



2009 CONFERENCE

IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Abstract

State, Mobility and Identification in England, 1500-2009

EDWARD HIGGS, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

This paper examines two approaches to the relationship between the State and identification - the 'Statist' and 'Social Functionalist' models. The Statist approach sees the State as yet another manifestation of the Nietzschean 'will to power', and that as far back as one can go back it has been attempting to identify and pin down its subjects – this is just what States do, and it requires no further explanation. In the 'Social Functionalist' model the development of State forms of identification is explained in terms of the 'needs' of society. The processes of industrialization and urbanization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are seen as creating mobility, the breakdown of traditional social bonds, and increasing anonymity. In the case of England neither of these conceptual models works very well. Identification is not necessarily part of the teleology of the State, nor an inevitable function it performs at some historical stage in its role as the superstructure of the social base. Rather we might see the State as a social system within the broader ensemble of social systems within which it moves, and that its changing relationship with these other systems – other states, electorates, social elites, commercial organisations, and so on – requiring different strategies and negotiations with respect to identification. Modern ID card systems in England can be seen not in terms of 'Seeing like a State', but as the outcome of the State seeing itself as a business enterprise.

The Documentation of Individual Identity:

Historical and Comparative Perspectives since 1500

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