Following the Digitalised Rabbit: Biometrics, Bodies and Borders

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Lewis Carroll’s white rabbit has recently gone through important transformations. In approximately 150 years, it has moved from paper to 3D technology, being fully digitalised in the most recent blockbuster movie. And still it continues to escape most attempts to capture it. Nevertheless, the quest remains of paramount importance in ‘epistemological terms’, especially since the rabbit is not the only one that gets digitalised, but also Alice and important parts of both her (and our) worlds.

Indeed, biometrics and their application in a risk management perspective are Benjamin J. Muller’s white rabbit. Following their deployment in security practices provides an occasion to study some of the most interesting developments in the modes of government of individuals, societies and mobilities. In particular, the choice of focusing on these technologies offers important insights into the ongoing digitalisation of borders and bodies, and their management in terms of risk.

The selection of this research pattern is well grounded. First, the introduction of such technologies attracted (and still attracts) public interest and concerns in terms of their impact on fundamental rights. Second, as highlighted by multiple references, a ‘critical’ mass of researchers is working on these themes, creating both a stimulating intellectual environment and a certain need for conceptualisations.

To gear up for this journey, Muller borrows from two crucial, but still marginal approaches to IR: Critical Security Studies and International Political Sociology. But he goes even further, and draws intellectual and research resources from the growing field of Surveillance Studies. In a handful of chapters, he brings IR face to face with many of the themes and topics that emerged in the last decade as central to contemporary debates and politics: technology, risk, (in)security, borders, sovereignty and human lives. While none is *per se* a novelty, Muller shows us that their new articulations are what matters, and what deserves academic attention. He does so by attempting to introduce the evocative image of the

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biometric state which “refers not only to the increasing reliance and prolific application of biometric technologies, but the logic of rule that underpins it” (24). This image permits “to highlight emerging trends in terms of dominant logics of rule, and the essential and constitutive role a range of technologies play in this state” (24).

Several patterns of reading can be followed in Muller’s volume. Without pushing aside the possibility offered by the introduction and the organisation of the book, three important moments stand out in Muller’s argument. The first basically coincides with Chapter One, in which he sets out most of his theoretical and conceptual premises: the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics; the scholarship on “governing through risk”;¹ the works on securitisation, and especially the so-called Paris School;² and an introduction to technology in general and biometrics in particular, concluding on the notion of the biometric state.

This wealth of theories and concepts is further enriched and broadened in several other chapters. For example, in Chapter Four, he includes the most recent works on the role and perception of catastrophes in the construction of security practices; in Chapter Five, he explores popular culture, drawing on the works of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Zizek; finally, in Chapter Seven, he borrows from the Agambenian concepts of exception and homo sacer to follow the digitalisation of part of the Fallujah population.

However, these same chapters can also be read as a second moment in the book, and probably the most appealing. The selection of under-researched case studies creates the potential and rare occasion to seduce a wider range of researchers, including those who would normally refrain from focusing on these subjects. They also provide some fresh material and analyses for those who are already working in the field. For example, Chapter Five puts popular culture at the forefront: if images and their representations are a key element in understanding (in)security politics, “the objects of popular culture (…) not only reflect changing norms, ideas and identities regarding governance, risk and (in)security, but (…) play a constitutive role in sustaining claims of efficacy, legitimacy, and the general ubiquity of RM [risk management] techniques and overwhelming reliance on biometric technologies in the emerging security dispositif that is essential and constitutive of the emerging biometric state” (73). In Chapter Seven, Muller and co-author John Measor take the battle of Fallujah as a case study with the aim of showing how “biometrics is becoming an ever powerful tool on the war on terror’s battleground du jour” (109). Turning the tables so as not to limit the analysis of biometrics to the ‘homeland security’ domain, the authors are successful in offering important reasons to more traditional IR scholars to integrate technologies into their ‘objects’ of research.

The third important point comes in the chapters that focus on such cases studies as ID cards and the re-bordering of North America (chapters 3 and 6). In particular, the latter offers a critical analysis of the large-scale implementation of ‘registered travelers’ systems, a mode of government that challenges a wide range of assumptions in many disciplines, from the limited

relevance of individuals’ behaviour in IR to the presumption of innocence and due process in penal law and human rights.

Muller’s publication is part of a growing number of studies that highlight how important it is for IR to take a more acute interest in technologies. It is also a valuable contribution to the work being done, from different perspectives, on the theory of the state and the protection of fundamental rights.

Framing research around the development and deployment of specific technologies is like following a white rabbit, probably a digitalised one, that discloses worlds full of ‘wonders’ in front of us: new actors, new rationales of government, new power relations. However, even if these worlds are an integral part of what Carroll would have called ‘dull reality’, unpacking technology is not an easy task. This is due both to the protean forms it takes and its multiple and diverging conceptualisations. Muller’s publication is to some extent a victim of this, in that the main critique that can be levelled against it is that he calls so many intellectual companions onto the stage that the study of the most interesting cases is often overshadowed. The paradoxical effect is that the impact of the ‘wonders’ on our understanding of ‘dull reality’ is curtailed in advance, as if it were Alice guiding the rabbit.