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Gouvernementalité coloniale et pensée politique à travers l’année « 1931 » dans la colonie de la Couronne de Ceylan/Sri Lanka

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This essay aims to rethink the “political” through a particular event in order to revisit a historical moment and the “political” in a colonial situation. In a common sense understanding, the “political” is a broad category capable of incorporating the way power is exercised in society in ways that


2. Jeremy Valentine (2006) points out that in the English language the notion of the political is “an awkward formulation” that comes from a direct translation from Germanic
conserve and potentially challenge prevailing power arrangements and social hierarchies. This essay hopes to suggest that the political is best read less as a domain or a structure than as a “space of appearance”—I borrow this formulation from Hannah Arendt—where action and speech meet at particular moments to form an organization of people. This space is ephemeral and differentiated and no man or woman lives in it, all the time. It is there “only potentially, not necessarily and not forever” (Arendt, 1998: 199). But first of all, how can we understand the political and why adopt this frame? The term “the political” hypostatized as a noun exists most famously in the works of Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt, who each conceive it in a different way. What they share however is a reading of the “political” as distinguished from institutionally grounded conceptions of “politics” as well as from the “state” or “government.” The political as I envisage it is also there as a distinct sphere of human life or a distinct kind of human potential. Arendt argues that the public realm ought to be seen as separate from both the private and the social and that it is the public that is home to the political. What is possible in the political—action, power and individuality—simply cannot be performed in the other realms of human life. Action, she writes, is the political activity par excellence (Arendt, 1998: 9, 41, 198).

How historians read a critical moment such as the granting of universal suffrage to a subject people in 1931, depends on the “promontoir,” to use Fernand Braudel’s expression, the games of scale they indulge in and the type of lens and analytical frame they choose to muster. In 1931, while world prosperity had collapsed, superseded by an age of tension and extremes, all men and women over twenty-one years of age in a small Crown colony in the Indian Ocean were given the right to vote their representatives to a new chamber called the State Council. Conventional history tells us that universal adult suffrage under colonialism was a unique event in Asia, even worldwide. Sri Lanka/Ceylon was described in the western press as a “laboratory of democracy” and later “a model colony.” Postcolonial histories have read and Romance languages. In French, for instance one has “la politique” (politics) and “le politique” (the political).
this moment quite differently as a reorganization of “colonial modernity” and as a moment when colonized people began to become political.

In this essay, I would like to explore the nature of the “political” in colonial Sri Lanka through an engagement with approaches that have scrutinized the eclosion or production of the political as a field alongside the social or the economic. In a first section, I will examine the reading of 1931 through the lens of colonial modernity and governmentality, outlining what I see as some of the flaws in these approaches. Then I will turn to the early works of Subaltern Studies historians, today subject to much criticism (see, for instance, Chibber, 2013), to recover some of their valuable insights on the political. Finally I will conclude with an outline of my own position that draws from Arendt’s reading of the political as a space of appearance.

1931, colonial modernity and governmentality

A relatively recent rendering of 1931 and the political can be found in anthropologist David Scott’s celebrated *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (1999). This work sets forth ways of understanding the political terrains that colonial power made possible: the new forms of subjectivity, society, and normalcy organized and produced by Europe’s entry into the lives of the colonized. Before addressing the significance of 1931, Scott focused on one particular historical moment—what he called the “formation of Sri Lanka’s modernity”—which he saw as following upon British Ceylon’s Colebrooke-Cameron constitutional reforms of the early 1830s. Scott skillfully argues that these institutional changes 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” (ibid.: chapter 1).

Later in the book, 1931 is indexed as a crucial period in the colony’s move towards self-government. Scott reads the process, however, differently from earlier political historians. This was, he writes, a moment in the “inauguration and reorganization of a colonial modernity” (ibid.: 165). He sees the granting of universal franchise as an experiment in “colonial
Universal suffrage, according to Scott, was to have “an educative or rather a governing effect on the conduct of the elites” (ibid.: 168). His underlying thesis is that colonialism was a universalizing project that had as its aim to inscribe the colonized in the space of modernity (Burton, 1999; Scott, 1999).

David Scott’s work is important because it complicates the conventional reading of 1931 and moves away from the idée fixe of much work on colonialism, the so-called epistemic violence of colonialist discourse, by which power works to include or exclude the colonized.

Conventional history sets the stage in this manner, just as in India, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards institutional procedures were created to objectify and normalize the colonial terrain. This is quite a familiar story. The introduction of communal representation in the Legislative Council was part of the colonial strategy of knowing, classifying and ruling the natives. In 1833, a legislative council composed of British and native (Ceylonese) members was established. In the selection of the natives, the governor had recourse to racial representation, nominating one Low-Country Sinhalese, one Burgher and one Tamil. Under the colonial regime, communities were identified in the “enumerable sense.” This shaped the subsequent forms of mobilization seeking representation in the state domain.

The Donoughmore Commission on constitutional reform brought about an unprecedented form of self-government to the crown colony of Ceylon in the 1930s. The committee headed by Lord Donoughmore was sent to Ceylon in 1927 by the British government to examine the existing constitution and to make recommendations for its revision. The commission recommended a radical extension of the franchise until now limited to a tiny portion of educated Ceylonese and submitted its report to an unusual Secretary of State to the Colonies, Lord Passfield, Sydney Webb, joint founder of the Fabian Socialist Society and the London School of

3. Colonial governmentality inspired by Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality has in the past two decades provided a convenient grid for the understanding of relations between colonizers and colonized and the effects of colonial domination on subject populations. See Foucault (2004); for a useful synthesis see Burchell, Gordon and Miller (1991).
Economics. He accepted all the commission’s proposals and even went a little further. This entailed universal adult suffrage for the Ceylonese. Literacy and property qualifications that had been in force were abolished, residency became the criterion for civic rights.

Thus, in 1931, seventeen years before the country became independent, conventional history tells us that Sri Lanka became the first Asian country to be bestowed with universal suffrage in an interesting experiment in colonial self-governance. Wrongly described as a “major departure in British colonial administration”—since similar moves towards majority rule were occurring in other places of the Empire such as Palestine—this event is generally read as a hurrah moment, a pioneering effort towards an extension of the public sphere. Indeed the number of eligible voters jumped from 205,000 in 1924 to more than 1.5 million in 1931. The liberal story of the extension of the vote and Sri Lankan exceptionalism needs to be measured against the way the granting of citizenship actually entered people’s lives (this includes women’s lives) in a surface, diffuse, and impermanent way (Wickramasinghe, 2006a: 163-168).

In Scott’s story of Sri Lanka’s colonial modernity, one kind of political rationality—that of mercantilism or sovereignty—is displaced by another after 1832, that of governmentality with the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms and later the granting of universal suffrage in 1931. These reforms introduced the idea of political representation, modern social institutions, and a capitalist plantation economy. Scott describes the move towards colonial modernity not in the language of modernization, but simply as transformation, in this case the transformation of power, as colonial authority adopted a different strategy directed at different targets.

What then is this monster “Colonial modernity” that is made responsible for various transformations in the colony and the demarcation of a political field that the people inhabit? One can only agree with Fred Cooper, who has forcefully argued that while there were colonial initiatives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that might be described this way, it makes little sense to say that the sum of such efforts produced a “colonial modernity” or that colonial administrators intended them to do so (Cooper, 2005: 143). 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 (Visvanathan, 1989). 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 (Prakash, 1999)? 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 secret and hidden. 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 (Cooper, 2005: 143).

Colonial modernity in turn is made responsible for various transformations in the colony, including the fashioning of a new domain of the political. Taking these as self-evident explanatory grids, when modernity is endowed with some kind of agency, Cooper argues, it casts away all other types of analysis and other historical frames (ibid.: 134). 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. The colonial frame and modernity have for long over-determined the way historians have analyzed the political in South Asia.

My second ground of dissatisfaction with this reading of 1931 is its lack of interest in the people that were supposedly acted upon, refashioned and transformed. Isn’t the more interesting question: What did 1931 do? Did it really change anything for people who got the vote? Did it in practice reshape the relation between elites and the people in a more egalitarian fashion including all of them in a single domain of the political?

Scott’s work argues that through the creation of a modern public sphere, colonized subjects were recast as modern subjects. This analysis of colonial governmentality, however, addresses only those groups that the colonial state included in its path towards progress. Those people who were admitted to the enchanted realm of the colonial public sphere constituted about five percent of the population. What then of the rest? Their politics and
voices, literate in the vernaculars or wholly illiterate, expressing their demands in various ways, are simply not heard.

Empirical archival work would have revealed to Scott another world beyond the text of the Colebrook-Cameron report and the Donoughmore Constitution of 1927. Colonial petitions that can be found in the archives provide us with a picture of “colonial power” that is somewhat different than Scott’s, a picture in which power was much less routinized and normalized, in which power was constituted by different and often conflicting forces and individuals (Wickramasinghe, 2006b). The form of political action—the petition—adopted by the other ninety-five percent had existed during Dutch colonialism in the eighteenth century. Then, typically, if petitioners did not succeed in obtaining their demands, they rebelled. They acted, in either case, outside the field of governmentality and remained there well into the twentieth 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 the control of Gods, spirits, and 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, then, reveals 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 (Chatterjee, 2004).

It is perhaps time for historians to recapture the space of the past and trade “colonial modernity” and “colonial governmentality” for multiple agents, actions, forces, and processes of historical explanations (Cooper, 2005: 134).

The two domains of the political: early Subaltern Studies

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 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 conditions in which knowledge could be obtained and organized. Inspired by Bernard Cohn’s pioneering work, their work 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 (Cohn, 1991). 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 (Cooper, 2005: 49).

The Subaltern Studies historians made a critical intervention by redefining the category of the “political” in colonial India, which they read a something quite distinct from the formal side of governmental and institutional processes (Guha, 1984: 3-4). They highlighted the existence of an autonomous domain of the “politics of the people,” different from the domain of the politics of the elite. This departed from the boundaries of the category “political” as it was confined to in Western political thought and in historical works of radical historians. Eric Hobsbawm for instance had called peasant revolts “pre-political” and described the consciousness of its participants as not being in tune with the institutional logic of modernity or capitalism. In contrast, Guha and others saw peasants as an integral part of the modernity that colonial rule gave rise to in India. They studied this consciousness through an exploration of the practices of peasants at moments of rebellion and strife. The autonomous domain they identified and that continued to exist in the context of capitalism was traditional only insofar as its roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times.¹

¹ For a discussion of the notion of pre-political in Ranajit Guha’s oeuvre see Chakrabarty (2000).
Building on Walter Benjamin’s idea of an alternative concept of history and temporality, which he called the Jetzzeit or Now-Time (Benjamin, 1979: 261), Chatterjee suggests that a historical period can be lived very differently by diverse actors, anchored in modernity or remaining in a pre-modern time nevertheless shaped by modernity (Chatterjee, 2004: 3-26). His insights are useful to understand the quality of non-synchronism that reflects the differentiated and fragmented nature of the category “colonized” and by extension “citizen” in Sri Lanka during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Other scholars in the Subaltern Studies collective strayed away from the archives and the voice of the subaltern to modes of governing the people during colonial rule. The “political” was then less important than a putative colonial governmentality. Gyan Prakash, for instance, pointed out to what made colonial governmentality profoundly different from that which was being enacted in the West, which was its absolute need for domination. Unlike in the West, he argued the purpose was to dominate in order to liberate (Prakash, 1999).

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 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 (Mukherjee, 2004; O’Hanlon, 1988; O’Hanlon and Washbrook, 1992). But in many ways by privileging texts and their exegesis over social being and materiality, later works of Subaltern historians tended to replicate the axioms and premises of colonial representations.

The early Subaltern Studies delimitation of two braided domains of the political has in some way shaped my own understanding of 1931. My work shows that colonial authorities attempted to structure the societies
they ruled over by encouraging claims and demands of those who were not directly participating in representative politics, through the establishment of inquiry commissions on specific issues such as labor or landlessness. The purpose was both informative as well as aimed at dampening potential threats by winning the consent of these social groups. This was put in place by creating a sort of personalized government closer to pre-modern norms than to the liberal forms grafted onto colonized society. Lord Donoughmore’s 1927 commission heard 140 representatives of groups and individuals express themselves on future constitutional reforms. Caste associations came forward with petitions asking for privileges in the new constitution based on noble lineage. The colonial state gave room to the peripheral voices, whose claims were based on non-liberal principles to put forward their demands. Such communities sought to recast the political again in 1947 before the Soulbury Commission, but their demands no longer rested on references to a glorious past but to a present of discrimination and economic difficulties. Even as the representative principle was extended to all men and women above twenty-one years of age, these older forms of claim-making continued. People did not wait for election time to approach their representatives, letters were written and delivered, and results expected.

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 (Wickramasinghe, 2006a: 11). In this sense, we can understand the violence of both the state of coloniality and what Achille Mbembe calls the “postcolony” as about failure of the disciplinary technologies and governmentalized technologies of Western modernity to produce modern rational subjects (Mbembe, 2001). So the political in 1931 was a far more complex domain than encapsulated in the term “colonial governmentality.” It was a domain where the grievances of the people were heard, where contacts were made between plaintiffs and authorities, citizens and their representatives, but where there was still little room for the formation of autonomous political institutions.
The afterlives of colonial governmentality

In the last decade, South Asianists have renewed with the notion of governmentality and injected it with a new life. They come in the wake of scholars such as Gyan Prakash and James Duncan who had quite early intimated towards the unevenness and fragmentation of modernity and read power less as a set structure than as the resultant of the loose and changing assemblage of governmental practices and rationalities (Prakash, 1999; Duncan, 2007). For Prakash, colonial governmentality was not simply the tropicalisation of a metropolitan type of rule, but something different and disjunctive.

These new works have explicitly attempted to:

[...]

push the study of governmentality in South Asia in new directions—to interrogate, for example, the similarities or differences between the colonial and post-colonial operations of this form of power in South Asia, or the often-ignored linkages between governmental, sovereign and disciplinary power—as well as to question the validity of the very concept of governmentality and its limitations in the study of South Asia.  

One can single out a few studies that illustrate these new trends and directions. Manu Goswami’s Producing India (2004) explores how India got imagined as a territorial unit, emerged as a national space, and acquired a reality as geography, economy, and culture. The novelty in this work is that it places the modern nation as an aspect of global transformations. An interesting section of her book looks into the pedagogic process by which the idea of India as a territorial unit was spread through geography textbooks. Where the book is wanting is that it remains confined to an understanding of colonial governmentality as forms of regulation, leaving forms of resistance outside her scrutiny. Peter Pels has argued that governmentality “cannot be regarded as a singular colonial strategy” and suggests that “governmentality should be understood as power dispersed through the whole social body” (Pels, 1997: 176).

U. Kalpagam argues that colonial governmentality reconstituted the public sphere in India in “radically new ways,” spawning a new conception of the economy and society (Kalpagam, 2001: 418). For the new rights-bearing subjects, institutions of society such as public opinion, or private property, were constructed. A new field of the social emerged. When native opinion sharpened against colonial rule, colonial governmentality, until then guided by liberal principles, was forced to suppress public opinion. Kalpagam’s analysis falters when it attributes causal significance to governmentality as a mechanism that led to the onset of colonial modernity and its alter ego capitalism in the colony. In her approach, colonial governmentality is endowed with some kind of agency and occludes other factors that generated change by assuming that colonial rule had a complete political and cultural authority over those it ruled.

There is a flurry of new works on urban governmentality among which Stephen Legg’s study of Delhi stands out (Legg, 2007). Other topics covered by the South Asian governmentalties group include inter alia the politics of the governed (Chatterjee, 2004), agrarian capital (Gidwani, 2007), and race and violence (Kolsky, 2009).

Partha Chatterjee, building on Foucault’s argument and its South Asian avatars, has pointed out that ideas of participatory citizenship that were so much 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. “Citizens inhabit the domain of theory, populations the domain of policy” (Chatterjee, 2004: 34). His work traces lineages between power as exercised in the present and under a colonial regime.

A recent trend has been to argue that disciplinary techniques, governmentality, and sovereign power were often coeval. Michael Dutton, who has traced what he calls the afterlife of colonial governmentality, suggests that 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” (Dutton, 2009: 304). He argues that sovereign power and disciplinary power worked together, merging into a discourse that attempted to occlude the political. 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 (Cooper, 2005: 40).

Studies on South Asia inspired by the notion of governmentality even in its most recent incarnation fail to give us answers to the following questions: How did people understand their condition as dominated beings? How did they describe it in their own indigenous terms? How did they resist? Colonial governmentality is hence best used as a grid alongside others to understand the relations between colonized and colonizers.

Unlike Scott’s argument, 1931 did not leave much of an imprint on ordinary people’s lives. After the campaign and the vote followed a lull, during which this space of appearance shrank and other things took over. If we follow Arendt’s interpretation that the “political realm rises directly out of acting together, the sharing of words and deeds,” (Arendt, 1998: 198) it was other forms of engagement that brought men and women together during these times. The realms of the political appear as ephemeral, multifaceted, and layered, made of a variety of new practices, performed by people looking inward and outward. One critique that has been leveled against the Arendtian conception of the political is the manner in which she imagines walls between the public, social and household. If one forgets these walls and think of the political instead as a set of interconnected positions that must be thought about and described in relational terms, another vision of the past can emerge. These interconnected, overlapping, encased realms of the political can be envisaged as a configuration, to use Foucault’s term, where regularities, variations, repetitions display coherence as well as internal relationships, and where domains interpenetrate and obscure one another. Most importantly each realm of the political can be grasped only in terms of the position it occupies within the whole and its interconnections with all others.

Historians of the colonial who have privileged colonial governmentalites over the making of a political realm have often overlooked global connections in their refusal to see the colonized/disempowered as purely “consumers of modernity” and eagerness to see him/her 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 policies and acts performed by states and market. The relation between market and the political is particularly challenging to think about. Does the market constitute a new field of the political? Or is it the terrain where the political is occluded? Can we then look for citizenship in new places, in life politics in consumption. I would like to suggest that to speak of cultural citizenship in the colony needs further scrutiny and situated evidence. To say that as the colonial state restricted avenues for politics, new ones were prized open in consumer power does not stand the test in Ceylon in the 1920s and 1930s. What was clear, however, is that the advance of Western consumption patterns is not the measure of progress towards the liberal democratic norm. I would argue, rather, that consumption, in most accounts, indexed a retreat from the political.

With the recent scholarly interest in webs, networks, and flows, and the focus on cosmopolitan spheres studied through practices of reading, learning, translating, and transmitting, the “political” is no longer a pivotal area of reflection. As someone who has rarely followed fads, I think some of us need to remain in the field. After all, cosmopolitan encounters were not the norm in the colonial past nor are they the norm today in most parts of the world. They constitute exceptionally rich and exciting moments, yet extraordinary ones that concerned only a few. The option is not to fetishize the politics of subaltern majorities and the local, but to cast a broad and empathic eye on the forms of political agency that existed, accepting them with their limitations and fissures. In other words, we need to look less at colonial edicts and laws, as colonial and imperial studies scholars do with great brio, than at effects of both state and market, a market that often acts as a substitute for the loyalty of the people and understand the political as a dynamic field made of people doing things, following Spencer, a field of practices, rather than a given space, that can be delineated and measured.

What may emerge is a less neat picture, one of overlapping fields, where political practices came and went, did not appear suddenly and in the same way everywhere and for everyone; one where people were haunted by other forms of politics linked to battles over authority and legitimacy in the local domain outside the purview of the colonial state.
and its disciplining hand, or negotiating with it; one where the political stretched beyond the territorial boundaries of the state towards imaginaries of Buddhist or Asian alliances; one where the market was creating a public sphere parallel to the political, interlaced and related to it, drawing to it the excluded and impatient, a political where a multitude granted rights to vote as quasi-citizens remained disarmed and encountered these privileges from a context of fear of the modern.

References


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