

## Fingerprint

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In the late 1990s, a revolution began in the field of biometrics which led to a new primary means of security access and, in some cases, as a replacement for older identification technologies (Maguire 2009: 9). Biometrics refers to the technology of measuring, analyzing, and processing unique biological and behavioral characteristics, such as fingerprints, retinal and iris scans, facial patterns, hand geometry, and body odor. It can be used for identifying or recognizing individuals, as well as for self-identification or verifying whether a person is who they claim to be (Btihaj 2013: 11).

People holding passports from European Union countries encounter this technology daily, although we usually pay little attention to it. For people coming from the Global South, however, it carries much greater significance. Something as seemingly ordinary as a fingerprint often becomes the key that determines whether they will be allowed entry into a particular country—and thus the possibility to apply for international protection—or whether they will be detained in a transit center, with many forcibly returned (see: **detention** and **pushbacks**).

Since the 1990s, the European Union has sought to establish a unified system for international protection among its Member States, leading to the development of the Common European Asylum System. This system includes a supranational mechanism for determining which country is responsible for processing an asylum application (Hubman 2017: 6). The cornerstone of this mechanism is the **Dublin Regulation**, which stipulates that only one Member State can be fully responsible for each asylum claim—typically, the first EU country a person enters and applies for asylum in. One of the first steps following an asylum application is the collection of the applicant's fingerprints. These fingerprints are then checked against several databases, most importantly Eurodac, a system that stores the digital fingerprints of all individuals over the age of 14 who apply for asylum in any EU country. The fingerprints are compared with existing entries in the central database, which is responsible for storing and matching new fingerprints against those previously collected (Btihaj 2013: 14). The aim of this procedure is to determine whether the person has already attempted to claim asylum elsewhere. If their fingerprints match an existing record, they may be deported to the country where they first applied.

During fieldwork carried out as part of a course on the anthropology of migration in Trieste and its surroundings in late March 2023, fingerprints were a recurring topic of discussion. In interviews with asylum seekers at the refugee reception center in Prosek (Italian: Prosecco), every single respondent at some point described their experience of fingerprinting. In each story, experiences of violence at borders—at the hands of police or other state authorities—were mentioned, as well as feelings of fear and anxiety. It was clear that fingerprinting was a deeply negative experience, for some perhaps even traumatic. This became particularly evident when I paid closer attention to the words people used: rather than saying, “They took my fingerprints,” every respondent, without exception, said, “They took my fingers” or “They have my fingers.” While this phrasing might be attributed to their limited proficiency in English, I believe there is more to it. Listening to their accounts, it seemed to me that—consciously or unconsciously—they were expressing that a part of their body, a part of themselves, had been taken by the police and was still held by them. I began to reflect on what the act of fingerprinting truly means for their sense of identity and self.

When considering the use of biometric data for migration management and control, it is essential to account for how people themselves interpret and make sense of these practices. Among the authorities that use this technology, there is a strong belief that biometric data can provide indisputable proof of a person's identity and, by extension, be used to accuse or convict individuals who contradict their biometric records. Through checking whether someone's fingerprints have multiple “hits,” Eurodac can reconstruct the trajectory of a person's movement across EU Member States, and this information can be used to verify the credibility of their account during a substantive interview which is a part of the asylum application process. The legal weight of biometric data as evidence lies in its perceived objectivity: fingerprint matches are not only used to identify someone but to confirm their very sameness (Metcalf 2022: 54). However, a fingerprint can be seen as a one-dimensional representation of a person—based solely on biometric data—excluding the individual's full complexity: their story, their experiences, their history. As Philippa Metcalf argues, there is a fundamental gap between a fingerprint and the richness of a person's self-concept (2022: 55).

At this point, it is worth noting that fingerprinting citizens is only permitted under specific circumstances: when

issuing biometric IDs or passports, during border crossings, or in the case of serious criminal offenses that warrant detention. In the context of the European migration regime, however, fingerprinting has become normalized and routinized across most EU countries. This form of biometric control plays a key role in the criminalization of people on the move, framing them as inherently suspicious or associated with illegality. It reinforces a broader discourse of **securitization** rooted in fear, distrust, and suspicion (Btihaj 2013: 16). Migration is often framed as a security threat, prompting responses based on control and punishment—deterrence, prevention, detention, and deportation have become the dominant political responses. These practices, alongside the merging of criminal and administrative law, contribute to what is known as **crimmigration** (Kogovšek Šalomon 2017).

However, fingerprinting should also be examined from the perspective of **autonomy of migration**. The fact remains: people continue to move regardless of the controls imposed upon them. These controls are, on one hand, tools of surveillance, and on the other, prompts for evasion. One strategy used by people on the move relates directly to fingerprinting. During fieldwork, I heard accounts from interviewees describing how some individuals—fearful of being deported—burned, stitched, or even poured acid on their fingertips after being fingerprinted. Similar cases are reported by other researchers. For example, Jonathan P. Aus (2006) describes asylum seekers in Sweden who resorted to such practices as early as Eurodac's first year of operation. Aus cites a member of the Swedish Migration Board who reported "scars from knives and razors, or entire [fingerprint] patterns that are entirely destroyed because they've used acid or some other kind of product to destroy their hands" (2006: 13).

It is clear that the destruction of fingerprints in response to the Eurodac system has been happening since its inception. These actions should not be dismissed as mere self-injury; rather, they represent acts of bodily resistance—self-harm as a survival strategy. And how do law enforcement agencies respond? In Norway, for example, authorities attempted to address the issue through deterrence measures, including direct detention (Aus 2006: 13). As with many European policy practices, we see that actions unrelated to migration are not criminalized, while the same acts—when carried out by people on the move—are treated as criminal offenses, often leading to deprivation of liberty.

Although fingerprints are something all human beings share, within migration policies and practices they are used to monitor, classify, and criminalize people on the move. Instead of listening to a person's story, struggles, and experiences, a single square centimeter of skin becomes the deciding factor in determining their fate.

## Literature

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