

The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain

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The anti-imperialist credentials of Nicholas Dirks are beyond dispute. Trained at the University of Chicago under the tutelage of Bernard Cohn, Dirks is the author of *The Hollow Crown* (1987), a compelling work of anthropological history which traces the political and social transformations of the 'little kingdom' of Pudukkottai (in southern India) into the colonial period and the 'native state' system of administration, as well as *Castes of Mind* (2001), which examines the (re-/de-)formation of 'caste' during British colonial rule ([1](#)). In each book, Dirks has been concerned to explicate the ways in which the colonial state, and its allied institutions and imaginaries, have served to transform (or mutate) South-Asian cultural and social formations. Dirks's latest book is something of a departure from these earlier works, for *The Scandal of Empire* is less concerned with the effects of colonial rule in the Indian context than it is with the politics of the Indian empire in Britain. The book examines the 'scandal' of Governor-General Warren Hastings's administration of India (1773–85) and his impeachment on return to Britain (1787/8–95), famously led by Edmund Burke. Yet simultaneously, *The Scandal of Empire* is consonant with Dirks's earlier work in its uncompromising focus upon the destructiveness of imperialism (indeed, Dirks's tone in this book is very often one of outrage and indignation) and, ultimately, in the book's function as an auto-critique of the scholarly genre from which it claims to be derived (whether anthropology or, in this case, history).

Dirks principal argument in *Scandal* is two-fold. First, he asserts that to say 'empire was a scandal' is to tell only part of the story, for scandal was not incidental to British imperialism (or, for that matter, was not to be associated with only a few individuals), but rather scandal was central to empire, as it ultimately served as the 'crucible in which both imperial and capitalist expansion was forged' (p. 8). Moreover, through the 'moral spectacle' of the impeachment trial, this public addressing of scandal helped to convert Britain's presence in India to a perception of legitimate sovereignty, producing the conditions for empire's success and 'its transformation into a patriotic enterprise' (p. 125). Thus, Dirks argues, from the 1790s onwards, thanks in large part to Edmund Burke's machinations, scandal was no longer to be associated with British imperial rule, but with Indian socio-cultural forms (sati, thagi, female infanticide, etc.). Second, Dirks asserts that scandal, so central to imperial beginnings, has very often 'been either laundered or converted into narratives of imperial, nationalist, and capitalist triumph' (p. 25). In other words, Dirks argues that 'scandal', in itself, has largely been absent from the multitude of historical accounts written about the Company's expansion in India (here he invokes, not for the first time in his work, John Seeley's 1883 claim that empire

was acquired in a 'fit of absence of mind' as his genre-defining historiographical foe). Dirks seeks unambiguously to reassert the connection.

Dirks' book is divided into nine thematic chapters. The second of these, 'corruption', sets out some of the elements of the eighteenth-century Indian context, and thus the background for Burke's charges in Hastings's impeachment. Dirks describes, for example, the private trade, or 'inland trade', conducted by the East India Company's servants, which was in essence a parallel form of commerce outside the Company's own monopoly. This private trade was central to the financial viability of the Company for the role it played in supplementing the meagre salaries most of its servants received. It also transformed established social and political classes in Britain through the return of 'nabobs' from India, middling-class men made wealthy through dubious financial dealings. Such men sought to purchase positions of influence, and were invariably viewed as deeply troubling, even corrupting, to British society. None more so than Robert Clive, a military adventurer who secured British victories in southern India and, most famously, in Bengal against the nawab Siraj ud Daula. In the Battle of Plassey, waged in 1757, Clive managed to produce a 'coup' against the nawab, install his own puppet regime, secure substantial trading benefits for the Company and its servants, and make himself fabulously wealthy through plunder and the receipt of 'presents', including a substantial jagir (land grant), in the process. Clive's grafting was characterized by him as consistent with Indian practice, but no less important, as a small price to pay for the possible benefits to the Company, and to Britain, in the forging of a nascent empire. Yet as Dirks notes, while the Indian empire most certainly did come into existence with the accession of real Company control over Bengal with the granting of the divani in 1765, the promised financial benefits were often less forthcoming, as Bengal was soon plunged into famine and devastation caused, not least, by rapacious private trade and over-taxation. It is in this context that the Regulating Act of 1773 was passed, which sought to reform the Company's administration and the way the Company conducted its business. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General appointed in Calcutta under the Act, was thus to be 'the Indian agent of reform' (p. 59). In this chapter, Dirks also accounts for the role of southern-Indian politics in the transformation of Edmund Burke's own views on the Company during the pre-impeachment period. Burke had been at least a tacit supporter of Clive, and opposed the Regulating Act of 1773 on the basis that it impinged upon commercial autonomy, and yet he evolved into a vociferous critic of Hastings a decade later. Dirks argues here that it was Burke's personal links to the peninsular subcontinent in the years after 1773, when 'the excesses of the Company were most egregious' (p. 61), that served as a principal transformative factor.

The next chapter, 'spectacle', lays out some of the details of the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, including its essentially theatrical character, the convoluted personal politics at play, and the details of the charges brought by Burke with the aid of Philip Francis (who had once challenged Hastings to a duel in Calcutta). At heart, the impeachment is an event which Dirks characterizes as necessitated by Burke's view that 'the "saviour of India" [i.e. Hastings] had become a symbol ... of all that was rotten in the East' (p. 89). The charges levelled against Hastings ranged from illegally receiving presents to improperly conducting war, extorting the begums of Awadh, and prompting the rebellion of the allied state of Benares by making upon it unreasonable and unsupportable demands. Dirks notes that Hastings at first did not take the impeachment charges very seriously, but once the gravity of the situation dawned upon him, his hurriedly constructed defence strategy had to be thoroughly amended. And so while Hastings first argued (not unlike Clive) that charges of arbitrariness against him could not be supported because so much of the Indian political context was itself dominated by arbitrariness and despotism (and as such the Company was simply working within Indian political norms), he later took pains to emphasize his own substantial record of legal reform in Bengal and, in particular, the legal codification project begun after 1772 which was based ostensibly upon Indian cultural-legal norms. Dirks notes, with not a little justification, that the pre-eminent concern for Burke in the prosecution of Hastings was not necessarily the ill-effects of colonial rule upon the colonized, but the very possibility that colonialism (with its practical disdain for the universality of the norms of law), and also the character of India itself, would end up utterly corrupting Britain and its institutions. The outcome of the trial was, ultimately, thought to reflect upon 'the credit and honour of the British nation'. Burke therefore, in Dirks's words, 'attempted to make a debate on India the occasion for the

cleansing and regeneration of the imperial mission' (p. 92). While this is certainly right, Dirks has perhaps also underestimated Burke's concern for the population of India, and his view that all peoples should enjoy the protection of the rule of law, though Burke clearly viewed Britain as holding a responsibility to 'protect' such people through specifically imperial forms of control. Thus the concerns Burke may very well have held for Indians were inevitably couched in the language of the potential for destabilizing the burgeoning empire and undermining British imperial sovereignty.

In a chapter devoted to 'economy', Dirks examines the drain of wealth from the subcontinent, and argues for the importance of recognizing the ultimately extractive nature of empire in India. In the next chapter, 'sovereignty', Dirks argues, in a similar vein, that the Company pursued a relentless policy of expansion through warfare, and consistently understood the privileges granted to them by the Mughal emperor as sovereign rights. And so while the Company had often paid lip service to the 'productive fiction' of a 'dual' sovereignty in India (productive, Dirks notes, because it could disguise British imperialism under the banner of still-intact Mughal rule), its servants also made a 'strategic use of [Indian] cultural forms to explain and legitimate a relentless pattern of political and territorial conquest' (p. 172); a series of conquests, moreover, which were driven by a 'straightforward calculus of self-interest' (p. 172). Hastings's own moves to press more explicitly for forms of Company sovereignty in Bengal, including the extension of Company control over the administration of both civil and criminal justice, while being understood by Burke as a form of personal megalomania, Dirks instead understands as the 'inevitable logic of empire' (p. 187). The resultant Company 'state' is addressed by Dirks in his sixth chapter. This was a state which, despite Parliamentary efforts to exert control through regulation, found its extension increasingly eased by way of the Governor-General's consolidation of power. To fulfil his mandate, Dirks argues, Hastings could only work through securing a 'greater authority' for this 'new kind of state form'; a characterization which makes Hastings, in the author's view, a 'model servant of empire' (p. 210). The state's apparatus for this consolidation included, for example, the extension of a 'rule of property' (or a system of agricultural tax collection) as well as the imposition of a set of juridical practices and institutions (though in the execution of these legal practices, Dirks notes, Hastings was willing to be flexible in order to eliminate political opponents such as Nandakumar). The last chapters of the book then focus upon the near-contemporary historical representations of the early years of Company rule in Bengal and the role of history writing in capturing 'new ideas of sovereignty', or rather colonial sovereignties; and Burke's views on 'tradition', and how these informed his perception of Indian society, imperial governance, and Hastings's conduct.

Dirks has produced a very nicely written book, with an engaging, lively, and often polemical style which will make it accessible to audiences beyond those which Dirks's work has heretofore principally addressed. Equally, Dirks engages with many elements of the complexity and even contradictory nature of the Company's early state and state-building, and does an admirable job of disentangling elements of early Company politics (though it must be noted that Dirks has also made several elementary errors in the text, including the mixing up of Arthur and Richard Wellesley on p. 238 and on p. 122 the confusion of Haider Ali with his son Tipu Sultan). Dirks's argument that the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings served to transform imperialism, and the empire in India, from a scandal into an accepted form of governance (indeed, even into an unremarkable commonplace for most Britons) is a valid one, though surely the impeachment trial was also only one part of that transformation. One might cite the political and ideological challenge presented by France, for example, or the politics of Pitt the Younger (as reflected in the changes borne by the India Act 1784) to argue that such a transformation was already well under way by the time of the trial. But Dirks's ultimate goal here is clearly not to give a comprehensive analysis of late-eighteenth-century British political machinations, but simply to reassert the centrality of 'scandal' into the very heart of current debates about empire. In this regard, Dirks questions at the very beginning of the book whether he in fact has anything new to contribute to a subject so thoroughly analysed. Indeed, the sources used for the book are not particularly innovatory: Dirks has primarily drawn on the published writings and speeches of Burke, and also made heavy use of secondary literature. Surprisingly, there appear to be no references to the rich (and voluminous) cache of Hastings's manuscripts in the British Library (BM Add MSS), a source which must surely be crucial to any analysis of the impeachment trial and Hastings's conduct in India. In any case, Dirks

views at least part of his contribution to be related to his cognisance and reflection, throughout much of the book, of writing about 'imperial scandal' in an age of American-led expansionism, and the prosecution of an overseas war which has arguably been distinguished in equal parts by ineptitude, corruption, and tragedy. The reflexivity with the present in the book can certainly be viewed as a strength, for it ultimately serves to provide a deeper contextualization for contemporary forms of empire, and infuses the eighteenth-century historical narrative with a sense of vitality and relevance.

But there is obviously another point of contact for Dirks's analysis in this book, and that is the varieties of imperial historiography which he views as being, at best, produced in ignorance of the real effects of imperialism, or at worst, part and parcel of the imperial project. Similar to the critique levelled in his now-infamous 'coda' to *Castes of Mind*, Dirks has in this book drawn a straightforward lineage in imperial historiography from nineteenth-century writers such as James Mill, T. B. Macaulay, and J. R. Seeley to contemporary historians such as Peter Marshall, C. A. Bayly, W. R. Louis, and Niall Ferguson, this time on the basis that 'the ideal of neutrality' is common to these analyses. Dirks argues that this air of neutrality allows for 'the problems of empire' to be 'understood almost exclusively from the vantage of Europe', and that the history of the East India Company is thus reduced to issues of 'managerial incompetence and administrative failure' rather than the 'devastations of imperial rule on the colonized, and the extent to which the struggles and challenges of postcolonial regimes are themselves critical legacies of imperial rule' (pp. 329–330). Dirks is of course right to find fault with Ferguson's trumpeting of the supposed 'benefits' of British imperial rule, which have certainly been made all the more distasteful (and irrelevant) by the now-visible hollowness of the neo-conservative rhetoric surrounding Iraq (one could also find fault in Ferguson's picking and choosing of examples to fit his argument, rather than testing this argument in a detailed case study, however). Nevertheless, Dirks's critiques of some of these other historians seem misplaced. Peter Marshall, for example, is faulted for characterizing Hastings and Burke as the 'real victims' of the impeachment trial, rather than arguing that 'empire itself was a problem' (p. 124), even though the target is Marshall's first book, published in 1965, well before the influence of Edward Said or Subaltern Studies, and, indeed, before the process of decolonization had been substantially completed. Further, the rich social history of colonial South Asia elaborated by Chris Bayly in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars, Empire and Information*, and other works, is deeply invested in understanding the effects and implications of the colonial rule of the subcontinent, though Bayly admittedly doesn't wear his anti-imperialism on his sleeve in the same way that Dirks does. The continued popularity of Bayly's works in Indian university curricula also speaks to the relevance these have for understanding the genealogy of the postcolonial present.

Dirks's historiography of empire is one which, in the end, promotes an anti-imperialist stance (a stance I strongly support, it should be noted) through an emphasis upon the derisive effects of colonial rule, but also through easy formulations of imperial power, imperial extension, and an assignation of straightforward self-interest and voraciousness to imperial actors. In other words, any potential complexity within imperialism, as a political and cultural phenomenon, is drained from it in order to emphasize the deleteriousness of empire. This is also a historiographical stance which authorizes itself through the perpetuation of an essentially false dichotomy: an understanding that if one's approach to Britain's empire doesn't consistently foreground notions of imperial power, and the negative effects of that empire, it should then be characterized as being naïve, 'revisionist', and consistent with a school of imperial historiography which found its origins with Mill and Seeley. Now I don't know any historian currently working on British imperialism in South Asia who takes Seeley's charge that empire was acquired in a 'fit of absence of mind' to the heart of their analyses, including those working within the broadly defined paradigm of the so-called 'Cambridge school'. In this respect, there is also a clear generational gap evident in Dirks's citations of what he views as the historiographical 'gulf' in South Asian and British imperial history: there is a nearly complete absence of references to recent historical work. Dirks has instead principally cited (and praised) scholarship of the late-1970s to mid-1990s: Edward Said, Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Prakash, Bernard Cohn, and himself. Dirks's claim that this cohort of historians are 'writing from the margins' of the profession seems increasingly problematic, however. Rather, it would now appear that the understanding of empire and imperialism explicated by Said, Cohn, Dirks, and others, is the new orthodoxy of South-Asian

historiography.

The fact is that this new orthodoxy is, these days, increasingly being reformulated, and principally by junior scholars who fully accept the lessons of Said's *Orientalism*, Cohn's analyses of colonial power, and the historiographical revisionism of Subaltern Studies, and who most certainly recognize that Britain's empire in India was a forcibly-perpetrated enterprise of repression, extraction, and co-option. These scholars, however, are equally committed to producing work which does not reproduce an essentially Saidian, straightforward understanding of how empires function. One might cite Shruti Kapila's compelling analyses of how ideas of race were central to early forms of orientalism, and also the implications of the emergence of an Indian 'science of the mind' for Indian identity (2); the individual work of Robert Travers and Jon Wilson, who both seek to elucidate understandings of sovereignty in early-colonial India, though without equating that sovereignty unproblematically with the possession of power (3); and Javed Majeed's new work on the role of translation in imperialism and also his writings on pan-Islam, travel narratives, and Indian Muslim nationalism and identity (4) to name but only a diverse few (5). That many of these scholars do not consistently foreground the negative effects of empire, and often probe the claims of powerfulness for British political, cultural, and social forms within the colonial context, is not to 'excuse' the processes of empire building, as Dirks might charge, but to investigate its origins and complexity, and to try to understand its contradictions and complications, rather than assuming empire to be a nothing more than a straightforward tale of 'Britons arrive and conquer'. This body of historical scholarship ultimately leaves *Scandal of Empire* looking somewhat thin. And besides, isn't the more compelling prospect that imperialism, at its heart, is far less the directed, singular, visionary will of expansion that Dirks claims it to be than a series of overlapping and competing set of strategies, objectives, and practices? Perhaps we have become blinded to this possibility by the now-commonplace imperial rhetoric of the US administration and its allied neoconservative intellectuals. But if this is really so, then being less attuned to the complexities of empire risks ultimately obscuring our understanding of how they come about, how they flourish, and, indeed, how they are undone.

Notes

1. N. B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987); and N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, 2001). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. Kapila, 'Race Matters: Orientalism and Religion, India and Beyond c. 1770–1880', *Modern Asian Studies*, 41.3 (2007), 471–513; S. Kapila, 'Freud and his Indian Friends: Religion, Psychoanalysis and Selfhood in late Colonial India', in *Psychiatry and Empire*, ed. S. Mahone and M. Vaughan (Basingstoke and New York, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. R. Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge, 2007); J. E. Wilson, 'Anxieties of Distance: Codification in Early Colonial Bengal', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4.1 (2007), 7–23. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Majeed, 'Gandhi, "Truth", and Translatability', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40.2 (2006), 303–332; J. Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal* (Basingstoke and New York, 2007); J. Majeed, 'Geographies of Subjectivity, Pan-Islam and Muslim Separatism: Muhammad Iqbal and Selfhood', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4.1 (2007), 145–61. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See also the other contributions to a special issue of *Modern Intellectual History*, 4.1 (2007) which is devoted to elucidating an 'intellectual history for India', and which brings together historians trained both in the US and the UK. In *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. K. Wilson (Cambridge, 2004), one of a very few books which Dirks cites published in the 2000s, one might also highlight the essay of P. J. Stern, "'Rescuing the age from a charge of ignorance": gentility, knowledge, and the British exploration of Africa in the later eighteenth century'. Finally, the obligatory vanity reference is my new book, which examines the 'in-between spaces' of institutionalized orientalism and education: M. S. Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770–1880* (Basingstoke and New York, 2007). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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