Making social worlds
An academic perspective on passports

My name is Liz McFall, a lecturer in Sociology at The Open University. I was Chair of a course called the Making of Social Worlds, which is a course which is designed to offer a fairly detailed assessment about how sociology can be used to make sense of how social worlds work, how people feel safe within social worlds, how they form stable attachments, and how their behaviour and conduct is regulated. From the very start the thinking around the course was to try to adopt a very different approach to the teaching of sociology, so we specifically did not want to teach sociology on the basis of talking about class, race and gender – social divisions, in other words. What we wanted to do was get more down to basics really and talk about what it is that defines social worlds, what it is that goes into the making of social worlds in terms of people's everyday experience, so we wanted to talk about how people feel safe, how does fear work, how do social connections work, how do people form attachments, how is their behaviour ordered, regulated, what systems are involved in teaching people how they're expected to behave in certain situations. So the course looks specifically at three main themes which is security, attachment and conduct. With passports it may seem a slightly odd topic for a sociology course to start with because passports are one of those kind of mundane sort of everyday artefacts or devices that we don't really think about, they're just straightforward documents that are meant to be used to get you from one place to another, more specifically from one country to another. But passports are also much more than that, from the point of view of how social worlds function, how societies function, and historically how parishes and estates and communities have functioned. Passports are fundamentally an identification device. Passports form one of the systems that we call in this course 'regimes of identification', which are about how social worlds go about counting, sorting, ordering, classifying and controlling, to some extent, the people who fall within their grasp. If social worlds have a range of different objectives that they want to meet, by issuing passports or other regimes of identification, there are also a range of effects and consequences that follow in the lives of individuals. Most fundamentally this will mean that certain groups are marked as included, entitled, and for other groups they may be marked as excluded, unentitled or negatively privileged. In certain circumstances this just means that you're identified as someone who's not eligible for benefits, whether they're parish relief or the right to buy bread cheaply, as was the case in early modern Europe, or whether more sinisterly in certain times and certain contexts you're identified as in some way a hostile group, a group that needs to be watched, and a group that needs to be guarded against. The most notorious example of this is in Nazi Germany where groups including Jews, communists, homosexuals, gypsies were identified and marked. One of the interesting things about passports if because they're a relatively modern artefact, the modern passport really was only issued in 1911, people assume that before that the world was a kind of free-for-all where you could go wherever you pleased - in fact, historically, that's not at all the case. Historians have evidence of that. It really didn't actually make much sense. It was unwise to leave your parish, your village, rather than go wandering abroad at will, so systems of identification go back to the Middle Ages where if you wandered from an area where you were personally known, personally recognised without some form of identification, you were liable to end up in jail. What you need to understand about passports, and passport-type systems, is that they forward …………… ???? of particular sets of objectives and priorities that estates, communities, parishes, and in modern terms nation states have, so you need to understand the passport system in relation to what it's meant to achieve. In early modern Europe one of the things that identification systems were meant to achieve was not that dissimilar to what passport systems are about now. They're about defining who is and who's not entitled to be in a particular place. More specifically, this was grounded in the need to determine who was and who was not entitled to receive any relief from the parish, so it was a question of resources. If you were born in a particular parish you would be entitled to be relieved by that parish, should you fall on hard times. However, if you were unable to support yourself, and you were not born in the parish in which you were currently resident, the parish would want to

remove you. If passports are about providing a social world with security against the threat of foreign insurgents and the threat of disease, they're also about identifying people who are perceived as particular sorts of threats, and one of the concerns that has a long history in all sorts of different social formations is the desire to consistently identify someone over a period of time. How can you be sure that someone who was once recognised as a particular person is still that person twenty or thirty years later? This becomes an even more pressing social concern if the person has at one point been identified as a threat. You have Jeremy Bentham expressing a desire to tattoo names onto people's skin in the 19th century, and in practice you have a number of systems including tattooing people with their initials which refer to an offence they were once convicted of, so the initials AD for adulterer, V for vagabond, FM for free-maker have all been used at certain points in countries like France, England and the United States to identify people so that they would never be able to be free of a mark identifying them as a particular sort of person. One of the best ways of thinking about how passports work in both supportive and enabling sorts of ways, but at the same time in oppressive ways, is to think of them as a technology which embraces a given population. It may look after that population, give them rights of residence, codify their entitlement to certain benefits, but in more sinister circumstances passports can also be used to identify certain negatively privileged groups within a given population. This is very much the case in the South African passbook example which was this scheme developed by the apartheid government in the early part of the 20th century. The passbook system was designed to control pretty much every aspect of the life of the black African population. The passbook system not only identified who was who, it identified all sorts of minor rights: the right to live in a particular area, the right to work at a particular sort of job, the right to marry other people, even the rights to buy liquor. The passbook system in South Africa went right into the everyday lives of the individuals who were made to carry it. This included the use of stamps to designate whether or not you could be in a particular area. Any failure in terms of not carrying the passbook at the appropriate time might result in quite unbelievably sinister consequences. For example, on being arrested for not having a passbook, or having a passbook with inappropriate stamps, some kind of passbook offence, one of the stranger consequences would be being asked to present yourself for an examination which was called a voula-valla (??) which literally meant open-close, where a man would be asked to display his genitals and pull back his foreskin so that a person, purportedly a medical person but usually not a qualified doctor, would examine the genitals of the individual. You can see in a clip of Sheila and Michael Mesoti (??) when they discuss the voula-valla (??) ritual that what they are referring to is a ritual designed to humiliate more than to protect or secure the population. Passports are a strange document in the sense that we take them for granted, we don't even really think about them up until the moment when something goes wrong. You may take your passport for granted but when you don't have it at a point when you're asked to present it, and suddenly you find yourself in the situation of not being able to pass borders, not being able to pass barriers, not being able to document who you actually are, the consequences are devastating. So in the case of Mehran Nasseri who was the Iranian refugee, who inspired the film *The Terminal*, he actually lived at Charles de Gaulle Airport for ten years because no country recognised him as a citizen of that country, so he effectively ended up with no legal right to be anywhere.