Colonial Governmentality: Critical Notes from a Perspective of South Asian Studies

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RESÜMEE

Das Konzept der kolonialen Gouvernementalität, das in Anlehnung an Foucaults Theorien entwickelt wurde, ist in den letzten zwei Dekaden gerade in der südostasiatischen Geschichte oftmals als Ansatz benutzt wurden, um koloniale Gesellschaften zu interpretieren. Der Aufsatz untersucht diesen Ansatz kritisch und entwickelt eine nuanciertere historische Herangehensweise an koloniale Situationen. An Beispielen aus der Geschichtsschreibung Indiens und Sri Lankas wird erläutert, inwiefern das Projekt der „colonial governmentality / modernity" eine Überinterpretation der kolonialen Dominanz in der Forschung erzeugte und wie dadurch die Rolle der Kolonisierten und deren Spielräume im kolonialen Machtsystem marginalisiert wurden. Außerdem wird grundsätzlich auf die Vielfalt der kolonialen Situation verwiesen, die nur durch eine verstärkte Erforschung der Lebenswelt der Kolonisierten wahrgenommen werden könne.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some critical but constructive notes on the notion of colonial governmentality which has in the past two decades provided a convenient grid for the understanding of relations between colonizers and colonized. It does not in any way attempt to engage with or debunk more general ideas on governmentality, ideas that Michel Foucault quite magisterially elaborated in some of his later lectures at the College de France and elsewhere.[1] Taking most of his examples from early modern Europe, Foucault devoted a good deal of attention to the theme of modern political power; in particular its rationality, sources, character and targets. He suggested that a new set of concerns heralded new foci of power – clustered not around the binary of 'us'

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1   M. Foucault, Sécurité, Territoire, Population. Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978), Paris 2004; for a useful synthesis, see: G. Burchell / C. Gordon / P. Miller (eds.), The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, Chicago 1991.

and 'them' but around a more complicated set of concerns about life based on statistical probabilities and rational normative discourses. How well do his ideas translate into the relations of power that prevailed in the colonized world and how helpful to think with and formative of explanation is the concept of colonial governmentality?

I belong to the generation who began writing in the early 1990s in the wake of intellectual giants such as Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, and the Subaltern Studies collective of historians.[2] The debt of my generation of scholars to Foucault's work and that of his intercessors cannot be dismissed easily. James C. Scott compared works of great originality to a shipyard and suggested that a sure mark of influence was how many ships were launched from its dock. I have no doubt, to borrow Scott's words, that around the world "thousands of ships have since sailed forth flying his pennant" and others are still ready to sail away.[3] But with hindsight it is now clear that while Foucault unlocked a new world of interpretation, at the same time he gave us the hubris to think that we were the privileged ones who held the key.

For a scholar of colonialism whose archive was the Sri Lanka British colonial state Foucault's work was an invitation to rethink the story told in the 1960s and 1970s by liberal and Marxist scholars alike about the nature of the colonial state – benevolent or extractive – and the relations between colonizers and colonized.[4] According to these master narratives the state was the privileged site of an immense power standing in opposition to a civil society – nested between state and market – imagined either as the absence of power or as the fulfillment of freedom. These works that belonged to the British empirical tradition were written in a theoretical void, totally divorced from the shattering developments in philosophy and social theory encapsulated in the term 'poststructuralism' that were sweeping through continental Europe. Foucault was, for instance, painstakingly tracking the emergence in early modern Europe of a new form of political rationality which combined simultaneously two seemingly contradictory modalities of power: one totalizing and centralizing, the other individualizing and normalizing. A decade later however, all the certitudes of Sri Lankan colonial historians would be questioned by scholars formed in the American and European academia, cognizant of Michel Foucault's 1978 lectures on governmentality as well as parallel radical trends emerging closer to home in India.

It has now become increasingly commonplace, even banal, to understand the circulation of power as a decentered process. The excitement of the 1980s and 1990s is gone. Today everywhere – with the exception of the Netherlands where postcolonialism is still marginalized – scholars are using Foucauldian frames to explore the production of colonial

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2   E. Said, Orientalism, New York 1979; B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, revised edn., London 1991; R. Guha / G. Spivak (eds.), Selected Subaltern Studies, New York 1988.

3   See foreword by James Scott in: R. Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, Durham / London 1999, p. IX.

4   In the Sri Lankan context see: K. M. de Silva, History of Ceylon (ed.), v. III, Peradeniya 1973.

subjects.[5] Instead of identifying government with the centralized locus of state rule, this burgeoning governmentality literature argues that governmental power operates through the production of discursive normalizations, political rationalities, and techniques of regulation that ultimately produce subjects that behave as they are expected to.

Let me spell out some of my concerns with the generalisations and essentialisation of colonial governmentality as well as give just a few insights from my own work to argue for the need for a more contextualized, nuanced, and historically attentive approach to relations of power in colonial situations.

1. The Production of Colonial Modernity

One concern I have with the notion of colonial governmentality is the manner in which colonialism is essentialized in studies that use it as a grid to read the effects of colonial domination on subject populations. This is the case even in theoretically sophisticated works of scholars such as Antoinette Burton or David Scott whose underlying thesis is that colonization was a universal project that had as its aim to inscribe the colonized in the space of modernity.[6] One can only agree with Frederick Cooper who has forcefully argued that while there were colonial initiatives in the 19th and 20th centuries that might be described this way, it makes little sense to say that the sum of such efforts produces a 'colonial modernity' or that colonial administrators intended them to do so.[7] This is not to deny that there were such initiatives; one of them being in the field of education in India. Gauri Visvanathan has demonstrated to what extent Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education was designed under the "guise of liberal education" with the aim of preventing the risk of native insubordination.[8] But can we follow Gyan Prakash when he argues that there was a well defined aim to discredit indigenous systems of knowledge to ensure that 'natives' could be trained with modern scientific methods and lifted into the cradle of civilization?[9] Anyone who has read minutes of colonial administrators at the Public Records Office will agree that most of them did not have the faintest idea what they were doing. Beyond the immediate task of running a colony there was no grand plan, or if it existed it must have been in the realm of the tentative and the uncertain. Ann Laura Stoler makes this point when she shows that although rules of classification of peoples were produced by civil servants (in the Netherlands East Indies) they were 'fash-

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5   As an exception, see: A. Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule, Berkeley / Los Angeles 2002. For a critique of Dutch colonial historiography, see: J. Cote, Strangers in the House: Dutch Historiography and Anglophone Trespassers, in: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs, 43 (2009) 1, pp. 75-94.

6   A. Burton (ed.), Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities, London 1999; D. Scott, Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality, Princeton 1999.

7   F. Cooper, Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History, Berkeley 2005, p. 143.

8   G. Visvanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India, New York 1989.

9   G. Prakash, Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India, Princeton 1999.

ioned from uncertain knowledge' and were an 'unruly and piecemeal venture at best'.[10] The quality of colonial rule is better described as haphazard and tentative. So we must be mindful of the slippage in some scholarship from arguments that were articulated from within colonial regimes to an "essence of colonial rule" in the modern era.[11]

We must also avoid facile causal explanations that are present in even the most sophisticated accounts of colonial rule where it is common to read colonial governmentality as the mechanism that led to the onset of colonial modernity and its alter ego capitalism in the colony. Colonial modernity in turn is made responsible for various transformations in the colony. Taking these as self-evident explanatory grids, 'modernity' is endowed with some kind of agency as in this example taken from a recent work on Africa: "What is more, given that modernity has engendered forms of social living that command our approbation in different parts of the world…."[12]

In this example modernity is given a causal significance. The danger with this type of explanation is that it casts away other types of analysis and other historical frames. Events surely happen owing to multiple agents, actions, forces and processes.

Furthermore, the framing already presupposes the answer. The 'why' question, crucial to the craft of the historian, disappears when a question is already framed through the lens of governmentality / modernity. So my first critique relates to the way the overall history of the 19th- and 20th-century colonized territories has been read by some scholars through the lens of colonial governmentality or colonial modernity, neglecting the other factors that generated change by assuming that colonial rules had a complete political and cultural authority over those it ruled.

2. Colonial Governmentality and Subaltern Studies

Another concern linked to this idea of essentialism is the way one case study (as India or Bengal) is used to make universal pronouncements and claims over colonialism – a phenomenon that spanned five centuries at least and all continents. Historians from India or using India as their archive have argued very forcefully that modern governmentality was imposed upon colonial subjects. From the late 1980s onwards this notion reoriented the way power was conceptualized in many studies of the British Raj and of other South Asian colonies and the way relations between colonizers and colonized were written about.

The most influential scholarship came indeed from the Subaltern Studies collective of Indian historians. Influenced by Foucault but also by Gramsci and rebelling both against the nationalist and the Marxist traditions in Indian history, they examined the ways in which the imposition of a kind of colonial governmentality in India shaped the very

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10   A. L. Stoler, Along the Archival Grain, Princeton 2009.
11   F. Cooper, Colonialism in Question (footnote 7), p. 143.
12   O. Taiwo, How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa, Bloomington 2009, p. 4.

conditions in which knowledge could be obtained and organized. Inspired by Bernard Cohn's pioneering work, their works centered on the importance British officials attached to institutions that defined the subject in relation to the state – the census, the survey, and more generally the collection of knowledge that defines a 'population' and can be used to maintain surveillance and superintend social change.[13] These historians creatively adapted Foucault's paradigm by incorporating a reflection on resistance and what was being resisted. They questioned whether the Foucauldian approach gave adequate tools to understand the deflections, reinterpretations and reconfigurations to which indigenous peoples subjected colonial power systems. They saw a need to study how modes of power were received, lived and transcended.[14] But in many ways by privileging texts and their exegesis over social being and materiality, subaltern historians tended to replicate the axioms and premises of colonial representations.[15]

These scholars explored to what extent the modes of governmentality that Michel Foucault had shown as characterizing modern Europe were deployed in a field of power that included the metropole and the colony, in this case India. Gyan Prakash for instance pointed out to what made colonial governmentality profoundly different from that which was being enacted in the West, was its absolute need for domination. Unlike in the West, he argued the purpose was to dominate in order to liberate.[16]

Where these scholars were less cautious was when they implicitly or explicitly applied the situation in Bengal or another region of India to the entire subcontinent and even to the other colonized worlds. In Sri Lanka, my own work on the construction of authenticity as Kandyan Sinhalese shows that colonial rule depended not only on making the individual subject understandable within the categories of the state, but on a collectivized and reified notion of traditional authority.[17] So clearly there was no one single colonial situation which calls for a unifying colonial modernity. Cooper has pointed out that the situation was quite different in African countries such as Kenya where the first census was done in 1948. In many instances, colonial administrators saw little need to classify and count or see subjects with relation to the state, as they read them as belonging to tribes that were governed through the collectivity.[18]

While the Subaltern Studies tried to reveal that there existed a much richer range of oppositional movements and ways of thinking than colonial or nationalist elites were capable of seeing or acknowledging, they ignored the fact that other scholars in the field

13   B. S. Cohn, An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays, New Delhi 1991.
14   F. Cooper, Colonialism in Question (footnote 7), pp. 48-50.
15   Gayathi Spivak, however, encouraged and critiqued the work of the Subaltern Studies group. In her 'Can the Subaltern speak' in C. Nelson / L. Grossberg (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, Urbana Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, she takes issue with Michel Foucault and other postcolonial critiques for effacing their role as intellectuals in representing disempowered groups and letting the oppressed subjects speak for themselves.
16   G. Prakash, Another Reason (footnote 9).
17   Nira Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age. A History of Contested Identities, London C.Hurst and Honolulu University of Hawaii Press 2006, pp. 73-111.
18   F. Cooper, Colonialism in Question (footnote 7), p. 143.

of peasant studies were doing the same in a manner that explored forms of politics that had often led to alliances between elites and peasants. Their work shows that subalterns were quite readily and willingly mobilized by nationalists of various sorts, adopted on many occasions non-violent forms of struggle described as 'elitist' by Subaltern historians and participated in civil disobedience movements in a manner displaying their political consciousness. The politics of engagement were more complex than anti-colonial politics split between autonomous subalterns and colonized elites.[19]

Increasingly scholars questioned Ranajit Guha's formulation that described the particular form of power in colonial situations as domination without hegemony – that gave rise to particular forms of subaltern politics in which the very non-hegemonic nature of the state allowed subaltern groups a considerable measure of autonomy. Chandavarkar for instance called out to find ways around "the sterile dichotomies of East and West, science and superstition, rationality and rumour which have enveloped the subject".[20]

Most colonial regimes of the 19th and 20th centuries combined coercive domination with hegemonic strategies such as dissemination of Christianity, European literature and science which trapped subjects within a web of beliefs and values.

3. Colonial Governmentality in Sri Lanka

I would like to turn to what I think is the most articulate and field defining work on governmentality that uses Sri Lanka as an archive; namely the work of anthropologist David Scott who developed a line of thinking to move toward a better understanding of the operation of colonial power.[21] His influential piece set forth ways of understanding the political terrains that colonial power made possible: what new forms of subjectivity, society, and normalcy Europe's insertion into the lives of the colonized organized and produced. He did so by working through one particular historical instance: what he called the "formation of Sri Lanka's modernity", which he traced back to British Ceylon's Colebrooke-Cameron constitutional reforms of the early 1830s. These institutional changes, Scott skillfully argues constituted a crucial break with the past, ushering in Sri Lanka's modernity by way of "the introduction of a new game of politics that the colonized would (eventually) be obliged to play if they were to be counted as political".[22]

David Scott's work is important because it moves away from the writing back at the West strategy of much of the work on colonialism where what is at stake is the way colonialism as a practice of power works to include or exclude the colonized (the epistemic violence

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19   M. Mukherjee, Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory, New Delhi 2004; R. O'Hanlon, Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia, in: Modern Asian Studies, 22 (1988) 1, pp. 189-224; R. O'Hanlon / D. Washbrook, After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World, in: Comparative Studies in Society and History, 34 (1992) 1, pp. 141-167.

20   R. Chandavarkar, Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class Resistance and the State in India c. 1850–1950, Cambridge 1998.

21   D. Scott, Colonial Governmentality, in: Social Text, 43 (1995); D. Scott, Refashioning Futures (footnote 6).

22   D. Scott, Refashioning Futures (footnote 6), chapter 1.

of colonialist discourse). He tells us the story of Sri Lanka's colonial modernity along the axis of the displacement of one kind of political rationality – that of mercantilism or sovereignty up to 1832 – by another, that of governmentality with the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms. In a nutshell these reforms which followed the arrival of a commission of enquiry in 1830 introduced the idea of political representation, modern social institutions, and a capitalist plantation economy. In Scott's article and book, the move towards colonial modernity is described not in the language of modernization but read as a transformation of power, as colonial power adopting a different strategy and working on through different targets.

My own work on colonial petitions gives a somewhat different picture of 'colonial power' where power was much less routinized and normalized and colonial power was understood as made of different and often conflicting forces and individuals.[23] Let me give one example. Scott argues that through the creation of a modern public sphere colonized subjects were recast as modern subjects. But what then of those who were outside this enchanted circle, what then of 95 percent of the peoples? Their relation to the colonial state cannot be understood through the grid of governmentality. The form of political action – the petition – which they used was a political instrument that existed during Dutch colonialism (18th century) and if petitions did not succeed in obtaining their demands they rebelled. They were outside the field of governmentality and remained so well into the 20th century. The petition constituted the domain of those who were not yet ready for a 'civilized government', for the social groups that John Stuart Mill suggested were still under control of the Gods, the spirits and the supernatural beings and who did not frequent the same spheres as the bourgeois. Since they had no civic rights they used the petition to express their demands and sentiments. The petition is evidence of the presence of a dense and heterogeneous time in the colony where the times of the modern – of the quasi citizen and of the pre-modern – of populations – were coeval.[24] The petition can thus be understood as a democratic instrument and as a form of political action. But it is a double-edged instrument. It favoured direct contacts between plaintiffs and authorities but at the same time it did not encourage the formation of political institutions that represented rather than simply listened to grievances of the people. David Scott's analysis of colonial governmentality addressed only those groups that the colonial state included in its path towards progress, the English speaking westernized bourgeois classes. The politics and voices of the rest, literate in the vernaculars or illiterate who expressed their demands in various ways, are not heard. Empirical archival work would have revealed another world beyond the text of the Colebrook-Cameron report. Perhaps they would uncover singular notions of improvement or progress to which people laid claim; or they would show us peoples who reacted to colonial structures with varying

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23   N. Wickramasinghe, La Petition Coloniale. Objet de Controle, Objet de Dissidence, in: Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue, 7 (2006) 1, pp. 82-97.

24   P. Chatterjee, The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World, New Delhi 2004.

degrees of instrumentality, or display evidence that people thought with little regard to the traditional / modern polarities or even outside that frame altogether.

The words, for instance, that are used today in Sinhala to describe the idea of modern, 'nutana' and 'navina', both from Sanskrit, came to common parlance after the 1930s. Martin Wickramasinghe, the most reputed Sri Lankan novelist of the 20th century, author of a seminal work entitled *Gamperaliya* or *The Changing Village*, used the term in his editorial columns in the two Sinhalese daily newspapers – the *Dinamina* and the *Silumina* – in the 1920s and 1930s and also in his other critical works. But in the late 19th century these words were not common. Most Sinhalese writers used the term 'abhinava' or 'nava' to denote the period, which literally means 'new'. Some writers used the term 'varthamana' (the present, the now) to describe their time. For example John de Silva's play *Sinhala Parabhavaya Natakaya* (1902), a satire on the upper-classes, uses the term 'varthamana kalika', literally the 'present times', in the introduction to the play. If an essential part of being modern is thinking you are modern, modernity was understood as an aspiration to be with the times. The term we use today ('nuthanathvaya') to translate 'modernity' was not used in the early twentieth century.[25]

What is argued here is that the battles that were fought were not fought on the turf of modernity; the positions that were taken were framed differently. How did people understand their condition as dominated beings? How did they describe it in their own indigenous terms? As historians we owe it to the colonized peoples to understand their own framings or rationalities.[26]

4. In Guise of Conclusion

Partha Chatterjee, building on Foucault argument, has pointed out that the ideas of participatory citizenship that were so much a part of the Enlightenment notion of politics have fast retreated before the triumphant advance of governmental technologies that have promised to deliver more well-being to more people at less cost.[27] "Citizens inhabit the domain of theory, populations the domain of policy".[28] Michael Dutton who has traced what he calls the after-life of colonial governmentality has a different view on the part of disciplinary power. In major crises such as natural disasters or when it is necessary to re-establish norms of governance, "sovereign decisionism" – a term he borrows from Carl Schmitt – , "which is an overt form of political intervention, interrupts and overrides the everyday rationality of government".[29] He argues that sovereign power and

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25 Conversation with Sandagomi Coperehewa, Department of Sinhalese, University of Colombo.
26 For instance, see: J. D. Y. Peel, Olaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development, in: Journal of Development Studies, 14 (1978), pp. 139-165.
27 P. Chatterjee, The Politics of the Governed (footnote 21), p. 34.
28 Ibid.
29 M. Dutton, 911: The After-life of Colonial Governmentality, in: Postcolonial Studies, 12 (2009) 3, pp. 303-314, here p. 304.

disciplinary power worked together, merging into a discourse that attempted to occlude the political.[30] His work invites us to think again about the nature of the colonial state and its everyday impact on the lives of the dominated. Cooper argues that Foucault's reading of power as capillary based on European examples hardly fits colonial contexts where power can be described as arterial, strong near the nodal points of colonial authority but less able to impose its discursive grid elsewhere.[31] Indeed in Sri Lanka, the Matara literature of early 19th century gives no reference to colonial rule, either the Dutch or the British, as though the presence and absence of colonial rule was irrelevant. Colonial rule was a shadow that loomed upon aspects of their lives that were more concerned with other forms of politics or other battles for power and distinction.[32] In this sense, we can understand the violence of both the state of coloniality and what Mbembe calls the 'postcolony' as about the failure of the disciplinary technologies and governmentalized technologies of western modernity to produce modern rational subjects.[33]

My own work has addressed the role of the census in framing identities and creating containers for people to use to claim entitlements from the state. But we have few historical sources to demonstrate that the local people's forms of self-representation actually changed. What many scholars documented was in fact the intentions and perceptions of colonial administrators. It is not clear how far the "colonization of the mind" went beyond the minds of missionaries and administrators. The reliance on colonial texts written in the language of the colonizer even read against the grain answers the near obsessive urge to understand how the native was 'represented', but gives us only part of the story, however compelling it might be. Too much lazy scholarly work, which involves a scant use of indigenous sources and limited visits to archives, has paid much attention to the way natives are represented – what Ann Stoler calls "the representation machines" – rather than how they negotiate with colonial state institutions and the market. Furthermore, the global market outside the frame of empire and new consumption forms surely played a role in the shaping of people's perceptions and worldviews in the late 19th century. Historians of the colonial have often overlooked global connections in their refusal to see the colonized / disempowered as purely "consumers of modernity" and eagerness to see them moving in uncontaminated autonomous cultures that create a reservoir of anti-colonialism. If modern subjects were actually created, it was also through various mechanisms and efforts that involved appropriating and deflecting colonial policies. Colonial governmentality is best used as a grid alongside others to understand the relations between colonized and colonizers.

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30   Ibid.
31   F. Cooper, Colonialism in Question (footnote 7), p. 48.
32   See: N. Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities, London 2006, p. 11.
33   A. Mbembe, On the Postcolony, Berkeley 2001.