

Book Review

Bennett, Colin J. and David Lyon (eds.) 2008. *Playing the Identity Card: Surveillance, Security and Identification in Global Perspective*. London: Routledge.

287 pp. Paperback, \$35.95 (US); ISBN 978-0-415-46564-9.

Tarangini Sriraman

University of Delhi, India. tarangini.sriraman@gmail.com

This collection of essays deals with concepts and processes, across the world, of contemporary (state-driven) documentary identification of citizens and aliens. The book realises its ambitious project of analysing the dynamic interrelationships between identity and identification; technologies and rationales of identification, official identities and citizenship, state control and corporate roles. While it discusses the roles of different political cultures, policy instruments and institutional arrangements as yielding separate outcomes in different countries, the book as a whole wisely steers clear of culturally deterministic or purely causal analyses of national identity card projects and produces narratives that are globally implicated and domestically divided. The book also deserves credit for fulfilling the editors' promise of closely tracking the increasing incidence of corporate bodies designing the architecture of identity cards and analysing the implications of their involvement in different stages in the social sorting projects of different states.

The essays in this book perform the crucial act of unpacking the authoritative sanction of the things that are central to identification systems, namely, official identities and document forms, bureaucratic markers, state procedures and documentary regimes of verification. Kelly Gates points to the completely constructed identities that accrue when these are subjected to a process of making trust a matter of showing proof, or sanctioning a document through standardized forms and markers of identity, ratifying signs and acts of the issuing authority.

This book also critiques the strategies and methodologies central to making documented identities. Contributors imply that a methodological paradigm shift in the "logics of identification" (p.25) has arrived in population control and the policing of societies. Louise Amoore points out that, where earlier modern states tracked movement at designated places through a document system, it has become common in contemporary times to invest individuals with codes and identifiers and the physical environment with sensors and screens to capture mobile things and bodies. Taha Mehmood argues that ideas of citizenship in the current national identification project in India, among other things, turn on the ability of persons to furnish evidence in questionnaires that conforms to sharply delineated categories.

Many of the essays here discuss governments as employing discursive frames through which they make out national identity cards as an enabling tool of the socially vulnerable. While discursive moves to justify a nation-wide identity card to pre-empt terror attacks find themselves easy targets for public criticism, those that invoke, for instance, "administrative efficiency and consumer convenience" (p.185) present themselves as unambiguous and legitimate. Piazza and Laniel point out that French authorities, by revising

Sriraman, Tarangini. 2009. Review of Bennett and Lyon's *Playing the Identity Card: Surveillance, Security and Identification in Global Perspective*. *Surveillance & Society* 7(1): 87-9.

<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s). 2009 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



rationales of the INES card (Secured Electronic National Identity) and by engaging with their detractors in a national debate through an Internet forum, have shown themselves to be persistent and efficient users of rhetoric.

In fact, the discursive language of welfare services and entitlements may have enabled different countries to surreptitiously usher in national identification cards within their national borders. In Australia, where a resounding rejection was meted out to an 'Australia Card,' Dean Wilson writes that such a document may simply have found a surreptitious way into the country in the form of the 'Access' Card. The illusory notion of voluntariness implicit in this card is evident in the contingent relationship that is sought to be set up between this card and claims on health and social services.

Several essays refer to national identification projects as launch pads for performing commemorative acts of citizenship. Scott Thompson tells us how the National Registration Programme in the UK during the Second World War became a site where citizens had to prove to British authorities and to each other their participation in military or industrial efforts and thus 'earn' their right to a more privileged card. Cheryl L. Brown points out that China sensed a technological opening to evoke a celebratory sense of citizenship by advertising the pretty look and the home-manufactured status of the card but also by flaunting its leading capacities in the international RFID market.

In contrasting colonial or historically located identification systems with contemporary regimes, the authors tread cautiously. For instance, Midori Ogasawara writes that where earlier identification systems bore tyrannical traces of colonial authority that undertook exclusionary practices against perceived enemies or outsiders within Japan's extended colonial territory, present systems entrench new prejudices against everybody within new identification regimes of risk control.

In describing discriminatory practices of identification of aliens, some of the essays here show that the marginalisation of aliens was something that did not merely ensue as a result of the exclusionary practices of state authorities, but also as a consequence of citizens' own self-definitions in contrast to their perceptions of aliens. The authors also show how the states' use of identification cards to police aliens may be concealed by officially stated rationales of cards as providing information for the government and (online) public services for citizens.

Mobility is a theme that resonates across this book. Louise Amoore invokes this theme in the complex contemporary state practices of securing not so much movement as mobility, mobile persons spread across spaces and information broken down into fragments and monitored. The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) undoubtedly enabled EU nationals to enhance their freedom of mobility and concretise the empowering possibilities of European citizenship by providing them portable health benefits across European borders irrespective of the health schemes or arrangements made with insurance companies prevalent at the travelling visitor's state of residence. However, the EHIC, Willem Maas indicates, speaks of the state-like aspirations of the European Union. The EHIC, while it has a distinct symbolic function in helping people imagine one's belonging to a region, also behaves like an identity card that is classificatory and differentiating in its rationale. This is borne out by the fact that the EU leaves it to respective countries to draw up their lists of EHIC beneficiaries.

Though this book paints governments as attempting ambitious, sweeping projects of surveillance, it shows that it is all too likely that efforts to governmentalize the state by linking different functions like national security and welfare services and plans to infiltrate every sphere of social life are bound to meet with failure. Yet, within a delimited field of welfare practice, as in the case of South Africa, a single company falling back on a 'patented smart card interchange standard' (p.52) may be immensely successful.

The authors are sensitive to the globally lateral ways in which identification forms and regimes act on each other but are also made to act on each other. For instance, in Canada, Clement and others, argue the presence of strong “ID policy drivers” (p.236) whereby Canada must oblige a security-driven America by enforcing a tough border regime hinged on the potential use of biometric passports. Many authors in this book foreground the egregious and selective interpretation by their national governments to domestic ends of the International Civil Aviation Organization’s biometric, safe standards for international travel.

Much as it deserves to be applauded for undertaking various complex analytical tasks, this book brings together an amorphous and not easily reconcilable set of concerns, pulling the authors in different critical directions. While some authors suggest that identification systems would be acceptable if only certain policy matters were made transparent or the debate over them democratised, some others critique the bio-power and pre-emptive practices inherent in contemporary identification practices of fingerprinting and RFID tags. While some fault governments for not strengthening systems of information privacy, others critique the very discourse of privacy as easily appropriated by the sovereign practices of states. One cannot also help wondering why a book that takes so seriously the job of interrogating state discourses and card cartels, does not question at all the vocabularies producing terms such as ‘function creep’, ‘interoperability’ or ‘corporate solutions.’