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**The Biometric Imaginary:
Standardization & Objectivity in Post-
Apartheid Welfare**

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Abstract

Starting in March 2012, the South African government engaged in a massive effort of citizen registration that continued for more than a year. Nearly 19 million social welfare beneficiaries enrolled in a novel biometric identification scheme that uses fingerprints and voice recognition to authenticate social grant recipients. This paper seeks to understand the meaning of biometric technology in post-apartheid South African welfare through a study of the bureaucratic and policy elite's motivation for this undertaking. It suggests that biometric technology was conceived of and implemented as the most recent in a series of institutional, infrastructural, and policy reforms that seek to deliver welfare in a standardized and objective manner. This technopolitical imaginary has contributed to both the strengths and weaknesses of today's centralized welfare state.

1. Introduction: The Biometric Imaginary in Post-Apartheid Welfare

Beginning in March 2012 and continuing for about a year and a half, 18.9 million predominantly low-income South African residents queued at government facilities to be photographed and submit their personal details, including a full set of fingerprints and a voice recording (SASSA, 2013b). From rural towns to major cities, old and young alike were required to present themselves for this massive registration drive. States make records of their citizens for various reasons, and depending on the age of those queued, chances were they had been similarly registered in the past, perhaps for racial labor control during apartheid, perhaps for South Africa's democratic election in 1994.

The episode in question, though, was the result of a bureaucratic decision by welfare policymakers to implement a new administrative infrastructure for South Africa's extensive program of social grants. These programs have deep

roots, with formal welfare beginning in the 1920s as an effort to curtail poverty within the white population (Seekings, 2007). In subsequent decades, it expanded considerably. Today the grants are designated primarily for the elderly, poor caregivers, and the disabled, and these monthly government-to-citizen transfers are perhaps the most significant means of poverty alleviation in contemporary South Africa.¹

Despite this, as Everatt (2008: 301) notes, the politics of welfare in South Africa are contentious. Broadly, it is divided between proponents (usually represented by “COSATU and the SACP, the churches, and some elements of civil society”) and opponents (“including senior government officials, business, and much of the media”). While proponents tends to be motivated by apartheid’s legacy of poverty and inequality and draw on the protections of the Constitution, there is also a strand of support that promotes grants as a means to escape a poverty trap, allowing the poor to enter the market as entrepreneurial risk-takers (Ferguson, 2010).² In contrast, opponents tend to worry about the cost of the grants, the risk of welfare dependency, and perverse incentives; they more often point to something called ‘the dignity of work’ as the appropriate path out of poverty (see Meth, 2004; Barchiesi, 2011).

Those 19 million residents – nearly 40 percent of the country’s entire population – provided their personal details in order to receive their grants through a new payment system (SASSA, 2013b). For the government, the system promised a reliable means of delivering millions of rand per month. As the Minister of Social Development Bathabile Dlamini (2013) would explain, the goal was “to improve the integrity of our social security system, and to eliminate all forms of fraud and corruption.” Prominent civil society organizations like the Black Sash, too, “welcomed [the] move to a biometric system” (Nyembezi, 2012). For the recipients, the new system aimed to offer increased convenience through the provision of a payment card accepted at a large cash distribution network established by the government’s contractor, Net1 CPS.

The cornerstone of this new system is biometric identification, the use of technologies to recognize specific bodily features. A fingerprint would also be the primary means of authenticating recipients, but in case a fingerprint scanner was unavailable, the grant recipients also provided a voice recording, to serve as a back-up means of verifying individuals at the time of payment. This is not the first time biometric identification has been used widely in South Africa. Both

¹ On the grants as a type of ‘redistributive economy,’ see Bähre’s (2011) informative discussion.

² In the case of COSATU, whose members stand to gain through the defense of high wages, a relaxed need to support poor dependents, and an expansion of state administration, there is also a measure of self-interest (Seekings & Matisonn, 2003)

before and during apartheid, government officials were enamored of the potential for using analog fingerprinting to identify individuals, most commonly in schemes of racial labor control. In the post-apartheid era, digital biometric technology has been central to the identification programs of the Department of Home Affairs, as well as used extensively in previous welfare systems.

Yet rarely have these systems functioned as promised, whether for good or ill. Without ignoring the very real human cost of authoritarianism, Evans (1997: 99) suggests that “the collective impact of recent scholarship on the labor bureau system has steadily destroyed the structure’s reputation for omnipotence and doctrinaire imperiousness.” Breckenridge (2005a) suggests the biometric obsession even undermined the apartheid state’s ability to act. In the post-apartheid era, too, despite significant investment, large-scale biometric identification schemes have stalled or proven ineffective (Breckenridge, 2008). Therefore, the continuing salience of biometric identification amongst the bureaucratic and policy elite seems curious. To explain this ‘non-scandal,’ this paper narrates the post-apartheid history of welfare state building that culminated in the 2012-2013 biometric registration drive. To do so, I rely primarily on government documents, civil society reports, court filings, parliamentary minutes, and nearly a dozen interviews with stakeholders. I pay particular attention to the ways in which elites conceptualize and attach meaning to biometric identification and the reasons for which it is adopted by policymakers and members of government, especially those within the welfare administration.

Historians have suggested that states and societies tend to cohere particular systems for registering and identifying individuals. “Viewed globally,” write Szreter and Breckenridge (2012: 3), “societies, and the individuals within them, seem to be very variably shaped by what we might call cultures of registration”. Similarly, Caplan (2001: 51) suggests that a “culture of identification” – “essentially unruly” but comparatively distinct – can be said to exist in a given society. These cultures are the historically contingent results of evolving politics, economics, technology, and more.

In this paper I aim to explicate some of the dynamics behind a post-apartheid culture of registration and identification. I argue that a relatively stable and collective understanding exists among the bureaucratic and policy elite about how to constitute the relationship between the welfare state and beneficiary. In brief, this collective understanding – that I propose to call *the biometric imaginary* – posits biometric technology as a necessary, suitable, and effective means of constructing a standardized and objective welfare state. This paper traces the emergence, spread, and influence of this imaginary.

The will to standardize has arisen as a means of uniting and improving the fragmented and weak bureaucracy inherited from the apartheid regime. South Africa has endeavored to create equality of citizenship through imposing uniformity. This has included bureaucratic centralization (first through the establishment of a unitary, national Department of Social Development (DSD) in 1994, and after through the creation of the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) in 2005) as well as technological reform (such as through the linking of various databases and implementation of new payment infrastructures).

In parallel, an egalitarian ethos has militated against subjectivity, in favor of rule-bound practices. As De Tocqueville and Weber elaborated long ago, in a democratic setting, subjective discretion is viewed with suspicion. In post-apartheid social protection, two forms of discretion have proven particularly troubling: illicit access to grants and bureaucratic error. A preference for objective practice has deeply influenced the social grants, with biometric identification offering an impersonal and presumptively neutral means of grant administration.

Both standardization and objectivity are widespread and productive—though not hegemonic—commitments that shape the understanding of biometric registration and identification. This particular confluence of the will to standardize, the pursuit of objectivity, and the use of social grants has given rise to the belief that biometric identification is necessary, suitable, and effective. As in Appadurai's (1996: 31) discussions of social imaginaries, the biometric imaginary is "a constructed landscape of collective aspirations" that serves as a "staging ground for action". These imaginaries are productive social forces with real-world implications, but they do not always accurately correspond to reality, exhibiting varying degrees of interpretive flexibility. As I will contend, the dominant understanding of biometrics as necessary, suitable, and effective are each, in part, fantasy and reality.

However, the biometric imaginary is not merely relevant at the level of ideas; it has material effects. Biometric welfare is a form of technopolitics, Hecht's (2009 [1998]: 15) term for the "strategic practice of designing or using technology to constitute, embody, or enact political goals." The discussion that follows will show how the will to standardize and the pursuit of objectivity have driven a series of technopolitical programs within the post-apartheid welfare sector, including institutional centralization, technological standardization, and bureaucratic automation.

Although biometric technology has been used in grant delivery for at least two decades, the 2012 SASSA contract with Net1 CPS is an unprecedented moment:

a nationally centralized database of 19 million grant beneficiaries who are biometrically identified for each payment. It may be too soon to tell if the new biometric registration and payment system will prove to be another troubled use of the technology by the South African state; however the emulation of both South Africa's system of social grants (Hanlon *et al.*, 2010) and biometric methodologies (Gelb and Clark, 2011; Breckenridge, 2010) suggests the need for an understanding of the conceptualization, meaning, and drivers of biometric welfare in South Africa. This paper next turns to the drivers of standardization and objectivity before showing how—and with what consequences—biometrics have been used to reach those goals.

2. The Will to Standardize

As apartheid ended in the early 1990s, an insidious danger lurked in the governing structure of post-apartheid South Africa. To a significant degree, the quasi-independent homelands lacked competent bureaucracies and were riddled with corruption. Furthermore, the provinces displayed a high degree of variability in their processes, technologies, and adeptness. For example, despite the panoptic ambitions of the apartheid government, the basic task of population registration was split between more than “a dozen discrete yet overlapping and duplicated population registers” (Breckenridge, 2005b: 276). The story was similar within welfare due to a 1984 designation in the tricameral parliament of the sector as an “own affair”. The peculiar result was “the creation of costly and duplicated administrative structures, with 13 ‘national’ and 4 provincial head offices, plus another 3 coordinating departments” (Lund, 2008: 10-11).

As the government began in earnest to address the situation, it convened a series of national commissions of inquiry. Beginning in 1992, no less than five more major national commissions were convened. These commissions reflected the solidifying politics of post-apartheid welfare, concerned primarily with improving the delivery of social protection while reducing fraud and corruption in the system. Although alternatives (such as significant delegation to the provinces) were at least considered, these initiatives rather quickly coalesced around an understanding of the problem as fragmentation that impeded service delivery and created the opportunity for mischief. Increased uniformity required a process of standardization that, with time, was enacted through the administrative centralization of social protection. As we shall see, the issue of identifying the recipients was at the forefront of these processes.

An early and influential source of this will to standardize was the 1996 *Committee for Restructuring of Social Security*, led by Thabo Mbeki's advisor Frank Chikane. The Chikane Committee was motivated by the belief that “the

delivery of social security is in crisis” (CRSS, 1996: 5). Fragmentation into fourteen separate systems, each with particular management, rules, and procedures, created the opportunity for loopholes “which could easily be exploited by unscrupulous officials and members of the public.” Of the R11.5 billion paid out to 2.8 million beneficiaries in 1995-1996, it was estimated that about ten percent was lost to fraud and corruption. As it reports, “fraud and corruption are rampant as a consequence of a lack of systems, proper internal controls, unduly complex legislation and department rules governing internal disciplinary proceedings.” This malfeasance is said to “represent the greatest threat to the programme” of welfare, requiring a “complete re-engineering” (1996: 23).

While it mentioned the possibility that some tasks could be decentralized, this potential was not the subject of further detail; instead, the Committee focused on unifying and standardizing a national system in which, as a result, it was believed that the detection of fraud would be easier. The report also emphasized the need to establish “linkages with other systems... such as the Home Affairs, Population Registration System, other pension insurance funds, South African Police Services (SAPS), Deeds Registry, the provincial financial control systems, and post offices and banks” (1996: 6). Specific recommendations for the social security system were offered, including a nationally organized system, a national human resources strategy, a standardized and integrated management system, a “national transverse information system,” and regulatory simplifications. Thus, standardization was a task both within social security and between other government programs.

This logic was directed particularly at the means of identifying grant recipients. The committee argued that the “benefits of a biometric system can only be reaped if there is a uniform system for the country as a whole” (1996: 44). They were deeply concerned that the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Northern Province, KwaZulu Natal and Mpumalanga were in various stages of issuing biometric contracts, enrolling beneficiaries, and using different proprietary systems for delivery, perhaps permitting fraud: “Without a national fingerprint data-base [*sic*] this gives no assurance that the person is who they claim to be.” Thus, their opposition to biometrics was pragmatic, concerned with the difficulty of creating a functioning system, especially as the amalgamation of different systems could compound data errors.

They were also deeply concerned with the costs, especially in light of early indicators of ineffectiveness and corruption. As early as 1993, biometrics were tested in the Cape Province, and of the 190,000 recipients enrolled only 1,040 potential duplicates were identified. When 254 of these were further investigated, only 32 were actually duplicate entries; the rest were mistakenly

flagged. The problem was compounded by the fact that biometrics reportedly cost more than double alternative means. In the Western Cape, the biometric system was said to cost R1.9 million per month, compared to the R16,500 per month savings from identifying 32 duplicates. Throughout, there were emerging concerns about corruption in provincial tendering for biometric welfare systems; ultimately these concerns would result in a full investigation by the Office for Serious Economic Offenses (OSEO) and ensnare the NP's senior welfare official, Abe Williams. As the Chikane Committee concluded, "[we are] gravely concerned that the outsourcing of biometric identification is premature, costly and will not necessarily eliminate fraud."

In the years following the Chikane Committee, the depiction of the problem and solution solidified into a relatively consensual view that (a) a crisis existed and (b) standardization was the necessary response. The archive yields few dissenting voices, especially among the representatives of the elite. The 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare declared that fragmentation led to "gross inefficiencies" and "loopholes... which could be exploited by officials and the public" (1996: 51). The "manual system" for accounting and "the lack of an integrated national ID system" were specifically cited as problems. "A uniform social grants system", it reasoned, required "the rationalization of computer systems and the development of a National Social Grants Register and automated fingerprint technology" (1996: 54). It noted that a national re-registration effort might be required to produce an accurate database.

The sense of calamity was exacerbated by a prominent 1997 revelation from the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper that an estimated R1 billion was being lost to pension fraud from an annual budget of R14.3 billion (see Reddy and Sokomani, 2008: 19). A major report in the following year from a government watchdog, the Public Service Commission (PSC), detailed the state of service delivery and proposed a variety of institutional and technical reforms. The PSC's *Investigation into the Delivery of Social Security Services* argued, like its predecessors, that the troubles of the social security program were the result of a lack of standards in the data captured from applicants, the complexity of regulations, the "varying interpretations of eligibility," and the methods of payment. It recommended the "development of a national policy to standardise" paperwork, bureaucratic procedures, and identity documents (PSC, 1998: ix). The PSC recommended computerizing identification forms and adopting a national model from Home Affairs. When the report received additional attention at a series of Parliamentary hearings in February and March 1998, many of the findings and arguments were affirmed. For example, members of the Executive Councils from Free State and the Eastern Cape complained of the identification troubles facing their provinces. In the Free State, it was alleged that citizens from Lesotho claimed South African pensions; in the Eastern Cape,

former Transkei and Ciskei citizens lacked the new ID books while others had both the new ID books and older identity documents that were still accepted, thus were able to benefit twice (Saloojee, 1998).

The report also reasoned through the institutional structures most able to deliver social grants in a manner keeping with the various demands of the democratic era. A decentralized model where “each province develops its own social security service” was rejected due to limited accountability and the recognition that “all citizens of South Africa should be treated equally” (PSC, 1998: 12). Instead, they recommended a centralized standard-setting entity with provincial departments who would deliver the grants. The 2002 *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa* (led by Vivienne Taylor) provided an important boost to these recommendations by advocating for the establishment of the South African Social Security Agency—an entity introduced in 2004.

The goal of SASSA is to serve as “the sole agency that will ensure the efficient and effective management, administration, and payment of social assistance” (RSA, 2002). As Selwyn Jehoma (2003a), the head of grants for the Department of Social Development, told Parliament in February 2003, in addition to providing clear accountability, integrating social security within a national agency would permit “standardization and uniform business processes” which would “reduce costs of service delivery.” Further, “[p]ractices of double dipping into funds would also not be possible with an Agency as the institution would have a better grip on social services.” Social Development Minister Skewyiya reiterated this, saying that “financial leaks had necessitated the centralization of control and payment of grants, leading to the formation of a social security agency that would do the job” (Radebe, 2006). As Mr. Jehoma (2003b) told Parliament a few months later, this was necessary because “it was not possible to give all nine provinces a set of guidelines and expect them to interpret and implement them in the same way [so] a nationally guided process was needed.” While few in Parliament advocated otherwise, at least some civil society organizations were skeptical of the centralization: the Black Sash worried that SASSA would merely “replicate the existing dysfunctions of the system” and that “the new system overlooks the political, social and technological nuances in each province” (Robinson, 2005). Their protest, though, was ineffectual.

SASSA, then, has been tasked with homogenizing the policy and implementation of grants. While the fragmentation was particularly troubling for the manner in which it facilitated illicit behavior, it was also at odds with the egalitarian ethos of the newly democratic nation. For instance, not only did quality of service differ wildly, fundamental definitions of, say, what counted as disability meant that applicants may qualify for a grant in one province, but not

if they move to another (Reddy and Sokomani, 2008). In the context of hard-fought equality, the grants, then, became a means of aspiring to and establishing uniformity of citizenship (cf. Peebles, 2008; Ferguson, 2002).

3. The Pursuit of Objectivity in the Face of Bedeviling Discretion

In addition to bureaucratic structures, fragmented and discretionary *practice* has come under scrutiny in post-apartheid welfare. As Daston and Galison (2007: 199) emphasize, ‘objective’ should not be understood as synonymous with ‘truth,’ but rather as the inverse of subjective. Certain techniques, such as automation or quantification, offer means by which to remove subjectivity (see Porter, 1995). In post-apartheid welfare, techniques of objectivity have been directed at two forms of subjective practice that have continued to trouble the bureaucratic and policy elite: illicit access to grants and inappropriate or inept bureaucratic action.

Historically, grant fraud has occurred in various ways, from a 2008 case where just three people absconded with R22 million (Zulu, 2008), to more everyday acts of dissimulation, such as “looking poor” to pass the means test (Plagerson, *et al.*, 2012; see also Versfeld, 2012). In conversations with and public statements by SASSA officials, two practices are considered particularly widespread. First, there is concern about “phantom twins,” the practice of registering fictional children in order to receive extra grants (one town reportedly had more than 100 twins in 2010 [Piloso, 2010]). Secondly, there is a perception that deceased pensioners are not reported as dead, and relatives continue to collect money on their behalf. This form of fraud is often linked to the use of bank accounts, where money is traditionally deposited without verifying that the recipient is alive.³

The wayward behavior of middle- and low-level bureaucrats has also been particularly troubling, with the widespread belief that error and incompetence undermine the effectiveness and equality of service. For pro-poor civil society organizations, bureaucrats have historically been found to be an impediment to the goal of improving legitimate access to the grants. This was most evident during the early years of the Child Support Grant when organizations like the Children’s Institute and Black Sash (Guthrie *et al.*, 2000) highlighted “worrying... reports that applicants are often dissuaded from persisting with applications because of the attitude of welfare officials.” They called for

³ Interview with informant #6, a current government official (November 2012).

“welfare officials... to be educated” to improve their delivery behavior. As Simon Kimani (2000) of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers told Parliament, “some welfare officials are arrogant, rude and abusive.” At the time, the process of applying for grants was described as “torturous” because there were “no uniform standards, assessment guidelines and procedures, and some officials themselves [did] not know of or understand the procedures” (Guthrie, 2002). For some, outsourcing to private payment firms was particularly problematic due to the inability or unwillingness of private firms to provide quality services (see Overy & Zuma, 2004). As Francie Lund and colleagues (2009) noted, “administrative discretion appears to be subverting the aim of the broader social policy.” They flagged as particularly ineffective policies such as Batho Pele and laws like the Administrative Justice Act which requires that “organs of state may not act capriciously and arbitrarily”.

The work environment has exacerbated these problems. Offices were poorly maintained. Electricity and other infrastructures were missing. Paperwork and documents have been particularly troubling, with necessary forms variously lost, in the wrong language, and open to forgery (Kimani, 2000). For post-apartheid welfare, the documentary-mediation of state and citizen has often been a source of discretion and error, undermining the aspirations to fixed objectivity pinned upon them (cf. Scott, 1998).⁴ During the 1990s, there was “no way of verifying the authenticity” of applicants’ documents (PSC, 1998), especially if they were issued by entities with which the welfare administration had little interoperability (most importantly Home Affairs). In 2001, a report from the Auditor-General (2001) found 225,471 computer-generated ID numbers. These were formally supposed to be used for recipients who only had the apartheid-era identity documents, but in practice were used by unscrupulous bureaucrats to create false recipients. Nearly a decade later, an audit of SASSA highlighted similar documentary problems, noting deficiencies “including information technology controls” and “poor-filing management” (Hlongwa, 2010).

For beneficiaries, a lack of identity documents has been one of the primary barriers to accessing the grants. Budlender *et al.* (2008) detail how “officials were requiring documents and other evidence far beyond what the law dictated”. Early in the Child Support Grant this was recognized as a barrier, and lobbying removed some of the requirements for children (Lund, 2008:75) but it still took a lawsuit—only decided in 2008—to permit a broader array of documents,

⁴ Although it is not traditional to consider inanimate paperwork an influential mediator, a growing amount of scholarship has emphasized the vitality of mundane artifacts (e.g. Latour, 1992; Bennett, 2010). As Matthew Hull (2012: 13) writes, “Just as discourse has long been recognized as a dense mediator between subjects and the world, we need to see graphic artifacts not as neutral purveyors of discourse, but as mediators that shape the significance of the linguistic signs inscribed on them.”

including sworn affidavits (Lund, 2008: 486). Yet a 2010 survey found that problems with documentation remained the most significant reason for not receiving legitimate grants (Leibbrandt *et al.*, 2010).

Since the 1990s, the social grants have been depicted as ‘in crisis’ due to the specter of these forms of bedeviling discretion. The illegal and diffuse nature of this behavior makes estimating the extent of the problem quite difficult, but numerous entities have tried (see Reddy and Sokomani, 2008). These figures filter through Parliamentary hearings and budget speeches, news reports and opinion pieces, and daily discussions in South African society. When the Democratic Alliance said in Parliament that the DSD was “crippled by managerial dysfunction” and facing “a management crisis” (Waters, 2013) or when the Inkatha Freedom Party labeled “all SASSA offices across the country as ... breeding grounds for corruption” (Inkatha Freedom Party, 2013), their rhetoric was not particularly uncommon, nor was it merely opposition politicking. The leaders of DSD and SASSA are also quick to admit widespread fraud and corruption, with Minister Dlamini calling it “endemic” (SASSA, 2012a). Despite the difficulties of accurately assessing the amount of fraud and corruption, the ambiguity is rarely noted. It is the *perception* of crisis that is productive – based on, but not congruent, with facts. Roitman (2011; see also Roitman, 2013) has called for an understanding of “the kinds of work the term crisis is or is not doing”. In this case, at least one result is the adoption of biometric identification, conceived as a way to deliver grants impartially and uniformly, lowering costs and boosting efficiency. As a standard and objective technology, biometrics are understood as the solution to crisis.

4. South African Biometric Welfare

The technopolitics of standardization and objectivity have driven the adoption of biometrics as a way to reduce human discretion and boost bureaucratic efficiency. As Breckenridge (2005b: 281) noted, biometrics remove bureaucracy “from the world of paper-based documents and—more importantly—from the domain of human agency”. This goal continues, and in a recent outline of work for 2012-2015, SASSA emphasizes that “The automation of systems for improved service delivery is non-negotiable... The constant use of manual systems not only limits the number of applications that can be processed in a day, but also contributes significantly to fraud and corruption in the grants administration system” (SASSA, 2013a).

The 2012 contract and re-registration into a centralized biometric database is a high-water mark of the welfare administration adopting biometrics. In part, it

has been propelled by the weaknesses in national identification infrastructure. As Breckenridge (2008) documents, the Home Affairs National Identification System (HANIS) is a long-running fiasco that only began to issue identity cards in mid-2013 though it has its roots in the security concerns of the 1980s. In the 1990s, the ANC began to view this proposed biometric population registry as a key enabler of welfare expansion. The Public Service Commission (1998) recommended it, though recognized that it may not be available for some years.

During the debates around the proposed basic income grant, proponents recognized the need to build the delivery infrastructure, and imagined HANIS being a key component of that. The Taylor Committee (RSA, 2002) recommended a phased introduction of the basic income grant, emphasizing that “to avoid any duplication of payment, a reliable identification and verification system will have to be established.” In 2003, the Basic Income Grant Coalition proposed to Parliament that “This ‘smart card’ based identification system is expected to offer the most cost-effective platform for the future administration and delivery of social grants” (BIG Coalition, 2003). Yet HANIS has been repeatedly delayed and over-budget, often impeded by competing legacy systems that are not interoperable, despite considerable effort at setting standards for biometric algorithms and financial infrastructures. As one scholar of the Department of Home Affairs wrote, “HANIS has been in the Home Affairs pipeline for a number of years and seems always to be just a year or two from implementation” (Hoag, 2010).

As institutional centralization accelerated, welfare officials began to take steps to develop a uniform identification method for grant recipients. As early as 2003, a senior DSD official told Parliament that the proposed SASSA “would not have nine different contractual arrangements across all the provinces” (Jehoma, 2003b). In 2007, shortly after its formation, SASSA tried to standardize payment and identification infrastructure through a tender whose intent was “to ensure that service providers appointed in the nine provinces provided a standardized payment service in line with the norms of service delivery approved by government” (SASSA, 2007). It was ultimately (and begrudgingly) cancelled because no such regularity was deemed possible from the bids received. As the adjudication committee wrote, the bids did not offer “standardized payment services,” appropriate norms and standards of security and integrity, nor were they cost-effective (Arendse, 2008). In the interim, SASSA used the inherited provincial systems, many of which were technically incompatible and ineffective (Breckenridge, 2005b). Furthermore, for technical and contractual reasons, SASSA has not had ownership of a unified biometric database for recipients.⁵ The system that resulted from the amalgamation of

⁵ Interview with informant #2, a current government official (September 2012).

provincial databases has been routinely criticized for being out of date, filled with inaccuracies, and open to fraud (e.g., FinMark, 2012). Where fingerprint verification did occur, it was not always reliable, such as the case in 1999 when one town was found to be home to 1,650 identical fingerprints (Saloojee, 1999).

More recently, though, biometrics have been turned inward as an effort to remove the opportunity for bureaucratic misbehavior. As SASSA reported to Parliament in March 2010 when justifying their budget, “[s]taff were more strictly controlled through biometric access systems and clearer controls” that recorded employee activity to search for fraud and “ensure that these staff could not easily access sensitive programs where they could manipulate information or create “ghost beneficiaries” in the system” (Pakade, 2010). This is part of a broader effort to automate grant delivery, removing unskilled or corrupt bureaucrats. For example, the acting CEO of SASSA illustrated the biometric imaginary’s conception of objectivity in an early 2011 complaint that “The lack of automated business processes make activities extremely labour-intensive and error-prone” (Ensor, 2011). Later that year, the head of SASSA’s internal audit and fraud management unit highlighted automation as a means of overcoming “poor employee work ethic” (Sibanyoni, 2011). Moving to electronic systems also saves money, and the acting CEO of SASSA noted during a time of financial limitations that automation also helped lower personnel, their “second largest portion of the budget” (Pakade, 2010). Future plans aim to continue the automation of services and the biometric identification of bureaucrats (SASSA, 2013b: 12).

The continuing salience of these twin goals is clearly evident in the issuance of the new grant payment contract in early 2012 to Net1 CPS, a South African technology firm. The government’s request for bids from contractors called for “significantly improved services” with “sameness of Beneficiary experience.”⁶ “The minimum acceptable requirement during bulk and on-going enrolment,” they said, “is that all ten finger prints of Beneficiaries must be captured. The Biometric Data capturing during enrolment will be used for matching and authenticating during payment process.” In addition to requiring this data from grant recipients, beneficiaries – such as children – would also be incorporated. The goal, it explained, was to ensure “that a Beneficiary is not enrolled more than once” (SASSA, 2011).

The award in early 2012 of the R10 billion contract for the entire country to Net1 CPS prompted an acrimonious court challenge by a losing bidder, AllPay.⁷

⁶ All government document quotations are *sic*, including the peculiar capitalization.

⁷ Another bidder, Empilweni, also contested it, but lacked the resources to do so as meaningfully.

As a subsidiary of ABSA bank, AllPay was the incumbent payment provider in the Western Cape, Free State, Gauteng and parts of the Eastern Cape, while Net1 CPS operated in the other provinces (except Mpumalanga, where a third firm—Epilweni—was used). AllPay alleged improprieties in the tendering, including a potentially last minute change in requirements. These allegations were quickly supported by subsequent media reports that suggested the influence of bribery (e.g. McKune, 2012). These assertions led to a brief investigation in South Africa, an ongoing one in America (where Net1 is listed on the stock exchange), and a series of lawsuits that came to the fore with a November 2013 decision by the Constitutional Court which found the tender invalid due to procedural improprieties (but did not set it aside, pending another hearing in February 2014).

SASSA's court filings in response to AllPay's initial February 2012 complaint make clear the importance of standardization and biometric authentication to their new contract. Their opening filing includes an extended discussion of grant "abuse arising mainly from a lack of uniformity" and that it was "resolved that... a national approach be adopted in dealing with social grants in order to instill uniformity and standardization" (Ramokgopa, 2012: 8-9). The filing also bemoans the "fragmented payment system" inherited from the provinces, split between multiple, incompatible contractors. For example, the SASSA representative explained, "that the six different [payment] methodologies employed in the Eastern Cape Province has directly led to substantial fraud and other abuses" (Ramokgopa, 2012: 10).

In contrast to SASSA's response, AllPay's complaint depicted a different vision for the contract. "AllPay's focus," they asserted, "is to facilitate access to financial services and products to beneficiaries of social grants, with particular focus on the rural and semi-urban communities" (Webb, 2012: 22). Given the extensive network of ABSA bank branches and ATMs, AllPay maintained that they could provide formal financial services where Net1 could not (as a non-bank). An insistence on biometric identification for each payment (instead of just registration) would render ATMs useless because they do not have fingerprint scanners. SASSA, however, rejected the preeminence of 'banking the unbanked,' contending that AllPay "did not make provision for adequate biometric verification and standardization of services" and thus "fell short of requirements imposed by SASSA" (Ramokgopa, 2012: 11).

Net1 CPS, in contrast, put biometric identification at the core of its offerings, and, as they gleefully revealed in their submissions to the court, their new offering has been able to combine their proprietary biometric payment technology with the standard national payment system (such as that used by bank cards and ATMs). Because the standard system would still not allow

fingerprint verification, Net1 CPS would “conduct proof of life verification telephonically, as an alternative to fingerprint technology” (Belamant, 2012: 14). This new form of voice biometric verification would be used in cases where recipients were receiving their grants into a bank account, requiring a brief monthly call to certify they had not deceased.⁸

This seems to have caught AllPay by surprise. Not completely without merit, they had believed that fingerprinting was the biometric method *de rigueur*. Indeed, in declaring the contract invalid in late 2013, the Constitutional Court affirmed that a last-minute shift to requiring monthly biometric verification (rather than only at registration) rendered “the process entirely uncompetitive” (Froneman, 2013: 49). It was not the case that AllPay was opposed to biometric identification – indeed, they spent considerable time detailing their technical acumen – but only after seeing their opening salvo in favor of “banking the unbanked” stall. It was a difference in emphases arising from technical and institutional legacies; while both would conduct fingerprint enrolment to remove duplicate entries, Net1 stressed a supposedly objective and standardized way to identify and pay recipients each month. Net1 CPS stakes its work on universal biometrics; for AllPay, it has been secondary to—even sometimes at odds with—its banking and ATM system.

Beyond the court filings, SASSA officials have validated the new system to the public. In response to an inquiry about grant fraud from Parliament, the CEO of SASSA called the new biometric scheme “the greatest risk reduction tool that SASSA had engaged in its history” (Peterson, 2012a). Emphasizing the appeal of removing bureaucratic weakness, she has specifically highlighted “automation of business processes” (Peterson, 2012a). The Social Development Minister Dlamini (2013) also emphasized that interoperability with other government databases (including Home Affairs’ population registry) was enhanced. Speaking in March 2013, as the re-registration process was finishing, she reported that nearly 19 million recipients had been registered into the new system and that she was “pleased to report that 44 thousand social grants were manually lapsed at the request of the beneficiaries. A further 66 thousand grants lapsed due to non-collection. We shall continue to root out fraud and corruption whenever and wherever it appears to ensure that social grants only go to eligible beneficiaries.” She noted a further benefit was the ability to detect nearly 400 beneficiaries who were receiving their grants outside of South Africa (a revelation at least one Member of Parliament deemed “shocking”). A few months later, as the registration drive ended, SASSA reported over 150,000

⁸ This is particularly relevant given a partnership with Grindrod Bank to provide bank accounts to grant recipients. For a discussion of the resulting controversy, see Donovan (forthcoming).

grants were voluntarily canceled, leading to a claimed saving of R150 million per annum (SASSA, 2013b).

Where this proclaimed success stands, however, is less clear following the Constitutional Court's unanimous declaration that the contract between SASSA and Net1 CPS was "constitutionally invalid" (Froneman, 2013: 53). The Court found that SASSA had contravened its constitutional duties in two ways during the tender process. First, the last-minute shift to seemingly requiring biometric verification at each payment created vagueness and uncertainty that undermined procedural fairness. Secondly, SASSA did not ensure that Net1 CPS was, as constitutionally required, empowering previously disadvantaged people. And while it thus found the contract "fatally defective" (Froneman, 2013: 41), it recognized the importance of continued grant delivery; therefore, it postponed a remedy until further information was gathered for a hearing in February 2014.

For SASSA, the task of distributing millions of rand per month has required a sociotechnical network that minimizes the capacity for intermediaries to serve as anything but passive infrastructures. In the words of the PSC (1998), the goal is that "policy and execution are not divorced." In the language of actor-network theory, the goal is to minimize the "translation" (Callon, 1986) that occurs during "action at a distance" (Law, 1986). Biometric identification has been a crucial means of doing so, serving as what Rose (1999: 155) calls a "key fidelity technique." In many ways, the new grant payment and identification infrastructure instituted in 2012 is the result of nearly two decades of reform efforts. The Chikane Committee's call for biometrics to be addressed in a unified, national manner has been accomplished. In Minister Dlamini's (2012) words, "The improved biometric-based payment solution was long overdue and will go a long way towards minimising fraud and corruption so prevalent in the previous systems." But if the literature on audit (e.g. Power, 1997) is an indicator, there will need to be a social solution to the lack of trust, for ones based on technique alone "fail to immunize the assemblages they govern from doubt" (Rose, 1999: 155). Indeed, already the biometric technology has been questioned and subject to fraud, such as a case where fraudsters were found to be in possession of three biometric registration machines (Jacobs, 2013). The rest of this paper considers these shortcomings more directly.

5. The Myth of Perfection

The bureaucratic elite and their peers in civil society, the news media, and elsewhere have presented biometrics as a material means of improving service delivery, uniformly identifying recipients, and removing undesirable activity.

Speaking of the new biometric grants program, Social Development Minister Dlamini (2012) unequivocally stated that it “will eliminate incidents of fraud and corruption in the social grants system” which she said resulted from the “manual system that SASSA has been using.” SASSA’s chief, Virginia Peterson (2012b), claimed “the new SASSA card... will make it virtually impossible for fraudsters to defraud the Agency.” This appeal of biometric identification rests on its presumed uniqueness, universality and its ability to labor reliably free of error.⁹

This faith in biometrics builds on the presumption of universality – *everyone has fingers* – and algorithmic objectivity. This is considered especially so when compared to alternative means of authentication, such as PINs which are considered vulnerable to fraud because the number can be shared. In contrast to this view of imperviousness, Magnet (2011) argues that biometric technology is prone to failure, not as an aberration or exception, but rather that “biometric errors are endemic.” The experience in South Africa adds to this thesis, suggesting the faith in biometrics is at least partly mistaken, that they are unable to remove the unevenness for which they are adopted. The confusion arises from a simplistic, overly technocratic understanding of the real-world implementation. Focusing too closely on the technical means through which individuals are identified by the state, rather than understanding the larger complexities of such an unwieldy task, often misleads the biometric imaginary. In J.D. Peters (2001: 9) words, the “mistake [is] to think that ... better wiring will eliminate the ghosts” in the machine. Even the otherwise thoughtful Chikane Committee fell prey to defining problems and solutions in terms of technological systems, arguing that the “principle cause ... [of] serious and widespread” fraud and corruption was “the lack of proper systems of internal control” (CRSS, 1996). Such a view ignores the role that poverty, inequality, and limited opportunity have in generating fraud.¹⁰ Instead, it focuses particularly on reforming systems of surveillance and audit. Biometrics, here, become another technical solution to social problems (cf. Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004; Morozov, 2013).

As Breckenridge (2005a; 2005b) relates, this dynamic has a lengthy pedigree in South Africa. It has continued today, even as problems emerged in the 2012-2013 registration initiative. For example, the children who were required to be enrolled were often fearful of the red light emitting from the fingerprint scanner,

⁹ Influential supporters of biometric identification reflect similar sentiments, including The World Bank (Garcia and Moore, 2012: 7) and the Center for Global Development (Gelb and Clark, 2011; 2013).

¹⁰ Von Schnitzler (2013) makes a similar point with regard to behavioral change and prepaid metering in Britain and South Africa.

protesting and crying as they mistakenly thought they would be burned.¹¹ Early results from the use of the voice recognition system, too, suggest technical difficulties, including poor recording environments during re-registration (Kweyama, 2013). This is a sort of “data friction” that, as Edwards (2010: 97) notes, “generates errors and noise.” It is also indicative of Burrell’s (2012) assessment that many digital technologies now proliferating in sub-Saharan Africa are poorly designed for the “invisible users” who are not considered in the process of invention.

A more significant failure of the biometric technology is the portion of the population that has been unable to enroll. In September 2013, thousands of elderly and ill pensioners did not receive their grant because they had been unable to re-register and promised home visits by SASSA had not occurred (Black Sash, 2013). Biometrics have proven especially problematic for domestic laborers whose fingerprints are eroded from years of washing dishes. Additional worries exist for farm and mine laborers, many of whom have lost fingerprints or even whole fingers and hands. Because biometric identification is compulsory in the new system, these populations will require a procurator, an individual who will enroll and withdraw money on their behalf.¹² Of the figures available, in October 2012, with only 15 percent of the recipients re-registered, 13,000 procurators had been required (SASSA, 2012b). This creates a form of dependency that, at the very least, will introduce complicated negotiations and conflicts for the individuals. More fundamentally, it unsettles the stated goal of “sameness of Beneficiary experience” (SASSA, 2011). Importantly, this disjuncture between presumed (and marketed) universality and the diverse reality of bodily features occurs along class, age, and gender lines: while fingers typical of white collar labor are rarely problematic, for low-income populations doing manual labor, this is not the case (Magnet, 2011).

For all their mimetic aspirations, neither biometric technologies nor the dominant ways in which they are conceived accurately reflect reality. This is what makes the case of the biometric imaginary particularly apt: an imaginary is not a fantasy—it is grounded in reality and is actually productive—but it may be decoupled from certain on-the-ground realities. Put otherwise, despite biometric universality and objectivity being mythical, the biometric imaginary is productive. The technology does, viewed *en masse*, by and large enable an enormous and impressive welfare program. But like other technopolitical efforts, biometric identification can also be a productive failure (Edwards and Hecht, 2010; Edwards, 1996: 75-112). The promises embedded in the technology – such as ending corruption – need not be fully realized in order to

¹¹ Interview with informant #6, a current member of government (November 2012).

¹² Interview with informant #2, a current member of government (September 2012).

justify the expense and effort of biometrics. This interpretive flexibility enables a wider range of support for biometric identification, fueling the biometric imaginary. Because biometric technology is *presumed* to be effective it can serve certain needs.

This was clear when Minister Dlamini (2013) was “pleased to report” in March 2013 that the biometric re-registration process had resulted in 44 thousand grants being cancelled and 66 thousand lapsing due to non-collection. This was represented – both in her speech and the subsequent media reports – as a successful example of using biometric identification to, as she put it, “root out fraud and corruption whenever and wherever it appears to ensure that social grants only go to eligible beneficiaries.” As a portion of beneficiaries (less than half a percent) this is quite small, but that does not seem to register, and the same dynamic occurred months later when the final number of voluntary cancelations was increased to more than 150,000.

An important fact is that welfare surveillance and auditing in the form of biometric identification did not need to prove *technically* efficacious in order to produce its effects here. These individuals were not caught, but rather preemptively canceled or let lapse their grants. Even if all the lapsed grants were fraudulent (an heroic assumption given widespread beneficiary confusion and frequent normal turnover), it was not the promised de-duplication or identity verification that was responsible. It was the *perception* that the technology functions which produced its result. The authoritative presentation of biometric technology as effective is performative (cf. Austin, 1975); rupture-talk helps to create the desired disjuncture (Hecht, 2002).¹³ A bit more speculatively, one can imagine that the presentation of such anti-corruption efforts – especially ones utilizing innovative and not particularly well-understood technology – performs a different reality to another audience: it demonstrates a particular seriousness about the ‘crisis’ in grant fraud and corruption on the part of DSD and SASSA to a population and political elite deeply concerned with cost overruns and illicit grant access.

Finally, it is important to note another way in which biometrics ‘work’ even if they do not meet their promise of ending fraudulent access. In receiving the SASSA contract, Net1 CPS secured a large and lucrative market of around R2bn annually. Had they lost the contract, 50 percent of their business would have reportedly followed (Speckman, 2012). Instead, they have revealed that they are currently in talks with 11 other countries, no doubt benefiting from the prestige

¹³ On this phenomenon in surveillance see Bogard (1996) and Gates (2011). Joseph Masco (2002: 460) has noted a similar result in his ethnography of nuclear scientists operating in a context of “hypersecurity” – as with the nuclear bomb, technologies like lie detectors work because they are perceived to work.

and experience of this contract. Serving as payment provider for so many has also opened up ancillary markets, such as (controversially) offering financial services (McKune, 2012). For those who place credence in the corruption allegations (which they deny), the importance of this contract to the firm is taken as motive, but a more general point is also true: the fervent commitment to combating the ‘crisis’ with biometric identification – and not, say, identity documents – has boosted a nascent technology without many other markets.

6. The Political Ambiguities of Delegation

In addition to its means, the end results of this process are also worthy of questioning. The effort to end improper discretion and uneven service delivery has resulted in a situation where responsibility has increasingly been delegated away from humans and toward machines.¹⁴ This has primarily been twofold: (a) away from little scrutinized and poorly verified grant applications and toward interoperable databases in order to remove those deemed undeserving and (b) away from street-level bureaucrats and toward biometric cash dispensers. This transformation is widely considered legitimate, but in neither case is it an unalloyed good. Instead, as von Schnitzler (2013) has discussed with regard to prepaid metering in South Africa, these infrastructures implement particular ethical and political regimes.

The emphasis on technologies of surveillance and audit serves to constrict what Scott (1992) calls “infrapolitics,” the everyday weapons of the weak.¹⁵ Many poor South Africans share details on how to pass the means test and qualify for a grant (Plageron *et al.*, 2012; Versfeld, 2012). According to the Special Investigation Unit, one of the primary forms of grant “fraud” is “individuals who initially qualified to receive a grant but then saw an improvement in their financial status which generally disqualifies them from receiving grants” (Timm, 2012). Yet, the simplistic, binary means test does not accord with the fluid, fluctuating incomes of the poor (Collins *et al.*, 2010). In a situation of rampant and durable unemployment, much of it caused by racial authoritarianism, there is a case to be made that numerous practices deemed ‘grant fraud’ are actually infrapolitical tactics and necessary livelihood strategies.¹⁶ Instead of recognizing this, there are emerging suggestions of increasing the surveillance of grant

¹⁴ On delegation, see Ribes *et al.* (2013); Akrich and Latour (1992).

¹⁵ See also Chatterjee (2004) on the (anti-)politics of administration.

¹⁶ Moreover, it seems odd that fraud and corruption should be so closely linked when, in reality, they are different activities, often operating in different moral registers: a poor individual acting even poorer to get some assistance does not seem the same as a salaried government employee falsifying invoices, yet ‘fraud and corruption’ are so tightly linked discursively that the distinction is rarely made.

usage, perhaps through digital transaction monitoring or payment systems that block certain purchases such as alcohol (Monama, 2013).

As detailed above, the new grant system has sought to replace street-level bureaucrats with machines, as well as to increase recipient convenience by allowing payments at ATMs and third-party merchants (equipped with biometric readers). While 60 percent of beneficiaries used to receive their grant at SASSA pay points, as of April 2013, it had decreased to 22 percent, with a significant shift toward ATMs and retailers (Dunkerley, 2013). Subsequently, ATM providers have reported “a huge injection” of new users in the form of SASSA beneficiaries (Moyo, 2013). In contrast to the traditional SASSA pay points, where a government employee was present, in the new system, beneficiaries now interact with a third-party merchant or faceless machine.

The irony is that the distance between citizen and state has been extended in an effort to remove discretionary middle-men between the fiscus and the pockets of the poor. In Ferguson’s (2013: 236) felicitous phrase, the result is perhaps “asocial assistance” rather than “socially ‘thick’ recognition...between state and citizen.” In these ways, biometric welfare resembles what Callon *et al.* (2009) call ‘delegative democracy’, the assignment of technopolitics to specialists, not the broader public. When something fails – as it did during a technical error in January 2013 where many pensioners in the Western Cape did not receive their full grant – the delegation means those on the ground are unable to address the errors (Matlata, 2013).¹⁷ The shift to objective technology is not neutral and the removal of subjective discretion is biased toward those who control the technology.

These delegations and redistributions of power, in turn, raise the stakes elsewhere. The countless street-level negotiations, maneuvers, and deceptions that the biometric imaginary condemns as illicit fraud (rather than ambiguous infrapolitics) are minimized while the influence of the central policy and standards are enhanced.¹⁸ When the rise of biometric welfare administration is viewed as *redistribution* of subjectivity – rather than (as the biometric imaginary has it) an absolute reduction – then it is less surprising why the current biometric contract between SASSA and Net1 CPS has been the subject of intense legal dispute and allegations of corruption. If true, it suggests that the effect of the

¹⁷ Interview with informant #4, a member of civil society focused on human rights (March 2013).

¹⁸ This can be compared to other social sectors, such as healthcare. Vale (2012a; 2012b) has documented the improvisations necessary for community health workers to fulfill their duties, a street-level informality that is in conflict with official rules. A similar conflict is currently occurring with the qualifications for the disability grants, as more stringent rules exclude the needy.

biometric system has been to reduce petty corruption but increase grand corruption. Although SASSA and Net1 strenuously deny the allegations (and have gone forward with the contract) the episode is an illuminating suggestion that the reduction of subjectivity at the street-level increases the subjectivity at the center. The centralization also created a certain fragility, illustrated during the court battles when two courts found the contract invalid but (as of December 2013) refused to set it aside due to the disruption it would cause to the millions of grant beneficiaries.

Indeed, the centralization of welfare decision-making in post-apartheid South Africa has created a situation of concentrated judgment about who qualifies for grants and who does not, both in policy and technical enactment. The opposition to street-level subjectivity magnifies the influence of decisions made by SASSA. Given the pathetic state of social assistance delivery at the end of apartheid, it seems clear that some centralized uniformity was necessary (Geviser, 2007: 716) but numerous observers have argued that the South African state is too centralized and technocratic (see Marais, 2003; Hemson and O'Donovan, 2006; Terreblanche, 2008; Friedman, 2009; Barchiesi, 2011; Marais, 2011).

The biometric imaginary may be understood similarly, but as I have argued, it is also the result of political liberalization, an opening up that means no longer is poor administrative capacity free from the agitations and demands of the public. The technopolitical regime that reached its height with SASSA's 2012 biometric payment contract is closely tied to the founding principles upon which most agree: post-apartheid social policy should be equitably and competently administered, in a manner that is impersonal and objective, free from the informal and formal discriminations of the previous era.

7. Conclusion

"...standards are a means by which we construct objective reality..."
— Busch (2011: 68)

The social grants are one of the flagship interventions of the new South Africa. At around 3.5 percent of GDP and benefiting around 40 percent of the population, they are intimately involved in the formation of South Africa's democratic identity, even if, in many ways, they are the product of the old South Africa. This importance and their scale make the social grants the subject of politically divisive debates, ranging from their affordability to their impact. Throughout these contests, though, runs a firm commitment to delivering grants reliably and equitably. The quality of implementation, therefore, is central to the broader politics of grants. This realm of implementation is one of civil servants

and paperwork, fingerprint ridges and accounting techniques. It is a complex interchange between the state and citizen that occurs millions of times each month. And it is a relationship to which biometric identification technology is pivotal.

On one level, this paper has been an exploration of the salience of biometric technology within the social grants program. What explains the investment in identification infrastructure by the welfare bureaucracies? Why this method and not others? A colloquial answer would point to fraud and corruption, and while the widespread belief that the grants are the subject of exploitation and administrative incompetence has been a key motivating factor, this does not exhaust the particular reasons and manners through which it has unfolded. Instead, my argument traces a shared commitment – the biometric imaginary – that has grown during nearly twenty years of welfare implementation. The biometric imaginary positions biometric technology as a necessary, suitable, and effective means of achieving standardized and objective welfare administration. It is broader than just the purchase and use of fingerprint scanners; it builds upon programs of institutional reform, policymaking debates, and infrastructural development, but the implementation of a nationally centralized biometric identification scheme is perhaps its apogee, a technopolitical goal that has come together during the post-apartheid era as various forms of delivery weakness and fraud have bedeviled the initiative.

As I have traced, the institution of a national biometric grant identification scheme in 2012 has a long lineage. Most directly it is the result of SASSA's failed 2007 tender that was cancelled when no standardized option was deemed feasible. But the goal of a standardized and objective delivery mechanism is the result of a longer history, extending to at least the democratic transition where the inheritance of a fragmented bureaucracy curtailed the ability of the state to use its redistributive function to alleviate poverty. Since the mid-1990s, this fragmentation has been blamed for weak service delivery and widespread fraud and corruption. Unification through a process of centralized standards setting has been the order of the day, necessitating institutional reorganization, regulatory alignment, and infrastructural interoperability. That the biometric database has been explicitly designed as a nationally centralized system is not an accident, but rather the result of nearly two decades of broader reform and commitment. One could readily imagine alternative models – such as the provincial biometric schemes adopted during the 1990s – but the lack of interoperability with other provinces and the attendant sub-national differences in service delivery have proven to be at odds with the egalitarian ethos of the era.

One could also imagine alternative methods of identification, such as the paper identity books or PIN-based authentication. And at various times, these and other alternatives have been proposed – after all, imaginaries are neither totalizing nor uniformly applicable – but the promise of a unique and universally valid identifier that would operate free from human temptation has attracted the bureaucratic and policy elite. For the government, biometric identification represents an automated – and thus impersonal – means of identification, a way to end illicit behavior while paying grants uniformly. As Daston and Galison (1992) note, “Instead of freedom of will, machines offer... freedom from will.”

As I have argued, these commitments to standardization and objectivity are deeply held, influencing welfare policy and practice beyond just biometric identification. As the new biometric grant system unfolds, they will undoubtedly continue to influence its trajectory, though unlikely in uniformly effective or positive manners.

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