

---

# A registration crisis? History and policy

*In October 2012 the British Academy published a volume of essays on 'Registration and Recognition', looking at how the individual has been documented in different periods of history and in very different societies across the world. In the following extract from their introduction, editors Simon Szreter and Keith Breckenridge consider the implications of post-9/11 approaches to identifying and registering citizens, and explain how their volume contributes to the debate.*

**T**HIS VOLUME provides an intellectual resource of comparative historical knowledge with which to judge whether there may, indeed, currently be a crisis of registration approaching and what form that crisis will take. Biometric identification systems originated as ways to create a non-archival register of criminal identification with tattooing, branding and amputation. Fingerprinting for sub-sections of the population defined as criminal became the first biometric archival method. Using the pretext since 9/11 of defence against global terrorism, it is proposed, through iris-recognition technology, to apply a fully archival biometrics comprehensively to democratic and non-criminal populations across the world, to confer upon them a security from external threats and also, with the emergence of basic income grants, their internal social security and positive rights. The interaction of this official registering technology with the application of computerised searchable and potentially linkable database information systems, and also with the emerging trend of commercial supply and delivery of these systems to states, has created an extraordinary conjuncture in the history of identity registration that should be of concern to all citizens.

## Questions

The interaction of these technologies with both state security interests and commercial logics poses significant questions about the necessary regulations required, which citizens, their elected governments and their judiciaries should wish to consider. Is there, for instance, a question of 'ownership' that should be considered in relation to the right to use information about a person's identity, once that information has been created and verified as authentic? The popular notion of 'identity theft' would appear to suggest that there is such a sense in common understanding, but does this also amount to a legally defensible concept in practice? If 'ownership' is not quite the appropriate concept for legal purposes, what perhaps of a law reflecting principles of permissive 'informed consent' governing the use of such identity information



*Photo: Lairt Keiows, 2004 (Creative Commons).*

by third parties or commercial organisations (including those companies increasingly bidding for and charged with the contracts to collect the information in the first place)? If such a right can be defended against a commercial corporation, can it also be defended against a sovereign state, in particular the state which also provides the institutional resources and the authorising and verifying procedures for the registration system itself? What is the relationship between the individual and the state over the question of the right to control or change a registered identity? The individual cannot be a self-authorising and self-verifying agency in relation to his/her identity. The state and its archiving and legal systems are ultimately necessary to provide this verification and authorisation role. There are therefore irreducibly at least two distinct parties with an approximately equal, or at least complementary or reciprocal, stake and claim in creating what we refer to as a legally-valid and enforceable personal identity: the individual in question and the verifying and recording state – or, at least, its devolved legal registration agency. Each such state currently issues passports, for instance – documents which epitomise this duality. If it is considered important that an individual is to have the right to exercise personal choice in changing aspects of his or her legally-recognised identity (gender for

instance), then there would need to be agreed and easily-accessible (though secure) procedures for doing this, which could satisfy the state's function as guarantor of the registration of identities. Some states deny or resist the possibility for individuals to vary by choice their identity once the state has made an original determination, which is then treated as permanent. Is this rule simply for the convenience of the state, or because it is claimed to uphold an ethical, legal or security principle of vital importance?

### History

Can history assist with providing a perspective on these current predicaments concerning the future of registration, due to this intense set of international, technological, commercial and political developments that have all come together during the last 10 years? At the moment we face these issues as a citizenry and set of experts who are equally uninformed of the rich and deep comparative history of the technologies of representation and recognition. This book provides a set of empirically-researched historical resources with which to address these contemporary problems. There are chapters here which uncover the rich but previously largely invisible histories of the evolution of these important infrastructures of

social rights in European, American and Asian societies. There are many chapters which explore the history of registration in Africa, as well as in India and China, the three greatest population centres of the poor in the world today, where registration is a highly contentious issue affecting a large proportion of the world's populace. There are chapters which explore the curious absence of direct relationship between the modern history of identity registration and the emergence of the international human rights agenda. And there are several contributions which explicitly link the diversity of historical information presented to the highly contemporary policy questions of the future of identity registration in a biometric and commercialised global context preoccupied with internal and external security.

---

Simon Szreter is Professor of History and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, and Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge.

---



---

Keith Breckenridge is Associate Professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Johannesburg.

---



---

*Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History*, edited by Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 182), was published in October 2012. Further information can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

---

