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Valentin Groebner. *Der Schein der Person: Steckbrief, Ausweis und Kontrolle im Europa des Mittelalters.* München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2004. 224 S. EUR 24.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-406-52238-3.

Reviewed by Jeanne E. Grant (Department of History, Metropolitan State University)

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Their Papers or Your Life

In what is becoming his trademark style, Valentin Groebner's *Der Schein der Person* relates the past to the present and the historical to the personal.[1] In this book, identity is examined as it applies to individuals, not as it applies to the usual subjects of historical inquiry: communities, nations, or other groups. A brief glance through the book review section of any *American Historical Review* from the 1990s will confirm that historians more often than not wish to trace the formation of group identity. Of course, plenty of histories focus on individual identities, such as Natalie Zemon Davis's famous *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), which demonstrated how one person, Martin, lost and regained his identity among his family and closest friends while another man posed as him for four years. Martin Guerre is the most appropriate ingress to Groebner's *Der Schein der Person*, because Groebner introduces his readers to his heady argument through the comparable story of Manetto "the Fat." Manetto, a poor fifteenth-century Florentine woodworker, was the victim of a prank instigated by the famous artist Brunelleschi, who convinced Manetto he was not who he thought he was. Further, Groebner concludes that the figure of "imposter" was the most important result of bureaucracies' efforts to control people's travels.

Groebner's book combines philosophical inquiry into individual identity formation, that is, how people make their own identities, or at least the angst commonly associated with wondering who one is, with a thorough investigation into the historical process of official and "objective" verification of identity. He finds the evidence for this process not in anecdotes about individuals but in material and abstractions. "What made 'it' authentic?" –when "it" could be anything from a letter of introduction to a border pass to a painted portrait–is Groebner's driving question. This question is examined in the book with varying degrees of depth from the surface issue to the deep question. "Wie hat man ... Leute, die [man] noch nie gesehen hatte, [wiedererkannt]?" as a practical query is placed right alongside the philosophical question, "Wie modern ist die Moderne eigentlich, wenn es um die machtvollen papierenen Verdoppelungen und Bescheinigungen der Person geht?" (p. 8). And throughout the book, these two sides of the question are dealt with simultaneously, consistently, and in an intellectually stimulating way.

The book's chapters build the case, both chronologically and thematically, that the standard narrative of increasing bureaucratic control of Europe's populations throughout the late medieval and early modern centuries idealizes the real process of state-sponsored authentication of a person's identity. The key to this assertion is Groebner's historicization of the word *Schein*. The fact that it changed meaning over the centuries, from *Urkunde*, *Bescheinigung*, or *Ausweis* to *Trug*, *Simulation*, or *Unwirklichkeit* points to the individual's durable ability to shape his identity in the face of bureaucratic attempts at increasing control.

Groebner's argument is based on a keen philosophical sense of the effects of the centuries-long process of greater and more sophisticated identification technology and on extensive and thorough historical research into the technology itself. For example, he dates the advent of "papers," that is, the "passport," to the 1460s, when King Louis XI required all royal messengers to carry personal identification papers. Other moments of new laws and new techniques for recording persons and their movements are noted throughout the book. The standard narrative of increasing state-sponsored authentication of identity is also greatly enhanced by Groebner's observations about more refined techniques and technology, because Groebner does not tell a simple story of more refined technology, but the significance of technology for humans.

Authentication of identity takes place at the intersection of people, things, and actions. The person who carried the document, the document that was produced and, after the sixteenth century, recorded by officials in registers, and the action of the border guards checking the document against the person all were part of the process, the transaction, of authentication of identity. Each person assigned his own meaning to each step of the process: the document, the identifiers (sometimes as simple as the clothing and scars on the person's body), and the sequestered record of the document that gave it its authenticity. At each step, it was possible for the process to break down. Hence, the imposter was the most important result of increasing efforts to control people, because this figure makes apparent the fiction upon which the process is predicated and which the process produces. The fiction is the bureaucracies' impact on reality to the best of their ability, and though today the process includes additional, sophisticated sciences such as biometrics as means of controlling peoples' movements, individuals still assign their own meanings to every step of the process.

While the English translation is divided into two halves and seems to have rearranged the book's contents slightly, the original German version relies on the arrangement of the chapters to deal with both sides of the twofold practical and philosophical question, thus making the book a sophisticated and rewarding read.[3]

Notes

[1]. Valentin Groebner, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York: Zone Books, 2004) displays a similar approach with the author's typical effective and persuasive style.

[2]. Valentin Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Mark Kyburz and John Peck (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

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