



Humanities Book Award 2017: Deep scholarship in action

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In 2009, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) published a report entitled *Scholarly books: Their production, use and evaluation in South Africa today*¹, which recommended that the publication of scholarly monographs be 'strongly encouraged and supported' in South Africa.

This recommendation was based on a visible need for the 'deep scholarship' enabled by the form of the book to be better recognised in the national research system, particularly when – despite some apparent scepticism towards their real scholarly value, and some of the real difficulties in assessing this scholarship – books 'generated on average three times more citations than the journal article' and enjoy 'a longer active citational life'^{1(p.24,25)}.

This necessary recognition would register the potential impact of the scholarly monograph on both local and global scholarship, as well as its potential for contributing to, and even changing the terms of, public knowledge and practice.

Within ASSAf, the Standing Committee for the Humanities noted the particular force that the scholarly monograph holds for humanist research and enquiry, for which it is generally believed that the book rather than the journal article is most often the marker for durable impact and international recognition.

Indeed, it is arguable that one of the unintended outcomes of the otherwise successful mode of research support and stimulus through the 'carrot' of government publication subsidy and its favouring of the journal article over the book may well have been a tendency to remove South African scholars from the terms of international visibility and global impact.

The focus on speedier publication of journal articles – and these often in journals with a national rather than international reach and footprint – built into subsidy policy for decades surely acted as a disincentive to the long haul of the book, and its necessarily slower accumulation of deep research and argument. And this despite a global environment in which (in the humanities and social sciences) monograph publication is very often taken as the *sine qua non* for tenure, and the transition from (non-tenured) assistant professor to tenured associate professor, rather than – as it often is in South Africa – for promotion from (already tenured) senior lecturer to associate professor or professor.

As a way of contributing to the greater recognition of the monograph form, and at the same time making more visible the contribution of the humanities to national progress in scholarship and social understanding, the committee resolved to offer an annual prize for a book 'noteworthy' (as the rubric for the prize reads) 'in its contribution to the development of new understanding and insight'. And taking up, in this regard, one of the key recommendations of ASSAf's 2011 *Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa*², the need to 'enhance the book as a cultural and human asset in both the scholarly and the public minds'.

Such a book is Keith Breckenridge's *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present*³, published by Cambridge University Press in 2014 – the first recipient of the ASSAf Humanities Book Award.

Breckenridge argues – and substantiates – that for more than a century,

the South African state...served as a laboratory for [a] new form of biometric government, and that the technologies that states across the world have been adopting over the last decade find their earliest and fullest development here.

This study – of the rise of biometrics as 'the automated recognition of human beings...the identification of people by machines' from fingerprinting to iris-scanning – manifests all the virtues of the 'deep scholarship' that the extended form of argument, reference and analysis of the book alone allows.

For it is only through the labour of extended reading and comparative enquiry, and the consequent accumulation of argument and evidence involved in this, that it is possible to shift the weight of received ideas and interpretations that constitute the 'normal science' of any area of humanist or social knowledge.

With *Biometric State*, Breckenridge successfully challenges many of the usual understandings around the politics of identification and surveillance in (but, importantly, not only in) South Africa from 1850 to the present day. In so doing, he consciously moves against a powerful trend in historiography which tends to take the national alone as its boundary, often inhibiting certain forms of global or comparative analysis. At the same time, he demonstrates the value – and indeed the necessity – of understanding some of the most pressing concerns of the present moment through a careful analysis of their often occluded or misunderstood historical roots, and, in so doing, highlighting one of the disciplines of history's most important roles in the promotion of public knowledge.

For – at a moment in which the new US President, Donald Trump, calls for ever more extreme vetting measures, and the volume of migration increases worldwide – there can be no doubt that identification and surveillance are key components of the modern state, and that the mixture of their politically positive and negative roles needs the most careful scrutiny.

In a detailed and painstaking analysis, Breckenridge argues that the colonial world sees the emergence of new modes and methods of biometric identification, and that these methods entail a paradigm-breaking shift away from the older dominant modes of 'documentary identification'.

It is because of the depth and density that the form of the book allows that Breckenridge is able to *correct and enrich* the standard ideas and images of figures in this history such as Francis Galton, the father of scientific fingerprinting, and Edward Henry, usually known for his work in getting Scotland Yard under way in Britain.

In the place of the existing, rather one-dimensional, accounts of such figures available in the literature that present their scientific ideas in isolation from their historical and cultural context, Breckenridge offers powerful new assessments and interpretations. After examining the evidence, he argues, for instance, that 'Galton's nineteenth century ethnography was more important than the existing international scholarship of statistics, eugenics or Darwinism has allowed'^{3(p.213)}.

Similarly, against the airbrushing of too-celebratory accounts of Gandhi, the book, through its comparative and archival research, is able to situate and throw new light on some of the contradictions and changes in Gandhi's thinking.

Throughout, the book reveals the ways in which the thinking of such figures was importantly modified and even directed by their often neglected experiences in South Africa, and highlights the pressures on 'thinking straight' that decontextualised accounts ignore at their peril.

The force of the book also comes through in the ways in which it is able to *query and contradict* many of the too-casual assumptions at work in modish deployments of concepts such as 'biopower'.

One recipe for the speedy journal article is to take a relatively unfamiliar notion such as 'biopower' and use it as a frame for interpreting a range of texts or events and while this may have some genuine explanatory value, the intellectual problem is that this often leaves unexamined the key term itself. Lending an unquestioned authority to influential figures such as Foucault, Agamben or Negri and Hardt undoes some of the force of the critical thinking associated with what is often referred to as Theory (with a capital T) by proponents and opponents alike. Where the concept as framing device for an argument can work well at article length, the real force of the concept can often only be assessed through the deeper scholarship and critical reflection which the book form allows.

One of the intellectual pleasures of this book, as well as one of its significant contributions to public knowledge, is the ways in which it is able to query, question and challenge many of the received ideas of our own history by locating it in a larger picture (as, for instance, in its correction to the ways in which many have 'taken the state at its own public word and massively overstated its coercive and surveillance abilities'^{3(p.161)}).

Throughout, Breckenridge points – with all the authority of the historian's enlarged comparative and temporal perspective – to the paradoxes of the intertwining of progressivism and totalitarianism in the global thinking around identification, noting the 'sweet and perplexing irony that those same coercive systems [of colonial surveillance and identification] are now being championed as the only viable remedy to [our] entrenched forms of poverty'^{3(p.214)}.

He closes with a warning that is made possible by the scholarly work that made the distinction between the older forms of documentary identification and the newer forms of biometric identification:

Biometric registration has always had as its raison-d'être the identification of those who cannot write. In the process it has clearly contributed to weakening the political agency of those who can write.^{3(p.218)}

Duly considered, opting for biometric registration in place of documentary identification has played a considerable role in South Africa's 'pitifully weak forms of local government'^{3(p.217)}.

At a global moment in which the easy access to information and communication made possible by the Internet and social media seems to be working against its critical appropriation in the public spheres of both science and politics, the book's reminder of the liberating potential of literacy is timely indeed.

For this reminder, and especially for its contribution to the development of new understanding and insight into the interaction of local and global forms of governance, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present* richly deserves the first ASSAf Humanities Book Award.



Keith Breckenridge (right), the author of *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present*, receiving the ASSAf Humanities Book Award from Shireen Hassim (Chair: ASSAf Humanities Standing Committee) on 9 March 2017.

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