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EARLY COLONIAL INDIA BEYOND EMPIRE*

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ABSTRACT. *Since 1947, the relationship between Indian society and the British empire has provided the most important frame of reference for scholars writing about the history of modern India. India is often treated merely as an exemplar of the colonial condition. As a result, scholars have failed properly to examine modern India's participation in global processes of historical change, and been reluctant adequately to 'provincialize' Europe. This review argues that historians need to move beyond this imperial frame of reference if they are to explain the transition to, or characteristics of, British rule in the subcontinent. Placing modern India in a broader comparative context allows one to see how the colonial subcontinent participated in an uneven but broadly comparative set of processes which occurred across Asia as well as Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are, for example, important parallels between the process of active state-, economy-, and culture-formation occurring in France, Germany, and India in the nineteenth century, for example. This comparative approach would not denigrate the importance of 'colonialism' as an analytical category. It might, though, allow historians to produce a more satisfying interpretation of the difference between colonial and non-colonial states and societies.*

Since the emergence of Indian history as an academic discipline in the early twentieth century, debate about the role of British colonialism in the subcontinent has dominated the history of modern South Asia. Historians have examined the impact of British rule in economic, political, cultural, and intellectual terms, discussing the extent and character of empire's effects on India's subject population and, more recently, on British colonizers themselves. Whether nationalist, imperial, liberal, Marxist, or post-colonial in inclination, the relationship between Indian society and the British empire has provided the most important frame of reference for scholars writing about the history of India since the late eighteenth century.

For those outside the field, the centrality of empire to Indian history has only increased over the last years. Within what some have called 'the new imperial history', the subcontinent has become the paradigmatic case study of imperialism as a process of cultural transformation and domination. Although post-colonialism might have had its origins in Algeria and the Caribbean, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* was concerned with the Arab world, South Asia has dominated the post-colonial problematic in history as well as literary

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criticism since the mid-1980s.[1] India has become the field on which arguments about the connection between empire and liberalism, about new forms of global cosmopolitanism, or the relationship between empire, science, rationality, religion, and that nebulous thing called 'modernity' have been played out. The subcontinent has also provided a central focus for historians developing new interests in the relationship between imperialism and British culture back 'home'. Nowadays, no one seems capable of writing the history of nineteenth-century British liberalism, domesticity, monarchy, law, or religion without thinking about the British empire in India.[2]

This review argues that this emphasis on empire has had a limiting effect both on the historiography of South Asia and on the way that that historiography has been received outside the field. At its worse, interest in the British empire allows the history of colonialism in India to be treated simply as a parable that can tell us moral lessons about American imperialism and the war in Iraq.[3] Leaving the banalities of such an approach aside, those works on India that have been read most widely by other historians tend simply to treat India as a case study of the relationship between a colonized society, empire, and modernity.[4] Modern South Asian history is often seen merely as an exemplar of the ambivalence of the 'colonial' impact and the complexity of the 'indigenous' response, rather than somewhere worthy of study on its own terms. India is seen as a place that has things done to it and reacts accordingly, but which is only relevant in so far as it is the object of colonial knowledge and power and the subject of anti-colonial resistance. Any sense that colonial India productively participated in global historical dynamics, in an uneven but broadly comparative set of processes that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across Asia as well as Europe is lost. What is more, arguments about the 'impact' of empire rely on a reductive and stereotyped account of the concepts and practices that the British introduced or imposed on the subcontinent. Perceiving India as merely a field for British action overseas produces an over-simplistic account both of Britain and British imperialism.

Recent work on the period from 1750 to 1900 offers the possibility of incorporating India into a different kind of history, what in *The birth of the modern world* C. A. Bayly calls

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY, 1979). For the emergence of the 'post-colonial' paradigm, see Robert J. C. Young's *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction* (Oxford, 2001), and Robert J. C. Young, *White mythologies: writing history and the West* (London, 1990).

[2] Persuasive examples are Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British political thought* (Chicago, IL, 1999); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire families: Britons and late imperial India* (Oxford, 2004); Miles Taylor, 'Queen Victoria and India, 1837–1861', *Victorian Studies*, 47 (2004), pp. 264–74; Margot Finn, 'Colonial gifts: family politics and exchange of goods in British India, c. 1780–1820', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40 (2006), pp. 203–32, and Margot Finn, 'Law's empire: English legal cultures at home and abroad', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 295–303. India and the East India Company figure prominently even in a volume on a period associated usually with Britain's Atlantic empire, Kathleen Wilson, *A new imperial history: culture, identity and modernity in Britain and the empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004). For one of the few non Indo-centric instances of the new imperial history see Sarah Stockwell, ed., *The Blackwell companion to the history of the British empire* (Oxford, 2007), and for a critique of the dominance of India in post-colonial writing see Balachandra Rajan, 'Excess of India', *Modern Philology*, 95 (1998), pp. 490–500.

[3] Nicholas B. Dirks, *The scandal of empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

[4] In particular Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). Note how both books are exclusively concerned with India, yet neither refers to the subcontinent in its titles.

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a 'connected and comparative' history of the world.[5] Drawing on Bayly's approach, this review suggests that recent scholarship allows historians of South Asia to contribute to a set of narratives about the way states, polities, and empires changed during the extraordinary period of political, economic, and cultural transformation which occurred across the globe at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. In the process it suggests that the constraints of the 'imperial paradigm' need to be loosened a little. But this review also suggests that moving beyond an approach focused on the clash between the British empire and Indian society does not require the categories of either 'empire' or 'colonialism' to be jettisoned. Instead, it enables the historian to think in a more rigorous fashion about what the characteristics of 'colonialism' were, and about how colonial politics and societies differed from those in modern, non-colonial Europe and America.

To begin with, a broader comparative perspective forces historians to ask an ontological question about the type of 'thing' colonialism actually was. Colonialism and in particular the colonial state have usually been perceived as morally culpable historical actors, as agents that act upon something or someone else in a transformative fashion, and can be held as responsible for their actions.[6] From this perspective, historians debate the relative amount of 'power' or 'agency' which colonialism possessed. Some suggest that the British were able unilaterally to transform Indian society; others note that the East India Company was a victim of Indian social forces, subject to the powerful effects of South Asian 'agency' instead.[7]

This review suggests that colonialism should not be studied as a causal agent in this way, but instead be regarded as a form of practice or style of interaction between people. Rather than asking how much power 'British imperialism' or 'the colonial state' had, such an approach allows one to consider instead what was peculiar about the practices, institutions, discourses, and subjectivities that emerged from the encounter between Europeans and Asians in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India. One answer to that question will be given in the conclusion to this review: colonialism was a form of interaction in which Europeans attempted to define South Asians (and to some extent the other way around) in different, abstract, general, and unfamiliar terms. This colonial style of practical engagement allowed miscommunication and mistrust to ferment, and enabled characteristically colonial stereotypes about 'Indian society' to emerge. As we will argue, nineteenth-century India witnessed a pattern of social and political change similar to developments occurring in much of continental Europe. It saw the *ancien régime*'s hierarchical yet participatory polities being replaced by a much sharper sense of the distinction between 'state' and 'society' as well the emergence of 'national' forms of social, religious, cultural, and racial identity, the peasantization and consolidation of rural hierarchies alongside a much starker separation between town and country, and the codification of law. Few of these changes

[5] C. A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914: global connections and comparisons* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 1–3.

[6] For an important critique of this approach, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity* (Stanford, CA, 2003), especially p. 216.

[7] For a variety of different positions in these debates see C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); P. J. Marshall, 'Britain and the world in the eighteenth century: III, Britain and India', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (2000), pp. 1–16; M. Athar Ali, 'Recent theories of eighteenth-century India', *Indian Historical Review*, 8 (1987), pp. 102–10.

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can be attributed to the direct causal power of British rule, not least because most of them occurred in Britain after they happened in India. But it was the aloof and often rather anxious relationship between rulers and ruled, the way colonial officials were always unsure and often ambivalent about their footing in Indian society, which ensured that comparative developments had such different effects from those that occurred elsewhere.

I

The most useful volumes for teaching the history of South Asia are the collections of articles and chapters on a particular theme published by Oxford University Press India in series such as their Themes in Indian History. Two recent volumes cover the eighteenth century, one edited by Seema Alavi and the other by P. J. Marshall.[8] Alongside a volume of essays edited by Richard Barnett on the same subject and Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's volume on *The Mughal state, 1526–1750*, they indicate that 'the eighteenth century' is a vibrant period of South Asian scholarship.[9]

Alavi and Marshall both introduce their collections by outlining a debate between historians who see colonialism as a dramatic break and others who perceive it as a process of evolutionary continuity. As Alavi puts it, the difference is between those who see 'colonialism as a defining and determining disjunction' on the one hand, and others who suggest that 'the colonial state was effectively sucked into the regional political economies and continued, with improvisations, many of their indigenous economic and cultural referents'.[10] Both volumes indicate that the 'problem of the eighteenth century' tends to be framed around the two imperial moments that circumscribe the period – the 'decline' of the Mughal empire on the one hand, and the emergence of British colonial rule and new, modern colonial institutions on the other. Historians tend to think that both can be collapsed into a single 'transition debate'. In fact they are two very different sets of arguments.

As Alavi's and Marshall's volumes indicate, it is the first of these 'moments' that has received far more nuanced interpretation. Arguments about the nature of the 'transition' focus on what colonial rule was a transition from, about the character of Mughal and post-Mughal political society, and the relationship between the changing patterns of Indian society and British political and economic power. The initial part of this review will consider this first transition debate.

From the 1920s to 1970s, most historians saw the Mughal empire as 'an all-powerful Leviathan, with a bureaucratic 'steel frame', and uniform institutional structure'.[11] Irfan Habib's classic 1963 work *The agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556–1707*, reissued in 1999 with minimal revisions, consolidated a late colonial conception of the Mughal empire as a despotic extractive mechanism which had very little connection to Indian 'society'. From the point of view of Habib's so-called 'Aligarh school', the tensions between different interests within the steel frame led to the rapid collapse of the Mughal state in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, a process that was followed by a chaotic sixty years before British rule was established. For Habib, just as for earlier British historians such as W. H. Moreland writing in the 1920s, the eighteenth century was

[8] Seema Alavi, ed., *The eighteenth century in India* (Delhi, 2002); P. J. Marshall, ed., *The eighteenth century in Indian history: evolution or revolution?* (Delhi, 2003).

[9] Richard B. Barnett, *Rethinking early modern India* (New Delhi, 2002).

[10] Alavi, ed., *The eighteenth century in India*, p. 38.

[11] Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal state, 1526–1750* (Delhi, 1998), p. 70.

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a period of economic decline, 'the trough from which the new colonial world would be born anew'.[12]

From the early 1980s this view collapsed as dramatically as its proponents believed the Mughal empire itself fell in the early years of the eighteenth century. The essay by Habib printed in both Alavi's and Marshall's volumes is now an example of a very outdated view.[13] Examining dynamic processes rather than static structures, historians have looked at the operation of Mughal 'power' at a local and regional rather than all-India scale. Instead of seeing a straightforward process of 'decline' in the eighteenth-century, historians such as Muzaffar Alam, C. A. Bayly, Chetan Singh, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and most recently Neeraj Hatekar argue that an alteration occurred in the kind of social relations that sovereignty was based on.[14] In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries new forms of authority emerged which were based on cash-based landholding and mercantile activity emerged, and which allowed new local power bases to be consolidated and economic growth to be relocated away from old Mughal centres. As Bayly puts it in his seminal 1979 work *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars*, 'new stable patterns of local power were slowly precipitating between the state and agrarian society', patterns which included the rise of mercantile corporations, new ascetic religious orders, and local landed chieftains or *zamindars*.[15] What previous historians described as 'decline' was actually, in Hatekar's words, 'a relocation of economic activity and growth in areas which had the advantage of being nurtured by the local elite', instead of the 'supra-local state'.[16] It was patchy economic growth and the emergence of new local notables, alongside the increasing mobility of cash, labour, and capital that led both to the corrosion of central Mughal power and the formation of autonomous regional states such as those in Awadh, Bengal, and Mysore.

So much for Mughal 'decline', what about the Mughal state at its height? Some scholars have begun to suggest that it was a 'paper tiger' even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when supposedly at its most strong.[17] But in an important and nuanced local study of western India, Farhat Hasan challenges the need to choose sides in the debate about the relative strength of the Mughal centre as opposed to local polities, arguing instead that the regime was 'strong and powerful' as long as it was capable of securing the support of local power-holders. In both fact and Mughal imagination 'the powers

[12] Irfan Habib, *The agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556–1707* (2nd edn, Delhi, 1999); W. H. Moreland, *The agrarian system of Muslim India* (Cambridge, 1929); Frank Perlin, 'The problem of the eighteenth century', in Marshall, ed., *Eighteenth century*, p. 53.

[13] Irfan Habib, 'The eighteenth century in Indian economic history', originally published in Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra, eds., *On the eighteenth century as a category of Asian history: Van Leur in retrospect* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 217–23.

[14] Muzaffar Alam, *The crisis of empire in Mughal north India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (Delhi, 1986); Chetan Singh, 'Centre and periphery in the Mughal state: the case of seventeenth-century Punjab', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), pp. 299–318; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The political economy of commerce: southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990).

[15] C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: north Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), a chapter from which is printed as 'The rise of the corporations', in Marshall, ed., *Eighteenth century*, pp. 138, 164–5.

[16] Neeraj Hatekar, 'Farmers and markets in the pre-colonial Deccan: the plausibility of economic growth in traditional society', *Past and Present*, 178 (2003), p. 122.

[17] Andre Wink, *Land and sovereignty in India: agrarian society and politics under the eighteenth-century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge, 1986). For a discussion of these different arguments see Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal state*, p. 31.

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of the state were based on a co-sharing of the honours and perquisites of sovereignty'.[18] The Mughal polity was able to act effectively when it mobilized and incorporated a network of actors who had their own locally rooted forms of political authority. The 'state' was constituted by a set of 'circuits' based upon the exchange of cash and perquisites between locally powerful groups such as merchants, little kings, and landholders. Even the authority of 'imperial' officers such as the *kazi* and *kotwal* was based on their immersion into local norms of rule.[19]

For Hasan, the eighteenth century witnessed a reconfiguration of the Mughal 'system of power', not its collapse. The rise of new groups led to 'a structural change in the system of rule' and a reconfiguration of the Mughal 'complex of power'. Early modern Indian political systems were flexible enough to incorporate social and economic change but '[t]he integration of the local corporate bodies in the system of rule reflected the fact that the state was now shifting, gradually and imperceptibly, towards more locally rooted centres of power and authority'.[20]

Insofar as they emphasize the flexibility of Mughal idioms of rule Hasan's arguments about the nature of the Mughal polity chime with Muzaffar Alam's recent study of Islamic political theory in medieval and early modern India, *The languages of political Islam*. Alam shows how, from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, the languages of Islamic statecraft were reconfigured in order to accommodate the rule of a largely non-Muslim population. Alam suggests that a 'creative tension existed from the very start of Islamic history', between a sense of the continuity of a purely Islamic tradition dating from the days of the prophet, and a continual process of incorporating and appropriating elements from 'outside', whether Aristotelian philosophy or eighteenth-century Indian Hindu religious practice. Alam focuses in particular on the Persian literature on *akhlaq* ('disposition of the soul', in this context political ethics) that dominated Mughal political thought. From this perspective, government did not involve the framing of juridical restrictions, but was an incorporative process of dialogue between ruler and a range of local authorities. Politics did not involve the governance of a bureaucratic structure, but was a process of continually balancing diverse, decentred elements that each had their own ways of doing things.

Although this is not the main focus of his study Alam's research offers some clues to help historians think about the changes that occurred in the eighteenth century. *The languages of political Islam* notes how the emergence of Hindi/Urdu as the high cultural language of north India occurred as a new mercantile and service elite emerged and was incorporated in the Mughal 'complex of power' in the eighteenth century. The rise of the Hindi/Urdu language, along with the increasing importance of north Indian cultural practices, 'signified the region's rise against the Persianized Mughal centre', but was incorporated into Mughal culture to such an extent that even the emperor Shah Alam wrote poetry in the language.[21] Perhaps we can see a process where universal, non-territorial attributes of good governance began to be mapped on to particular geographical spaces, as seventeenth-century Mughal idioms were transformed into a variety of 'regional patriotisms' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Alam's argument connects with Ayesha Jalal's recent suggestion that aspects of nineteenth-century Urdu-speaking culture were often expressions of a north Indian regional rather than religious patriotism. A similar argument might be made about the merging of Mughal idioms with Hindu, Sanskritic norms, and

[18] Farhat Hasan, *State and locality in Mughal India: power relations in western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 126. [19] Ibid., pp. 91–109. [20] Ibid., p. 126.
[21] Muzaffar Alam, *The languages of political Islam: India, 1200–1800* (Chicago, 2004), p. 184.

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their translation into Bengali to produce a very different kind of early modern Bengali identity.[22]

Over the last few years, historians such as Hasan and Alam have extended the duration of the Mughal polity well into the mid-eighteenth century. They have done so, though, by providing us with a new interpretation of what the state actually was, seeing it as a form of political culture associated with particular kinds of conduct and skill (the *akhlaq* literature which Alam discusses, or the notion of *adab* studied by other scholars), rather than a political structure or commanding form of sovereignty. The danger, however, is that an overly functional analysis of flexible political relations prevents one from noticing when the 'system' became so loose it had become something else: when, in other words, recognizably 'Mughal' norms were replaced by a post-Mughal political environment. As scholars of early modern India increasingly turn to the history of ideas, and the study of Persian-language sources becomes more widespread, 'social scientific' accounts of relations and structures such as Hasan's are being supplemented by a growing intellectual history of eighteenth-century Indian political discourse. The study of Mughal and post-Mughal political culture will be an exciting field over the next few years.[23]

The field of early modern Indian history has been so productive in part because it has escaped an over-riding concern with the causes and conditions of British rule. Nonetheless, new perspectives on the eighteenth century have revised accounts of the 'transition' to British sovereignty in the subcontinent. In the 1980s, the work of C. A. Bayly, Karen Leonard, P. J. Marshall, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, David Washbrook, and others showed how the changes that occurred in India during the mid-eighteenth century provided a fertile socio-economic field for merchants associated with the English East India Company to engage with, a perspective that was developed by the work of Lakshmi Subramaniam for western India and Kumkum Chatterjee on Bihar in the 1990s.[24] As Marshall puts it, this corpus of literature on 'the eighteenth century' shows that the Indian polity's increasing 'dependence on men who could command ready money and mercenary soldiers was making them accessible to Europeans'.[25] In regions where the 'commercialization of royal power' occurred to the greatest extent, Bengal, Benares, Awadh, much of South India, and Surat, the English East India Company's officers acted in the same way as India's local merchant-princes or 'portfolio capitalists', trading goods, collecting revenue by

[22] Ayesha Jalal, 'Negotiating cultural modernity and cultural difference: Indian Muslim conceptions of community and nation, 1878–1914', in Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C. A. Bayly, eds., *Modernity and culture from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, 1890–1920* (New York, NY, 2002), pp. 230–61. For an analogous instance of cultural 'regionalization' in Bengal, see Philip B. Calkins, 'The formation of a regionally oriented ruling group in Bengal, 1700–1740', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 29 (1970), pp. 799–806; David L. Curley, 'Kings and commerce on an agrarian frontier: Kalketu's story in Mukunda's *candimangal*', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 38 (2001), pp. 299–324. For the concept of 'regional patriotisms' see C. A. Bayly, *The origins of nationality in South Asia: patriotism and ethical government in the making of South Asia* (Delhi, 2001).

[23] Kumkum Chatterjee, 'History as self-representation: the recasting of a political tradition in late eighteenth-century India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34 (1998), pp. 913–48.

[24] Lakshmi Subramaniam, 'Banias and the British: the role of indigenous credit in the process of imperial expansion in western India in the second half of the eighteenth century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1987), pp. 473–510; for a critique of Subramaniam's argument about an 'Anglo-Bania order' in Surat see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Trapped inside the colonial order: the Hindu bankers of Surat and their business world during the second half of the eighteenth century, *Modern Asian Studies*, 25 (1991), pp. 367–401. Also Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, politics, and society in early modern India: Bihar, 1733–1820* (Leiden, 1996).

[25] Marshall, *Eighteenth century*, p. 13.

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tax-farming, hiring out troops, and establishing local monopolies in goods such as salt and opium. European traders and companies became closely integrated into the networks of local political society, eventually taking over direct functions of 'the state' themselves. In a society in which 'trade' and 'sovereignty' were closely entwined, and politics was becoming rapidly commercialized, explaining the English Company's transition from merchant to ruler is not a difficult task.

However, historians of British imperialism influenced by these perspectives have tended to assume that by acting as Indian merchants and traders within Indian networks, the British betrayed little more than their inability to impose their own will on Indian society. Arguments about the transition to British rule in India are often articulated as a discussion of the relative power of 'Indian' and weakness of 'British' social and political forces. The British are described as being 'dependent' on Indian structures or 'sucked in' to Indian society in a way that is sometimes seen as leading to a 'collaborative' Anglo-Indian social order. The implication is that Britain and India belonged to very different cultures, but that Britons were forced to do things in an Indian way to begin with.

Interpretations which stress British 'dependence' cannot explain the real moments of misunderstanding and conflict between the Company and Indian merchants and sovereigns which occurred in the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century, moments such as the eighteenth-century conflicts between the Calcutta mayor's court and Patna merchants that Kumkum Chatterjee describes. If Britons had reluctantly to conform to Indian practices, why did they forcefully assert their 'rights' or 'privileges' in such an arrogant fashion on so many occasions? But the reverse is also true. In most spheres, the Company and Indian merchants and princes managed to engage with one another in a fashion that belies the idea either of an untraversable cultural gap, or of the British reluctantly conceding in the face of Indian power. A glance at recent work on the politics of eighteenth-century Britain and Europe shows why. British and more broadly European forms of statecraft were far more diffuse and flexible, and far more closely resembled the styles of rule that occurred in the subcontinent than historians of India or Europe usually imply. By immersing themselves in flexible Indian political networks, blurring the boundaries between politics and trade, and acknowledging the existence of multiple points of political authority, the British were acting in a characteristically European fashion.

So, for example, in an important recent work on English governance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Michael Braddick suggests that the English state was 'a mind without a body', a 'network of agents' which performed a complex range of governmental functions but were not located in one place, did not belong to a single institution, and were not paid by a single employer. The court, privy council, parliament, and Whitehall were 'points of contact' in which elites met and negotiated with one another to co-ordinate their local activities.[26] Braddick's study ends in the late seventeenth century, but David Eastwood and Joanna Innes argue that well into the nineteenth century most of the 'state's' functions continued to be exercised by local bodies such as parishes, boroughs, and justices of the peace who saw themselves as more closely connected to the political relationships of local society than Westminster.[27] The only action that the small central

[26] Michael J. Braddick, *State formation in early modern England, c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2000); also the essays collected in Michael J. Braddick and John Walter, eds., *Negotiating power in early modern society* (Cambridge, 2001).

[27] David Eastwood, *Government and community in the English provinces, 1700–1870* (London, 1997); Joanna Innes, 'Central government interference: changing conceptions, practices and concerns, 1688–1840',

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complex of ministers, officials, and Crown in Westminster initiated on its own volition was to fight wars. But it is a mistake to believe that raising money to fight wars was the only function of the state.[28] Far from being confined to the excise office and Admiralty board, the 'state' was a sprawling web of diverse local welfare and regulatory functions and authorities, all of which were overseen by a ruler concerned not to ensure a single direction of purpose, but to maintain the balance and cohesion of the whole. In this world, property rights, commercial interests, and participation in politics were often as closely linked as they were in India at the same time. As recent work by Asma Ahmad and Philip Stern has shown, Company officers were well aware of the fact that commercial activities were underpinned by complex structures of governance in both Britain and India. The term 'Company' after all designed a form of political arrangement, an *imperium in imperio* within Britain's own segmentary state.[29]

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, Britain was certainly not unique in being governed through such a diffuse form of state power. As J. H. Elliot argued, early modern Europe was populated not by nation-states but by 'composite monarchies' and 'multiple kingdoms' in which sovereignty was exercised at a number of different levels in each polity.[30] The Habsburg, Spanish, Russian, and even French empires consisted of similar clusters of polities. In each case, governance occurred through the interaction between local interests and uneven clusters of 'central' authority. Even the most 'absolutist' forms of state were dominated by 'collaboration' between the sovereign and local elites.[31] William Scott notes that in France '[t]he Old Regime had an over-abundance of collective bodies expressing group interests – *parlements*, provincial estates, assemblies of the clergy and of the provincial nobilities, chambers of commerce, guilds and so on', each of which were connected, in an increasingly ineffectual way, to central functions such as tax collections. France had a famously uneven tax system, and a complex system of revenue-farming of the eve of the French Revolution.[32]

Elliot suggests that '[c]omposite monarchies were built on a compact between the crown and the ruling class of their different provinces',[33] in which the latter had a large degree of autonomy. In most of Europe for much of the early modern period, maintaining the 'compact' or balance between different forces in an uneven polity remained the most important domestic function of sovereignty even though pockets of stronger administrative power emerged at a regional level. As Michel Foucault argued in his famous essay on

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in José Harris, ed., *Civil society in British history* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 39–60, and Joanna Innes, 'Parliament and the shaping of eighteenth-century English social policy', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 40 (1990), pp. 63–92; also the essays collected in John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, *Rethinking Leviathan. The eighteenth-century state in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1999).

[28] For this overly narrow and now widely criticized military-fiscal account of the British state see John Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (London, 1989).

[29] Asma Ahmad, 'The British Enlightenment and ideas of empire in India, 1756–1773' (Ph.D. thesis, London, 2005); Philip J. Stern, '"One body corporate and politick": the growth of the English East India Company-state in the later seventeenth century' (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia, 2004).

[30] J. H. Elliott, 'A Europe of composite monarchies', *Past and Present*, 137 (1992), pp. 48–71.

[31] William Beik, 'The absolutism of Louis XIV as social collaboration', *Past and Present*, 188 (2005), pp. 195–224.

[32] William Scott, 'The pursuit of "interests" in the French Revolution: a preliminary survey', *French Historical Studies*, 19 (1996), p. 813; Eugene Nelson White, 'The French Revolution and the politics of government finance, 1770–1815', *Journal of Economic History*, 55 (1995), pp. 227–55.

[33] Elliott, 'A Europe of composite monarchies', p. 57.

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'Governmentality', maintaining sovereignty was often the circular end of sovereignty, and sovereignty consisted of the managing of alliances and networks, rather than intervening, acting upon, transforming, or 'reforming' the lives of a subject population in a consistent way.[34] In this context, 'the state' was not regarded as an entity separate from society, it was constituted by politically charged circuits of sociability. For British political thinkers from Locke to Burke, just as for Montesquieu in France, and the Mughal theorists whom Alam describes, the state consisted of the flexible relationships that incorporated individuals and small communities into 'political society' or 'the body politics'.[35]

Placing recent work on the Indian and European state in the same epistemological field, comparing the diffuse nature of European and India sovereignty, for example, allows one substantially to rethink what it was the British were doing in the late Mughal subcontinent. Eighteenth-century Europeans, including Britons, were ruled in hierarchical yet participatory politics, in which local corporate interests usually counted for far more than 'national' state-sanctioned rights or rules.[36] As in early modern India, governance occurred through complex networks of sovereignty rather than rule by a bureaucratic regime; not even Prussia was governed by what Max Weber would have called a bureaucratic state.[37] In the eighteenth century, commerce and local economic interests often brought political power with them and allowed 'new men' in Europe to enter the networks of the state as well. In some parts of Europe as well as South Asia, these processes led to the consolidation of sovereignty on a regional scale. But they did so without the production of the kinds of 'national' identities or states that emerged in the 1800s.[38] Comparisons of this kind mean that, unsurprisingly, historians have found it difficult to decide whether officials such as Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, and Philip Francis were guided by 'Indian' norms or 'metropolitan' ideologies when governing Bengal.[39] The answer might be that one does not have to. The two were not so different from one other as is usually imagined.

There were, of course, striking differences within and between different Eurasian polities. Some of these help explain the dynamics that led some European states to found trading companies and establish profitable connections with India's commercial economy to begin with. Eighteenth-century Britain and much of western Europe had a growing market for consumer goods, especially 'exotic' commodities from India and China, which

[34] Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), pp. 87–104.

[35] Ian McBride, 'The nation in the age of revolution', in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer, eds., *Power and the nation in European history* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 248–72.

[36] For one attempt to place Asian history in a broader 'Eurasian' context see Victor Lieberman, Transcending East–West dichotomies: state and culture formation in six ostensibly disparate areas', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31 (1997), pp. 463–546. For comparisons between Mughal India and other west Asian states see Alam and Subrahmanyam, *The Mughal state*, 'Introduction', pp. 5–12.

[37] Rudolf Vierhaus, 'The Prussian bureaucracy reconsidered', in Brewer and Hellmuth, *Rethinking Leviathan*, pp. 149–66.

[38] For the role of new forms of property in redefining British politics, see Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1992), and Hilton L. Root, *The fountain of privilege: the political foundations of markets in old regime France and England* (Berkeley, CA, 1994). For one discussion of the incorporative flexibility of eighteenth-century British political society, Ian Christie, *Stress and stability in late eighteenth-century Britain: reflections on the British avoidance of revolution* (Oxford, 1984).

[39] For example T. R. Travers, '"The real value of the lands": the British, the Nawabs, and the land tax in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 517–58, and T. R. Travers, 'Ideology and British expansion in Bengal', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 33 (2005), pp. 7–27.

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was underpinned by an increasingly large middle class employed in the service sector. In line with its more flexible political economy, population density was lower and labour mobility, especially in the military labour market, was far higher in India than in most parts of Europe. As a result, channels of commerce, production, and military recruitment could redirect themselves to meet western demand. In contrast, in France, Britain, and the Netherlands at least, subjects had a stronger sense of being connected to a particular set of national or local political institutions and being rooted to a particular place. Patriotic sentiment (together with forms of connected ideological and religious affinity) seems to have been a much stronger force in western Europe. As a result, the fate of companies trading to Asia could be linked to the honour and destiny of the 'nation' in the public imagination, a connection that allowed the English East India Company at least to play an assertive role in eighteenth-century South Asian politics.

II

The above factors might be significant in explaining the British *presence* in the subcontinent, and thus help us to understand the first transition question. However, none of these differences can help us understand a second issue, how the British developed such a novel and distinctive form of 'modern' state in the subcontinent so quickly after the late eighteenth century. There is no necessary connection between the emergence of a mass consumer market and the codification of law, for example. Many English jurists argued that an uncodified form of common law could more easily be accommodated to rapid commercial change.[40] British patriots celebrated the diffuse and decentred nature of the British state, and were deeply fearful of the kind of bureaucratic centralization (what some would call 'modernization') that later emerged in colonial South Asia. In neither case can one argue that differences between British and Indian societies played a significant role in the emergence of the modern, colonial state in South Asia. Even if its *ancien régime* had specifically British characteristics, the polity that provided the personnel who governed the East India Company's territory belonged to a common Eurasian world of early modern shared sovereignty and diffuse political power nonetheless.

Despite this, historians continue to attribute the emergence of new forms of governance to a clash of cultures between east and west. Prasannan Parthasarathi attributes *The transition to a colonial economy* to the introduction of alien British economic norms to the subcontinent, in particular the East India Company's attempt to control labour. Parthasarathi examines the fate of the textile industry in eighteenth-century South India, suggesting that weavers declined from a position of relative prosperity in 1720. Before the late eighteenth century, labourers could take advantage of a shortage of labour, whilst the norms of South Indian kingship meant that weavers were encouraged rather than coerced to produce because rulers were more concerned to retain a local following than keep costs down. But in the 1780s the English Company acted to discipline labourers in a new way, 'dramatically reduc[ing] the power of weavers'.[41] Despite resistance, wages were driven down and skilled labour impoverished. This process was accompanied by an increasingly rigid attitude to

[40] David Lieberman, *The province of legislation determined: legal theory in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 1989).

[41] Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The transition to a colonial economy: weavers, merchants and kings in South India* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 135.

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agrarian production, in which previously mobile agrarian cultivators were 'settled' in a fashion that similarly deprived them of power.

Parthasarathi's account fits with a broader interpretation, developed by David Washbrook in particular, about the emergence of an agrarian economy under colonial conditions that was dominated by peasant production, was less mobile, and was more concerned with social status than under the old regime.[42] Much of this interpretation is persuasive. What is not convincing however is Parthasarathi's suggestion that colonial attempts to discipline labour were 'modelled on English practices'. Parthasarathi argues that Britain 'may rightfully be seen as the home of the modern state', a form of state 'which intervenes in the lives of laborers to discipline them as well as to regulate the workings of the labor market' in order to produce a 'free' market. But the only evidence Parthasarathi uses to prove this point are a few statutes which illustrate occasional attempts to reduce the mobility of labour, and a number of contemporary accounts about the need to keep labour low. Similar attempts at control could be found in virtually any society that had a labour market and a relative shortage of labour, South Asian included. There is nothing to convince the reader that Britain possessed a radically different conception of 'sovereignty and statecraft' from that occurring in South India at the same time.

A clutch of recent volumes share a perspective similar to Parthasarathi's on the emergence of a colonial regime in India. In her account of the transition to British rule in Malabar, a region in South India beyond the pale of Mughal sovereignty, Margret Frenz discusses the 'clash of sovereignties' between Britons and Indians, a clash which occurred between 'the entirely different conception of the state held by both parties'. Frenz argues that, in the 1790s, the British in Malabar were driven by 'visions of a state modelled on European bureaucracy', a form of rule contrasted with more fluid Indian idioms.[43] Sudipta Sen's *Distant sovereignty* argues that British ideas about sovereignty, statecraft, bureaucracy, and political economy shaped the Company's rule, and contrasts western bureaucratic absolutism with India's flexible, fuzzy forms of political interaction.[44] Although she allows more room for complexity and ambiguity than Sen does, Radhika Singha similarly suggests that Britain introduced an absolutist idea of state authority and the 'rule of law to govern crime in Bengal and Benares. Although in practice forced to accommodate with pre-colonial Indian norms, Singha suggests that British rule was underpinned by the characteristically British attempt to project the authority of written law and a small number of bureaucrats as the sole source of both legitimate violence and social order.[45] Each of these arguments projects on to early modern Britain a simplistic model of the 'modern' state which is drawn more from early twentieth-century sociological theory than historical understanding of contemporary political practice. But arguments that attribute the colonial 'transformation' to the imposition of a distinctly European form of state on the rest of the world fail because, as we have seen, Europe did not possess such a form of state to impose in the eighteenth century.

[42] David Washbrook, 'Land and labour in late eighteenth-century South India: the golden age of the pariah', in Peter Robb, ed., *Dalit movements and the meanings of labour in India* (Delhi, 1993).

[43] Margret Frenz, *From contact to conquest: transition to British rule in Malabar, 1790–1805* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 3, 104, 151.

[44] Sudipta Sen, *Distant sovereignty: national imperialism and the origins of British India* (New York, NY, 2002).

[45] Radhika Singha, *A despotism of law: crime and justice in early colonial India* (Delhi, 1998).

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One aspect of this argument is the assumption that when British officials in late eighteenth-century India engaged in the active, conscious process of trying to construct a unitary, bureaucratic state governed by written rules, they were merely articulating domestic British concepts of rule in a colonial environment. But as Michael Braddick suggests, early modern England saw a process of unconscious 'state-formation' not deliberate 'state-building'.[46] The English state consolidated its authority as the unintended consequence of men moving in complex networks, rather than within a conscious process of construction. As late as the 1830s, British politicians saw government as the complex process of aligning and modifying networks of local influence, rather than the construction of a bureaucratic state. Movements for 'reform' usually came from the locality not the centre.[47]

But things were different in colonial India. Let us examine the conscious process of colonial state-formation for a moment. First of all, the British state in India attempted both to justify its own presence and to produce a new sense of its powers of government by classifying and mapping the area it ruled. In his *Making history, drawing territory* Ian J. Barrow emphasizes the important role of colonial mapping in this process of state construction.[48] Map-making was intrinsically connected to 'the making of a British colonial territorial state' which attempted to plot and regulate the lives of the subjects it ruled, and diminish the claims of corporate intermediaries and little kings.[49] Colonial maps effaced any sense that India was a complex political society able to incorporate the East India Company on its own terms, creating a sense instead of India as a field of action and intervention by the British state. In the process, they produced a conception of India as a single territory governable by the institutions of a unitary colonial state.

Like Matthew Edney's slightly earlier work on British mapping in colonial India, Barrow argues that colonial maps were a product of European scientific tradition. They were not, as Kapil Raj argues, a 'hybrid' form of knowledge that combined European and Indian cartographic styles.[50] But whereas Edney rather blandly saw colonial map-making as another instance of European 'enlightenment rationalism' transported overseas, Barrow traces the history of colonial mapping more definitely, and more persuasively to an active project of colonial state-building in India.

Manu Goswami's *Producing India* is a nuanced interpretation of the attempt to construct an Indian national identity based on a notion of India as a 'territorially defined productive space'. Through an examination of *Swadeshi* nationalist rhetoric, Indian political economy, and geography textbooks, she shows how nineteenth-century Indian nationalism depended on a conception of 'India' as an economically and culturally autonomous space. Indian nationalist conceptions were rooted in, and developments of, the way British colonial officials perceived India as a homogeneous 'territory' to be mapped, classified, and transformed by a distant, alien state', what she calls a conception of 'colonial state space'.

[46] Braddick, *State formation*, pp. 427–37.

[47] See the essays in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, eds., *Rethinking the age of reform: Britain, 1780–1850* (Cambridge, 2003).

[48] Ian J. Barrow, *Making history, drawing territory: British mapping in India, c. 1756–1905* (Delhi, 2004), p. 183.

[49] Ibid., p. 13.

[50] Matthew Edney, *Mapping an empire: the geographical construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago, IL, 1997); Kapil Raj, 'Colonial encounters and the forming of new knowledge and national identities: Great Britain and India, 1760–1850', *Osiris*, 2nd ser. 15 (2000), pp. 119–34, and Kapil Raj, *Relocating modern science: circulation and the construction of knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900* (Basingstoke, 2007).

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Colonial cartography 'provisioned the ground for the nationalist appropriation of colonial state space as the locus of an imagined national space and economy'. Like Barrow, Goswami shows how new ideas about the power of the colonial state emerged alongside new conceptions of 'India' as a space upon which British officials could act and intervene. As she puts it, '[t]he geographical space of colonial India became the territorial unit and organizing frame for bureaucratic and statistical labor, plans, and programs'.[51]

Goswami's book draws significant parallels between the process of Indian identity-formation and new notions of territory, economy, and nation that occurred in Europe, notably Germany. She connects the work of the German nationalist economist Friedrich List with the work of nationalist politicians in India, especially Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. German thought resonated in Indian because the two countries faced similar political concerns and economic conditions – a concern with national unification, an interest in producing rapid 'development' of a region on the margins of global trade, a need to overcome Britain's global economic and political dominance.[52]

What might be added to these accounts is a comparison between the techniques of government and ideas of rule that occurred in India and the similar transformations that occurred in nineteenth-century Europe, as forms of 'old regime' were remodelled in each place. The *conscious attempt* at state-building that occurred in colonial India parallels the process of active regime-construction that took place in Revolutionary and particularly Napoleonic France, early nineteenth-century Prussia, Federalist America, and many other parts of the globe – probably occurring the least in the UK. After all, early nineteenth-century European regimes created their own conceptions of 'state space', conceptions reinforced by the kinds of institutions Goswami discusses in India, such as railways and the production of standardized educational textbooks. Mapping played a significant role in the emergence of 'modern' Prussia and the creation of a single unified German 'state'; it was also significant to the claims made on behalf of the federal United States. New forms of governmental cartography emerged alongside other ways of classifying the 'population' such as the census and national registers. These techniques occurred at the same time as other attempts to 'produce' a concept of both the state's own powers and a new conception of the 'population' being ruled, such as national education and welfare schemes.[53] The early nineteenth century also saw the emergence of an attempt by legal institutions to create homogeneous, textualized 'bodies' of law in India, Napoleonic France, and the United States: by the end of the nineteenth century, almost every European polity apart from Britain and Catalonia had codified law in statutes enacted by a single sovereign legislature. In each case, the law became an instrument for producing a common standard of 'legal' behaviour, rather than adjudicating between historically rooted and often locally based rights, claims, and privileges.[54]

[51] Manu Goswami, *Producing India: from colonial economy to national space* (Chicago, IL, 2004), p. 73.

[52] Ibid., p. 216.

[53] Gauri Visvanathan, *Masks of conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (London, 1989); David Sorkin, 'Wilhelm von Humboldt: the theory and practice of self-formation (*Bildung*), *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (1983), pp. 55–73.

[54] Daniel J. Hulsebosch, *Constituting empire: New York and the transformation of constitutionalism in the Atlantic world, 1664–1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); Stephen Jacobson, 'Law and nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe: the case of Catalonia in comparative perspective', *Law and History Review*, 20 (2002), pp. 307–47.

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Administrative and legal changes intersected with changing forms of social practice, and a new sense of 'civil society', to use G. W. F. Hegel's phrase, as the realm of interpersonal action in which a community's identities and interests were forged. Across both Europe and India, the nineteenth century saw the articulation of new notions of 'society' as a sphere which existed beyond and before politics, in which the primordial forms of interest and identity that motivated human action occurred. These conceptions underpinned the liberal notion that the function of the state was to protect individual rights and interests that emerged not from the citizen's engagement with the polity, as most eighteenth-century commentators believed, but from the subject's self-interested social interaction. Such notions are hard to detect in Britain until they were popularized by John Stuart Mill after the turn of the century. But they were articulated in Hegel's *Philosophy of right*, and were also present in the arguments made by a small group of Indian intellectuals in Calcutta in the 1820s and 1830s.[55] Ideas about the autonomous, rule-bound regularities of 'society' allowed notions about national economics, and national social culture to emerge. In many places, identity came to be rooted less in the flexible way citizen-subjects participated in a common set of political institutions, and more in the way communities attempted to define themselves through commonalities of culture, language, religion, caste, or race in a supposedly apolitical social sphere. At the same time domestic life became an increasingly important sphere for the articulation of national identity, whether in India, France, or Britain too.[56]

These comparative developments occurred as the flexible yet hierarchical networks that structured eighteenth-century Eurasia's political societies broke down. For much of the eighteenth century, institutions such as the landed estate, manorial court, mercantile corporation, caste council, guild, or local assembly had played a key role in the management of social and political relations and the redistribution of resources even in the most 'absolutist' form of state. But in the critical period between 1770 and 1850, many rulers and subjects lost trust in the role of corporate institutions and local hierarchies to negotiate the relationship between the individual, the family, and political society. Alongside the emergence of a new form of absolutist colonial state in India, that period saw the French and American Revolution followed by Napoleonic and Federalist centralization, the crisis and consolidation of Prussian bureaucracy, and attempts by the khedive Mohammed Ali to consolidate state power in Egypt.[57] These 'revolutions' occurred as different forces intersected in different places. Some, such as the crisis in the thirteen American colonies, began as attempts to assert the viability of local corporate bodies against the seemingly despotic actions of central power.[58] Nonetheless, each of these movements resulted in the *attempt* (and I would like to emphasize that word) to undermine the role of what Edmund Burke called 'little platoons' in constituting the polity, in the process destroying an earlier sense of

[55] G. W. Hegel, *Elements of the philosophy of right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, 1991); Kalidas Nag, ed., *The English works of Rammohun Roy* (6 vols., Calcutta, 1945–51), I, pp. 1–37.

[56] Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (2nd edn, London, 2002); Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe*, pp. 117–48; Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled identities: Rajput lineages and the colonial state in nineteenth-century north India* (NewDelhi, 2002).

[57] Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the reign of Muhammad Ali* (Cambridge, 1984).

[58] For these debates and later arguments about the relationship between province and centre in post-revolutionary America see Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and centre: constitutional development in the extended polities of the British Empire and the United States 1607–1788* (Athens, GA, 1986).

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politics as the art of maintaining and balancing the complex network of interests and authorities that existed within the patchwork of political society.

To explain this great transformation, one needs to investigate the conditions that led to such a pervasive sense of mistrust in the role of local political networks and hierarchies. As Bayly notes, fiscal crises played an important role. Having spent too much money fighting wars in the second half of the eighteenth century, polities across Europe, Asia, and the Americas stretched the relationship with the revenue-farmers and local notables to breaking point. The American Revolution occurred as the Westminster parliament abandoned the earlier practice of raising revenue by seeking the consent of local assemblies, and instead asserted its unilateral right to make laws which taxed each colony's 'internal' economic activity instead.[59] In France, the impossibility of raising enough money to fund a fiscal deficit by taxing and borrowing from local elites created a distrust of aristocratic and clerical 'interest', and contributed to the causes of the French Revolution. In Bengal, the breakdown of the East India Company's negotiations with local revenue-farmers underpinned Lord Cornwallis's attempt to standardize the payment of land revenue from *zamindars* (landholders) and the conscious attempt to construct a 'new constitution' for the rule of the region.[60] Fiscal crises fuelled a new scepticism about the supposedly self-serving behaviour of local interests and led to attempts to transform the relationship between centre and locality in each case. Peter Mandler argues that Britain's public and politicians alike were unusual in maintaining an unusually high degree of trust in fiscal functions that relied on traditional local hierarchies.[61] The continuation of Britain's *ancien régime* well into the nineteenth century had its critics though. Hegel complained shortly before his death in 1831 that, of European states, Britain remained almost uniquely backward in seeing statecraft as the art of balancing local 'particular interests' rather than actively making new law or representing and intervening in society as a whole.[62]

The history of tax and political relations can be linked to the history of less 'rational' fears and emotions. As William M. Reddy argues, one cannot comprehend the French Revolution without understanding how it was that a small group of revolutionaries believed they had the capacity sentimentally to empathize with and speak for the 'nation' as a whole, without the mediation of pre-existing 'interests' and elites.[63] Similarly, one cannot explain the emergence of colonial India's new politics without understanding why British officials believed they had the capacity properly to articulate the interests of 'Indian' society without engaging in the process of often face-to-face dialogue and negotiation with local 'interests' that sustained political relations beforehand.[64] British imperialism and French centralization were both driven by the belief that it was dangerous for government to trust familiar forms of contact with potentially self-interested local interests. Both

[59] For a recent discussion see P. J. Marshall, *The making and unmaking of empires: Britain, India and America, c. 1750–1783* (Oxford, 2005).

[60] Jon E. Wilson, '"A thousand countries to go to: peasants and rulers in eighteenth-century Bengal"', *Past and Present*, 189 (2005), pp. 81–109; Travers, '"The real value of the lands"'.

[61] Peter Mandler, 'Nation and power in the liberal state: Britain, c. 1800–1914', in Scales and Zimmer, eds., *Power and the nation in European history*, pp. 354–69.

[62] G. W. F. Hegel, 'On the English reform bill (1831)', in Lawrence Dickey, ed., *Hegel: political writings* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 234–70.

[63] William M. Reddy, 'Sentimentalism and its erasure: the role of emotions in the era of the French Revolution', *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), pp. 109–52.

[64] For the development of these themes in early colonial Bengal, see Jon E. Wilson, *The domination of strangers: modern politics in colonial India, 1780–1835* (Basingstoke, forthcoming).

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attempted to place executive responsibility in the hands of a bureaucratic elite driven by a supposedly trans-local sense of national 'duty' instead. Interest, familiarity, and passion were suppressed by new, rationalist polities that tried (although rarely succeeded) bureaucratically to reorder the world.

These new states were not the result of the triumphal march of 'enlightenment' rationalism from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, or its spread from Europe to the non-European world. They came into existence in moments of crisis, when other, older ways of balancing and negotiating with the plethora of institutions and interests that constituted early modern political society broke down, when the gap between interest and duty, between peasants, nobles and rulers, or between locality and centre became so wide it needed to be reconstituted in a new form of rule. As we shall see in a moment, in practice states still had to incorporate and negotiate with a range of local social forces. But it is not enough merely to suggest that early nineteenth-century states were far weaker than their architects believed they needed to be. The *attempt* at active state-building – the project of rational state-making – had profound consequences, however 'unsuccessful' it might have been, contributing to the creation of political cultures that were very different from the worlds of eighteenth-century political society.

III

Placing colonial India in a comparative framework alongside continental Europe, showing how similar processes occurred simultaneously, might also enable one to develop a more nuanced and persuasive sense of what 'imperialism' and 'colonialism' were. To begin with, comparing recent arguments about nineteenth-century Britain with the literature on colonial India allows one to appreciate the divergence between 'imperial' and 'metropolitan' ideas about governance. It is with this practical sense of difference that, first of all, one can identify the specificity of the 'colonial'. Let me give one example. Thomas Macaulay argued that previous forms of political experience offered no guide for British rule, suggesting that 't]he light of political science and of history are withdrawn: we are walking in darkness: we do not distinctly see whither we are going'.[65] Whilst Macaulay was a fervent critic of abstract reasoning in British political life, in India he framed a penal code on rational principles, arguing that India required a different kind of judicial logic. A sense of India's supposedly more chaotic and less comprehensible social relations, together with the idea that it was a society habituated to 'despotism', fed the reception of utilitarianism in India, even by Macaulay, at a time when utilitarianism was a marginal doctrine in England itself.[66] Through examples such as these, one needs to note how, even if in a complex and ambiguous fashion, Britons thought that ruling India required a different kind of practice than that employed in 'domestic' political life.

Although British rule in India was marked by what Partha Chatterjee calls a 'logic of difference' it is difficult to argue that a consistent set of ideas about India's 'otherness' preceded and determined the construction of the colonial state at the outset.[67] Ideas about India's 'despotism' were important from well before the onset of British rule; 'race' mattered as a category for accentuating difference between Europe and India from far earlier

[65] 'Government of India', 10 July 1833, in Lady Trevelyan, ed., *The works of Lord Macaulay* (8 vols., London, 1866), VIII, p. 142.

[66] Wilson, *The domination of strangers*, ch. 5.

[67] Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*.

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than most historians have hitherto argued.[68] But the sense of chaos and disorder which accompanied Britain's late eighteenth-century imperial crises prevented a fixed set of ideas about 'Indian society' from cohering within the practice of British administration until much later. In the last years of the eighteenth century, the vocabulary used to classify India's place in the 'scale of nations' and 'progress of civilization' was variable and inconsistent. India was variously described as civilized and barbaric, despotic and ordered, idolatrous and deist, racially akin to both Europe and Africa.[69] The categories of 'colonial discourse' that Britons used to justify colonial domination emerged *within*, rather than before, the process of state formation in India. As a result, the assertion of stable and unbridgeable difference between Britons and Indians based on race, civilization, culture, and religion occurred in a different way from the articulation of racial, social, and civilizational hierarchies at 'home'. The paradox is that the colonial regime in India often justified its project of colonial state-building with arguments about the irreconcilable difference between Asiatic and European peoples and states, when similar forms of rule were being constructed elsewhere in Europe, and were being celebrated in the name of the superiority of European civilization.[70]

The second difference between European and colonial forms of modern state-building concerns the way limits to 'rational' forms of rule were dealt with in each place. As historians of continental Europe emphasize, early nineteenth-century attempts to centralize and rationalize administration had their limits. States projected an image of authority which far exceeded their capacity. As John A. Davis puts it, 'modernity' had 'many faces'.[71] Old networks of political society were not entirely eradicated by the abstract logic of bureaucratic rationalism, or the purported homogeneity of the unitary nation-state.[72] A plethora of recent local studies has emphasized complex patterns of 'resistance' and 'collaboration' to new regimes such as the Napoleonic empire or newly unified German nation-state. To govern, collect taxes, and administer the law, regimes still had to 'rally' and 'incorporate' a range of different social forces, including notables, merchants, peasants, and workers. These forms of 'negotiation' were, and often still are, underpinned by forms of parochial patriotism and interest based on a sense of 'rootedness' in place. Whilst contradicting the rationalist, universalizing claims of the state, it was often these forms of local particularism that enabled government to function.

Britons in India found negotiation of this kind far more difficult. Whilst attempts were, of course, made to 'incorporate' local elites, they occurred from behind a grid of abstract

[68] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Frank submissions: the Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris', in H. V. Bowen et al., *The worlds of the East India Company* (Rochester, NY, 2002), pp. 69–96; Shruti Kapila, 'Race matters: orientalism and religion, India and beyond, c. 1770–1880', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40 (2006), pp. 1–43.

[69] For arguments about the comparability of Indian and European religion, see P. J. Marshall, *The British discovery of Hinduism in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1979), and Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, poetry and the millennium: the chequered life of N. B. Halhed* (Delhi, 1983).

[70] For the relationship between Napoleonic administrative centralization and European identity see Stuart Woolf, 'The construction of a European world-view in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic period', *Past and Present*, 137 (1992), pp. 72–101.

[71] John A. Davis, 'The many faces of modernity: French rule in southern Italy, 1806–1815', in Michael Rowe, ed., *Resistance and collaboration in Napoleonic Europe: state formation in an age of upheaval, c. 1800–1815* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 74–89.

[72] T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: occupation and resistance in the Rhineland, 1792–1802* (Oxford, 1982).

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bureaucratic classifications, and often from inside the closed doors of an increasingly distant revenue office or court room. The role categories such as caste and religion played in British administration demonstrates a far more rigid conception of Indian social structure than rulers in Europe articulated about their 'own' societies. Challenges to the 'state' were often met with aggressive displays of military force and governmental power, rather than attempts at conciliation. British officials were wary about stepping outside the bureaucratic confines of the state, retreating instead into highly ordered 'European' spaces in both their domestic and administrative lives. Colonial political culture was rooted in the fantasy that it was unnecessary to engage with Indians on familiar terms. The British did, of course, need to interact with Indians to collect taxes and to adjudicate disputes. In court and the revenue office, the colonial desire for rational order was continually defeated by the complexities of everyday political life. A conscious sense of continual failure was a characteristic of colonial thought; but failure was again and again met with a heightened sense of anxiety, rather than attempts at conciliation. Failure led to the consolidation of officials' belief in the need to perform their 'duty' whatever the outcome, often also the crystallization of abstract models about economics or law used to make policy, irrespective of the extent to which they accurately predicted the behaviour of their Indian interlocutors.[73] For many officials, solace existed in virtual trans-continental family and friendship networks maintained by letter-writing. Official lives were dominated by a longing to return to the familiar – or fantasy – of life back 'home'.[74]

The difficulty of maintaining 'pre-modern' (or at least non-bureaucratic or non-governmental) forms of local connection and familiar relation in India meant that British rule in mid-nineteenth-century India was marked by a hyper-rational sensibility in which abstract plans often mattered more than everyday political engagement. These sensibilities, and a lack of connection between British administration and the messy realities of Indian life, often gave the British the unrealistic idea that they could rationally reconstruct Indian social forms, whether revenue systems, economic relations, or forms of law. Early attempts at the codification of Hindu jurisprudence in the 1820s, for example, were far more interventionist in intent than most historians realize. British officials writing 'codes' of Hindu jurisprudence often believed that they were actively remaking Indian law. In the central offices of Britain's colonial bureaucracy textual knowledge and British administration had a far closer relationship than even Edward Said imagined, even if space for 'dialogue' between Britons and Indians existed elsewhere.[75]

One of the most important consequences of this colonial 'hyper-rationalism' occurred in the way Indians responded to it. Challenging the aloof, dessicated language of colonial liberalism, many of the colonial regime's interlocutors used a vocabulary which articulated a heightened sense of homely Indian life, producing criticisms of colonial rationalism that celebrated the importance of familiar forms of sociability and local connection, rural life,

[73] For the rigid application of an abstract model of the market, for example, see David Hall-Matthews, *Peasants, famine and the state in colonial western India* (Basingstoke, 2005).

[74] E. M. Collingham, *Imperial bodies: the physical experience of the Raj, 1800–1947* (London, 2001); Jon E. Wilson, *The domination of strangers*, ch. 2; Buettner, *Empire families*.

[75] Jon E. Wilson, 'The anxieties of distance: codification in early colonial Bengal', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007), pp. 7–23. For the existence of dialogue in other institutional spaces see Michael Dodson, 'Re-presented for the *pandits*: James Ballanntyne, "useful knowledge" and Sanskrit scholarship in Benares during the mid-nineteenth century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 (2002), pp. 257–98, and Michael Dodson, *Orientalism, empire and cultural nationalism in India, 1770–1880* (Basingstoke, 2007).

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and face-to-face folk culture. Clear parallels can be drawn with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German critics of bureaucratic rationality from Freidrich Hölderlin to Martin Heidegger. But the difference was that intellectuals such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mohandas K. Gandhi identified such hyper-rationalism with the culture of 'the West' or 'modern civilization' in order to present a vision of an authentic alternatively rational Indian 'society' instead.[76] As assumptions about the 'West's' possession of a single form of 'modernity' break down, studies of the complex ways in which Indians engaged with European thought and constructed and criticized Europe become a fruitful area of historical inquiry.[77]

Ranajit Guha notes that colonialism in India was marked by the inability of its rulers to feel 'at home' in India.[78] Such a sense of 'unhomeliness' should not simply be seen as an inevitable consequence of the fact that Britons were aliens ruling a foreign land. To do so would be to treat 'national' and 'cultural' differences as naturally given, and to ignore the extent to which a British sense of alien-ness in India was actively (and sometimes consciously) produced by a complex set of historical processes. In some respects, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam argues, this British feeling of being different had pre-colonial antecedents, perhaps in early modern British notions of despotism used to distinguish European from Asian states.[79] But this review has emphasized the more contingent and rapid breakdown of British relations with the idioms of early modern Indian political life in the late eighteenth century, followed by the dialectic of colonial state-building and Indian 'society-formation' from the 1790s onwards. A surprising feature of South Asian history is the fact that one of the most obvious questions, namely, why Britons and Indians believed they were so different from one another, remains so poorly explored. As historians break apart notions of 'civilizational' difference that a century or more of orientalist and anthropological scholarship has encrusted on to the academic landscape, that topic will be a source of exciting research and debate in years to come. To answer questions of this kind, and to develop a more nuanced account of what 'colonialism' was than is allowed in current approaches requires historians to step beyond the imperial paradigm, to move 'Britain' and 'India' outside a straightforward binary framework and to place the history of India's modernity within a broader set of connections and comparisons. Such an approach might allow Europe to be 'provincialized', and both undermine and historically explain the claim that Europe is 'the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories'.[80]

[76] See for example Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* (Madras, 1921), and M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Cambridge, 1910; here 1997 edn). For an argument about Indian notions of reason see Gyan Prakash, *Another reason: science and imagination of modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

[77] Some of these themes are tackled in the essays by Shruti Kapila and Andrew Sartori in the special edition of *Modern Intellectual History* on 'A new history of ideas for India', 4 (2007).

[78] Ranajit Guha, 'Not at home in empire', *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (1997), pp. 482–93.

[79] Subrahmanyam, 'Frank submissions: the Company and the Mughals'.

[80] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for "Indian" pasts?', *Representations*, 37 (1992), p. 1.

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