

# Registration and Recognition

Documenting  
the Person in  
World History

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EDITED BY KEITH BRECKENRIDGE AND SIMON SZRETER

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BRECKENRIDGE  
SZRETER

Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History

THE  
BRITISH  
ACADEMY

## REGISTRATION AND RECOGNITION



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Documenting the Person in World History

Edited by  
KEITH BRECKENRIDGE  
AND  
SIMON SZRETER

*Published for* THE BRITISH ACADEMY  
*by* OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



*Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP*

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*First edition published in 2012*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available*

*Typeset by  
Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton*

*Printed in Great Britain by  
[TO FOLLOW]*

*ISBN 978–0–726531–4*

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# Foreword

BY C. A. BAYLY

It is a pleasure to have been asked to introduce this fascinating and original collection of essays. I write as a colonial and more specifically Indian historian, and the approach taken in the Introduction and many of the chapters represents a rather different way of looking at the registration and counting of persons than has been common in my field. Broadly, in the work of scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Bernard Cohn and even Susan Bayly on South Asia or Frederick Cooper on Africa, the census and more local forms of registration have been seen as instrumental intrusions into, or even ‘epistemic violence’ on society perpetrated by colonial states intent on extracting revenue or classifying people into tribes or castes for political purposes or for the coercion of labour. The ‘person’ registered, from the Thuggee and Dacoity (bandit) registrations of India in the 1830s, through to registration of dissident villages in the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s, was an insurgent or troublesome collective, though individual leaders were sometimes mentioned. The themes of the early Foucault and modern governmentality hang heavily over this literature.

Individuals were only registered spasmodically because there was little concern with the person of the colonial subject as such. For this reason, mortality from famines, disease or local ethnic conflict, could never be adequately assessed. Yet even in British and European historiography, a wide range of historians from neo-Marxists to conservatives have tended to assume that registration proceeded from the desire of the elites to monitor the ‘dangerous classes’, as in Gareth Stedman Jones’s London of the 1870s, for instance, or to gauge the extent of crime and degeneration among slum-dwellers in the 1920s and 1930s, as recently emphasised in Richard Overby’s study of eugenic theorists in his recent book, *The Morbid Age*. Indeed, personal experience tends to confirm me in my own suspicion of registration and ‘marking the person’, even for apparently benign purposes. At the age of eight, I was measured, photographed in the nude, plucked from my family and sent to a Thomas Mann-like sanatorium on the bracing Kentish coast full of London slum children. The bizarre medical theory proposed to justify this was that the ozone gusting along the coast would prevent incipient lung disease.

The Introduction and several of the papers take a rather different perspective: that the registration of persons is an essential, if contingent precursor to social provision, equality and welfare. The Editors argue that registration is fundamental to recognition and so to entitlement. What the registration of slaves in Stanley Engerman’s paper, for instance, was directed to was halting the illegal slave trade and gave ammunition to groups and individuals seeking to abolish slavery

altogether. Contemporary societies with the most elaborate and coherent system of lifetime registration and monitoring, such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia, certainly have the highest scores for social equality. Ravindran Gopinath's chapter similarly reveals that the most highly educated states in India in the recent past were also those with the highest scores for the registration of births: Tamilnadu, Kerala and, to a lesser extent, West Bengal. The state that comes out worst in his analysis is Bihar, still almost a byword for inequality, low literacy and 'caste-ism'.

One great success of this collection is that it moderates the conflict between this image of the domineering, instrumentalist, counting state and these contingently benign features of the registration of persons. Clearly, the ideological predisposition of the state in question must immediately be brought into the picture: registration could evidently function either as an instrument of gross oppression, as in Nazi Europe, or, to a lesser extent in Communist East Germany, or equally, as an instrument to promote liberation and equality. It all depended on the political and ideological context.

A second general point concerns the density of forms of registration of persons and the identity of the registering agent. Emerging state projects of registration, as in early modern England, were set within a dense matrix of local and non-state forms: church records of births, marriages and deaths; manorial records of individual property; urban property registers, and so on. Religious groups, and not only Christian ones, registered their adherents. Among the first Asians to have lifelong accounting in colonial provinces, were Indian, Chinese and Vietnamese Christians, for instance, because they were registered in churches, even if often segregated off during religious services. But equally, it is possible, to get some sense of the size of congregations or adherents from the records of *madrasahs* and Sufi *khanqahs* in the Islamic world, or even the *akharas*, or the records of establishments of Hindu 'renouncers' in India, which have recently and somewhat dubiously, been used to assess deaths during the Rebellion of 1857. Some years ago ancient personalised records of Hindu priests at the holy bathing sites were supposedly appropriated by Mormons with a view to 'converting' those recorded.

Some questions arise. How far, I wonder, can the idea of identity registration be expanded? How far should the comparative approach to personal registration take account of the different forms of state, local and familial power and recognition of and meaning of 'the person' in different world societies? What, ultimately, are the theoretical boundaries of a collection such as this? Khaled Fahmy's chapter sets the beginning of registration of persons in Mehmet Ali's Egypt in a very broad context: the emergence of the modern state in the Middle East and the move he charts, following Foucault, from state as sovereign to state as instrumental governmentality. I'm sure a broad approach such as his will bring enormous benefits to students of registration. But it will be difficult to stop it merging into a catch-all social and political history of the world. And, as the editors are well aware, the

studies assembled here suggest there may be limits to the invocation of Foucault as a kind of Holy Spirit blessing all social sciences through all time.

Among other, more general points to bear in mind in this debate, it seems to me that a critical issue is, first: in Lenin's phrase, who is doing what to whom? What is registration and what is a person? We can distinguish between registration by high state authority, as in the colonial and Euro-American censuses, for instance, and local forms of registration by authoritative agencies, loosely related to the rulers. I am sure that Ravindran Gopinath and Khaled Fahmy are both correct to argue that broad state censuses were specifically features of modernity, however defined, and that they were only broadly characteristic of the period after 1800. The Mughals' great accounting of their realm, the *Ain-i-Akbari*, was in Fahmy's terms, an expression of sovereignty, not a reflection of centralised governmentality. Equally, Pre-Napoleonic Mameluke Egypt or Ottoman Turkey certainly produced 'descriptions of the people', but there was no census in a modern sense.

At the same time, these societies *did* produce dense systems of local registration connected with the payment of tax and rent in cash whose origins stretched back into the Middle Ages or even antiquity. Their consequences could be quite significant in these early periods: not least the purported birth of God on earth as a result of Caesar Augustus's census. In fact, the spectre lying behind the registration of persons in most societies was often the tax collector. Indian historians, for instance, are aware of the existence of village accountants (*patwaris*) even in pre-colonial polities. These recorded taxes, landholdings and dues, though mostly in the form of 'collective persons', i.e. local brotherhoods or caste groups. Something similar seems to be true of the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt, and more distantly the *pao-chia* in Ming and Qing China and parallel local forms of accounting for people through family groups in Tokugawa Japan.

Local disputes over inheritance and privileges also empowered the expansion of quite dense systems of local registration, perhaps similar to European manorial records. In western India, for instance, the historian Narendra Wagle has spent years ploughing through the dense records of the Peshwa Daftar (the archive of the Poona ruler). He finds the records of local bodies of arbitration called *panchayats*. Representatives of the state authorities were present at these gatherings, but rather than controlling the proceedings, their role was to get 'the sense of the neighbourhood'. These bodies may well have something in common with Rebecca Fleming's Athens, where status was created outside, but registered in the assembly. Most striking is the fact that the personal names of the local leaders of castes and brotherhoods present were appended to these documents, according to Wagle. The persons registered here validated the judicial outcome. This raises another general question about agency in registration. This was a case of self-registration in the context of local governmentality, rather than simple registration by the state. It is not surprising that in the nineteenth century, Indians – perhaps erroneously – took this to be evidence of the existence of a tradition of democracy. A general question

arising from the volume is: what is the relationship between self-registration and the development of representative and democratic forms of government?

A further comparative question arises: was it more difficult in societies where cash-revenue, defined landholdings and complex systems of local authority were not so clearly developed, for the modern state, with its own superordinate systems of personal registration, to take root in the longer run? I am thinking here of African examples. We hear of the 'exit option' of African farmers, who in pre-colonial polities could literally up-sticks and disappear if they didn't like the terms of their agrarian relationships with local power-holders. There is a pervasive argument among African historians that this partly explains the relative superficiality of pre-colonial African polities, which were often mere 'gatekeepers' for migrant groups. In some analyses, this argument suggests that African farmers were less open to subjugation than many of their European or Asian contemporaries, who were subject to local registration for labour services or cash-revenue payments. Here we are pushed back to the issue of whether registration was a 'good' or a 'bad' thing, though my view would be that this depended on the ideology, power and aims of the rulers in question.

So who did the registration to whom and what was recorded: individuals, community leaders or group persons, i.e. castes, tribes or religious communities (like the Iberian Moriscos, for instance)? At what point does the centralised, modern state come in, and to what purpose? Fahmy's broad account shows decisively how fear of epidemic disease, the need for military labour and, latterly, various types of Islamic juridical activity set the scene for the widespread registration of persons in nineteenth-century Egypt. Yet with growing population pressure, colonial incursions and the destruction of Egypt's emerging small-scale industries by European free-traders, it is not clear how far the more benign corollaries of registration were ever realised in Egypt.

One thing I would like to point to, however, is the way in which emerging nationalist and humanitarian movements could use state statistics to argue for better governance even in dire situations like this. By the time of the rule of Lord Cromer in the 1890s, Egyptian patriots were compiling a range of charges against colonial governance and local landholders based on Mehmet Ali's and Ibrahim Pasha's registrations or censuses and British blue books.

Equally, even if the Indian census paid little attention to the welfare of persons, being merely a massive exercise of counting for revenue and police purposes, nevertheless, people whom I call 'statistical liberals' were using the census and other forms of British accounting and registration to attack the colonial state as early as the 1860s. R. C. Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji were among the foremost among them. Dutt recorded the income and expenditure of individual cultivators. This did not go unnoticed among more conservative groups in Indian society who felt their interests were being threatened by registration. In the mid-1850s the British in Bengal began to try to require the registration of tenants by the local landed

classes. This was not, at root, a humanitarian exercise: the British were worried by the prevalence of agrarian riots in the countryside around indigo production and also looking for new sources of revenue. But the local newspaper working in the interests of the landlords, the *Hindoo Patriot*, was adamantly opposed to registration of tenants. It would impose enormous cost and hardship on the unfortunate landholders, an editorial said. Moreover, the landlords would not allow tenants to register voluntarily because ‘registration is not a custom of the country’.

Understandably, registration by the modern state – and increasingly full-life personal registration – is a major topic in the volume. But it is worth pointing out that the rise of the registering state was also accompanied by a massive expansion of non-state registering bodies and bodies using state data for their own purposes: perhaps a key, but underplayed aspect of the emergence of Habermas’s public sphere itself. Stanley Engerman’s slave registration registers were used by abolitionists. And the issue of slaves reminds us that diasporas, forced or voluntarily, and particularly those crossing jurisdictions, were at the cutting edge of registration.

Contemporary parallels to slave registration included the registration of *lascars* – East Indian seamen. British owners began the move to register them when discontented seamen set fire to their vessels or the Chinese or Dutch authorities imprisoned British Indian seamen in Canton or Batavia. Yet the cause was soon taken up by British and Indian liberals, notably James Silk Buckingham, anti-slaver, opponent of the East India Company, Methodist, teetotaler and, later, town planner. Buckingham and his co-actors were genuinely concerned with the welfare of sailors. He deplored the incarceration of Indian seamen in what he called a ‘kennel in the Isle of Dogs’, near the Port of London. He put this down to the fact that the Indians might see the poverty and depravity of London with their own eyes and pass on the news to their discontented countrymen in India. The registration of indentured labourers across the world had similar consequences. This ‘new system of slavery’, in the words popularised by Hugh Tinker, soon attracted the attention of reformers.

Finally, I return to the questions: who did the registration; what was the ‘person’ being registered; was the person merely being counted, or was there regular lifelong periodic assessment; what were the longer-term consequences of registration for different societies, both progressive and malign? How did registration relate to the expansion of the cash-economy, global diasporas and labour requirements? The following chapters go a long way to answering these important historical questions.





# Acknowledgements

All the authors of the chapters in this volume met together at a workshop that took place during 7–10 September 2010 in St John's College, Cambridge, which was supported by a British Academy conference grant to the two editors. Edited volumes – like registration systems – can be bad-tempered affairs, with scholars of different enthusiasms tied to a common project that can only proceed at the pace of the slowest member. The speed of the appearance of this large book, in just over two years since that meeting in Cambridge, is testimony not only to the remarkable efficiency of the British Academy and OUP, to whom we are all most grateful, but also to the fact that the production of this book has been a remarkably mutually supportive process and a highly enjoyable one for the two editors. We would like to thank all of the authors for their professional and good-humoured cooperation. We would also like to thank all the participants in the workshop that was held at St John's College, especially the several discussants for their excellent commentaries and those who contributed papers that do not appear in this volume. Those present comprised: Ross Anderson, Claudine Dardy, Eddy Higgs, Peter Kitson, Philip Kreager, Karl Jacob Krogness, Pier Larson, Gayle Lonergan, Jelle van Lottum, David Lyon, Susan Pearson, Pierre Piazza, Richard Smith, Catherine Sumnall, Stephen Thompson, Sarah Walters, Michael Woolcock, and Tony Wrigley.

The staff of the British Academy, particularly James Rivington and Brigid Hamilton-Jones, have provided us with invaluable advice and assistance. Sarah Pearsall was an unflappable, quick and careful copy-editor, and her professionalism and generosity made the last stages of production quick and pleasant. We would also like to thank Kyla O'Neill, who provided invaluable editorial assistance for several of the chapters.

Keith Breckenridge would like to thank his current and former colleagues in Durban and at WISER and, especially, Catherine Burns, for her assistance and encouragement. Similarly, Simon Szreter would like to acknowledge Hilary Cooper. He would also like to express his general gratitude to the Cambridge History Faculty and to the Master and Fellows of St John's College for the supportive scholarly environments they provide, and to the college staff for their customary courtesy and efficiency during the workshop. His work has also been supported and stimulated during the last three years by the Wellcome Trust 5-year Strategic Award to Cambridge University, 'Generation to Reproduction', and by colleagues and staff at [www.historyandpolicy.org](http://www.historyandpolicy.org).



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