

The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835

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It has begun to seem clear that the modern British Empire was driven by a remarkable amount of uncertainty. Far from the shameless and confident enterprise some once imagined, the value and proper shape of overseas expansion was – from Hakluyt to Hobson – a matter of constant and consistent debate. This was particularly true in the 18th century, as the nature of that empire was itself in flux, whether in Bengal, Quebec, or any number of points between. In terms which have now become familiar, territorial expansion and a mass of new, non-British subjects challenged an empire that imagined itself to be ‘Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free’ to come to terms with its identity as ‘a free though conquering people’.⁽¹⁾ Modern empire thus found its ideological power not solely in the relentless expansion of blue water navies and sepoy armies but in the measures – such as the trial of Warren Hastings or the abolition of the slave trade – to regulate, accommodate, and validate what was in fact a strange and often discomfiting project. Imperial aplomb was, in the end, something made not born.

While we have come over the past decades to think and know more about this imperial ‘anxiety’, it has tended to be understood largely as a metropolitan problem: how the excesses of those abroad affected, and in turn were affected by, the ambivalent reactions of those ‘at home’. This, in turn, has blurred the formerly stark lines that marked the transition between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ British empires, though in some ways also reinforced that division, by envisioning imperial anxiety as a sort of moment of transition, which ultimately gave way to a more comfortable and confident – more modern – form of empire.

In this innovative and stimulating book, Jon Wilson both extends and, in several ways, inverts this issue,

suggesting that the critical conversation determining the shape of Britain's new empire in India was not necessarily to be found in London newspapers, coffeehouses, and parliamentary inquiries, but in the courthouses, district offices, and emerging public sphere of late 18th- and early 19th-century Bengal. East India Company judges, administrators, and governors in early colonial Bengal, as Wilson describes them, discovered governing over strangers – that is, in its early modern sense, foreigners – to be a keenly paralytic experience, particularly in India. The natural and immediate response was not hubris but desperation, or perhaps an odd mixture of the two. British officials thus, in fits and starts, found themselves searching for more general and abstract rules and principles that suited the frustration and detachment that governing by custom in India seemed to produce. As a consequence, the style of empire we now come to associate with modern British India – dismissive of the South Asian past and present, 'liberal' and 'utilitarian' in its character, universalizing in its scope and ambition, exemplified in any number of quotes from Macaulay – was not primarily a European export but a product of the act of governing itself. Thus, importantly, this book implies, such 'anxiety' over governing strangers never could really ever subside, but only be diverted into a style of government which assuaged it by treating its subjects *as* strangers, through universal, abstract, and codified laws. Yet, the final turn to Wilson's argument reveals, this was not an exception but the rule for how politics across the world would come to regard their citizens in the 19th-century; in other words, British India was not the product but indeed the very model of the modern state.

If *The Domination of Strangers* ends with this fall into modernity, to which we will return, it first begins in a sort of prelapsarian 'connected' early modern global moment, worked out here in the second chapter but of the sort also described in different ways by recent scholars, such as C. A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. (2) From this vantage, Hanoverian Britain and Mughal Bengal looked far from the alien political cultures we once imagined. In Europe and Asia, relationships between lords and patrons, landholders and peasants, princes and subjects were similarly based in networks of patronage and hierarchy, mediated by negotiation and forms of moral economy. In both, politics and the law were deeply and indelibly integrated with history, custom, and tradition. In neither was the early modern state a monolithic institution: rulers may have made aspirational and prescriptive claims to total power but in practice relied upon a political system that operated on 'different levels within a complex web of institutions that criss-crossed rural society,' whether on JPs, corporations, and landlords or *faujdars*, *nawabs*, and *zamindars*, not to mention peasants, merchants, and artisans of all stripes. As a result, the early modern Eurasian polity was by form and function deeply integrated with society, not distinguished from it, or, in Wilson's words, 'political practice was [a kind of action] inseparable from social life' (pp. 29–30).

Wilson illustrates this not only analytically, but with some compelling comparisons, that push beyond the standard marvel that 1707 witnessed both the death of Aurangzeb and the union of England and Scotland – or, at the very least, which understand that those two coincident events also had similar ramifications. For example, Wilson notes that the challenges posed to the British state by the mid 18th-century Jacobite rebellion found an analogy in the simultaneous Maratha invasions of Bengal (to which he could also probably have added, perhaps if taking a wider lens than the study permits, the disruptions occasioned by the slightly earlier Persian 'sacking' of Delhi). It is a thought-provoking insight, though one which also perhaps highlights some further questions. Both moments can and need to be understood as part of succession struggles, born of the military and fiscal demands of expanding states, but which state matches to which? The Maratha incursions were a product of the space opened by the decentralization of the Mughal Empire and the increasing power of a state on Bengal's borders; the same dynamic could hardly describe Scotland, where it seems more like the Jacobite invasions were a rebellion *against* an increasingly centralizing state from its periphery rather than on behalf of one. Conversely, it may be possible that instead of pulling up reins, we might just need to push the comparison even farther. In particular, historians of other parts of South Asia might wonder how to fit this insightful vision of Bengal into a wider lens: did *Mughal* rule, for example, seem as familiar and socially embedded in the south, for example, where the Mughal state was no older by the time of Muhammad Ali Khan than British rule in Bengal by the time of Macaulay. Thus, if Mughal Bengal is best analogized to somewhere in the English south, is the 18th-century Mughal Karnatic the Indian version of the Scottish highlands? And, if Mughal rule was somehow less embedded in some parts of South Asia than others, perhaps this may have been an important influence on those alternative visions of

revenue administration, like those of Thomas Munro in Madras, which Wilson rightly points out ‘inflected’ the conversation in Bengal while similarly attempting ‘to apply a set of consistent, general rules across the whole of Madras’ agrarian society which offered little room for the vicissitudes of time and movement, or local diversity’ (p. 127).

These are simply some thought experiments which may unfairly stray, of course, from Wilson’s central point: governing Bengal was not like governing an English province, not because British and Mughal forms of government were so alien from one another but because, in many ways, they were so similar – just not similar enough. Wilson draws on and amplifies the work of Robert Travers, who has shown how Company officials in the wake of the acquisition of the *diwani*, or office of revenue collector, in Bengal searched for a coherent way to translate Indian law and custom into policy, which they found in the familiar but increasingly contested and modified languages of ancient constitutionalism (e.g., p. 51).⁽³⁾ Both Company officials and those Bengalis they governed could imagine a state and society tied together through custom and tradition, what Company officials translated into a ‘Mughal ancient constitution’. As Wilson argues, the problem with this did not inhere, as the scholarship on Orientalism has tended to argue, in the fact that the British relied on *pandits*, *munshis*, *dubashes*, and *qazis* to interpret, privilege, and codify one version of the past at the expense of a flexible and multiple, but ultimately inscrutable, Indian present. Wilson’s Britons were perfectly comfortable with a politics of flexibility and multiplicity, and could even approximate it in many ways in Bengal. What they lacked was the intuitive understanding of custom and tradition in South Asia necessary truly to get it – for example, to adjudicate seemingly equally valid but rival civil claims, or to understand property relations in their proper historical context. Try as they might, Company officials quickly found they did not have the proper ‘analytical vocabulary’ to describe and interpret 18th-century Indian politics (p. 41) nor the proper ‘context’ in which they could ‘convert facts into norms’ (p. 126). In fits and starts, this retreat from history and custom took shelter in a ‘particularly abstract, objectivising style of thought,’ derived from the increasingly characteristic detachment of rule itself: the tendency, in the words of Company critic Ghulam Hussein Khan Tabatabai – who himself has been experiencing somewhat of an historiographical renaissance of late – to treat Indian subjects ‘like pictures on a wall’ (pp. 12–3).

Here it is worth pausing to catch a glimpse of Wilson’s attempt not simply to offer a new theory of colonial state formation but indeed a set of suggestions about the methodology of the history of political thought itself. The book finds its apostasy within the broad church of the ‘linguistic turn’ on the one hand and historical anthropology on the other — both of which have been very influential in defining the ways we understand the tensions of this early colonial encounter. Such critiques are not uncommon but tend simply to dismiss both as too theoretically inflected. Wilson instead offers alternatives. Instead of Michel Foucault, he has Martin Heidegger, while Bernard Cohn is counterpoised to Georg Simmel. From Heidegger, Wilson derives an epistemological foundation for his argument, which suggests that understanding is not derived from abstract speech-acts but direct engagement with the world. This has two major consequences for Wilson’s argument: first, the historical observation that any politics which is not involved in the world around it is bound to face a crisis of meaning; second, historiographically, we need to look for political thought not in the ether but on terra firma, as understood but also produced by those who themselves did the governing. Through Simmel, we are introduced to a modern state not distinguished by the difference between Eastern and Western styles of politics, but simply defined as a regime, wherever it is found, which treats its subjects as ‘strangers.’

Thus, for Wilson, Ghulam Hussein Khan is ‘uncannily Heideggerian’, in his implicit complaint that the problem with British administrators was that they acted and reacted as if they were outside rather than involved with the Bengal they governed; thus removed, it is no surprise they could not truly understand the task before them (p. 13). (This, of course, raises an odd, somewhat renegade thought in my mind, as to whether or not there is an alternative but possibly complimentary interpretation to be found as well in a Heideggerian aesthetics, which might imagine these ‘pictures on a wall,’ like van Gogh’s ‘Pair of Shoes,’ to be not just a detached imitation of Indian society but even productive of new, but ultimately dangerously incomplete and flawed, way of understanding itself. The metaphor includes artwork and the artist, but absent the essential understanding of the art; in even more starkly Heideggerian terms, perhaps British rule in India

is 'earth' without 'world'?) What is crucially 'Heideggerian' in this sense is also the notion that the search for Indian custom began to fail by the end of the 18th century not because it became anathema to a new generation of English sensibilities: a conflict between an older style of 'Orientalism,' embodied in someone like Warren Hastings and William Jones, and a newer generation of 'Anglicists,' 'Utilitarians,' and 'Liberals,' like Cornwallis, Mill, and Macaulay. Rather, the transformation in the style of government came as Company governors found themselves on 'an anxious search for semantic coherence' produced by the fact that they were 'in a world they did not understand' (pp. 7, 105).

On the one hand, this anxiety was political and administrative, a failure of affective engagement or intuition to provide adequate languages through which to govern, 'stable hermeneutic practices' (p. 97) to resolve disputes, define and prosecute crime, or collect revenue. On the other, this alienation was also epistemic, psychological, and emotional, informed by the rampant loneliness, strangeness, and linguistic and cultural distance experienced by Britons in India itself.⁽⁴⁾ The result was 'a mood of anxious detachment [that] dominated the way officials privately discussed their lives' (p. 66). (It would be of course tempting to quip that Wilson has just replaced utilitarianism and liberalism with another British export: the quintessentially 'English malady' of melancholy). This is a compelling insight, though it does suggest that there is much more story to be told about the history of British India (and empire more broadly) as a history of emotions, especially how this kind of unhappy detachment translated into policy, society, and culture as these colonial figures and administrators came 'home'. It also leaves open the possibility for others to think through how this might affect our vision of another quite vibrant subject in the historical literature on empire: that is, Britons' fascination with actual 'pictures on the wall', the kinds of art, artifacts, and collecting that also characterized this engagement with India. After all, while it is true that 'Robert Clive had his Claremont' (p. 68) he also had his Plassey in County Clare, both populated with physical reminders of India and neither of which could prevent at least his, ultimately fatal, melancholy.

This raises another set of questions which might engage some historians of early modern Britain: the degree to which British (or Mughal, for that matter) rulers also had the potential to see their subjects as 'pictures on the wall'. While there is no doubt the conditions described by Wilson represent a fundamental break from the past, early modern Britain was not without at least its impulses to nationalize and abstract: discourses of political economy, political arithmetic, probabilistic science and statistics, credit, classification, and the incipient challenges to the 'moral economy' all carried with them the germ of 'the assumption that it was possible to use general, social scientific categories which were supposed to have meaning across the whole of the province' (p. 129). Importantly, these were produced from precisely the sorts of dynamics implicit in the expansion of state power that Wilson describes, though by no means as extensive or complete. Did Company figures like Holt Mackenzie – who contrasted the need for abstract, formalist, and seemingly arbitrary rule in India, Ireland, and highland Scotland with a more flexible and de-centered government of 'friendship and neighbourhood' in southern Britain (p. 145) – offer a perceptive vision of home or a slightly idealized one? Was the 'almost Burkean description of the polity as a de-centered web' any less prescriptive than the Hobbesian Leviathan, especially in an 18th-century India which seemed to produce as much anxiety about political authority as 17th-century England? None of this at all challenges Wilson's premise or his conclusions; it simply is to suggest that perhaps the exclusively pastoral vision of Britain produced by early 19th-century Company administrators was also in part a product of the encounter with a 'strange and uncertain' India (p. 132). Put another way: nothing assuages anxiety like nostalgia – or, in Wilson's words, 'the familiar fantasy of life back home' (p. 192).

Whether Britain was possibly slightly more 'modern' in the 18th century than Wilson suggests, however, has very little to do with the central foundations of his argument that it was the failure of Company officials to govern through Indian society that compelled them to create a system that fundamentally divorced politics from it. This insight offers a critique both of the genealogy of colonial liberalism but also the Indian responses to it, and thus a different way of talking about the question of whether nationalism was a 'derivative' discourse. Even ostensibly anti-liberal nationalism, Wilson argues in chapter seven, accepted the premises established by that liberal regime: namely, that society was alienated and severed from the state. In this vision, there was a fast distinction between *samaj* and *sarkar*, though for those rejecting colonial rule, it

was ‘Bengal’s ‘social institution’ rather than its polity was seen as the place where proper indigenous practice occurred’ (p. 181). Wilson’s argument implies that to see society as separate from the polity, in either Europe or Asia, is not a natural division but a product of the arguments of generated by the contingent circumstances of attempting to rule a modern state, and the consistent discovery of just how limited that ability was. Thus, in a different direction, this book also suggests to me that modern state strength is produced not out of an inexorable logic for expansion but indeed from its own endemic anxieties and insecurities. It is a powerful and sobering image of the modern state and empire, one that looks less like Big Brother, and more like a schoolyard bully.

In the end, *The Domination of Strangers* is a remarkably evocative book, and what has been said here should be taken as inspired by rather than critical of its interventions. Its methodological suggestiveness – both in its particular understanding of what marks a ‘modern’ state as well as its arguments that the history of political thought must attend not just to abstract philosophy or to its reception, but to the ideas produced out of political practice of those in the middle who did the governing (5) – will make it quite stimulating reading both within colonial history and beyond it. Though it is by no means the first work of late to highlight the centrality of imperial anxiety in determining the shape of the late 18th-century British Indian Empire, it relocates that crisis of confidence from London to Calcutta and provincial Bengal and into the hands (and heads) not primarily of polemicists and parliamentarians, but of judges, administrators, and governors engaged in the everyday practices of rule. It is also extremely provocative to suggest that the anxiety that accompanied expansion was not simply the abstract problem of measuring liberty against conquest, but in fact was actually engendered by the frustrations implicit in doing the business of empire itself.

Consequently, its solution came not in the ‘confident articulation of coherent ideas expressing Britain’s will to transform Bengal, nor the expression of Enlightenment principles,’ but rather from a somewhat panicked, incoherent, and non-linear response (p. 46). That East India Company officials began to treat India as strange because that is how they perceived it, and in the process prompted a revolutionary way of thinking, gives a remarkable texture to the deeply flawed act of colonial rule, not to mention to our understanding of the modern state itself.

Notes

1. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000); P. J. Marshall, ‘‘A free though conquering people’’: Britain and Asia in the eighteenth century’ (1981), reprinted in P. J. Marshall, *A Free Though Conquering People’’: Eighteenth-Century Britain and its Empire* (Aldershot, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Delhi, 2005); C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA, 2004), esp. chaps. 1–2.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: the British in Bengal* (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Here Wilson draws inspiration, quite cleverly, from William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2002).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. To show my sympathy for this point in particular, though not nearly as articulately or extensively worked out, see Philip J. Stern, ‘Rethinking institutional transformations in the making of modern empire: the East India Company in Madras’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 9, 2 (Fall 2008).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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