

Governmentality

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Since the publication of Michel Foucault's 1978 lectures on governmentality, it has become increasingly commonplace to understand the circulation of power as a decentered process.¹ Instead of identifying government with the centralized locus of state rule, a burgeoning governmentality literature has argued that governmental power operates through the production of discursive normalizations, political rationalities, and techniques of regulation that ultimately produce subjects that *behave as they ought*. In *Social Text* 43 (1995), David Scott's article "Colonial Governmentality" developed this line of thinking to move toward a better understanding of the operation of colonial power. 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: 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 shows, constituted a crucial break with the past, ushering in Sri Lanka's modernity by way of the "*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" (emphasis in original).

"Colonial Governmentality" has created an extensive series of critical openings for a range of work that has subsequently explored the dispersed strategies and effects of colonial power and its relationships to political modernity.² But I am not so interested in mapping these wide, wavering, and hugely productive proliferations. Rather, and in line with this thirtieth anniversary issue, I am more interested in how a reading of Scott's article speaks to some of things that a critical leftist journal like *Social Text* must take seriously in its continual pursuit of responsible and effective interven-

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tionary modes of critical thought. In what follows I want to suggest, first, that the very composition of Scott's article says much about the role that journals like *Social Text* play in the task of critical knowledge production more generally. And second, leading from this, I want to suggest that we can productively think critical knowledge production itself through the notion of governmentality to signal some useful questions about the relationships between any journal's institutional locatedness and the terrains of modern critical rationality.

What interests me about Scott's article is a productive tension between the universal and the particular. That is to say, the more or less universal theoretical argument the article puts forward about the political rationalities that colonial power makes possible (hence its influence) is only enabled by a quite particular engagement with the trajectories of colonial power in the postcolony Sri Lanka, the case study. Indeed, this is a tension common to wider governmentality literature wherein a general theory about power is advanced by engaging very particular "texts of rule."³ But more than this, a close rereading of Scott's article suggests how "colonial governmentality" was only useful insofar as it enabled him to critically work through pressing, quite particular, social and political questions *in the Sri Lankan context*.

The article itself reveals a number of clues regarding this particularism. As early as the first page, for example, Scott refers to the article as a set of "notes": "inasmuch as they are, in many ways, only the tentative explorations of a working paper." Indeed, at the time, the article was a step toward a monograph on the making of political modernity in colonial Ceylon that was intended as an intervention into debates around Sri Lanka's constitutional history and the ethnic conflict.⁴ Though that book was not written, the article became the first chapter in Scott's excellent 1999 monograph *Refashioning Futures*, roughly half of which is an in-depth exploration of culture, political rationality, and colonial power in Sri Lanka. And, in the acknowledgements to that book, we learn that "Colonial Governmentality," together with other chapters, was drafted in Colombo, Sri Lanka, during a period when the author was a fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). "Colonial Governmentality," it seems, owes much to the conversations Scott had with Colombo-based critical scholars and activists, all of whom at the time were working through pressing social and political questions concerning Sri Lanka's violent, ethnicized conflict. Finally, Scott's article is consistent in its persistent claim that understanding the effects of colonial power requires attentiveness to colonialism's specific targets in any given historical (one could add, geographical) instance, lest we "run the risk of a too hasty homogenization of colonialism as a whole." On this reading, "Colonial Governmentality" is mired in Sri Lanka's particularities. Location matters.

At the same time, however, Sri Lanka is barely mentioned until the fourteenth page of a twenty-four-page article. The first half of the article works in detail through a theoretical argument about “colonial governmentality” as a way of approaching colonial power. Only in the article’s last half are the particularities of colonial power’s productions of political rationality in the Sri Lankan case (study) addressed. So despite the article’s engagement with the particular in all the ways I have suggested above, it works by advancing “colonial governmentality” as a theoretical intervention into the problem of how we can conceive of colonial power in general. In fact, it is worth stressing that “Colonial Governmentality” is positioned as a sympathetic response to Partha Chatterjee’s prior argument about colonial power’s distinctiveness from modern power.⁵ In such ways are advances in theoretical work and understanding performed and achieved.

The point I want to emphasize here is that the play between, on the one hand, the demands of speaking to quite particular social and political vexations in place and, on the other, making a contribution to the universal terrain of a “broader theoretical literature” (what David Harvey refers to in *ST* 42 [1995] as the play between “militant particularism and global ambition”) is I think symptomatic of the effects of the metropolitan locatedness of leftist knowledge production institutions such as *Social Text*. In other words, it is simply inevitable that for *Social Text* to carry the article it would need to address a picture bigger than just Sri Lanka’s postcolonial social and political modernity. Understandably, it would need to advance a theoretical position vis-à-vis colonial power in general to satisfy the demand that the article be of interest and use to those whose work lies beyond the provincial domain of the specifically Sri Lankan.

Once again, we can say location matters. *Social Text*’s location within the Euro-American metropolitan spaces of critical, interdisciplinary thought places quite particular demands on the shape of critical academic knowledge production. Articles we publish—particularly those that focus on the global South—must manage to advance thought first and foremost around theoretical and political questions of concern beyond the particularities of place. Addressing the nuances of a politics located specifically in non-Euro-American places is at best a secondary requirement. To be clear, these demands are not unique to *Social Text*. They apply equally to demands most peer-reviewed journals make of their contributors. Neither should these demands be taken simply as disabling. They are wholly desirable inasmuch as the privilege of learning and tackling the theoretical and political conundrums of our time from a kaleidoscopically worldly array of case studies is central to the intellectual freedom that propels the dynamism of intellectual work.

But this aspect of knowledge production is a privilege, and for the

sake of humane, responsible and, not least, effective modes of critical, leftist knowledge-production-to-come, at *Social Text* we must be aware of this politics of institutional location. We must be aware that this is another case of Europe's insertion into our lives, into the life of critical knowledge production itself. The question heuristically posed is: how do the demands we make on theory objects and theoretical rigor connect with specific political demands located in place? And in posing that question, one of our aims at *Social Text* must be to avoid the easy abstraction of theoretical knowledge such that it becomes disconnected from the places in and through which critical thought must be set to work. As Edward Said reminded us in his essay "Travelling Theory," a theory, lest we work it through the specificities of context, perennially runs the risk of moving up into a sort of "bad infinity" that expansively claims to singularly frame the world in its entirety.⁶ David Scott's article is an object lesson in how to effectively tack back and forth between the particular and universal; of how to satisfy the demands of a metropolitan readership by advancing critical thought beyond the particular while not losing any of the social and political incisiveness that the call of place demands. But his article is instructive in other ways as well. Its focus on governmentality reminds us that part of what critical, leftist knowledge production institutions like *Social Text* do is train, foster, and secure the contours and conduct of critical intervention itself by placing such demands on authors. The very industry and infrastructure of the intellectual work in which most Euro-American academic journals participate produces its own field of power effects: a governmentality that secures an ongoing production of critical thought that, in order to make it to publication, must seek out global theoretical impact and ambition first, and only then address a more provincial and grounded politics of place.

I return then to Scott's articulation of his own task in setting forth, in *ST* 43, to explore the political rationalities that European colonial power created in Sri Lanka. The question he usefully poses is

What then is the ~~conceptual level to be assigned to~~ "Europe," understood not merely as a geographical space but as an apparatus of dominant power-effects? My question, it is easy to see, presupposes that the critique of European hegemony in the construction of knowledges about the non-European world—the so-called "decentering" of Europe—ought not to be confused (as I think it very often is) with programmatically ignoring Europe, as though by seeking to do so one would have resolved the problem of Eurocentrism.

If we take "Europe" as metonym for the Euro-American institutional locatedness of the criteria, checks, and balances that arbitrate on the quality of critical leftist knowledge production, we are left to ponder the role that *Social Text* plays in a kind of governmentality of critical knowledge production, what Dipesh Chakrabarty may call the artifice, not of history, but of

critical leftist knowledge itself.⁷ This is to raise a necessary, if uncomfortable, question over the theoretical generalizations and rationalities that drive Euro-American intellectual work in the present. Specifically, what challenges does this governmentality of critical knowledge production pose for seeking out effective, creative, and generative intellectual representations in place? Thought this way, governmentality offers a provocation to regard the role of the collective theoretical expertise and professional certainties of journals like *Social Text* in a broader politics of knowledge production. An ongoing and humble introspection into our own practices and effects on the conduct and terrain of critical rationality is, I suggest, crucial for *Social Text*'s effective political and interventionary longevity; for the *ST* 200 to come.

Notes

1. See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

2. See Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); James Duncan, *In the Shadows of the Tropics: Climate, Race and Biopower in Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Margo Huxley, "Space and Government: Governmentality and Geography," *Geography Compass* 2 (2008): 1635–58.

3. Pat O'Malley, Lorna Weir, and Clifford Shearing, "Governmentality, Criticism, Politics," *Economy and Society* 26 (1997): 502.

4. Personal correspondence with David Scott, 10 November 2008.

5. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

6. Edward Said, "Travelling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 239.

7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26.