Book Review

Groebner, Valentin. 2007. *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*. Translated by Mark Kyburz and John Peck. New York: Zone Books.

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William G. Staples

Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, USA. staples@ku.edu

Most accounts of the history of personal identification and documentation locate their origins, or at least their flourishing, with the rise of the bureaucratic nation state of the nineteenth century. Yet, as Valentin Groebner, a historian at the University of Lucerne demonstrates quite deftly in this wonderfully written and fascinating book, the lineage of such practices date as far back as the Middle Ages. “How were people described in the long centuries before photography, before finger printing, and before modern techniques of administration and visualization,” Groebner posits, “so that they could be recognized by others who had never seen them before?” (p.8). In order to address this question, Groebner weaves a narrative of intriguing historical details while arguing that notions of identity and identification are inherently social and cultural constructs produced by those around us as well as the documents we have been given to prove who we are.

Groebner begins and frames the book with a parable that dates from 14th century. The tale is set in 1409 in Florence where a group of well-off ruling elite, including the sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi, decide to teach a local tradesman woodworker named Manetto (aka Il Grasso, “The Fat One”) a lesson for not showing up at a social event. They concoct an elaborate plot that includes a cast of locals—friends, a young boy on the street, city officials, police officers and even a priest—where, in a number of social settings, they all pretend that Il Grasso is in fact another fellow by the name of Matteo. They even have him arrested as the supposedly deadbeat Matteo and along the way produce various documentation of his identity as Matteo. In court, “Matteo’s” brothers arrive and pay his supposed debts and, at the conclusion of the proceeding, the scribe asks, “Quale è Matteo?” “So which one of you is Matteo?” and Il Grasso humbly replies, “Eccomi, messere” or “Here I am, sir.” For Groebner, the story of Manetto is a heuristic device that he refers back to often throughout the book.

The text is divided into two sections containing eight chapters. The first part entitled “Natures,” explores the collective and individual markers and signs that were used to describe someone. It begins with an account of how what was perceived as a person’s individual “nature” could be represented so that others could recognize it. Perspective and portraiture emerged to capture the likeness of not only princes and patricians but also debtors, delinquents, and traitors whose unflattering images ended up in the frescoes and on the outside walls of public buildings throughout northern Italy and on small broad sheets, sent as letters, and put on public display north of the Alps. But it was the appearance of the seal—an embossed emblem, symbol or word—that came to play a crucial role in certifying a signature or authenticating a

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document, in essence, duplicating and authenticating a person's existence. With this development, the administrative *doppelgänger* was born as was the proliferation of coats of arms, badges, municipal seals, notary stamps and symbols, and other insignias which, of course, are all still with us today. The role of these signs can not be underestimated, according to Groebner, as "municipal servants and couriers wore them conspicuously on their clothes, and pilgrims donned badges on their coats, gowns or hats to identify themselves...during an extraordinarily successful pilgrimage in Einsiedeln in Switzerland in 1466, one hundred and thirty thousand pilgrim badges were sold in two weeks" (p.49).

At the same time, paper records were increasingly deployed throughout the chancelleries of Europe. The oldest of the indexes were religious; the Lateran Council had, in 1215, instructed all believers to attend confession and Holy Communion at least once a year and parishes were instructed to keep records of the names of those in attendance. During the high Middle Ages, registries of criminals and other perpetrators were kept and exchanged among allied city-states throughout Europe. For example, Florence maintained a municipal registration system, the so called "Book of Nails," between 1269 and 1313 that was introduced to keep track of the convicted and the banished. Others indexes were less concerned about names, which were problematic for many reasons, but centered on detailed description of clothing and other physical characteristics. In 1574 for example, a band of highwaymen operating in the Tyrol were described in a warrant whose leader was described as constantly changing appearance yet was known to carry lots of money, two cocked pistols and a massive two handed sword. "Three centuries after the first appearance of wanted circulars," Groebner declares, "names no longer seemed to matter... (p.89).

Next, Groebner considers the signs that lay beneath the clothes and outer appearances, to those inscribed on the body; scars, birthmarks, pockmarks, freckles, tattoos, brandings, and other identifying marks. As with the other chapters, a host of interesting examples from the early to late Middle Ages are presented. "The human skin is beyond repair; its scarring and blemishes represent, as *signa rememrativea*, an open book of all those interventions and reconstructions to which an individual's skin has been subjected" (p.97). In the final and relatively long chapter of this section, the author moves from the inspection and recording of markings on the skin to its color and complexion. Here he describes some of the earliest characterizations—reserved especially for "outsiders," foreigners or aliens such as gypsies, slaves, vagabonds, and others—who were often describe along a spectrum of white, red, and black. Importantly, Groebner argues, these descriptions were not simply used for purposes of identification, as skin color, but as body colors. That is, the exterior and interior of a person were held to be identical, both being signs of an individual's "nature." Those particularly interested in construction of racial identity and affiliation will appreciate this chapter.

The second part of the books shifts from "Natures" to "Objects" and begins with an exposition of the role of letters of conduct, letters of introduction, and passports, "whose purpose was to give details about someone not in their absence, but in their presence" (p.154). Moving about Europe, even as early as the twelfth century, meant negotiating various borders, customs check points, and tariff barriers and a letter appropriately embossed with the seal of a local duke meant that say, a merchant could travel within the Duchy unfettered. Of course, such documents could only be obtained at a cost, typically an annual fee. But from the middle of the fifteenth century on, new forms of identifying and certifying individuals took hold, in part because of the technology of paper itself but also because of the spread of literary and written judicial evidence. One such document was the *passporti*. "Unlike the older letters of safe conduct, these passports were no longer ex officio or costly privilege, but an obligation imposed by authorities on all travelers" (p.171).

This shift, of course, is fundamental since it not only lays the foundation for universal and compulsory carrying of identification papers but also created a *fait accompli* that governmental authorities had the monopoly on the issuing of such instruments. Groebner also contends that move created the context for a utopian slogan to emerge over the course of the sixteenth century: "Register everyone and everything."

He cites evidence from a variety of contexts from Leipzig where poor inhabitants were referred to as *Zettelbürger* (literally “paper citizens”) because they were required to carry permits bearing their landlord’s surety, to the synod of Salzburg where registries were created that contained the names of all parish members, their extended kin, and all births and immigrants, to France where jurist Jean Bodin proposed a population census as a means to detect the “wolves among the sheep,” the former being beggars and dangerous idlers. Yet far from the tightly woven, administrative utopia desired, Groebner cites lengthy travel diaries and other evidence that suggests that the mere fact that a traveller had identity documents, and that they appeared genuine, was good enough to let them pass since matching registries with documents proved to be an elusive goal. Another unintended consequence of this development was the proliferation of the con artist and the impostor as well as the diplomat and the spy. All were able to take advantage of fabricated papers to assume identities other than their own. “Their careers in dissimulation,” Groebner asserts, took place not in spite of, but through the expanding systems of bureaucratic control” (p.219).

Groebner closes the book with an interesting chapter on the relevance of his historical journey for our situation today. Most compelling to me is his underscoring our seemingly inexhaustible quest for the perfect administrative apparatus of surveillance and control, error and fraud proof, which will bring order to an otherwise chaotic world. “The effects of these fantasies of registration and surveillance rest,” Groebner reminds us, “on this historical echo chamber...down to the present day. We love to fear most what we already know best” (p.249).

Who Are You? is a provocative and original contribution to our understanding of the complex social and cultural dimensions of personal identification. Get this book, read and enjoy it, and refer to it often.