

Review

Keith Breckenridge (2014) *Biometric State: the global politics of identification and surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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On March 9, 2017, as I began to write this review, Keith Breckenridge received the inaugural Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Book Award. The recognition won by this book, rightly described as ‘magisterial’, is richly deserved. This strikingly original work offers rich new insight into global debates about biometrics.

Breckenridge introduces novel conceptual understandings about state control and the limitations of biopolitics, and, importantly, it refocuses our thinking about the nature of the South African historiography. It is a wholly original contribution to South African historiography. It is particularly useful in illuminating the complexity of the state and how biometric technology functions not just as a means of surveillance, but also changes the very nature of state bureaucracy, power and the state’s relationship to its citizens.

This book traces the history of the South African biometric state and does so in a global context. It transverses space and time, beginning with the colonial development of biometrics in South Africa to control the African migrants coming into mines. Through this story, Breckenridge demonstrates how the biometric state in South Africa is shaped by the global fingerprinting project, and also, how the local development of the biometric state in South Africa impacted on the global project.

This book provides important conceptual clarity with regard to how we understand the state and the biometric. Breckenridge's engagement with both these concepts does not succumb to the lure of offering one straightforward answer. Instead, through a through reading of the global literature, he is able to trace the gaps and nuances in both these concepts.

The text provides a lucid historical overview of the philosophical understandings of the state. As this overview unfolds it becomes apparent that the question of how the state can be 'separated from society and how it acts' (3) are often put aside for more cultural arguments about the nature of power. In a few pages Breckenridge not only traces over time complex arguments about the nature of power but also engages wide-ranging detailed discussions of the nature and technology of bureaucracy that makes possible the running of the state from Europe to Pakistan. In the story of the state, writing emerges over centuries as a vital tool of state control and operations from England to Asia and the Americas. However, Breckenridge shows that the introduction of biometric technology changes this fundamentally.

Breckenridge also provides us with a historical evolution of the history and definition of the biometric. Through an engagement with a variety of theorists, he demonstrates how the introduction of biometric technology fundamentally changes the nature of the state. In the colonial spaces, South Africa in particular, it introduces a new system of governance that hardly resembles traditional systems of governance in the Europe.

Of course, as the title suggests, this six-chapter book focuses on the development of the biometric state in South Africa. Importantly however, the concentration on the South African experience does not preclude an engagement in global debates. In fact the book is a demonstration of exactly how to write a history, a master class that engages, in breath-taking detail, with global literature while dealing with the particularities of the South African experience.

The chapter titled 'Gandhi's biometric entanglement: fingerprints, satyagraha and the global politics of Hind Swaraj', perfectly captures the complexity when dealing with the question of biometrics. Breckenridge demonstrates how Gandhi was torn between rejection of Western modernity and machinery, and viewed himself as an 'expert administrator and an architect of more efficient and secure legal mechanisms' (91). This was especially true for his relationship with South African Indians. This chapter convincingly captures how Gandhi the politician was often at the

crossroads of a profound contradiction. In this case it was his disavowal of Western modernity and technology that was pitted against his desire for efficient state bureaucracy to govern and control South African Indians. These contradictions were often shot through with a deep class prejudice against indentured Indians, whom he often viewed as inferior to the merchant class of Indians who he likened to British citizens rather than subjects of the British Crown. In the case of fingerprinting, Gandhi's desire for efficient bureaucracy outweighed his rejection of Western modernity. By accepting general Jan Smuts' arguments in favour of the virtues of fingerprinting he laid the groundwork for a system of governance that would continue for most of the twentieth century. It was a system that ended being used by the various systems of discrimination that were developed in South Africa.

Biometric State will be of value to any person interested in the history of South Africa, biometrics and the nature of the state. The recent crisis in the grants system has given it particular relevance. And anyone interested in gaining a lesson on how to write should read this elegant and deeply informed piece of scholarship.