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Valentin Groebner. *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe.* New York: Zone Books, 2007. 349 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-890951-72-6.

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Who Are You? The Authorities Really Want to Know

Over the last decade, Valentin Groebner has established himself as one of the most imaginative historians working on the late medieval and early modern Holy Roman Empire. Like his earlier works, this translation of his 2004 German monograph *Der Schein der Person* is filled with detailed vignettes and analysis organized around an innovative theme: the emergence of identity papers throughout Western Europe in the late Middle Ages.[1] *Who Are You* covers a large amount of geographical and chronological terrain, dealing with an array of sources including portraits, the first "wanted" posters, *pitture infamanti*, civic badges, host stories, slave registers, letters of conduct, ancient drama, emigrant books, and passports, to name just a few. By investigating how we are identified as who we are, Groebner makes a strong case for the late Middle Ages as the birthplace of modern systems of identification.

Groebner's book deals closely with issues of identity, but he avoids deploying the term indiscriminately. For Groebner, the "vagueness" of the word "identity," and the multiple ways in which historians often employ it, hampers its usefulness as a theoretical category. Instead, the author prefers to talk about "identification," which he defines as a process of constructing identity that involves the participation of numerous individuals, rather than just one (p. 26). This focus on how multiple agents construct identity is an intriguing approach that represents the cornerstone of Groebner's analysis. He divides his study into two parts: "Natures" and "Objects." While the order of the chapters is the same from the original German edition, the physical division into two sections is new in the translation. The first section, which contains five chapters, examines the various methods and procedures used to identify people in the late Middle Ages. This brings Groebner to his second key term, the use of "resemblance" in authenticating individuals and documents. Groebner explores this idea in chapters devoted to artistic depictions of the individual, the use of images and signs, the official registration of names by civil authorities, marks on the human skin such as scars or brands, and the color of human skin or "body colors that referred to other personal traits and to a person's complexion" (p. 131). In all of these well-crafted chapters, Groebner makes a similar and compelling argument: that the body and its attendant attributes (clothing, marks, colors, etc.) were viewed as the source of true identification in late medieval Europe. They could reveal both the external identity of an individual, as well as his or her internal complexion. This is especially well conveyed in Groebner's discussion of branding and skin color, both of which had multiple meanings and could be interpreted and used in different ways depending on context.

A useful example of how Groebner constructs his argument in the first section is his treatment of *al naturale* Renaissance portraiture. Groebner argues that in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century images, the idea of *al naturale* identification went beyond a simple notion of faithful reproduction of the face to include clothing, elaborate visual contexts, texts, and especially the subject's coat of arms. This observation launches Groebner into the history of one of the most important identification markers in late medieval and early modern society: seals. From their first appearance, insignia like seals and coats of arms carried indicators of the person's collective affiliation. At the same time, they had to serve as personalized identification markers, resembling those used by others at a similar social rank and yet remaining distinct enough to identify the individual bearer. Groebner refers to this as a "logic of sameness" which authenticated the documents, or individuals, that bore these symbols (p. 44). Regulation of such insignia therefore involved control of identification. This was complicated by the fact that insignia were not immutable, but could change over time. This allowed for a visual connection between contemporary and past appearances that influenced how individuals identified themselves and were identified by others.

In the second section, Groebner turns to "objects" as means of identification. He begins by analyzing the importance of letters and their carriers, a topic Groebner also discusses in his earlier study of late medieval gift giving.[2] His focus here is on how papers, especially letters of conduct or recommendation, could both authenticate individuals in the eyes of authorities and be used to deceive those same authorities into believing the papers' owners were someone they were not. Since the legitimacy of identification documents relied on their similarity to other documents from the issuing authority, those individuals with the means or skill could illegally reproduce them to make counterfeit papers. The same was true of certificates of identity and mandatory passports, which began to appear in the fifteenth century. These new documents represented a watershed moment in the history of identification by radically expanding the circle of individuals required to carry papers. By the mid-sixteenth century, some form of passport had become obligatory for many travelers in Europe, which Groebner ascribes in part to increased regulation of marginal groups like beggars, Sinti and Roma, and mercenaries without employ. These documents authenticated the "exceptional" status of their bearer, indicating that the possessor had been granted a special right to beg or travel. This contributed to the rise of new systems of registration in the early modern world, which sought to identify individuals through the official recording of information. Groebner argues we should view the history of identity papers "as a history of transformation. These documents transformed whoever could produce a sealed letter ... into whomever and whatever the document 'certified"' (p. 171). This could be equally true of "real" documents and forged ones which conferred on the bearer an assumed name and identity. Groebner concludes that "careers in dissimulation" such as con men and spies became possible through the authenticating stamps the new bureaucracies placed on counterfeit documents (p. 219).

Groebner's final chapter attempts to bring the history of late medieval identification into the present day by drawing a direct connection between contemporary passports and the older identification documents used from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries. Groebner shows how the problems faced by medieval authorities in identifying and tracking individuals remain alive today, despite the sophisticated nature of modern technology. In the twenty-first century as in the thirteenth century, "individuals are identified by documents whose contents and use they cannot themselves determine" (p. 253). For Groebner, the age of online identity theft and retinal scanning represents a new expression of centuries-old problems of identification that first emerged during the late Middle Ages.

Groebner argues quite convincingly and his command of source material is impressive. The translators have done an excellent job rendering his readable German prose into fluid, engaging English. They have retained several key words or phrases in their original languages–two examples that spring to mind are *cedulae* and *Steckbrief*–but after each foreign word, the translators insert a parenthetical translation to aid those not versed in the many languages Groebner utilizes. This technique is very effective, since it allows the non-specialist reader to remain engaged with the translated text while providing the specialist reader access to the original key terms and vocabulary. The translation is, for the most part, free of errors. In addition to a few typos, this reviewer noticed only one confusing part: when we are first introduced to the traveler Thomas Platter the Younger, he is mistakenly referred to as Felix Platter (p. 202). Otherwise, Mark Kyburz and John Peck succeed in making Groebner's complex ideas accessible to an English-speaking audience.

The book's one shortcoming concerns its heavy emphasis on evidence produced by authorities to regulate identification. Since the author places his focus on the ways in which authority recorded and created identities, Groebner tends to concentrate more on the enactment of new registration rules than on their implementation. This approach leaves the reader pondering several questions that Groebner only hints at. One example involves the process of confessionalization. At several points, Groebner argues that forged documents certifying one's orthodox religious stance were rampant during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in both Catholic and Protestant countries. How does this affect our understanding of confessionalization and the ability of authorities to enforce adherence to new religious rules? How successful were authorities in combating religious forgeries? Were those forging such documents mostly foreigners, as in many of Groebner's examples, or did they include locals as well? Groebner leaves these questions largely unanswered. I think this is rather on purpose, since Groebner's goal is to show the ways in which authorities sought to create and regulate identification, not to chart all the conflicts that inevitably emerged when authorities tried to implement their rules. In this Groebner succeeds, and the additional questions his work provokes are more of a compliment than a criticism. The thought-provoking nature of Groebner's analysis should serve to spur research in this field for years to come. Valentin

Groebner has written an insightful analysis of the ways in which late medieval methods of identification have developed into modern systems of identity checking and surveillance. Like Groebner's other volumes, this book will profit any late medieval and early modern scholar who reads it. The depth of its research and the breadth of its source material will make it a useful tool for a variety of fields and methodological approaches. Available now in this English translation, *Who Are You* has something for every historian who has ever stood in line waiting to go through passport control.

Notes

[1]. Valentin Groebner, *Der Schein der Person* (Munich: CH Beck, 2004). For two excellent earlier studies by Groebner, see *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002); and *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

[2]. See Groebner, *Liquid Assets*, esp. pp. 40-49.

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