REVIEWS

MAKING A SCIENCE OF FINGERPRINTING


By Steven Jackson

In Suspect Identities, Simon Cole offers an engaging and provocative challenge to one of our most cherished popular scientific certainties: the uniqueness of the individual human fingerprint. Cole’s book traces the uneven spread of fingerprinting through an impressive variety of institutional and geographic locations, charting the paths by which the nascent technique of fingerprint identification came to forge a credible and durable link between state records and individual bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Cole, the story of fingerprinting plays out at the intersection of social and technical worlds, where growing fears of the ‘born criminal’ popularised by evolutionary theory, criminal anthropology, and resurgent anxieties of difference prompted new efforts to ‘link bodies to themselves across time and space’ in the service of social order. Cole’s account ties the rise of identification techniques to reformist curative ideals, the hope that armed with adequate knowledge of criminal histories and propensities, an enlightened penology might purge the disease of criminality wherever it was to be found.

Early sections of the book take up the contest between early fingerprinting advocates and the supporters of a range of alternative identification systems vying for acceptance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The most serious of these was the Bertillon system, built around a series of precise bodily measurements, the new technique of photography, and conventions of textual description structured according to a highly disciplined morphological vocabulary. Pioneered by the Paris police department in the 1880s, Bertillonage presented itself as a model of rigorous training and disciplined classification, a true ‘science’ of bodily identification. Fingerprinting, by contrast, ‘looked like technology’, with methods that could be learned rapidly and disseminated widely. As it developed, fingerprinting took on an aura of mechanical objectivity,
removing professional skill in the recording of prints and rendering the meaning of prints self-evident. With this technical assist, it was felt, the body could be made to speak for itself.

Much of Cole’s account is taken up with the construction of fingerprinting’s legal authority, as it shifted from record-keeping to forensics in the early twentieth century. Through a series of dramatic cases during the 1910s and 1920s, fingerprinting emerged as the hardest of legal evidence, and the presence of single and latent prints, certified by recognised experts, was taken as irrefutable proof of presence at the scene of the crime. By the 1930s, spectacular courtroom demonstrations had given way to routinisation, and the locus of fingerprinting’s authority had shifted from the scientific virtuoso to the competent and credentialed professional, boasting an expertise secured through mechanical adherence to method. This is a credibility story par excellence, and Cole does a nice job of describing the anxieties and internal debates concerning the proper extent and performance of dactyloscopers’ expert knowledge before the court.

*Suspect Identities* also brings to the fore the immense work of classification and standardisation involved in the construction of a workable science of human identification. The efforts of early fingerprint advocates focused primarily on finding a system of classification that would allow investigators to travel efficiently from individual prints to the growing store of prints on record. No less difficult was the jurisdictional and organisational passage through what by the early twentieth-century had emerged as a complicated patchwork of partially and wholly incompatible systems. As Cole’s account shows, the on-again off-again dream of a comprehensive identification system built around universal citizen fingerprinting, like other fantasies of universal knowledge, has been consistently frustrated by incompatible standards, legacy systems, and organisational politics played out at the level of infrastructure. While this may come as little shock to readers well versed in social studies of science in recent years, where issues of standardisation, classification and other infrastructural themes have occupied a central place, it should be noted that *Suspect Identities* offers an unusually rich and sensitive account of such topics.

Readers with a post-colonial interest will also find impressive the geographic and cultural scope of Cole’s work. Like many other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century innovations, fingerprinting was introduced and perfected in the colonies before being brought back for European application. As Cole recounts, within the colonial laboratory, and in parallel American projects of immigration control, fingerprinting’s ‘industrial’ edge over other biometric techniques was joined with a further advantage: its ability to reliably distinguish bodies that, in the eye of the coloniser,