

Review - Security, Risk and the Biometric State

Written by Katja Lindskov Jacobsen

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KATJA LINDSKOV JACOBSEN, SEP 24 2012

Security, Risk and the Biometric State: Governing Borders and Bodies

By: Benjamin Muller

Oxon: Routledge, 2010

Although biometrics is a topic that has received considerable attention in the years following the events of 9/11, this book makes an important contribution by raising new questions in the often inadequately nuanced debate about contemporary states' deployment of biometric technology. For example, rather than continuing the unhelpfully polarized 'privacy vs. security' terms of debate, Benjamin Muller engages the issue from a different perspective as he demonstrates to the reader how this very discourse misses crucial aspects notably the very politics of casting the debate in these terms including the extent to which evoking the term 'security' in a context of 'exception' tacitly implies that citizens are afforded very little room for critical engagement. Likewise, Muller also argues that the question of appropriateness is afforded regrettably little attention within this 'privacy vs. security' framing of the issue.

Rather, by drawing on Critical Security Studies and International Political Sociology and by situating his argument neatly in relation to a sizeable body of critical IR scholarship on various closely related topics, Muller then develops

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an analysis that brings out the politics of biometrics, the consequences for bodies being 'managed' – whether 'local identities' in Iraq and Afghanistan or citizens in the U.S. and Canada – and the broader logic within which the widespread reliance on biometrics as a security technology is to be understood, as well as.

By engaging the notion of meta-discourse Muller makes visible the conditions of possibility for the move whereby biometrics has become part of a wider securitization of bodies. For example, in his analysis of a 2005 report by the European Commission, Muller shows how a discourse of exception combined with arguments about information society requirements, form a favourable atmosphere for the introduction of biometrics with little critical awareness of potential implications such as disempowerment and differential treatment of bodies. Also concerning the conditions of possibility for states widespread affection for and application of biometric technology, Muller brings into play the analytical perspective that rather than being an objectively definable thing 'risk' actually functions as a mode of governance. Embracing this idea, Muller then demonstrates the importance of situating debates about biometrics within a framework that calls attention to the broader governmental logic of pre-emption and risk management, as important elements of the 'condition of possibility' for contemporary states' widespread usage of biometric technology. Situating the application of biometrics within a context of risk management, Muller is able to convincingly argue that we are witnessing with the emergence of what Muller refers to as 'the biometric state', is a transformation of border security into border management. To further the analysis of this transformation, Muller uses Foucault's notion of biopolitics to demonstrate that what we are seeing is that rather than the border itself being the main focal point, the very body which crosses the border has become the central issue and the subject of "a deeper governance" of bodies.

The introduction of various theoretical perspectives and analytical concepts is nicely combined with illustrative examples in ways that makes Muller's points about how bodies are affected by the new border management strategies an interesting and insightful read. However, despite these important strengths I want to suggest that three themes arguably call for further engagement.

First, I want to make a few comments about Muller's notion of "the biometric state". I certainly agree that biometric technologies have become a crucial element in a number of the tasks that today's state sees as critical, most notably that of distinguishing between valuable citizens and dangerous foreigners. That said, I am still uncertain as to the appropriateness of this concept, given the risk that it might divert attention away from the whole range of other digital technologies that the contemporary states seems increasingly to rely upon. Muller himself addresses this point, and notes that biometrics are by no means the only technologies deployed in contemporary border management (23). However, it is my contention that using this concept might still involve a risk of diminishing the importance of other technologies such as drones, RFID, and CCTV. Moreover, the notion of a biometric *state* might also risk diminishing the importance of the extent to which the use of biometric technologies implies an expansion in the number of private actors involved in the realm of 'state security' as technology providers, on-site staff, database managers, etc. Indeed, both of these aspects are important when contemplating the implications of biometrics as a contemporary security technology.

From this follows the second point that I want to raise, which has to do with the nature of technology. As Muller argues, technology has affected citizenship in a profound manner. Yet, throughout the book one awaits a more elaborate account of just how technology 'acts' on bodies. What is the role of biometric technology in bringing about changes in the very nature of citizenship such as those that Muller describes in this book and elsewhere? What is the relationship between the technology, the political usage of technology and the broader discursive context in terms of effecting changes in the very make-up of the biopolitical body? This, then, brings us to the final point.

The third aspect that I want to address concerns the concept of biopolitics. By engaging Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Muller demonstrates how contemporary states' use of biometrics has changed border security to such an extent that it is no longer the border but the body that has become the main focus. And, hence, Muller concludes that in this sense, we have seen a shift to biopolitical border management. Despite this interesting and relevant point, one might still argue that although the concept of biopolitics aptly captures this new focus on the body, the use of biometrics also comes with a significant change in how 'the body' is understood. In terms of political intervention, Foucault's account of the population as a political body arguably differ from the emergence of a digital body as open

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to political intervention as we see today – and as Muller also describes. One example of an important difference concerns the notion of visibility, where two things are critical. One thing is that digital data can be collected ‘at a distance’ and hence without the awareness of the person in question. The other thing is that once collected, the biometric data which is then being stored in databases can now (at least potentially) be accessed remotely and again without the awareness – let alone consent – of the person whose data is being accessed and processed. As such, there are important differences that might get lost in our analysis of biometrics as a contemporary biopolitical technology, if we apply the notion of biopolitics without explicitly considering the question of how the digital population of today differ from the kind of population that Foucault had in mind when he originally developed his argument.

By way of conclusion, the book is undoubtedly a timely and most relevant contribution to a field of study that to some extent has been characterised by a lack of critical engagement with underlying issues such as discursive conditions, a lack of engagement with broader implications for bodies being targeted by this technology and the ‘risk regime’ within which biometric technologies are being constituted as rational, operative and superior solutions. Muller’s argument is also important because of how it manages to introduce its reader to a much broader literature when drawing upon and situating its main arguments nicely in relation to existing critical IR scholarship. In this way, Muller neatly demonstrates the relevance of insights from this body of literature for the argument that he advances in this book about the politics of biometric technology in a security climate characterised by risk as the mode of governance and an almost uncritical embrace of technological solutions to what he demonstrates are in fact complex political problems. Indeed, Muller convincingly shows how an “uncritical embrace” of biometric technology can involve a risk of producing further complication and insecurity, rather than increased security – the case of Iraq being but one illustrative example of this.

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