critical practice. Bhabha (1994, 25) sees politics and political resistance as a *negotiation* rather than a *negation*, because political engagement can never be fully counted on to produce the 'mimetic reflection of an a priori political principle.' What matters in political engagement is 'to open up a space for translation: a place of hybridity … where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations' (Bhabha 1994: 25, emphasis in original). Bhabha's hybrid space is a new opening, something unpredictable. In

Bhabha's reading, politics has an uncertain, experimental, grounded character, which means that things could well go wrong (also Peter 2019). Indeed, to speak of the *failures* of critique is itself problematic, because it remains in the register of failure and success. If critical praxis is an experiment, then its measures of failure and success are not fully knowable at the outset (Sjoberg 2019).

In order to grasp what an engaged critique would look like, how it would read, look or feel, let us consider Annemarie Mol's *Body Multiple*, which dissects and analyses the medical practices of the diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis. The book offers a careful unpacking of the socio-medical practices of hospital treatment, by 'foregrounding practicalities, materialities, *events*' (Mol 2002: 13, emphasis in original). Mol shows how the illness is a 'composite object,' that is composed of 'elements that . . . may stretch all the way from the numbers that come out of the vascular laboratory to the possible future anger of someone's disappointed children' (Mol 2002, 71–72). All these elements may mix together when the hospital decides how to treat a patient. Mol adopts a perspective that could be said to *think with* doctors, patients, families, hospitals, laboratory test, surgeons, indicators, vessels and drugs. Nowhere does Mol condemn or denounce the doctors. Nowhere does she debunk Western medicine or unveil its hidden powers. She does not point at 'the wrongs of medicine in general or at those of the treatment of atherosclerosis in hospital Z' (185). At the same time, her book functions as a profound *critique* of medical ways of seeing and the ways in which hospitals come to know their patients. It 'makes strange' the ways in which medial practices sets indicators to reach its stated objectives of 'saving lives' and 'improving health.' Her book does not so much offer a way of 'talking about medicine' as a way of 'talking inside it' (185). Mol offers us a terminology and a praxiography that helps shift questions from 'how can we be sure' (about the diagnosis, about the right treatment), towards 'how to live with doubt, how to live in an under-determined world' (Mol 2002, 165). Mol's ontology of multiples shows the critical potential of foregrounding practice. Critique is not a matter of debunking, in this sense, but a matter of caring – through assembling, enriching, and '*adding* reality'.

Following and leveraging

What might it mean to practice Stengers' critical strategies of following and engagement in the concrete situation of a research project on the practices of counter-terrorism? In our project FOLLOW, we analyse the ways in which private companies operate in the frontline of security practice – by identifying, selecting and interpreting suspicious transactions.[6] We follow the trajectory of the suspicious financial transaction across private and public spheres as a 'chain of translation' – whereby a transaction is translated from simple bank registration to suspicious transaction to (sometimes) court evidence (de Goede 2018; Anwar 2020; Bosma 2020; Lagerwaard 2020). It is in the context of this research project and its institutional credibility, that it was possible to appear before the Parliamentary Roundtable discussed in the opening of this paper in the first place. The reason we are interested in terrorism financing as a key site for critical analysis of security practice, is not because we seek to analyse the behaviour of terrorists, or because we think that the financing of terrorism is a clear and urgent security problem. Rather, we are interested in the ways in which the securitisation of certain financial flows enables and legitimates new modes of financial transactions data mining and public-private security cooperation. 'Terrorism Financing' has become a place-holder that enables far-reaching financial data-sharing and data-analytics, and innovative (but problematic) platforms for public-private information sharing that operate at the limits of law. It impacts societal groups differently, with faith-based Muslim groups and diaspora communities more likely to face scrutiny, freezing or exclusions. Mindful of what Coleman and Rosenow (2016, 206) call the 'ontological commitment' to an uncontested and privileged notion of 'Security,' we follow the object of the suspicious transaction in a broad societal context, in order to understand how it plays a role in the recognition, allocation and categorisation of particular ways of life.

In Stengers' terminology, it can be said that we seek to *follow* the practices and practitioners who enact suspicion and security in the financial context. Our research approach is ethnographic and qualitative: our objectives to map and analyse the way in which the suspicious transaction materialises, the way it moves and modulates across a chain of reporting and analysis, demands close observations of technical (data-)analytical practices and the ways in which security decisions are shaped in practice. Our focus is on the enactment of social structures of ab/normalities, suspicions and convictions. We seek to understand these enactments through a focus on 'the sites in which those categories are being produced and reproduced,' to try to 'actually see how that's being done, materially' (Suchman in Gerst and Krämer 2019, 10). The point here is not to suggest that bringing in Stengers departs radically from what is already being done within CSS: as has been made clear throughout the paper, these arguments build on existing work in CSS and its 'experimental lineages' in post-structuralist International Relations (Huysmans and Nogueira 2016, 301). But explicating the connection between Stengers' thought and our actual research project serves the dual goal of (1) broadening the debate at the intersection between STS and CSS and (2) analysing the kinds of critical praxis afforded at this intersection.

First, in our research project, we operate with a methodological commitment to understanding the world from the *inside* of positions. Again, this does not mean that the ambition is to be value-free: we are acutely aware of the rights and liberties implications of current counter-terrorism financing policies, and profoundly critical of the emergence of 'terrorism financing' as a racialised category of suspicion. Nevertheless, we find it important to understand the 'lived complexities through which [our] object of critique comes into existence' (Austin 2019, 221). This requires, as Austin (2019: 221, 217) has put it, moving beyond 'moral judgements,' towards a 'multivocal engagement' between 'the critical theorist and her subjects.'

Thus, we heed Stengers' injunction to *follow* practitioners: following, in this context, entails neither the purposeful explanation of how things came to be, nor the emphasis on their pure arbitrariness. Instead, it encompasses an attentiveness to situated practices, taking 'into account the passion, the relentless effort, the risk' of their creation (Stengers 2000, 74). Stengers (Stengers 2000, 17) proposes that we 'think with' scientists and practitioners to understand orders of becoming.[7] This involves engaging the event or experiment on its own terms. We need to ask: what defines success or failure in the terms of the scientist/practitioner themselves? We follow the practices and ask about the way in which its participants 'define an achievement.' We seek to unpack and question: 'What matters to them?' 'What does success mean to them?' (Stengers 2011, 20). Concrete research questions thus ask about the challenges and doubts of practitioners, seeking to understand their own hesitations, failures and internal critiques. The objective is not to help professionals improve success or deliver better solutions. On the contrary, the objective is to multiply perplexity and explicate the faultlines in practices; to leave 'none of the words that serve as' common reference points in this practical domain 'unscathed' (although 'none … will be disqualified or denounced as a vector of illusion') (Stengers 2011, 15). Our objective is not to ratify practitioner positions but to assemble their *in*-sights and enrich critical debate (for a great example see Wissink 2020).

Following, furthermore, gives rise to laughter as a mode of critique, which is quite different from judging or debunking. Stengers takes issue with the way in which certain modes of critique paradoxically affirm the power that they seek to denounce, by casting this power as masterful and totalising. Instead, the argues that laughter 'has to be relearned with regard to science' – not in terms of irony but in terms of a humourful engagement (Stengers 2000, 17). It is a laughter that *lightens* its object of critique, instead of fortifying it, challenging the reverence for the scientist as a speaker of truth and power. 'The laughter of someone who has to be impressed always complicates the life of power,' writes Stengers (Stengers 2000, 17–18). This connects well to certain approaches in International Relations, like Jenny Edkins' argument that repoliticization involves rendering visible the 'contingent, provisional nature' of the symbolic order, which may be helped by 'disrupting [the] claim to seriousness' (Edkins 1999: 142, 140).[8]

Second, we seek to *leverage* practitioner critique. We assemble complications and hesitations, by what Stengers calls adding reality. The detailed understanding of technical practices and little security nothings afforded through STS approaches, offer concrete points of politicisation. As Suchman puts it, 'if you want to understand the big issues, you need to understand the everyday practices that constitute them' (in Gerst and Krämer 2019, 14). Researchers are sometimes surprised to encounter critical professionals. But practitioners have first-hand knowledge of the fallibilities and gaps in policy and practice (Leese, Lidén, and Nikolova 2019). Some know quite precisely how their 'little security nothings' operate, misdirect, fail and discriminate (Huysmans 2011).

For example, strategies of politicisation of financial surveillance and financial data mining could revolve around questions of policy effectiveness and policy consistency. Practitioners in this domain are highly critical of policy effectiveness: banking respondents in our research have delivered devastating critiques of regulatory requirements relating to the countering of terrorism financing, calling them impossible to practice.[9] They have been profoundly critical of the effectiveness of financial profiling in relation to counter-terrorism financing, and they have shared practical examples of where bank security practices fail and become misdirected. They have acknowledged that financial data mining practices are discriminatory and target certain societal groups more (and differently) than others.[10] In the context of developing profiles of the financial patterns of so-called foreign fighters, they have told us of impossible regulator demands and overly broad profiles of suspicion: 'what the regulator wants is impossible. If I have to report everyone with ties to Turkey and a car, I have 99% false positives.'[11]

Researchers can explicate these fallibilities, render them public and leverage them, as I tried to do before the Parliamentary Roundtable (with limited success). To leverage, in this context, would mean to gain 'increased power of action' or to 'gain advantage' through the use of a lever, understood as a 'simple machine.'[12] The notion of leveraging recognises that critique is immanent to the specific security practice it is seizing upon. Says Foucault, in his emphasis on the specificity of critique:

> It's a question of *making the conflicts more visible*, of making them more essential than simple confrontations of interests or simple institutional obstructions. From these conflicts, from these confrontations, must issue a new relation of forces. (Foucault 1981: 34, emphasis added)

We can explicate, anchor and seize on the system's own doubts and fissures. In this manner, we seek to effect what Massumi calls an *augmentation* – which takes a 'certain tendency' within the situation 'to the limit' (Massumi 2010, 338). Leveraging and augmenting practitioner critique, in our example, allows a detailed public account of the fallibilities of financial data mining and their discriminatory effects. It allows us to criticise regulatory power in way that practitioners themselves cannot. It allows us to deeply challenge the 'suspicious transaction' as a site of as a privileged, truthful knowledge, to highlight the contestability and the messiness of its creation.

Third, research access, dialogues and rapport with practitioners at the bank or the police agency amount to a risky situation and a mutual vulnerability. 'You have to place yourself not in a position but in the middle, in … a fairly vague situation,' says Massumi, 'and this opens you to risk' (Zourzani: 15). For Stengers, the moment of productive engagement between researcher and critic is *a place of danger*. The risk of engagement is situated precisely when 'commoning' creates new understandings, new connections and common stakes. Writes Stengers (Stengers 2015, 89):

> This moment of relative success, the moment that one moves from a position of contestation to a position of having a stake, is also the moment of greatest danger. In order to learn how to address themselves to practitioners and experts, those who participate in such discussions must learn how to get to know them, to get the measure of their knowledge, and this necessity is often the source of great tension.

In our case, collaboration with security practitioners is dangerous (Amicelle 2018): we may become coopted (maybe we already have been!), we may lose critical distance. We may publish findings that coincide with the bank's agenda and come to be seen as complicit. Equally risky, we may publish findings that do not at all coincide with the bank's agenda, resulting in lost contacts, a 'burned' field,

and – as a worst case – liability claims. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that financial practitioners are also taking risk in cooperating with our project. They worry about confidentiality of transactions data, sensational newspaper headlines in case we leak material (even inadvertently) or on the basis of our publications. They take risks with regard to liability issues in case we should publish critically about their counter-terrorism financing practices. They are profoundly concerned about what the regulators will think in a time when billion-dollar fines for alleged breaches of counter-terrorism financing compliance are not unusual. They are hoping that we might publish something that is useful to them, but nothing has been specified in advance. They may be surprised if the outcome is a theory-driven and barely readable paper engaging with the work of Isabelle Stengers.

Consequently, the relationship with practitioners – including the Bank – will never be an easy or comfortable alliance. In fact, as all critical practice, it is a space of tension and of trouble. It may never be an alliance at all: it is, if anything, a temporary and somewhat contingent coming-together. It is an unexpected alignment of positions, that has led to an uncomfortable yet productive dialogue across divergent expectations. It does not allow for easy positioning, but amounts to a relation of what I would like to call *productive discomfort*. Indeed, as Bellanova and Rudinow Saetnan (2019, 29) argue, it is precisely in such unsettling or 'estrangement' that 'new, and possibly alternative, relations with and among' research objects may be fostered.

Fourth and finally, the critical praxis of following requires 'paying attention' to unexpected places (Savransky and Stengers 2018). Coleman and Rosenow question the ways in which security studies define 'Security' as a privileged site of attention. Giving 'Security a tacit … privileged in understanding power and politics,' they argue (Coleman and Rosenow 2016, 213), tends to focus attention on the 'visibly violent side of liberal regimes,' leaving structural violences unattended. When following the suspicious transaction, we need to question the trajectories our own research carves out. Partly, we follow the suspicious transaction to privileged but untraditional security sites, like banks. Partly, we follow the suspicious transaction to traditional, secretive and privileged sites of security, like Financial Intelligence Units (Lagerwaard 2020). But what if, as Coleman and Rosenow (Coleman and Rosenow 2016, 205) ask, 'what is most relevant about these practices is not Security at all?' What if the thing most relevant about suspicious transaction analytics is the way in which it categorises and criminalises particular ways of life?

Here, it is imperative to pay attention to the ways in suspicious transactions have the capacity to disrupt the provision of aid, or police diaspora support. The art of paying attention, according to Stengers, involves asking whether 'maybe something has been muted,' and recognising that something may 'lurk' at the interstices of a seemingly smooth process (Savransky and Stengers 2018, 136). It is crucial to reconnect the seemingly benign work of identifying suspicious financial transactions, back to the ways in which postcolonial financial infrastructures are being maintained and reproduced. At the time of revising this paper, for example, financial sanctions and financial transactions monitoring are directly affecting Iran's capacities to deal with the Corona crisis (Reuters 2020). In our own public engagement work, we have paid attention to the topics of financial exclusion and derisking – whereby particular societal groups are banned from the banking system – in a public report on counter-terrorism financing practices, against a number of advisors who thought the issues should stay thoroughly disconnected.

Concluding

In this paper, I have drawn inspiration from Isabelle Stengers and others to explore critical praxis at the intersection between STS and CSS. I have built on Foucault to challenge the bifurcation between ideal critique and real transformation, to develop a plea for engaged and experimental critical praxis. The paper has emphasised the processual, uncertain and practical aspects of critical thinking. Stengers advocates a critical engagement that works through strategies of following and doing. Through reading Stengers, I have suggested the notions of following, leveraging, joined risks and paying attention as key, concrete pathways of engaged critique.

The paper has also asked how we might draw upon the unlikely and uncomfortable alliances of academic-practitioner engagement to anchor critique. It asked how critical practice can be leveraged through 'thinking with' professionals and practitioners – rather than denouncing them. Examples were drawn from our own experiences of critical but ambiguous engagement with the professional and policy worlds of financial security, and dialogues with bankers and other professionals. The paper suggests that practitioners' own doubts, hesitations and critiques can be leveraged and augmented to develop a richer public critique of financial surveillance and financial exclusion. The ontology for such critical praxis, according to Stengers (2019, 19), 'is about engagement all the way down … [T]he possibility to regenerate destroyed practices should not be a matter of critical pondering, from a safe distance [but] … demands engagement, involving partners.' For political scientists, this may mean that engagement with the world of practice and policy advice – however dangerous and flawed – is part of the uncertain, fallible, speculative experimentations that we could engage in.

Notes

1. Tweede Kamer, Rondetafelgesprek tegengaan terrorismefinanciering (Dutch Parliament, Roundtable Discussion Combating Terrorism Financing), The Hague, February 7 2017, via: https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat_en_vergadering/commissievergaderingen/details?id=2016A04063 (last accessed 2 June 2020).
2. 'Drie vragen over het tegengaan van terrorismefinanciering,' ('Three Questions about Countering Terrorism Financing), *Bank | Wereld Online*, 16 February 2017, at: https://www.nvb.nl/bank-wereld-online/drie-vragen-over-het-tegengaan-van-terrorismefinanciering/(last accessed 2 June 2020).
3. Haraway here is talking about 'the horrors of the Anthropocene and what she calls the 'Capitalocene.' I am borrowing her arguments to suggest that they are applicable to thinking about security practices.
4. Special thanks to Jef Huysmans who suggested this source to clarify Stengers' critique of judgement.
5. Public comments, Isabelle Stengers, 'Denken met Catastrophes' ('Thinking with Catastrophes'), SPUI25, Amsterdam, February 28 2017.
6. For more information, see www.projectfollow.org.
7. Stengers distinguishes between professionals and practitioners. That distinction is important to the practice of critique, because practitioners (unlike professionals) are defined through their capacity of 'thinking and going together' that is crucial to the ' collective intelligence' of the commons (Stengers 2015, 99).
8. These insights have given rise to a vibrant literature on the role of artistic practice, laughter and irony in the face of power, see i.a. Bleiker (2000); Brassett (2015); Odysseos (2001).
9. Fieldnotes, meeting with bank professionals, November 28 2017, Amsterdam.
10. Comments made by banking professional at Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Amsterdam, 4 April 2019.
11. Fieldnotes, meeting with bank professionals, November 28 2017, Amsterdam.
12. Quotes from Oxford English Dictionary for leverage and lever.

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