REVIEWS

Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter (eds), *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 532 pp, hardback. ISBN978-0-19-726531-4.

The identification of the person through documentation is a growing field of research for historians, sociologists, political scientists, and members of other disciplines. This reflects the shift towards seeing the State (with a capital 'S') as a series of discursive, bureaucratic processes, rather than simply that which claims the monopoly of violence over a particular territory. Of course, the world of 'paper pushing' is backed up by force if necessary. Breckenridge and Szreter's edited volume discussed here joins other seminal collections, such as Jane Caplan and John Torpey's *Documenting Individual Identity* (2001), and Ilsen About, James Brown, and Gayle Lonergan's *People, Papers, and Practices* (2013), in pushing forward our understanding of the subject. The collection starts with a short foreword by C. A. Bayly, followed by an introduction by Szreter and Breckenridge, and is then divided loosely into sections on 'States and Legal Personhood', 'Negotiated Recognition', 'Empires', and 'Recognition and Human Rights', although there is plainly much overlap.

Registration is defined broadly in the collection in terms of, as one contributor (Gopinath) puts it, 'the act of listing someone or something by an institution that commands authority or legitimacy'. As Bayly notes, this broad approach helps the contributors to range far and wide, but it is difficult to 'stop it merging into a catch-all social and political history of the world'. Certainly, the contributors to this excellent volume cover every continent bar Australasia, and from the ancient world to the contemporary world, although there is a preponderance of studies in the period after 1800. A brief enumeration of the contributions shows how widely the editors have cast their net, thus we have: Von Glahn on Imperial China; Szreter on early-modern England; Fahrmeir on nineteenth-century Germany; Saito and Sato on Japan from the early-modern period onwards; Rosental on nineteenth-century France; Flemming on the Mediterranean world in the classical period; Hertzog on the early-modern Spanish Empire; Looijesteijn and van Leeuwen on the Dutch Republic; MacDonald on South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Gopinath on India from the Raj onwards; Engerman on the Caribbean in the period of abolition; Fahmy on nineteenth-century Egypt; Breckenridge on twentieth-century South Africa; Cooper on post-war French Africa; Birn on modern Uruguay; Marshall on the inter-war USA and Africa; Lund on post-apartheid South Africa; and, lastly, Ferguson on the future of registration in Africa. This is a very impressive line up, and the emphasis on developments outside the Europe and the USA is refreshing, as is the attempt to link history to contemporary policy considerations.

The present reviewer would argue that the volume does not actually cast its net wide enough, because all the contributors assume that the only institutions that need to be examined are the state or other political formations. Registration is what states do, or even what they are. However, in a world increasingly dominated by commercial

organisations, hungry to turn citizens into consumer commodities, this is hardly a tenable position. As the introduction of the Unique Identification System in India shows, registration and identification are becoming a project driven forward by a partnership between the state and commerce, and the latter has long been creating its own information systems to record the identity of its customers. The relationship between the profit motive and the development of contemporary registration practices is hardly explored. The way in which people in the west have been eager to collude in their own commodification through supermarket loyalty schemes, or Facebook, is one of the most depressing (or liberating?) features of the past generation. Similarly, the dependence of state surveillance bodies such as the NSA in the USA on private digital service providers to harvest personal data, and make it available on demand, shows the increasing interpenetration of government and commercial powers.

Perhaps inevitably, the ghosts of Michel Foucault and T. H. Marshall hover over this collection. On one hand, there is a concerted, and welcome, effort by the editors of the volume in their introduction to point out that registration can underpin positive political, economic and social rights, *à la* Marshall. Indeed, Szreter goes perhaps a bit too far in his own chapter as presenting Thomas Cromwell, who as Henry VIII's first minister introduced the parochial registration of baptisms, marriages, and burials in England, as a sort of William Beveridge before his time. However, the present reviewer would certainly agree that this institution, and the civil registration which superseded it in the nineteenth century, helped to support the property and welfare rights that allowed England to give birth to the Industrial Revolution. Much the same could be said about the commercial development of the Netherlands, as Looijesteijn and van Leeuwen point out. But one wonders how far registration created commercial development, rather than reflected it. After all the Netherlands did not have an Industrial Revolution, and, as Breckenridge himself shows, the introduction of vital registration in colonial South Africa was not a priority because rights to land were customary not individual.

Nevertheless, much of this collection is actually about how authorities used registration for the purposes of control, the fostering of 'bio-power', or 'governmentality' in Foucault's sense. In Japan registration allows the taxation of land; in the Roman Empire conscription; it controls migration in the Spanish and British Empires; it is used for the management of health in non-democratic India under the Raj, or in nineteenth-century Egypt; and for controlling labour in colonial and apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, many chapters also help to undermine the rather Orwellian picture of state control found in Foucault, or the work of James C. Scott, by showing that registration was often ineffectual (see Breckenridge on South Africa, Rosental on France, and Hertzog on the Spanish Empire), or taken over by the 'controlled' for their own purposes, as in Von Glahn's China. The vast period of time covered in this work also undermines Foucault's rather parochial arguments about 'governmentality' as something that comes out of Enlightenment Europe. It would be good to see more work that showed the complexity of the motives and multiple drivers behind identification techniques. Also, as soon as documentation is used to control individuals, they find ways of getting round the bureaucracy, or using forged documents, as MacDonald shows in his contribution on the Indian Ocean during the late British Empire. The question of forgery raises the whole question of how registration, in the sense of the entry of a name in some form of record that persists over time, actually identifies people. What are the contexts, or practices, in which such an

action can be linked ineluctably to a particular body, and the bundles of rights and obligations connected to it? Do rights pertain to bodies or to pieces of paper in bureaucratic systems?

As one would expect from a work published by Oxford University Press for the British Academy, the volume has been produced to a high standard. However, at a price of £100 it will be out of the reach of many scholars, and for a volume dedicated to the history of documentation it is strangely bereft of illustrations. It would be a pity if such issues prevented this fine volume from becoming as widely available as it should be.

Edward Higgs
Department of History, University of Essex

Bhavani Raman, *Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 278+xii pp. ISBN 978-0-226-70327-5.

This incisive, knowledgeable and beautifully written book is a major contribution to scholarship, not only on law, record keeping and bureaucracy in colonial South India, but also on the fantasies and realities of law and paper-bound governance in many other parts of the world. Although a rather surprisingly large portion of the book consists of material published earlier, the delightful introductory essay performs the important task of pulling together rich socio-historical material on Tamil-writing scribes – their sociology, pedagogy and role in governance – and pointing it towards a broader understanding of the nature of colonial modernity. The principal argument of the book is not just that the Raj was an empire of bureaucracy, nor that it was upheld or undermined by its Indian underlings, for that has been said before, by Robert Frykenberg among others.[1] This book makes an important analytical leap by describing a Kafkaesque world where legal record was fetishised but justice unreachable, not simply because the Raj's Indian underlings were corrupt but because the system's obsession with recording and legibility created proliferating transactional arenas of fraud, blackmail and patronage. As Raman herself puts it, the book explores how, in an age when continuous writing and exclusive reliance on the written record was supposed to 'ensure political accountability and limit the abuse of power,' 'the cutcherry's [Anglo-Indian word for office of administration] micro-practices of writing reordered the production of juridical truth and interlocked the rule of paper with a subtle but devastating discretionary authority' (3).

Raman's tremendous achievement is that from this point she has neither slid into abstractions regarding the nature of power and legality, nor regressed into a social history of a certain clerical group: in her case, the Tamil-writing *kanakkuppillai*s, located at the bottom of the revenue bureaucracy. Instead, the book uses the concept of 'textual habitus'[2] to produce a densely braided narrative about the nature of scribal power (including its personnel, techniques, instruments and aesthetics) and the character of the bureaucratic colonial state, a narrative that speaks to several important historiographic debates about knowledge and power, intermediaries, the nature of the colonial states, and social history of language use.

The first two chapters of the book are exhilaratingly rich essays on the pre-colonial antecedents of the hierarchical, polyglot scribal groups of southern India, and their transformation into Company employees or hopeful job-seekers, huddled around the district office (cutcherry) and bound by ties of patronage and blackmail with their more fortunate kin and their European superiors. These are the men that produced the vast world of Tamil and Modi records, which underlay the sanitised English-language summaries prepared for the Company's directors and shareholders. The Tamil-writing scribes, or *kanakkuppillai*, in particular, were indispensable for their ability to compute, preserve and recover information about landholding and revenue from memory.

---

1   R. E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District, 1788–1848: A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).
2   Borrowed from Brinkley Messick's classic, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Dominations and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

In the early nineteenth century such esoteric skills, and the family and patronage connections which channelled them into the service of states, became suspect under a Company government keen on reforming itself, separating private interest from public governance and making records transparent, uniform and legible. Ironically, Raman shows, such efforts at reform only entrenched authority and re-valorised personal testimony, this time for purposes of indictment, while extending the language of corruption, transparency and respectability to these very social groups, adding a further register of mutual recrimination and mode of competing for patronage.

A very large part of these competing claims of veracity and transparency crystallised around the matter of language and script. They led to a search for an authentic Tamil which, unlike Persian (the language of Mughal administration) or languages written in the Modi script, could produce a legible record, comprehensible to all government officials of the region, and potentially, to all speakers of the language. Here Raman's work is an important complement to the better known and similar history of Hindustani in northern India.[3] Chapters three and four of this book explore the process by which such a form of Tamil prose came to be produced, and the institutions, individuals and intellectual efforts involved in its production and propagation. Within this, the story of the much disdained 'cutcherry [office-room] Tamil' and its aficionados, the Tamil *munshis* (scribes and language teachers), and the rejection of both by Orientalists, British and Indian, in search of a more authentic spoken language, is a substantial addition to the history of Indian languages and Orientalism, in all senses of the term. Raman's strategy of looking at sites of governance (together with evangelical and pedagogic institutions) for practices of language is one that many others may fruitfully emulate, and indeed her discussion of the Tamil language map is one that can throw light on many other multi-lingual contexts marked by diglossia.

The two final chapters of the book bring the story back to law and governance, examining how forgery and perjury were both enabled by, and served to undermine, the colonial aspiration of governance through legible and verifiable records, and how, despite such proliferating duplicity, the investment in official writing extended far beyond the range of literacy in Tamil-speaking India.

This then, is a book about paperwork and corruption and the social worlds that thrived around them. It denies that counterfeit is '"outside" of the law' and sees it as 'more a point of entry into the workings of law' (159). Given this, if there is a surprising omission in this book, it is the lack of reference to the Comaroffs' powerful and apt paradigm of fetishism of law, such that law and lawlessness enable each other.[4] As a historian, Raman has used a formidable variety of documentary sources – both printed and manuscript – language learning manuals, lexicons, petitions, reports, literary compositions, in addition to vast amounts of archival material collected from both Britain and India, in order to bring the 'letter of the law' to life. This work deserves to be a model for historians of colonialism and governance.

Nandini Chatterjee
Department of History, University of Exeter

---

3   B. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command' in B. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996),16–56.
4   J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 'Introduction' in J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Post-Colony* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1–56.

Craig Robertson, *The Passport in America: The History of a Document* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 340 pp, cloth. ISBN 9780199733422.

Until quite recently, the American state – like its contemporaries in colonial Africa – scarcely knew the people that it governed. America's population sprawls over a vast territory. Frontiers have always been open and, as in colonial Africa, government bureaucracy was underdeveloped. It was not until 1933 that the state of Texas agreed to enforce birth registration (105). Federal income tax was not introduced until 1913. Until the second decade of the twentieth century most Americans had little reason to adopt standard spellings for their surnames, since their documented interactions with a distant central government were few. Historian John Iliffe once called Africans the frontiersmen of humanity.[1] He might have said the same of Americans.

Craig Robertson's engaging book uses the history of the passport as a means to explore the uneven development of the contemporary regime of documentation in the United States. The modern passport was not born, whole, from the mind of an established bureaucracy. It is an assemblage of documentary procedures and surveillance techniques that took form over the course of a century. Each of Robertson's chapters chronicles the itineraries of the different elements that make up the passport. In one chapter, for instance, Robertson uses the 'physical description' part of the passport to explore the development of anthropometry. In the late nineteenth century the Parisian police clerk Alphonse Bertillon invented a rather extraordinary system – called Bertillonage – to identify criminals. There were 11 different measurements to be made; each measurement required a specially designed set of tools. The cards on which the measurements were recorded were collected at a central registry and filed in subdivisions – first head length, then middle finger length, then ear length (75). Nothing like this was ever attempted in the United States (though there was a Bertillon Bureau in New York). In the absence of anthropometry, American officials made snap judgements about immigrants' identity, class and race based on appearances. At the turn of the twentieth century some 5,000 people had to pass through Ellis Island each day. Officials conducted medical examinations in the space of 40 seconds per person (166). Bureaucrats made hasty notes on the manifests they were given by the steamship companies; the forms were thereafter filed in archives that were largely inaccessible. The examiners eventually excluded a bare one per cent of potential immigrants (168). There was no time here for Bertillonage.

A further chapter in the book describes the development of a bureaucracy to oversee the issuance of passports. Scholars of contemporary African politics will be struck by the uneven trajectory of the state's most elemental structures and by the informality of the processes that defined American citizenship. The Passport Bureau was created in 1870, but eliminated in 1873 due to budget cuts. Passports were subsequently issued by a variety of overburdened offices. The State Department, which oversaw the issuance of passports, relied very largely on the memories of two of its longest-serving officials, William Hunter and Alvey Adee, whose combined tenure spanned 95 years. The archiving systems were simply not up to the task: correspondence

---

1   J. Iliffe, *Africans: A History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 1.

was filed by date in large volumes, making it impossible for officials to track individuals or subjects through the paperwork. It was only in 1917 that a comprehensive decimal filing system was introduced to organise the archives of America's foreign relations.

In archives management as in other aspects of government bureaucracy it was the First World War that ushered in a new era. The first attempt to legally control the entry of aliens into the United States came in July 1917, when immigrants were obliged to procure a visa to enter the country. Immigration barriers were going up all over Europe, too. In 1920 and again in 1926 the League of Nations convened a passport conference that regularised visa procedures and created the standard booklet we now know to be a passport. Three years later, American currency took its familiar size and appearance, 68 years after the federal government first began to issue it (38). It was also in the 1920s that Americans were obliged to register their automobiles, obtain licences for driving, and sign up for Social Security. During the same decade the Native Registration Ordinance required Africans living in the British colony of Kenya to carry a *kipande*, a card with their name, photograph, fingerprints, and employment history. There was a global conjuncture in the decade following the Great War, a moment in which governments sought to harness new technologies to identify their people.

In Africa as in America these new means of documentary identification were controversial. Kenyans thought that carrying a *kipande* made 'a man look like a slave or a dog; it is looked upon as a bond or mark of servitude.'[2] Government-issued identity documents labelled a person, depriving him of the dignity and reputation he had struggled to earn. Robertson reports that passports were likewise considered an affront by the American travellers who were obliged to carry them. Throughout his book Robertson contrasts the official documentary regime – impersonal, governed by measurement and precision – with a 'local' sphere where people knew each other. It was the pervasive 'localism' in governing practice, argues Robertson, that caused Americans to dislike the growing apparatus of paperwork that increasingly defined their identity. To many people, it seemed as though government did not trust them, for bureaucrats in faraway Washington did not recognise the forms of respectability that they had earned (219). For Robertson locality does a great deal of work: it allows him to identify a space outside the developing regime of documentation where 'extraordinary knowledge of a person and his or her identity would always trump something like the misspelling of a name in a dispute' (9; 43).

Scholars of Africa will recognise this gesture toward a space of commonality and trust. In African Studies it is associated with the *ethnos*, the community, the village. The contrast between the undocumented world of common feeling and the rationalised, bureaucratic logic of the modern world was basic to liberal social science in the late twentieth century. In African Studies it helped scholars chart the 'enlargement of scale' that helped usher Africans into the modern world. In fact, as recent work has shown, the liberal account of pre-modern community is almost everywhere a fiction. Africans – like, I am sure, the Americans of whom Robertson writes – mistrusted each other. Localities were cosmopolitan and multi-linguistic. There were strangers

<hr />

2 Presbyterian Church of East Africa archives (Nairobi), I/D/5: Kenya Missionary Council, 'Report of the Kikuyu Province Sub-Committee on Native Registration,' August 1933.

everywhere.[3] By organising his book around the contrast between the personal and the impersonal, the local and the bureaucratic, intimacy and mistrust, Robertson partakes of the myth-making that undergirds the basic story of modernity.

There is, nonetheless, much for scholars of Africa to learn from this book. The documentary practices of labour management in interwar Africa were also being tried out on American citizens, and on the immigrant populations who wished to enter America. Among other things, this book helps attenuate the distance between colonial Africa and the modern world.

Derek R. Peterson
Department of History, University of Michigan

---

3   W. Shank and E. Skinner (eds), *Strangers in African Societies* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1979).

Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (Cambridge, MA and London: Zone Books, 2012), 182 pp. ISBN 978-1-935408-26-0.

In contrast to its subject matter's usually laborious and tedious nature, Ben Kafka's new book on paperwork is concise, punchy and a pleasure to read. He examines the history of bureaucratic writing as both a modern technique of power and as a compromised, frustrating and malfunctioning system. Kafka persuasively argues that it is in this contradiction that we can explore the 'psychic life of paperwork' (18). Whilst the turn towards using psychoanalytical concepts in history writing might put those with more conservative methodological tastes on edge, the approach helpfully illuminates social interactions that are both quotidian and familiar. It is a powerful book and the implications of Kafka's arguments demand serious consideration.

The Demon of Writing is a book that wears its profound engagement with theory lightly. The disciplinary fields and concepts discussed in the book are wide-ranging, but the discussions are always clear. Indeed, there is an endearing honesty in how Kafka describes the evolution of his own thoughts in relation to the work of others. His critical engagement with Bruno Latour's work brings into relief some of the most salient arguments in the book. Many aspects of Latour's thinking about how objects and materials produce the effect of human agency clearly shape Kafka's analysis. But he is left dissatisfied with the flat network of objects and humans that Latour depicts; and I'm sure that he is not alone here. Driven by his personal commitment to psychoanalytic practice, Kafka argues that the fundamental difference between people and objects is that they are 'ruled by unconscious processes' (14). He does not believe that the unconscious realms of persons in history are accessible to historians, as some psychohistorians in the past did.[1] Instead, he demonstrates the ways in which complaints about, and critiques of, paperwork and its contradictions have served as sites for the expression of frustrated desire, regardless of what those deeper wants may have consisted of (78–9).

The book is organised into four chapters, each of which are based around some striking case studies. The first chapter follows Edme-Etienne Morizot's attempts to attain recompense from a rapidly changing bureaucratic system. He was a clerk unfairly dismissed from service in the Ministry of Finance (replaced by the son-in-law of the king's aunt's chambermaid) in September 1788. At first he attempted to have his case heard in the rapidly growing and increasingly overburdened administrative system of the monarchical regime, and then in the new bureaucratic world ushered in by the French Revolution. In Morizot's failure to get what he deemed a fair hearing – through his sorry but familiar story of being passed between departments, none of whom wish to take responsibility for his case, and of documents being lost in the process – Kafka illustrates the success of a new regime of paperwork. In revolutionary France the collection of paperwork did not just enable the state to discipline its subjects, the state itself was disciplined through its subjects' access to its paperwork.

---

1   For an excellent critical discussion of these approaches, their limitations, and where interactions between the disciplines might be productively furthered, see: J. W. Scott, 'The Incommensurability of Psychoanalysis and History', *History and Theory,* 51, 1, 2012, 63–83.

In a neat turn of phrase, Kafka notes 'the personal state was becoming the personnel state' (32).

Chapter two traces the story, and myth, of Charles-Hippolyte Labussière, an employee of the Committee of Public Safety who saved people from execution during the Terror by soaking the documents in water until they became a paste, making them into small pellets, and then launching them into the river. Kafka uses the tale of Labussière not to demonstrate individual agency in oppressive contexts, as the story is often used, but instead to examine the material conditions that enabled that agency to emerge. Regarding the myth of Labussière, a story told and retold in France over the years, Kafka regards it less as a response to the trauma of the period and more as an attempt to resolve the contradictions of paperwork. In Year II of the republic paperwork was used extensively by the state to establish its authority, but time and again it failed and was undermined by its own paperwork. The same medium that made state power possible, also made it impossible. Employees were overwhelmed with the workload, and some used paperwork to sabotage the state's intentions. The materiality of paperwork did not eliminate human agency through greater surveillance, but 'refracted agency through its medium' (74). Labussière recognised that paperwork was, ultimately, paper and this enabled him to act.

In the third chapter Kafka explores the birth of the word 'bureaucracy' in the eighteenth century and then follows its career in the nineteenth as it became popularised. It is a word, he points out, that is 'surely one of the most spectacular linguistic-conceptual success stories of the modern era' (79). Kafka explains the term's success as being the result of the role that paperwork played as a site for the expression of deeper desires and anxieties. For this reason, drawing on the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville among others, Kafka locates new understandings of the powers and failures of paperwork in literature, and not in philosophy or sociology. Representations of bureaucratic despotism and of bureaucratic incompetence were (and remain) a source of a curious mix of anger and amusement. Paperwork is often a joke. The insights here are important. The recent turn towards the archive in historical studies have been influenced by Jacques Derrida's argument that they are produced through conflicting desires.[2] Kafka offers a route into studying not only the desires of the originators of paperwork but also of those who encountered it in their daily lives, through popular accounts and apocryphal tales.

The final chapter looks at the unpredictability of paperwork and its accidents. Whilst Kafka notes that as a medium of communication paperwork is inherently liable to be error ridden or misunderstood, this chapter posits that some accidents are more accidental than others. To help theorise this he turns to the writings of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud on the subject of paperwork. The former considers paperwork as praxis, the latter as parapraxis. Using an obscure article on a dispute between winemakers from Mosel and state bureaucrats, Kafka reveals an early stage in Marx's thoughts on bureaucracy. Marx argued that the dispute was produced and refracted through the 'bureaucratic medium'. Animosity grew between the two groups as, despite their actions being guided by good faith, they came to regard each others' correspondence with greater and greater suspicion. Marx's overlooked but central

---

2   J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For work specifically on colonial archives building on these insights, see A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Commonsense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

insight here, that we should be suspicious of the medium itself, is seen by Kafka as a missed opportunity in the development of Marxist theories of the place of the state in revolution asking, where are the clerks? Freud's theorising of paperwork was through his analysis of the 'slip'. In even the most banal of errors in his paperwork, Freud revealed deeper unconscious processes at play. This was powerfully critiqued by the Italian philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro, who pointed out that many Freudian slips could in fact be explained away as mechanical and cognitive mistakes. Kafka takes this point and pushes it further by exploring how, physically, Freud made his mistakes (have a piece of paper and a pair of scissors at the ready for this section). He encourages us to pay close attention to mistakes and how they were made materially to judge the reasons and meanings behind them (138–9).

For historians of the non-Western world, Kafka's work throws up particular possibilities and dilemmas. The importance of paperwork to colonial rule has been increasingly studied, particularly under the East India Company.[3] In this context the same contradictions of paperwork's successes and failures have been revealed through instances of forgery and fabrication.[4] Kafka's work helps draw out some of the specificity of the colonial entanglement with paperwork, which differs considerably from the experience of Revolutionary France despite sharing similar contradictions. His commitment to the importance of the materiality of paperwork is also an important insight. We should not only read 'against' and 'along' the archive grain, but consider the material nature of the archive itself. But what can historians uncover of the psycho-historical aspects of paperwork in a cross-cultural context? Although psychoanalysis has provided a site for the construction of an Indian self,[5] as a discipline it has struggled to accommodate the 'tropics'.[6] Might mistakes made in petitions submitted by the colonised be usefully analysed as unconscious slips? Might anti-colonial nationalist diatribes against despotic imperial bureaucracies be helpfully considered as expressions of broader and deeper desires? *The Demon of Writing* opens the door to considering these types of alluring but difficult questions.

Jonathan Saha
Department of History, University of Bristol

---

3   M. Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
4   B. Raman, 'The Duplicity of Paper: Counterfeit, Discretion, and Bureaucratic Authority in Early Colonial Madras,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 54, 2, 2012, 229–50.
5   S. Kapila, 'The "Godless" Freud and His Indian Friends: An Indian Agenda for Psychoanalysis', in S. Mahone and M. Vaughan (eds), *Psychiatry and Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 124–152.
6   J. Rose, 'Freud in the "Tropics,"' *History Workshop Journal,* 47, 1999, 49–67.

Ilsen About, James Brown and Gayle Lonergan (eds), *Identification and Registration Practices in Transnational Perspective: People, Papers and Practices,* St Antony's Series (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan in association with St Antony's College, Oxford, 2013), 344 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-35438-8.

Only a little more than a decade ago scholarly understanding of the most common ways that people have interacted with states was strikingly less developed than it is today. In the 1980s Foucault's work – especially *Discipline and Punish* – fostered sweeping accounts of the power of writing in the emergence of the modern state, culminating in James Scott's famous account of the politics of administrative legibility.[1] A brilliant exception amongst these works – in its interest in the details of the material forms of paper and the technological effects of writing – was Clanchy's study of the making of written bureaucracy in medieval England.[2] But, in general, it is fair to say that the study of the way bureaucracies and individuals produced the documents required by modern states was initiated by *Documenting Individual Identity,* a volume of essays edited by Jane Caplan and John Torpey, and published in 2001.[3] In the years since, documents of identification have been the subject of intensive research in History and Sociology throughout the Anglophone world; Empire – and colonial India in particular – have received special attention in these accounts, as has the history of policing and imprisonment.[4] *Identification and Registration Practices in Transnational Perspective* clearly marks the second generation of this scholarship and a self-conscious turn away from purely coercive systems of registration to a broad range of practices of documentation and identification, from civil registration systems to shopper loyalty cards.

 This catholic interest in practices of documentary identification means that the book covers many themes: fingerprinting in the courts, DNA databases, biometric systems, identity numbers, commercial tracking, immigration and civil registration. Indeed it is the great variety of forms of identification that seems to be the book's main point, one that is made convincingly across the papers. But it also leaves many intriguing analytical questions unanswered. Neither the introduction nor the structure of the book suggest convincing organising themes about the primary agents of identification; this is a problem that is exacerbated by the mismatch between the organising category of the 'central state' and the main identifying agent in many of the papers, which was often local municipalities. So too, the section on 'communities'

---

1   J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); P. R. D. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914*, vol 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); A. Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39, 1986, 3–64; J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
2   M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979).
3   J. Caplan and J. C. Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
4   R. Singha, 'Settle, Mobilize, Verify: Identification Practices in Colonial India', *Studies in History* 16, 2 2000, 151–98; J. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); S. A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001); C. Sengoopta, *Imprint of the Raj: How Fingerprinting Was Born in Colonial India* (London: Macmillan, 2003); C. Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality, and Identification in South Asia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004); V. Groebner, *Who Are You?: Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Zone, 2007); P. Sankar, 'State Power and Record-Keeping: The History of Individualized Surveillance in the United States, 1790–1935' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992) became widely known after 2001.

deals mainly with the identifying work of local states. The Icelandic *Kennitala,* for example, is an unusual example of a completely centralised identification and open and registration system (one that was similar in some respects to the South African *Book of Life*) but it falls under the section on 'beyond the central state'. It is clear that the editors are trying to draw attention to the commercial functions of the identity number in Iceland, but the categories are not well explained. The result, really, is that the sum of the book is less than its very interesting parts. This is a pity, in part, because the book, even more than *Documenting Individual Identity*, brings together the French and English scholarship on identification practices.

This scholarship has some interesting features. Both the English and French fields are relatively young, perhaps because, as Ilsen About shows (203–223), European writers, and especially Hannah Arendt, were convinced of the authoritarian purposes of documents of identification after the Second World War. Like the Anglophone historical scholarship, much of the French anthropology dates only from the last decade, as Claudine Dardy's essay on the État Civil shows, triggered by the difficulties of extending locally organised civil status to the last of France's former colonial regions (147–8). Yet read together it is possible to discern patterns of identifying and registering agents across periods and regions, to explore the cultural and political effects of these systems, and, perhaps most interestingly, to track their failures and the significance of those failures.

To begin with the main agents of identification, in Europe and the Americas, it was cities[5] that were the primary engines of identification. Whether it was early-modern Paris and its meticulous tracking of temporary lodgers (25), or the city of Moscow (at around the same time), the presence of the poor and the unattached in European cities was the subject of careful bureaucratic surveillance (32–5). Sometimes these local forms of residence registration meshed with elaborate schemes for central government surveillance, like the Nazi *Volkskartei* (227–8) but it seems likely from these studies that few central governments ever had the ability to collect and search these transactions properly. Indeed, successful arrangements for coordinating identification systems, when they have developed, have often emerged – as was the case with the spread of Vucetich's system of fingerprinting in Latin America by agreement between police chiefs in the largest cities – from arrangements and alliances between municipal officials, often outside of one nation state (50–1).

As the essays here show, the answers to the questions of how people have been identified, and with what political effects, are much more open and varied than might seem obvious. Conventional academic understanding of identity registration – in the aftermath of Foucault's arguments about the fashioning of individualised subjectivity after the Enlightenment, and Scott's work on naming and administrative legibility – is that it functions as a technology of individualisation. Tiny Iceland is an extreme case of this kind of identification, with the central government supporting a Population Register that was built from a punch card for each person after 1952, allocating them a number based on birth dates, and recording addresses. All of this was publicly and universally available (138–40). But that kind of identification is not universal.

---

5   V. Groebner, 'Describing the Person, Reading the Signs in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe: Identity Papers, Vested Figures, and the Limits of Identification, 1400–1600' in Caplan and Torpey (eds), *Documenting Individual Identity*, 15–28; Cole, *Suspect Identities*; Sankar, 'State Power and Record-Keeping'.

In Japan (and in China, the source of the very old practice of household registration) *Koseki* registration is intrinsically about the administrative location of people within families. In these systems personhood is entirely about being located within a family, in opposition to the desolate isolation of single individuals (255). The way that registration works in South Africa is also an intriguing mix, especially the state's meticulous registration of the racially isolated population of Indian migrants (198–9). In these systems of paperwork the identification of the size and shape of families – carefully naming and counting wives and husbands and all children – was key to the state's effort to prevent Indian migration. In another respect the South African systems served as an outlier of coercive and archival identification because it came to rely persistently on fingerprinting as an alternative to writing. As Dhupelia-Mesthrie puts it, in the Cape migration records 'fingerprinting cut through biographical fictions' (200).

States are clearly no longer the dominant agents of identification. Private firms, especially IT companies have become powerful and enthusiastic advocates of the 'biometric fetish'. As Eddy Higgs shows, the technologies of electronic banking have intersected with new kinds of data, like GPS coordinates (167) and databases, like credit histories (169) to produce very intimate and extensive systems of identification. Typical of Higgs's work, his paper shows that these commercialised forms of identification have long, and effective, histories that predating the proliferation of computerised feedback systems.

But there is also very broad evidence from these papers that the diverse tools of identification are often difficult to implement. Universal systems of surveillance, in particular, are very expensive and almost impossible to deploy on a large scale – as the history of the emergence and collapse of the *Volkskartei* shows clearly (228–30). Much of this is simply a matter of the administrative costs of centralisation. But, like the range of systems of identification, there have also been a great variety of subversions, many of them very paradoxical. Unlike the US history, where the courts have largely endorsed FBI-sponsored claims about the scientific character of fingerprint identification,[6] in Italy scientists worked to oppose fingerprint matching in the courts in the 1920s (69–70) precisely because police work was seen as the opposite of science. In Iceland, where registration has been extraordinarily public and systematic, arguments about privacy have been opposed by those who fear secrecy as an aid to corruption. There are many similar ironies in these essays.

It is, however, possible to track common processes of slippage away from panopticism as administrators have had to adjust their expectations under the financial, administrative and materials burden of overweening projects of identification. Perhaps the best example of this imperative to compromise was the substitution in Nazi Germany of the easily obtained *Postausweis* for the much more invasive (fingerprint-based) *Kennkarte* (231–2). Another common theme, which can serve here as a conclusion, is the politics of what can be called administrative mimesis. This is a struggle that pits individuals and families against administrators and paperwork, one in which fingerprinting and other forms of biometric identification can increasingly support identification without the cooperation of the subject. The working of

---

6   R. G. Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J Edgar Hoover* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Sankar, 'State Power and Record-Keeping'; Cole, *Suspect Identities*.

the mimetic predicament was succinctly captured by one of the detainee informants of a study on refugee identification by Melanie Griffiths: 'In Greece they took my fingerprint but the police did not detain me … I came to this country and immigration have said that I am a liar and that nothing I say is true because of my fingerprint in Greece' (294).

Keith Breckenridge
WISER, University of the Witwatersrand

Mathew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-27215-6.

In his compelling and challenging ethnography of bureaucracy in Pakistan, Mathew Hull reminds us that the architectural ambition underlying the construction of the capital city, Islamabad, was to distance society from the state. The bureaucratic agency especially assigned with this task was the Capital Development Authority (CDA), which became the focus of Hull's research. However it is bureaucracy itself and its vast documentary regime – at the heart of state functioning – that undid the distance between society and state. As Hull writes,

> If the Islamabad Master Plan stifled participatory democracy, the documents it required promoted a participatory bureaucracy. The Master Plan succeeded in confining political participation to the bureaucratic arena itself rather than provoking successful opposition to it through mechanisms of civil society – representative institutions, interest groups, and the press. And yet, over its five decade history, the city did not separate bureaucracy from 'society' but rather drew that society within bureaucracy itself. (253)

Hull acknowledges that such drawing in of society into bureaucracy was not always just, democratic or even legal (252); nevertheless the paper regime afforded unexpected forms of participation to citizens who manipulated, forged and traded in files, lists, maps and surveys to undermine state control. Two anecdotes that Hull begins and ends the book with are illustrative. The first features Ahmed, a driver about to move to a new house that he was working towards for a long time. However what animated Ahmed was not conversation about the move itself but the documents he had acquired in the process of obtaining the house. Here was a tale of title deeds, transfer certificates, approval of house plan and finally a 'No Objection Certificate' acquired via money, forgery and serendipity (2).

At the end of the book however we meet government officials who had wised up to the ways in which documents could not only be manipulated or illegally acquired but 'repurposed' (247) towards ends not intended by the bureaucracy. In this instance the state officials were alloting land to squatters in the hope that the squatters would not sell the land as soon as they obtained it to go and squat somewhere else. The bureaucrats therefore chose to leave matters undocumented and rather than giving ownership papers they took recourse to voice commands and assigned ownership vocally – for 'graphic artifacts' can be recontextualised and mobilised to achieve all kinds of ends. Consequently, as Hull writes, 'sound gave government functionaries greater control than paper' (247).

In other words, the state officials had come to recognise that not only human but non human agency of documents was also at play. This insight, especially associated with actor network theory and the writings of Bruno Latour, is at the heart of Hull's ethnographic analysis.[1] Building on it while also drawing on Peircian semiotics, Hull

---

1   B. Latour, *Pandora's Hope* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991) and *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

is attentive not just to the meaning of signs inscribed on documents but to the documents themselves as material mediators of signs.[2] Size, colour, shape, the kinds of signatures and stamps on the documents, how their surface is ordered all become relevant (17) since, to paraphrase Hull, material qualities condition the meanings of different documents (13). And so, the documents that Hull focuses on – relating to the offices of the CDA – create 'bureaucratic objects' such as legal houses, plots, expropriates plots, evictees and allotees. Furthermore each document creates different associations between government officials, property owners, builders, businessmen and middlemen, generating new relations, 'alliances and antagonisms' between them in a 'shifting network of people and things' as it travels from one context to another (21).

Following the methodology suggested by actor network theory, Hull traces these relations and associations between people and things that documents generate in different contexts not just as bearers of meanings but as graphic artifacts or things that condition the meanings they bear. Hull rigorously follows this method and carefully develops the arguments it enables about bureaucracy, the state, its relations with citizen subjects, and the role that materials such as documents play to mediate them. For a discipline such as anthropology that was preoccupied for a long time with the world of meanings, symbols and culture, and has since come to critically reflect on its hermeneutic and interpretive orientations, Hull's careful attention to materiality and signs as things is groundbreaking and instructive.

Crucially Hull does not denounce or altogether renounce anthropological preoccupations with meaning making and what Stuart Hall called 'signifying practices' (1980) but pays attention to the 'interface between materiality and meaning'.[3] His ethnography embodies the positivist impulses of actor network theory as well as its emphasis on exteriority and objects as things;[4] at the same time, we might commend him for the same reasons that the Swedish cultural theorist Johan Fornas praises Foucault, Latour and others: namely for not substituting meaning with materiality but for 'intensifying the clusters of meanings by pulling more aspects and phenomena into the expanding spirals of interpretation' (507).

That said, in my view, at various junctures Hull also forgoes opportunities to explore what mediation by documents – title deeds, allotment and evacuee lists, No Objection certificates, maps and surveys – means for subjects produced by them. One example particularly comes to mind: of the widow who was fraudulently seeking compensation as an evacuee from a piece of land she never owned and a house she never lived in. Interestingly the widow was herself defrauded by a policeman who sought to acquire the compensation from the CDA which she had believed could come to her. The widow approached the director and called on him to intervene on her behalf. The director, Hull writes, 'exclaimed with a mix of exasperation and amusement, "What do you do with a case like that?!"' Hull goes on to observe, 'While

2   C. S. Peirce, *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol 3 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); W. Keane, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
3   J. Fornas, 'Post-Anti-Hermeneutics: Reclaiming Culture, Meaning and Interpretation' in J. Frederick and K. Knapsog (eds), *Hunting High and Low* (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic, 2012), 502.
4   Latour, *Pandora's Hope* and *Reassembling the Social*.

everyone involved understands the magnitude of the stakes of the conflict, the absurdity of the situation is often recognized' (184).

What Hull does not reflect on are the understandings and experiences of the state that underlie and are generated in these absurd situations. How does the defrauding widow who appeals to the CDA director against another fraudster regard the director, the CDA and the state? How might we unpack the cluster of meanings that bureaucratic rules, regulations and graphic artifacts precipitate? Can the focus on the agentive capacities of these materials, and the associations and relations they give rise to go hand in hand with close attention to the meanings they generate in various contexts? It seems to me that such attention to not just materiality but also meanings is critical if we are to grasp the absurd as well as tragic ways in which citizens come to participate in the bureacratic interstices of their states.

Ruchi Chaturvedi
Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town

Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence and Poverty in India* (North Carolina: Duke University, 2012), 384 pp, paperback. ISBN 9780822351108.

A labour of political ethnography conducted over a number of years, Akhil Gupta's new book is an important theoretical statement on both the state itself, and how we think of the state more broadly. It falls within, but extends, a body of work on the postcolonial state in particular, that is no longer satisfied with the more familiar modes of critical thought, drawn often from a certain kind of Marxism, that objectified the state in instrumental economic terms. Here the work of Timothy Mitchell, in *Colonizing Egypt*, *The Rule of Experts*, and *Carbon Democracy*[1] comes to mind, inflected as it is by both Foucault and actor-network theory through Bruno Latour. Where Mitchell is painstaking in tracing the mundane ways knowledge, sensibilities and *doxas* move and circulate to constitute truths in modes of governing and economic logics, Gupta and his sometime collaborator, the Africanist scholar of neo-liberalism James Ferguson,[2] impress upon us that it is in the ordinary practices of those myriad subjects and agents who make up the bureaucratic apparatus, that we glimpse what we call the state, and get a grasp on why it works and does not work.

Here, Akhil Gupta takes as his focus one of the most significant post-colonial 'successes', India – talk of the town in terms of a middle class boom, and known as the world's largest democracy. Through his pioneering work of political ethnography, he fundamentally alters the way we come to understand the paradoxes of the fate of democracy, equality and biopolitical life.

The gesture that Gupta makes is important because when he immerses himself in the various levels of governmental practice in Uttar Pradesh, the populous and politically fractious state where he conducts his research, he enters it with a disposition of accepting that the political and ideological claims of its governing classes are made in good faith. In Gupta's view, there is a genuine desire for reducing poverty, a genuine desire to enact inclusive democracy and a genuine desire to increase the welfare of the population amongst political elites. He thereby differs with a body of work which would see the discourse of state as an ideological legitimation designed to maintain existing hierarchies, inequalities and power relations. But he asks, despite what he suggests we think of as a real political commitment at the epicentre of legislative authority, why is it that India ends up condemning millions to poverty and consequently a shortened life? Through Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, he asks, is it because the poor are considered an expendable population that neo-liberal governmentality can condemn to death? Here he differs with both. He firstly offers us a new deployment of the concept of biopolitics, but showing how Foucault (and Marx and most liberal thinkers too), and most critics, assume 'the state' to be a coherent entity that functions vertically and horizontally with great efficiency, of surveillance and depth of reach for example. On the contrary, Gupta suggests, the post-colonial state is defined by its lack of internal coherence and its lack of reach – there are many

---

1   T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013); The *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (California: University of California Press, 2002); *Colonizing Egypt* (California: University of California Press, 1991).
2   J. Ferguson and A. Gupta, *Culture, Power Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the New World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

parts of these societies where 'the state' is either not present, or where it in practice exists in ways that do not resemble the normative accounts of what Weber thought the states monopolies to be, over either violence or legitimate authority. The 'state' in this view, is an *effect*, rather than an agent. Secondly, in his reading of Agamben, he offers us a new reading of *homo sacer,* suggesting that in practice there is anything but a condemnation of the poor to an early death as some of the neoliberal critics suggest. There are immense institutional and budgetary commitments to poverty reduction strategies. So why is it then that, in practice, millions are condemned to poverty, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future? For Gupta, this violence is therefore not in what the state as an effect does not seek to do, but what it does despite its own intentions. This is what he calls 'structural violence', drawing on the well-known concept developed by the Scandinavian scholar Johan Galtung in the 1970s.

Gupta is making an argument of a political-theoretical nature, but the innovation of the book is less in this aspect than in the bridge between theorisation and ethnography that he articulates. One is acutely aware that the theoretical observations and arguments are drawing on years of careful research that is not immediately rendered visible in the text. He tracks the state through its details, and not only the empirical peculiarities of the people who constitute the state but also the forms themselves. A third of the book is devoted to the significance of writing, not so much in the post-stucturalist sense, but in the centrality of writing to the workings of a bureaucracy – the forms that are filled in, the filing systems, and the entire technologies of listening, translating and transforming what the citizens, or the poor say, and how these are inflected by location, gender, caste and class in the ordinary and everyday. It is through these practices that the poor, in effect, end up being condemned to death by an entire bureaucracy and modern political ideological order that measures its legitimacy on the claims it makes about extending and improving their lives. And to which many who work in the bureaucracy, suggests Gupta, are committed.

Whether we are persuaded that Gupta succeeds in braiding the theoretical and the ethnographic throughout the book, he offers us a richly rewarding way to think the modern 'state', defined as it is by the imperatives of development in most of the world. For example, the first third of the book is structured around the prominent question of 'corruption', which more often than not is taken to be both the description and the explanation for the failures of postcolonial democracies. But Gupta eschews the familiar refrains, the easy orthodoxies, the comforts of ideological solidarities, and challenges us to step into the field of our predicaments and to listen carefully to the way words name things, the way words are written, the forms through which they circulate and travel or are secreted and sedimented into files and dust or political scandal. His traces how what is called 'corruption' names a dispersed and interconnected set of practices that connect the ways in which officials and bureaucrats inside the state interact with each other, and with those outside. The outside – the social sphere – and the inside are intimately connected. This is not a book that assumes *a priori* to know its problems or its answers. In other words, for example, it works out what 'corruption' constitutes through the ethnographic encounter, rather than applying an abstract and universal idea of what it means, usually derived from an unnamed time and place.

This book, I would suggest, is an occasion to rethink the state, with a view to how we epistemologically construe critique. In other words, it both illuminates our understanding of Indian democracy, and gives us a way to think critically about how to

think about the state as an object of interpretation. It is thus an invitation then to also consider how we conduct a politics that might more effectively confront the structural violence that condemns millions to their deaths under the banner of economic success and liberal democratic hubris.

Suren Pillay
Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape