

## SECTION 4

# IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

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The desire for bureaucratic or scientific identification techniques is typically fueled by anxieties surrounding unknown others. This problem of unverifiability has a long history, dating back at least to early modern Europe, but was amplified by increasing social and geographical mobility—and the circulation of anonymous individuals in industrializing cities—in the late nineteenth century. The concern was that criminals or vagrants could become imposters or pass undetected, threatening both social stability and the well-being of people who supposedly belonged to a place. As Simon Cole relates in his impressive history of fingerprinting, the story of Jekyll and Hyde is emblematic of these nineteenth-century apprehensions “that criminals, far from exhibiting their villainy on their faces, were invisible, concealed beneath an inconspicuous facade. Criminals, it was said, exploited the anonymity of modern society, melting into the urban crowd, and this made them all the more dangerous” (Cole 2001: 2). Thus, early identification schemes began with a study of known “criminal” bodies with the goals of *detecting* previously labeled criminals and arriving at a scientific means of *predicting* criminality by mapping a set of shared characteristics.

From its outset, therefore, the science of identification began with racialized, classed, and gendered assumptions about who was considered dangerous or suspect. As a rule, the known criminal bodies were those already stigmatized in some way. They were people of color, migrants, the poor, beggars, prostitutes, or others deemed undesirable (Cole 2001; Sekula, excerpted in Chapter 21). Under the aura of scientific objectivity, a raft of early biometric techniques emerged to read biological difference and predisposition from the body: photography and physiognomy (measuring facial features), phrenology (measuring cranial size and shape), dactyloscopy (identifying fingerprints), and others. Unsurprisingly, white and relatively affluent bodies were found to be superior, whereas racialized bodies were found to be degenerate. Clearly, eugenic aspirations, of purifying society by gradually eliminating deficient traits and people, inflected these projects, such that racial prejudices were fused with scientific practice (Harding 1993). Over time, at least for criminal identification, explicitly racist agendas were muted, but the taint of racist origins remains and can be seen with the discriminatory functions and uses

of newer biometric systems today (Magnet, excerpted in Chapter 23).

State identification projects offer the most glaring examples of how discrimination may become encoded in—and reproduced through—abstraction. While the origins of many internal state identification schemes may have been to manage taxation and provide benefits for citizens, some of the worst atrocities against people have been facilitated by identification systems. As David Lyon writes, “In the mid-twentieth century, infamous systems of internal passport were developed under the Nazi regime in Germany, in South Africa under apartheid, and in the Soviet Union. In Germany, where . . . the administration of the Holocaust represents the apogee of modernist rationality, International Business Machines (IBM) was recruited to provide the technical infrastructure for genocidal identification” (Lyon 2009: 46). In colonial Rwanda, the strict codification of the categories *Hutu*, *Tutsi*, and *Twa* by Belgian authorities in the 1930s artificially fixed ethnic identities and created rifts between groups, which later contributed to civil war and genocide in the 1990s (Lyon 2009). State identification systems have also played a crucial role in the identification and management of slaves, refugees, prisoners, welfare recipients, and more. As new identification systems come into being, such as India’s massive biometric identity card scheme for its entire population or the United Nations’ biometric system for tracking refugees, it is worth asking questions about their discriminatory potential.

The politics of surveillance reside in the tangled relationship between identity and identification. Whereas identity is colloquially thought of as one’s core sense of self, as a self-fashioned personhood that one carries throughout the world of others, identification is a process of verification—of matching one’s claims of identity to representations in

abstract systems (Barnard-Wills 2012). From this perspective, surveillance occurs through exposure to identification processes, where one is verified, categorized, and governed based upon her or his fit (or lack thereof) with the system in question, be that a passport control checkpoint, an online shopping site, or a college classroom. This narrative, however, paints over the socially constructed nature of identity to begin with. As Valentin Groebner (excerpted in Chapter 19) explains, identity historically “denoted not uniqueness, but the features that the various elements of a group had in common.” The significance of group elements, physical traits, or individual abilities depends on a historically contingent system of social relations. As identification categories become codified in bureaucratic apparatuses and technological systems, the formation of identity through the negotiation of such categories can undermine any strong sense of self-ascription (van der Ploeg and Pridmore 2016). Tensions between identity and identification can be a good place to investigate the politics of surveillance, but the two formations coproduce each other and resist differentiation.

The excerpts in this section offer a window to the productive and repressive character of identification systems. Valentin Groebner traces the history of state identification systems in Western Europe, illustrating how they functioned to create the social world in their image but, also, inadvertently generated con men and imposters who could exploit the vulnerabilities of paper documents and records. John Torpey shows in his history of the passport that as countries asserted a monopoly on the legitimate means of movement, they effectively brought both “citizens” and the contemporary “nation-state” into being through the process of demarcating state territory and membership. Allan Sekula posits that the nineteenth-century use of photography to

identify social deviance should be understood in relation to the simultaneous circulation of photographic portraits of moral leaders; together, they constituted a larger archive that communicated a social and moral hierarchy. Dorothy Nelkin and Lori Andrews explore controversies over compulsory DNA testing of military personnel and prisoners to underscore how such ostensibly objective identification techniques are value-laden, fallible, and prone to abusive forms of “surveillance creep.” Finally, Shoshana Magnet problematizes contemporary biometric systems and reveals their propensity to reproduce and augment historical forms of discrimination.

## REFERENCES

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