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978-1-107-07784-3 - Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present

Keith Breckenridge

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Biometric State

Biometric identification and registration systems are being proposed by governments and businesses across the world. Surprisingly they are under most rapid, and systematic, development in countries in Africa and Asia. In this ground-breaking book Keith Breckenridge traces how the origins of the systems being developed in places like India, Mexico, Nigeria and Ghana can be found in a century-long history of biometric government in South Africa, with the South African experience of centralised fingerprint identification unparalleled in its chronological depth and demographic scope. He shows how empire, and particularly the triangular relationship between India, the Witwatersrand and Britain, established the special South African obsession with biometric government, and shaped the international politics that developed around it for the length of the twentieth century. He also examines the political effects of biometric registration systems, revealing their consequences for the basic workings of the institutions of democracy and authoritarianism.

KEITH BRECKENRIDGE is an Associate Professor and the Deputy Director at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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Keith Breckenridge

University of the Witwatersrand



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For Catherine and Alexandra, who remind me that
writing is not life

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is a history of biometric government before computers; it argues that most, although not all, of the authoritarian political results of universal and centralised fingerprinting will persist into the epoch of computerised automation unless we pay special attention to them. It is also a new and probably a controversial interpretation of South African history. This is because the book sidesteps two large and established bodies of writing in its explanation of the peculiar course of South African history – the older liberal historiography on the politics of Afrikaner Nationalism and the newer (although now also old) Marxist studies of the ideological and institutional effects of mining-driven capitalism. I have chosen, instead, to follow the local effects of globally staged debates in the science and technology of biometrics in accounting for the Apartheid state, and its immediate aftermath. This is not because I reject the explanatory power and value of the liberal and Marxist interpretations of South African history. On the contrary, as I hope my other work shows, I am utterly persuaded of the tremendous analytical power of twentieth-century South African historical writing in its published and unpublished forms. My reasons for ignoring the well-formed pattern of the debate lie elsewhere.

My interest in this book has been in the global significance of South African history. Why does South African history matter? An easy answer is to say, as many do, that it does not, or not any more than any other mid-sized country. I do not agree, of course. And I want to look carefully at the claims being made by writers such as Arendt, Cell, Mazower, Mitchell and Woodward that South Africa marks the capstone of imperialism, of a system of racist bureaucracy that was applied in many other societies on the Atlantic basin. Biometric forms of identification, often formed by expansive international scientific debate and widely dispersed international experiments, lie at the heart of the story of South African history. And they are also instruments of global significance, especially in our time, for the transmission – around the former colonial world – of some of the distinctive features of the South African state. This is, mostly,

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not a good thing. I hope to entice the students of those other societies to consider the implications of South African history very carefully.

I also have in mind a more local scholarly project. Like the academic writing of many other societies, South African historiography has dug itself into something of an intellectual hole over the last three decades. Some of this is intellectual solipsism, nurtured by a tumultuous national politics that requires detailed familiarity with organisations, individuals and cultural politics that is, at best, difficult to translate. The publishing imperative that applies in South Africa, which effectively only rewards the publication of research articles, does little to encourage wide and deep comparative reading. And the turn, after Edward Thompson's attack on Althusser, to a fine-grained social history driven by the explanatory power of deep archives and very interesting oral sources has encouraged provincial and local research that has been another source of this isolation. But there is, also, an implicit and not often articulated view that South African history is *sui generis*, completely distinct from any other society, and disconnected by its history from both its neighbours and its distant colonial peers. This argument has contributed significantly to the growing global isolation of South African historical writing. My point here is to reverse this argument – that the peculiarity of our history is derived from its connections with the wider imperial world, and that those linkages provide the basis for very interesting and productive comparisons. These relationships also speak very usefully to our contemporary interest in the dim prospects for democracy and social justice in the former colonial world.

In my attempts to understand South Africa and the other societies shaped by the obsessions of biometric government I have indulged a taste for wide reading, sometimes, I suspect, to the concern of my colleagues. Seema Maharaj, the Interlibrary Loan Librarian at my former university, provided an efficient and, most importantly, free stream of exotic books. I owe considerable thanks to Jane Caplan and David Lyon for their guidance, and for exposure to the members of their respective Identinet and Surveillance Studies collaborations. I cannot name all the participants in the many workshops and seminars that have been assembled by these scholarly networks but they have enormously influenced my understanding of the global forms of identification and surveillance. I am also sure that they will continue to find abundant reason to correct me.

I would like to thank my colleagues at WISER, especially Belinda Bozzoli, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, who, in very different ways, have worked to make Johannesburg a remarkable place from which to study the world. My thanks to Michael Watson and Cambridge University Press for finding a place for this book, and for their easy professionalism.

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Much of the book was written in two periods of splendid isolation in Cambridge, for which I owe thanks to St John's College, for a Colenso Visiting Scholarship, and to Sujit Sivasundaram and Simon Schaffer. From Ann Arbor, I would like, especially, to thank my friends Gabrielle Hecht and Paul Edwards for ongoing institutional and scholarly support. My colleagues in Durban – Marijke du Toit, Vukile Khumalo, Thembisa Waetjen and Goolam Vahed – were persistently encouraging and demanding. I offer special thanks to all the members of the History and African Studies Seminar. To Suryakanthie Chetty, Bernard Dubbeld, Prinisha Badassy, Vanessa Noble, Paul Rouillard, Nafisa Essop Sheik and Stephen Sparks for gathering evidence of many kinds. And to Charles van Onselen for his help over many years. David William Cohen and Jeff Guy have been encouraging, perplexing and brave colleagues and collaborators. We will continue to debate, I hope, how history should be written and what it was actually about. And then, finally, my largest intellectual and institutional debts are owed to Simon Szreter. All of these people, of course, have no responsibility for the tendentious arguments and errors in the pages that follow.

This book is dedicated to Catherine Burns and Alexandra Breckenridge, with whom I have shared the pleasures and stresses of running a household filled with visiting academics, a very busy young woman, and three dogs. Book writing, under those circumstances, is a wicked indulgence.