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By Josephine Berry Slater

We are standing on the brink of an immense revelation. The revelation of people to states. In the UK – the surveillance workshop of the world – people are becoming increasingly visible through IT projects like the Electronic Patients Record and the National Identity Register, as well as a forthcoming points-based immigration regime premised on the ability to identify subjects and then track and cross-reference their data as never before. Joining-up data, and hence governance, is the name of the game. What are the implications then of this dangerous regime of identity capture, assessment, and tracking for political demands for representation and rights? What are the risks and advantages of visibility, of joining the demos, when identification by the state triggers joined-up ‘knowledge’, often with punitive results? The bright light of IT in the hands of increasingly authoritarian regimes is chasing away the shadows that once provided the minimum of protection, income and manoeuvrability to people at the edges of society. The basic survival of the poor, undocumented or ‘illegalised’ often depends on the ability to operate without detection, the necessity of ID, or the creation of official records. This grey zone of anonymity is constantly squeezed in the interests of population management, border enforcement, welfare clamp-downs, technocratic convenience and, of course, the economy. This issue of Mute focuses on the exposure of subjects not just to state surveillance and databasing, but to sovereign state power enacted either through the ordinary rule of law or through its suspension in the state of emergency.

As Elizabeth Povinelli writes in these pages, ‘The state of exception and its tethering to moral panic, is a routinised form of state action.’ State/media orchestrated panics, usually presenting a society on the brink of calamity, have become the precondition of the state’s operations. In order to justify massive social change such as ‘managed migration’, in which would-be immigrants to the UK will be subjected to an inhuman assessment based on ‘skills’, the emotive bomb of ‘swamping’ is detonated again and again. In order to roll back hard-won indigenous rights and ‘neoliberate’ communities and their lands in Australia, the bomb of culturally ingrained child sexual abuse amongst Aboriginals is detonated. As Povinelli says, these moral panics are like screaming fire in a movie theatre – no time to think, just act. The time of the here and now privileges those with power, after all, this is the time-frame in which the world’s traders make fortunes.

Threats of bird flu, paedophilia, swamping, terrorism or inefficient hospital treatment are enough to convince parliaments that uncontrolled movement, indeed the chaos of life itself, must be managed. Here, blind panic combines with sober technocratic procedure: personal details must be taken and collated. As Camille Barbagallo & Nic Beuret argue in this issue, biopolitical control is achieved through the regime of rights, the ‘inscription of life into the state’. This production of a national body, protected by rights, requires an outside to give it meaning, but one which is constantly under attack. Although the attainment of rights often represents the culmination of struggles to redefine the composition of this national body, to admit those people or freedoms previously excluded, it always entails life’s re-inscription into the state – as well as the renewed exclusion of others.

The Strangers into Citizens campaign, that calls for an amnesty for illegal immigrants in the UK, throws up just this problem. As the campaigners explain, those granted asylum would enter a probationary period in which they would demonstrate their right to join British society as hard-working, family oriented, model citizens. Clearly then there is no universal basis for rights in the sheer fact of being human. In a series of interviews, Jaya Klara Brekke investigates how migration activists and other groups attempt to improve migrants’ conditions with or without recourse to rights and asks how, in their different and often conflicting ways, they deal with the problem of ‘organising in the dark’. Perhaps it is enough to venture, in response to the cover’s question ‘Show Invisibles?’,

that visibility is not only achievable through inscription in the state. Organising in the dark can of course result in other kinds of revelation such as the mass withdrawal of il/legal labour seen in the US last year during 'A Day Without Immigrants' – in this case the power of the 'invisible' was made palpably evident.

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