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*Biometric state: The global politics of identification and surveillance  
in South Africa, 1850 to the present*

**(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 252 pp., bibl., index.  
ISBN: 978-1-107-07784-3)**

**Keith Breckenridge**

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I have been peripherally associated with this research project and have been aware of some of the paths that have converged to create this significant contribution to the history of science and technology in South Africa. In his account of the role of fingerprinting and the gathering of biometric statistics in South Africa throughout its history, Keith Breckenridge is able to consider both the centrality of South Africa in the biometric project but also look at the ways in which imperial networks of knowledge and control were formed – the repercussions of which resound in the present.

The narrative takes as its starting point the work of Francis Galton, an early proponent of biometrics and statistics with a special interest in the use of fingerprinting as a means of identification and verification. Rather than South Africa as being emblematic of the colonial encounter in terms of being shaped by imperial science and technology, Breckenridge argues that it was, in fact, Galton's experiences in South Africa contextualized by the brutal violence of frontier conflict and his own nascent racism that provided the inspiration

for his views of scientific racism, eugenics and the use of statistics to classify populations. His return to England provided Galton with an audience for his views which grew in influence, so much so, that he was able to persuade his more celebrated relative, Charles Darwin, dissuading the latter from the more egalitarian bent of his theories of human evolution contextualized by movement to abolish slavery to one that became increasingly slanted towards eugenics, giving the axiom “the survival of the fittest” a far more ominous connotation.

While South Africa had provided the inspiration for Galton’s advocacy of fingerprinting, it was in the other British colony of India in the wake of the 1857 Rebellion that the system was used as a means of identification along with other methods such as tattoos and the use of photographs. While the unique patterning of individual fingerprints made them the ideal means of identification, from the outset their utility was offset by the difficulty of classifying them. This was in part addressed by Edward Henry, Commissioner of Police in Bengal, and created of the “Henry System”, an efficient means of mathematically classifying fingerprints. Henry was subsequently tasked with creating a police force on the Witwatersrand, complete with fingerprint identification system. With the needs of the mining industry paramount, the surveillance and control of a largely illiterate African population and concerns regarding fraudulent means of identification, fingerprinting was perceived to be the cure-all and was inextricably associated with coercion and the criminalisation of black labour.

The early twentieth century saw Gandhi’s involvement in the use of fingerprinting to identify the Indian population and regulate their movement into the Transvaal. Breckenridge argues that it was Gandhi’s compromises with the Transvaal government over the use of fingerprinting and the subsequent use of these records by the state to apply discriminatory policies against Indians and restrict immigration that disillusioned him with “technologism”. It would culminate in a full rejection of Western modernity and inform his political activism in India.

Under apartheid the use of biometrics represented the apex of state attempts to classify, control and discriminate and resources were devoted to attempts to create coherent and all-encompassing forms of identification harnessed to new computer technology. This attempt at creating the all-knowing and powerful state as envisaged by Michel Foucault repeatedly fell short although, in an ironic twist, the biometric measures put in place in the Bantustans

became the foundation on which existing state welfare provisions are based. Breckenridge's work suggests that the use of biometric technology has been shaped by its history and present concerns. In the developing world it has become the means by which economic inequalities are ameliorated – biometric systems with their origins in South Africa are being utilized in Mexico, Brazil and India where earlier dissent over their use has largely disappeared. In the west, however, the association of biometrics with coercion has made it incompatible with civil liberties. It is nonetheless utilized here as a means of identifying and controlling the movements of those deemed to be unqualified for full citizenship – criminals, immigrants – under the aegis of national security.

This is a book that is clearly and succinctly written and persuasively argued but, more significantly, makes history relevant by highlighting the ways in which existing and ambitious attempts to identify human beings – both for the purposes of social welfare and international and domestic security – have been built on earlier projects with their origins in British imperial ambitions to know and, by so doing, control the vast, diverse and largely illiterate populations that fell under its ambit.

*The new radicals: A generational memoir of the 1970s*

(Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd, 2014, xi +283 pp. ISBN 978-1-4314-0971-6)

**Glenn Moss**

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Moss's *the new radicals: A generational memoir of the 1970s* explores three distinct but related themes. It chronicles a “political, ideological and organisational journey undertaken by a group of students”. In a manner suggested by Amilcar Cabral, they are ready to commit class suicide. These students move from “relatively insular liberal protest and symbolic politics of an elite university to help in creating the preconditions for a radical challenge

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<sup>1</sup> Until recently, Lebelo was teaching history at Unisa. He is also co-author of *Soweto, 16 June 1976 – It all started with a dog* and *Nine family histories: Completing the circle*.