

CfP: Workshop, 11.2.-12.2.2027, University of Vienna

‘Halt! Who goes there?’ Registration of residents, travellers and migrants in historical perspectives

Monitoring mobility and keeping records of the population and/or individuals present in a state’s territory seems an indispensable element of modern statehood and knowledge-based governance. However, different countries used different criteria, set different priorities, and employed different methods and tools to register and locate people. Even today, there is no universal understanding of population registration.

This workshop aims to discuss the history of population registration from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, focussing on Europe from the late 18th to the 20th century. We are particularly interested in the (continuous) monitoring and documentation of the abode or stay of (permanent or temporary) residents as well as travellers or migrants. Our focus is on the practices and uses of registration, as well as on the interactions between those involved in such procedures.

We would like to address the following aspects:

The developments of categories and the making of differences: Registration practices contributed to producing social facts such as “population”, “residents”, or “mobility”. At the same time, registration could be patchy and selective; it differentiated and distinguished between various sections of the mobile and/or sedentary population which, in the eyes of the authorities, required various levels of vigilance. Those authorities openly or secretly classified not only various kinds of strangers, foreigners and types of presence. Citizens too could be subject to different forms of monitoring and documentation, e.g. military conscripts, workers and servants, suspects or criminals, and religious, political, national or ethnic minorities. Registration and monitoring of the population could go beyond a state’s territory and become a matter of international affairs in various respects, e.g. through exchange of information, comparison and adaptation of policies.

Methods and involved parties: Registers constituted a fundamental administrative infrastructure of municipalities and states. The bureaucratic practices of cities and smaller

municipalities, of industrial or rural regions, and of areas with intense mobility or tourism followed different agendas and faced different challenges. At the same time, registration was often relied on the reporting practices and cooperation of those who provided lodging or shelter, such as hosts, landlords, innkeepers, hoteliers, employers, wardens, etc. They could be compelled to keep records on guests or employees, deliver information, assess individuals and report suspects. Performing such tasks could conflict or align with their own agendas, administrative needs, and business strategies.

Uses, consequences and ambivalences: Registration is most commonly associated with surveillance and police work as well as the control of mobility. It is considered a feature of a disciplinary state, and – given the potential for persecution or abuse of power – seems almost intrinsically repressive. However, as Breckenridge and Szreter¹ have most prominently highlighted, registration can also signify recognition and acknowledgement of belonging; it may be the prerequisite for claiming entitlements such as voting rights, citizenship, welfare benefits, etc. Consequently, problems could be created by a lack (or denial) of registration, bureaucratic negligence, ambiguities, or errors. What was required or used to identify or verify data?

Perception, experiences and symbolic aspects: Registration could be regarded as an imposition, a nuisance, a threat or a humiliation. However, it could also come to be seen as a mundane formality. Moreover, various forms of voluntary and desired registration exist (i.e. of guests and tourists). Registration documented and reconfirmed status; it made individuals visible and tangible (e.g. in guest lists and address books). The experiences and perceptions of registration as benign or desirable can illustrate the power to normalise bureaucratic routines and encounters as well as official criteria and terms which, as Bourdieu has highlighted, may in the end might appear neutral or even “natural”.

In brief: this workshop aims to explore the interplay of practices and to discuss collective and individual struggles over the terms, conditions and consequences of registration. This includes attempts to enforce or avoid registration, to manipulate or protect data, or to access information on a national or international level.

¹ Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, ‘Introduction’, in: idem (eds), *Registration and recognition. Documenting the person in world history* (Oxford 2012)

The two-day workshop will be held at the University of Vienna on the 11th and 12th of February 2027. It is organised by the FWF-funded research project “Categorizing, Registering and Reporting of Mobility and Stay” (10.55776/PAT9328724); principal investigator: PD Dr. Sigrid Wadauer.

Submission guidelines:

- Please submit an abstract of 300-500 words together with a short biographical note of around 150 words to sigrid.wadauer@univie.ac.at
- Deadline for submissions: 31.07.2026
- Notifications of acceptance will be sent by mid-August 2026.

Limited funding for travel and accommodation will be available.

We aim to publish a selection of papers presented at the workshop in an edited volume or a special issue.

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