



2009 CONFERENCE

**IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Contested History of Identification in Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Argentina: Anthropometry and Dactyloscopy in Buenos Aires Police Departments**

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In the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, Argentina broke new ground in the implementation and development of identification systems in Latin America. In 1889, the region's first Anthropometric Office opened in the Police Department of the City of Buenos Aires (the Argentine capital), and in 1891 Juan Vucetich developed a fingerprinting system that was implemented in the Police Department of the Province of Buenos Aires (in the city of La Plata) and would later be adopted throughout the continent. Moreover, during this period arguments were raised in favor of civil identification in Argentina, and spread to other countries. As a result, more and more sectors of society were registered. This paper examines the process that laid the groundwork for the widespread identification of the country's population. This expansion of police registration and record-keeping capacities cannot by any means be seen as the product of an abstract process of growth of the state's power over individuals. During this time there was no consensus – either within police institutions or in the field of justice or in broad sectors of society – regarding the legitimacy of registering individuals and keeping a record of their identity in police files. There was also controversy over which identification system should be used and who was to be registered. This article explores the multiple ideas and conflicts that conditioned the choice and implementation of identification technologies and the construction of police files, which ultimately shaped a particular culture of identification that would have a great influence in Argentina throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

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