Introduction

Cartologies, Categories, Capital
Some Histories of the Social

An introduction is the primitive of a dissertation: it is written along with, even after, the chapters, but it has to appear in the beginning of a sequence, absorbing all the incongruities that would follow and defining the focus by setting up a frame. It is ironic that I am still writing one, because this dissertation, as far as I know, was designed to interrogate and, if possible, interrupt precisely those operations.

The structure of this dissertation might seem too schematic to some and too haphazard to others. The narrative starts conventionally: it describes a landscape, conjures a context, and rushes with the first British Indian troops into an ill-defined terrain. Somewhere in the long first chapter, however, the account begins to turn around, locates the silences, urges the reader to recognize the edge of the archive. Cross-references begin. The chapters cite each other, and suggest simultaneities, associations and interconstitutivities not always containable within a straight causal series. The dissertation, therefore, can proceed only circuitously: the order of the chapters does not necessarily reflect the sequence of the events.

At the same time, as everybody will figure out, the whole dissertation is oppressed by a sense of disciplinary self-consciousness. Its authenticating footnotes, its allegiance to chronological
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consistency, its appeasement of the detective rationality of truth-seeking: nothing will allow it
to be otherwise than a history. The question is, history of what? History, even when stuck in
the quagmire of postfoundationalism, requires a subject: a topic as well as an agent. What is
the topic of my dissertation? Who are the agents of the histories I write of? Like every other
bad researcher, I have always faltered at these questions. I still do. Would it make sense if I
say that I was, and I remain, interested in the strategies without subject? — That this dissertation
is an unfinished, indeed unfinishable, catalogue of such strategies?

Of Reality and Other Confusions

"[T]his is precisely what revelation is — the spending of the secret, the emptying of the cup."¹

The erudite reader knows that we owe the phrase "strategies without subject" to Michel
Foucault.

[Here the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, yet it turns out that no one can have
conceived and very few formulated them: such is the implicit character of the great,
amerous, almost mute strategies which coordinate the voluble tactics whose 'inventors' or
directors are often devoid of all hypocrisy.²

We do have the drafts of a few amendments to propose. But let us hold on to these lines for
the time being. A strategy is a "rationality functioning to arrive at an objective," Foucault
explains elsewhere.³ Imagining this rationality without a radical origin of thought, speech,
and action requires some rethinking of the conventional histories. The generic name that this
dissertation finds for these strategies is framing: a word that barely obscures the Heideggerian
ring of Ge-stell, "enframing." Enframing, says Martin Heidegger, is characterized by a typical
understanding of the surroundings as standing-reserve. “Everywhere everything is ordered to
stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a

¹ Michael Taussig, Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative (Stanford CA: Stanford
University Press, 1999), 269
² Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other
³ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Critical Inquiry, 8: 4 (1982), 793
further ordering. We call it the standing-reserve [Bestand]." Enframed in a particular way, both with reference to the means and the ends conceived, the world assumes a character before any other way is possible, and this world dangerously reveals its availability as a pure store of supply, as resource. The world-as-resource presupposes the overlapping purposes of measurement, utilization, optimization and control. Techniques proliferate and fields of expertise emerge. Management is economized and truths become indistinguishable from the signatures of the rulers. "[W]hat we call the real is revealed as standing-reserve." Nature, natives, notions: technologies of knowledge "set up" everything "to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance." 4

"Not so fast!," the readers might exclaim. Too many critiques of Foucault have been published, and now we know that we "should not overstate the coherence of these technologies, as Foucault sometimes does. Disciplines can break down, counteract one another, or overreach. They offer spaces for maneuver and resistance, and indeed can be turned to counter hegemonic purposes." 5 Who will fail to agree, as long as it follows that the understatement of the coherence does not carry us back to the conventional figure of the subject? It has proved particularly painful in the social sciences to give up the coveted figure of the subject – the seemingly autochthonous locus of action and resistance. Rather than readily dismissing the worries and the unwillingness of the dominant historiography, we wish to engage this sense of pain and loss in a slow and less aggressive way, locating the different modes and sites of investment in the economy of the self.

The fissure talk is popular now, because it suggests a horizon of hope. There is an undeniable element of comfort in recognizing the fact that the control was never foolproof – that leakages and excesses, disfigurations and hybridizations were ceaselessly at work. Despite all their claims of perfectability, strategies and technologies have never completely colonized the spaces on which they were released. In a treatise suggestively titled We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour, for example, criticizes Heidegger for overstating the dangers.

The moderns indeed declare that technology is nothing but pure instrumental mastery, science pure Enframing and pure Stamping [Das Ge-Stell], that economics is pure

5 Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond the Statist Approaches and Their Critics," The American Political Science Review, 85: 1 (March 1991), 77-96
calculation, capitalism pure reproduction, the subject pure consciousness. Purity everywhere! They claim this, but we must be careful not to take them at their word, since what they are asserting is only half of the modern world, the work of purification that distils what the work of hybridization supplies.\(^6\)

The excerpt makes its point. History will always be far less innocent than autobiographies. However, by the same token, we grow wary of hybridization too. It postulates purity in the beginning. It rehabilitates a defensive form of essentialism. It believes in the pre-hybrid primitive. Our disenchantment is slightly more intense than what a programmatic statement of hybridization can offer to assuage.

Possibly that is why the pretensions of this project differ from those of a plain and simple social history. We are interested more in the procedures through which the social is staged than in the events which occupy the stage of the social. To a great extent, of course, these are impossible to tell apart. But there are omissions too, foundational and quotidian omissions that bring forth the social as a comprehensible, visible and coherent space, as a free-standing legible sphere of reality in which the majority's actions reside. Conceived in this manner, the social becomes the final refuge of human agency, and particularly in the histories which are bracketed as colonial, its distinction from the alien State becomes crucial, even definitive, for imagining the (ever-hybridizing) indigenous.

Our debt to and unease with the ideas of Timothy Mitchell will be obvious to any of his readers. Mitchell argues that the appearance of the State "as a distinct dimension of structure, framework, codification, planning, and intentionality," in short, "as an abstraction in relation to the concreteness of the social" is an effect of the complex discursive technologies.\(^7\) In keeping with his wider argument that "[t]he production of modernity involves the staging of differences" and dualisms,\(^8\) we push this formulation to contend that the boundaries of the social are as elusive as those of the State, that the so-called "concreteness of the social" might itself be an effect of the "matrices of practical reason."\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Mitchell, \textit{Limits of the State}, 95


\(^9\) That is how Foucault describes the technologies in \textit{Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault}, edited by edited by Luther H. Martin, Patrick H. Hutton and Huck Gutman (London: Tavistock, 1988), 16-49
However, querying the claims of an autonomous social world wagers on a different approach to colonialism. If the great disjuncture is indeed less sharp than what we have been taught to imagine, then what name are we to give to the violence that is understood as colonial?

Allow us to defer our response till the end. At the moment we can address the question only tangentially, by trying to understand the conditions that make it possible to think of the social “as a noun phrase that designates an objectified abstraction.” Reducing the complexities of the surroundings to a calculable order, as John Locke recognized in the seventeenth century, involves abstraction: derivation of the general idea from specific observations. According to Locke, the abstract object – which exists neither in time nor in space – can be framed only by omission and elimination of particular situations in which “the real existence of things” occurs. Abstractions are “Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether Words or Ideas.”

Three hundred years later, very much predictably, we are interested in knowing “the Understanding” in a rather different manner, because we recognize that abstraction is not a simple operation of “the mind,” that the objectifying mind is also an effect of the operative regime of abstraction.

Mary Poovey perceptively points at the “complex series of theoretical and institutional developments” in Western Europe by which the old conceptualization of society as one or more normative orders grasped from the standpoints of participants (the political polity, the Christian societas) was gradually replaced by a non-participant-based understanding of one or more law-governed domains (the economy, the political), which were interpreted as objective and thought to be organized by their own characteristic dynamics.

Both the autonomy and the systemic coherence of the social, Poovey argues, became thinkable only within the terms of that “long history of reification that we call modernity.” The emergence and deployment of “a view from nowhere” – the perspective of a nonparticipating, objectifying mind – involved a particular form of governmentality in

10 Mary Poovey, “The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy,” Public Culture, 14: 1 (2002), 125
Cf. “The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet; and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards, the mind proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names.” Ibid, I: ii: 15
Western Europe since the eighteenth century: a particular mode of contact "between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self." The staging of the social as a law-governed sphere of abstraction simultaneously confirmed the constancy of calculations and the mutual immanence of order and subjectivity. In seeking to understand the histories of the social, therefore, one cannot invoke the easy, innocent and absolute distinctions between the concrete and the abstract, the real and the represented or, as Poovey would say, the figures of arithmetic and the figures of speech. These dualisms constitute the very procedures of staging a field of aggregate totality. Each of these procedures includes certain conditions within and excludes certain others from the field, and thus, writes Mitchell, they generate the effect of a consistent, self-supporting, and even preexistent order of reality—"an order that is only reflected by the processes of signification, never shaped by them." It is at this point that we re-acknowledge the force of Heidegger's insightful sentence: "what we call the real is revealed as standing-reserve." The statement also touches a central concern of Foucault. What else are strategies but the practices of this "revealing" and "staging?" The constant attempts at "unconcealment" derive their justification from the increased pace and efficiency they bring to utilization. "For Heidegger, it was through an increasing obsession with techné as the only way to arrive at an understanding of objects, that the West lost touch with Being," Foucault observes. "Let's turn the question around and ask which techniques and practices form the Western concept of the subject, giving it its characteristic split of

13 Poovey, The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social, 129-30; 125.
14 Foucault, Technologies of the Self. See also Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds), The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality (London: Harvester Press, 1991) 87-104
15 We refer here to Poovey's insistence on the theorization of the eighteenth-century moral philosophers "that government emanates from human nature instead of being imposed on it." Poovey, The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social, 126. In Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830--1864 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), Poovey also describes how the fabrication of the domain of the social in turn served the laissez-faire fantasy of free market.
16 Cf. Mary Poovey, “Figures of Arithmetic, Figures of Speech: The Discourse of Statistics in the 1830s," Critical Inquiry, 19: 2 (1993), 256-276. For Foucault, if one considers the subject-individual as "the fictitious atom of an ideological representation of society", one must also regard that fiction correlatively as "a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called discipline." Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 194. All this is in a jarring proximity with the description of "the political" as "a form of plastic art" by Lacoue-Labarthe. Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 66
17 Mitchell, The Stage of Modernity, 26
truth and error, freedom and constraint.”

In trying to work out a genealogy of the modern subject, which in effect dismantles Heidegger’s explicit hope to substitute Enframing with “a more original revealing” and hence “to experience the call of a more primal truth,” Foucault pushes Heidegger’s hidden disquiet with the conventional subject-object distinction through its logical limits.

However, in doing so, Foucault himself isolates, as Michel de Certeau points out, “a design of some practices from a seamless web, in order to constitute these practices as a distinct and separate corpus, a coherent whole.” Framing, in other words, does not disappear even when we recognize it. It is not a travesty of reality. It is not an illusion that a spirited and autonomous critique can be trusted to dispel. It is a mode of “revealing,” a practice of staging without which there can be no talk about the real. The critique, despite its corrective gestures, is caught up in exercising the very warranty of the dualisms that it wishes to exorcise. Histories of the social, therefore, cannot ride piggyback on a jaunty series of “representations” in the prevalent sense. They are not so much the colorful accounts of how the real was thought as the gray descriptions of how the real gradually became unthinkable outside the grids of usability. They can neither believe in the self-presence of the concrete, nor can they claim to address abstraction from a consistent distance.

\[\text{Discomforts, Disagreements}\]

“Thou art a scholar – speake to it, Horatio.”

Only a purist will mourn the situation. Only the most romantic of hearts will begin to bleed in sensing that the present dissertation, to the extent that it tries to indicate some histories of

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19 Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology, 28

20 Michel de Certeau, Heterologies: Discourse on the Other, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 190


22 William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, edited by Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), I. i. 45
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the social, suffers from this double bind. The dissertation does not want to play "the voyeur-
god," but it is often caught in a gesture of omniscience. It critiques the ideology and
techniques of utilization, but it is not free from the impulse to make the most of the pasts. It
inserts charts and tables, while it is too painfully aware that these are the precise modes
through which the fiction of self-sufficient homogeneous aggregates continues to be
reproduced. If we are expected to tender an apology here, we can only say that
embarrassments for transgressions belong to the domain of the proper. "When no known
language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language – as men used to steal a
loaf of bread." Thus we enter the palatial labyrinth of imperial archive with the intention of theft. But in the
national university we have only learned the art of policing. (How different is the work of a
trained historian from that of a professional sleuth who collects clues from the overlooked
cigarette ashes and the unnoticed fingerprints, carefully strains one witness's account against
another's and deftly ties all loose threads in the end to reconstruct a full-proof account?)

This produces a confounding displacement in the very actancy of the archive. As detectives,
we end up solving the mystery of property as theft. As thieves, we are always tempted to
transform theft into property. In other words, the thesis, even as it strives to disorganize the
oppressive coherence of the imperial archive by disentangling several elements from their
"circumscribed" locations, always throws these elements open to the risk of a further
territorialization. This is the structural dynamic of framing that is common to both the
archive and its critique. This is what allows the critique to dissolve into the archive after the
dust settles. This is why "the archive cannot be described in its totality" at any given point
of time: it simply never stops growing. Years pass before its presence becomes recognizable
in the most radical of contestations. If there is something uncanny about the archive, it is not
as much its ever-escalating scale as the irreducibility of its spectral appearance. As for us,
we have lived too long with the ghost to shudder at its appearance. "Stay, speak, speak, I
charge thee speak," Horatio the scholar beseeches the "strange eruption." But he receives no

23 We owe this phrase to Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall
(Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 93.
25 Cf. De Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, xix
26 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language, trans. A. M. Sheridan
Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130
answer. The specter – even when it erupts between credence and skepticism, provoking panic and confidence in one go, hinting at the irremediable incompleteness of the present and the past – makes it a point to address only his son and heir, the prince of Denmark.

Can only the prince make the specter talk? Does only "the fantasy of legitimate descent" trigger libidinal investments in the apparitional truths? It seems, pax Derrida, that the spectral does not emerge as a limit to the proprietorial, that the phantasms of truth are inexpressible without the fantasies of descent and property. The task is clearly not to recover an un-appropriated truth within an archive inscribed with these phantasmatic striations. There is none. Nor can we continue to pretend that the archive is just an institution, a collection, or even a short-hand for "an entire epistemological complex." The archive is also an operative function which, like the Deleuzean Baroque, "endlessly creates folds" – "twists and turns the folds, takes them to infinity, fold upon fold, fold after fold." We can run along the straight lines, measure the curvatures, and fathom the depths without caring to recognize how they are effected. We can try to unfold, to straighten out, without realizing that in folding back the forms and fantasies of the opaque and the curved into those of the surface we do not efface but extend the power of the fold.

The point is easy to mistake. It is not that we should shy away from explanations or that we must all happily perish under the weight of a romantic pessimism. The challenge is precisely the opposite: to redefine unfolding itself, to throw doubts on its claims of self-sufficiency and transparency, to make it recognize the traces of its own construction, and thus to make our own explanations accessible to further works of folding. We insist on this language of the futural and the performative, in contradistinction to that of an exorcist critique, in order to call attention to the everunfinished nature of our histories. Unlike Heidegger, we do not seek the ontological fullness of the primitive truth. We have been told by the prince that it

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28 I was drawn to this textual detail by the insightful discussion of Stephen Greenblatt, "What Is the History of Literature?", Critical Inquiry, 23: 3 (1997), 460-481.
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will always escape us, that there will always be "more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." We do not know. We cannot dream of knowing. It is only to the prince, to the sole and rightful inheritor that the specter will reveal its secrets. As the bystanders unworthy of address, we shall only continue to recognize the force of this silent obloquy, the enormous power of the proper and the proprietorial that unites the enunciation and acceptance of truths. This dissertation, in so far as it offers an understanding of the production of truths in the imperial archive, is simultaneously an account of their various nationalist receptions.

It is obvious by now that we are particularly interested in the truths of constancy, calculability and totalizability of the social. However, as the chapters may clarify, we proceed in a roundabout way, seeking to understand the grids through which these truths become legible. We work through a set of documents which, like all such sets in the imperial archive, is circumscribed by such temporal and geographical specificities as to generate the effect of a precise historical context — "Assam between the seventeen nineties and the nineteen thirties," as our PhD proposal put it. Conscious as we are of the limits of the "archival reason" / our discomfort with the claims of stability and self-presence that this "context" suggests is very acute. That discomfort runs through the entire dissertation and contributes to its attempt to recognize the histories of which "Assam" and "the Assamese" are effects, rather than originary moments.

Having announced that agenda, we are already in the midst of a historiographical maze. It is in fact customary for the Introduction of a doctoral dissertation to systematically discuss the previous contributions in the field — the "historiography." We would have loved to do the same. But there are two problems. First, we do not want to repeat ourselves. The chapters proceed through a rereading of the histories which have dissolved into the archive. Chapter Four does this brazenly, focusing primarily on the techniques and targets of history writing in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. But the other chapters too contend in their own ways with the contrapuntal unity of the imperial archive and its various nationalist critiques. Rather than settling these histories into one defined homeland of "historiography", we thought it would be more equitable to leave them scattered in the

respective chapters so that the readers might appreciate the constitutive connections between historiographical and disciplinary procedures.

Secondly, and more poignantly, there are not many distinctive new histories to discuss. In spite of the recent and continuing boom in the critical industry of South Asia, British Assam, or for that matter, the entire north-eastern frontier of British India remains largely unaddressed. Indeed, this is somewhat consistent with the longer academic tradition in India of understanding the pasts of this region as largely peripheral to that of the “national history.” The glaring elision in the “mainstream” histories has in turn triggered strong emotional reactions among the intelligentsia of a region where the Indian state continues to face some of the oldest and most organized armed challenges against its claims to embody one nation.\textsuperscript{34} The impulse of self-defense has however largely tended to verge on self-congratulation and hardly produced any critical reexamination of the early twentieth-century historiographical assumptions.\textsuperscript{35} Several adaptations of an unblushingly linear account of annexation, colonization and recovery of a pregiven space and a predefined people circulate

\textsuperscript{34} The works of the assassinated civil rights activist Parag Kumar Das [\textit{mok swādhinatā lāge} (Guwahati: Author, 1994), \textit{swādhin asamar arthanāti: Views on Assam Economy in the light of the demand for right to self-determination as per provisions of the U. N.} (Guwahati: Author, 1995), and \textit{swādhinatā prastāb} (Guwahati: Author, 1993)] may be cited as a typical example. For a critical introduction to the complexities of the ongoing “nationality struggles”, Sanjib Baruah’s two books — \textit{India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) and \textit{Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) — by far remain the most nuanced accounts. See also Udayon Misra, \textit{The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland} (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000) and Sajal Nag, \textit{Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationality in North-East India} (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002).

\textsuperscript{35} There are some signs of a critical rethinking in Sanjib Baruah’s volumes, although, strictly speaking, the political scientist does not claim to write history books. Yasmin Saikia’s \textit{Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India} (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004) is of course a recent and welcome break in the long litany of the conventional histories of Assam. She challenges at least two foundational creeds of the stock histories, namely the precolonial status of the \textit{buranjis} and the ethnicized understanding of the Ahom. Unfortunately, her evidences fail to catch up with the majesty of her contentions. Touchingly short on archival work, the book misses on many complexities of the process it chooses to address (how the category Tai-Ahom was produced, understood and lived over the last two hundred years.). Even her perceptive interrogation of the Ahom \textit{buranjis} seems a little preprogrammed and frequently energized by a strategic confusion between Tungkhungia titular designations and collective self-expressions. In her eagerness to discover the non-ethnic perspectives of the precolonial Ahom, Saikia elides the question of the structures of inequality and offers an almost idealized and sanitized image of the pre-British regimes. For a brief summary of the problems and promises of the book, see my review in \textit{Seminar} 550 (June 2005). In trying to develop both of her major themes away from her historical treatment, this dissertation offers alternative accounts. See, particularly, Chapters One and Four.
in textbooks and commissioned histories, reiterating the hackneyed glory-and-fall arguments and rehashing the "prepackaged passions."  

If this appears to be too sweeping and too harsh a judgment, we must clarify that a delightful and significant exception is present in the works of Amalendu Guha, who over the last four decades has done the most to unchain the histories of pre-British and British Assam from the oppression of self-congratulation. As a matter of fact, in Guha's broadly Marxist critique of exploitative plantation capitalism and "ugly" middle-class chauvinism, the larger South Asian academe has found a particularly acceptable idiom of understanding the history of British Assam, at least the history of its "backwardness." In nineteenth-century Assam, says Guha, "[t]he start in modernisation was indeed a false one."

Superimposed as it was on a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, the new plantation economy – subjugated to foreign capital and linked with immigrant usury and merchant capital – could not bring in a radical transformation within the local society itself. In other words, as Guha continues to explain in his various research publications, on the eve of the British colonization Assam was primarily a labor-short, land-abundant economy with insufficient monetization and having limited trade links with the rest of the world. Under the aegis of the colonial state, substantial investments took place in a modern sector that consisted mainly of tea plantation. But colonial malevolence did not allow these investments to establish any effective connection between the modern and the traditional sectors through important linkage effects in capital, labor and commodity markets. The resultant "dual economy" not only held back the economy from a path of long-run growth, but also decisively shaped the distinctive "two-track nationalism" of twentieth-century Assam: a "great nationalism grounded in a feeling of all-India unity", essentially suited to "the interests of India's big bourgeoisie", and a "little nationalism based on [a feeling of] regional-linguistic unity", corresponding to the interests of "the small bourgeoisie – the regional middle classes." However, we suspect that the tempting tidiness of Guha's explanation owes much to the consistency of capital's self-portrait. His unshakable faith in the transparency of the

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categories through which he organizes this explanation corresponds to his understanding of the "incompleteness" of modernization as a technical failure. Like most Indian Marxist historians of his generation, Guha shares "[t]he tendency to read Indian history in terms of a lack, an absence, or an incompleteness that translates into 'inadequacy'."39 The distinctive experience of Assam — particularly its "semi-tribal, semi-feudal society" which never underwent "a radical transformation" and its "dualistic plantation economy" which severely constrained "the growth of an Assamese middle class"40 — only doubly intensifies this sense of inadequacy: Assam becomes the most backward margin of a backward colony. In choosing to leave the violence of categories unquestioned, Guha reduces the complexities of the lived lives to specific imperfections of the Enlightenment templates. A modernist account of self-pity overtakes the idealist fictions of self-congratulation.

As Guha allows the constitutive connections between categories and capital to escape him, his account comes to be overtaken by the autobiography of capital. In his masterpiece, Planter-Raj to Swraj (which emphatically demonstrates the critical liaison between the imperial state and the joint-stock companies), the story of modern Assam moves on without even mentioning the everyday displacements, disposessions and contestations of the communities classed as "primitive tribes" in the imperial register. As the archetypal outsiders to the modern world of bureaucracies and corporations, the "tribes" form a silent exterior to the wicked marvels of capital in the whole book. If this excision indirectly serves to endorse one of the most enduring orientalist idealizations of the "primitives", Guha's "evolutionist taxonomy"41 — his objectivist attempt to distribute the coeval plurality of societal developments in Assam into qualitative historical "stages" — more explicitly reproduces the tactile stereotypes of imperial ethnography.42 "Primitiveness" is always a question of persistence for Guha — never one of production.

39 Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32
40 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 216
41 We owe this phrase to F. Jara and E. Magana, "Rules of Imperial Method", Dialectical Anthropology, vol. 7 (1982), 117
42 Guha explicitly pursues a stagist design of historical development throughout the Medieval and Early Colonial Assam (The Tai Migration and wet rice culture > "Tribalism" > "Feudalism" > "Peasant uprisings and the feudal crisis" > Colonialism and "aborted" capitalist modernization). A typical sample of the consequent narrativization may come from his well-known lines on the late eighteenth-century Moamaria revolt: "There was perhaps a vague longing on the peasantry's part to go back to the 'golden age' of their tribal past, but that was no more feasible. Nor was it possible for the peasants to go forward on their own to a higher stage of social development. Hence the outburst of the primitive savagery that matched the royalist
It is at this blurring boundary between the radical critique and the imperial archive that the truths of constancy, calculability and totalizability of the social emerge as objects of further scrutiny. If the autonomy and the coherence of the social are thinkable only within the terms of modernity, then the exclusion of the primitives is a necessary condition of its possibility. For Guha, who takes the social to be the degree zero, the excision of the primitive is a one-time affair — a natural, historically-ordained, evolutionary split between the primordial "tribes" and the advanced "peasants." This we find difficult to accept. The staging of the primitive can never cease if the show of the social has to go on. In trying to understand the ceaseless performance of difference through which the social came to be posited as an ever-present space outside the constitutive scope of colonialism and capital, we discover ourselves contravening the imperialist and nationalist conventions of self-portraiture and re-interrogating the meanings of being indigenous.

Accumulation of the Primitive

"Tribes living exclusively on hunting and fishing are beyond the boundary line from which real development begins."

The comfortable imprecision of the social in the sanctioned histories supports a particular form of spatial politics. At one point, this is the form of interiority, of depth, and of distance from the State. Particular combinations of these spatial fantasies frequently generate a sense of autonomy around which a world separate and distinct from the reach of "the State" can be woven. At another point, the social is also a planar figure with finite number of vertices which are connected, as in Euclidean plane geometry, by straight line segments. Apart from offering the social as an observable, measurable and (in James Scott's sense) legible shape, this often activates an impression of temporal homogeneity, a sense of togetherness in time from which the other times are shut out and their traces are effaced. Nevertheless, as terror." For an interesting argument concerning the inescapable connection of stagism to what he calls "the misleading concept of the 'dual economy'," see Immanuel Wallerstein, The Capitalist World Economy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1979), 3

43 Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, translated by S. W. Ryazanskaya, edited by Maurice Dobb (1887; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 212
Mitchell points out, a frame "is not a line on a map, but a horizon that at every point opens up into other territories," suggesting the "potentially limitless series" of exchange and connections — the "seamless web" of De Certeau — from which it seeks to extricate and constitute the interior. 44 The boundaries of the social continue to shift, the measurements of its depth vary, and the politics of its spatio-temporal equilibrium is always at odds with the politics of, what Anne McOintock calls, anachronistic spaces. "Anachronistic" are those spaces which appear out of place in the linear, homogenous time of modernity, development and nation. 45 They have to be constantly regretted, methodically brought in line with and ceaselessly reproduced within this temporal schema, as they simultaneously indicate its limits and constitute the very condition of its possibility. Although not reducible to a Wallersteinian "periphery", they certainly bear a constitutive relation to the geography of "uneven development" of capitalism — a space economy that always fails its promise of "an equalization of the levels and conditions of production." This failure, as several generations of critical scholars have asserted, "is structural rather than statistical." 46 Indeed, one may even argue, as Immanuel Wallerstein does, that in order to succeed in amassing wealth from every comer of the globe, capitalism has to necessarily break this promise — that in capitalism all spaces "cannot ‘develop’ simultaneously by definition, since the system functions by virtue of having unequal core and peripheral regions." 47

46 Neil Smith, Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), xi. For Smith, "The logic of uneven development derives specifically from the opposed tendencies, inherent in capital, toward the differentiation but simultaneous equalization of the levels and conditions of production. Capital is continually invested in the built environment in order to produce surplus value and expand the basis of capital itself. But equally, capital is continually withdrawn from the built environment so that it can move elsewhere and take advantage of higher profit rates. The spatial immobilization of productive capital in its material form is no more or less a necessity than the perpetual circulation of capital as value. Thus it is possible to see the uneven development of capitalism as the geographical expression of the more fundamental contradiction between use value and exchange value.” Ibid, xiii. See also the famous critique of “a spatial fix” in David Harvey, The Limits to Capital (London: Verso, 1999)
One does not have to walk the entire path with Wallerstein in order to see the structural affinity between the place of the primitive and the site of primitive accumulation. In seeking to dissipate the legend of "a capital fallen from heaven," Karl Marx observes that "the general law of capitalist accumulation" (how capital produces surplus value and surplus value in turn produces further capital) becomes a "vicious circle, out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation ... preceding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point." Marx has no faith in such a supposition:

This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in [Christian] theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. 48

In the gap of a condensed analytical passage, Marx assures us that "[t]he so-called primitive accumulation ... is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production." 49 We know who he is giving a talking to: Adam Smith, the Luther of Political Economy, according to whom "[c]apital has been silently and gradually accumulated by the private frugality and good conduct of individuals." 50 The subsequent pages of the volume one of Capital, however, still grope for a secular answer to the theological question of "genesis" of industrial capitalism, and indicate how "[t]he treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder, floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital." As the famous passage goes,

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of the capitalist production. 51

This was the red primitive accumulation – many have been tempted to say – as opposed to the "insipid childishness" of the fictions of "private frugality and good conduct of individuals." No doubt, there is a tension in Marx's writings here: a friction which neither the "historical primitive accumulation" approach of Vladimir Lenin nor the "inherent-
continuous primitive accumulation" approach of Rosa Luxemburg, can fully resolve.52 Dispossession under capitalism cannot certainly be confined to an epochal period of transition, "as a one-time, one-place phenomenon,"53 and as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, for Marx "the so-called primitive or originary accumulation" is indeed "[a]n important locus of discontinuity" in the center of the capitalist system, and (at least at several points of his analysis) Marx brilliantly displaces "questions of origin into questions of process."54 He keeps cautioning us that the history of primitive accumulation can never be "an anecdote of the past," a putatively singular "starting point" which telescopes the multiplicity of expropriation-events into a (let us lift from Nietzsche) monotonothestic "history of economic original sin."

But there is also no getting away from the fact, as Timothy Mitchell mercilessly insists, that in these very pages Marx himself proffers such a history as he sets out to gather back the dispersed and varied pasts into "the linear story of capital."

There is no analysis of the social organization, the methods of discipline, or the techniques of production that characterize the slave plantation, the shipping industry, the colonizing corporation, the colonial settlement, or the power of the army, to compare with his painstaking analysis of the nineteenth-century English factory. There is nothing except the use of force. The absence of detail is not, I would argue, an innocent one, for characterizing the colonial system solely in terms of force has an important consequence. It enables Marx's writings to fold these heterogeneous overseas developments into the history of the West.

The reduction of the complexities and specificities of these heterogeneous conditions into a curt expression of "force," according to Mitchell, confirms the "idea of 'Europe' — defined by the emergence there of modern bourgeois society — as the singular center of all other histories." The developments in the colonies "whose difference in social form, disrupted timing, or displacement across the globe seem to undermine the effort to make history homogenous become simply the unlawful force that forces history ahead."55 Marx actually

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55 Mitchell, The Stage of Modernity, 8-11
writes, "[the so-called primitive accumulation] appears primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it." If the ambiguous English verb "appear" still kindled some hope for a characteristic "ideology critique" of primitive accumulation in a postcolonial Marxist heart, the more definitive "form" positively forces a historicist closure: the coeval heterogeneities become remnants and reminders of "all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements [the European bourgeois society] built itself up." The time of capital becomes the time of history (historicist time).

But, Partha Chatterjee says in a matter-of-fact way, this time is "utopian." We shall call it the autobiographical time of capital, which allows it to describe itself as a logically unfolding, coherent, self-sufficient and universal project. But capital, like everything else, can only exist in and work through a time which Chatterjee describes as "heterogeneous, unevenly dense," and which — for the want of a better name — we shall call the historical time of capital. We are neither implying any underlying structural unity by this term nor claiming that it is somewhat more real than the autobiographical time of capital. For us, the historical time operates as "a dangerous supplement," simultaneously adding to the smooth run of the autobiographical time of capital and indicating its stark inadequacies. In other words, in seeking to move beyond a critique of primitive accumulation as deception, we do not wish to invoke any claims of self-sufficiency or fullness of the historical time of capital vis-à-vis the limitations of the autobiographical time. Rather, we contend that all such claims are intelligible only within the totalizing language of the autobiographical time of capital, just as the limits of a problematic (such as that of primitive accumulation) formed within that

56 Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, 668
58 Partha Chatterjee, "Anderson's Utopia", Diacritics, 29: 4 (1999), 131
60 Perhaps we should clarify here that our idea of "the historical time of capital" is informed by but different from the nuanced "History 2" of Dipesh Chakrabarty. In our usage, the historical time of capital does not correspond to the "histories that do not belong to capital's 'life process'" (Cf. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 50). Indeed, we are more suspicious than Chakrabarty is of the conceptualization of certain chaste pasts that do not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital and its attending historicism (see Chapter Nine). We fear that a distinction between History 1 and History 2 might itself be an effect of "the methods of enframing that enable an abstract code or structure of rules to appear separate from the practices in which they are brought into being and reproduced" (Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 296). The logic of capital's self-reproduction, as Chakrabarty himself tells us on various occasions, is much more complex than what its autobiography is able to capture.
language become visible only in the recognitions of the irreducibly plural historical time of
capital. Thinking through these and other difficulties of time and space, this dissertation
wishes to understand the connections between the processes of primitive accumulation and
of accumulation of the primitive within the regime of capital.

Considered together, they help us to complicate the self-identical presence of the social in
the sanctioned histories. As the autobiographical time of capital has to fold back some
accumulations into a putative “starting point” (primitive accumulation) in order to constitute
and sustain its characteristic linearity, the spatial fantasy of the social has to brush aside
certain locations as anachronistic spaces so as to offer itself as a valid unit of calculation and
utilization. But both capital and the social are exceeded by the very relations with which they
are thus constituted, each turning out to be “a differential network, a fabric of traces
referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.”

Perhaps this is why Étienne Balibar writes that “[t]he analysis of primitive accumulation … brings us into
the presence of the radical absence of memory which characterizes history.”

The histories which follow are condemned not as much to chase these infinite displacements
as to understand the operations of scission through which the displacements are defined and
denied – how connections and disconnections are emphasized, enforced and breached in the
process of generating the bounded reality of self-sufficient fields and distinct objects for
utilization. Understandably, this runs counter to the impulse to readily identify a “given
sphere of production” as a substantive (“real”) foundation of the social. Instead, we are
interested in the ways in which heterogeneous elements are constantly brought together and
scattered away to delimit such spheres. Our critique of plantation capital, therefore, cannot
be the conventional Marxist-nationalist critique of a “system” which was “not the products

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and Criticism (New York: Seabury, 1979), 84

62 Étienne Balibar, “On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism”, in Louis Althusser and Étienne
unity possessed by the capitalist structure once it has been constituted is not found in its rear. Even when
the study of the pre-history of the mode of production takes the form of a genealogy, i.e., when it aims to be
explicitly and strictly dependent, in the question that it poses, on the elements of the constituted structure,
and on their identification, which requires that the structure is known as such in its complex unity – even
then the pre-history can never be the mere retrospective projection of the structure.” Ibid, 281

63 Our use of the word “scission” evidently owes much to Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara
Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 287-366. Scission, for Derrida, is a necessary
violence performed upon a text in order to open discourse anew.

64 Cf. Isaak Illich Rubin, Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value, trans. Miloš Samardžila and Fredy Perlman
(1928; Detroit: Black & Red, 1972), 128. There is also a corresponding implicit understanding of the social
in Rubin as an aggregate of the “interconnections between all labor processes.”

Cartologies, Categories, Capital
of operation of indigenous economic forces but of exogenous development and requirements of the imperial order," because we find the distinction of indigenous/exogenous precisely complicit in the project of making this economy.

Indeed, the first part of the dissertation – we call it “Scandals of Territoriality” – is committed to explore the critical conjunctions between the topoi of capital and the tropes of the social. We sincerely apologize for the odd, tedious length of Chapter One, which introduces and discusses the issues of concurrent sovereignties, spatial sequences, cartographic productions and revenue geographies. Like every space in the world, the space of Assam has also been and still is “a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points.” In trying to move beyond the tired opposition between fluid precolonial and fixed colonial spaces, we wish to identify the specific modes of rupture, reproduction and disarticulation of the spatial geometry of capitalism. Chapter Two pushes the question further, complicating the locations of the extra-legal and the extra-economic. Through a connected history of the Inner Line, paea practices and transfrontier rubber trade, it offers rough sketches of an unofficial biography of capital which necessarily calls into question the most sacred and foundational distinction of Assam history: Assam proper and the “tribal areas.” In troubling the corresponding distinction between the ḍak and the savage, Chapter Three addresses some complexities of this disengagement and tries to rethink the genealogies of the Assamese ḍak. In doing so, it is led to complicate the categories of “slaves” and “freemen” and to explore the complex correlations between taxation, abstraction and agricultural forms which came to define the properness of Assam proper. The relationship between the proper and the proprietorial is addressed once again from a different set of issues in Chapter Four. Recounting a protracted and conflictual history of the orientalist overnaming of Assam as Kamarupa, this chapter probes the promise of an absolute space in the etymological thought. The regional coherence we know by the name of Assam was not generated by “the conversion of spatial restraints to accumulation” alone.  


67 Cf. Harvey, Limits to Capital, 416.
For the forms and fantasies of the social, the historicist production of the space of British India as a recuperation of the puranic pale was a crucial condition.

"Clearly this is not an either/or issue", say Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler in pointing towards the unmistakable traffic between "the political economy of colonialism" and "the cultural and representational features of colonial authority." 68 Timothy Mitchell, on the other hand, argues that the "power of the economy as a discursive process lies exactly with fixing this effect of the real (economy) versus its representation." 69 The second part of the dissertation, "Economies of Meaning", builds upon this understanding. It contains three chapters, each of which tries to complicate the different frontiers of conventional "economic history" in order to understand the semantic structure which enables that dominant approach to claim a transparent and privileged relation to its referents. Chapter Five inaugurates the discussion with an analysis of the linkages and leakages between the metropolitan blueprints of "improvement" and their destinies in this imperial frontier. In trying to explore the anthropological binds of political economy, this chapter discusses the extensive wasteland grants, the forms of labor recruitment, the frontier hats, and the institution of a uniform currency landscape. Chapter Six addresses the imperial endeavors to "people" Assam with "useful settlers." Rather than flogging the dead horse of the indenture system, it concentrates on the other and more protracted scheme of settlement targeted at the local "savages" which the sanctioned histories routinely overlook. Describing how the question of territorial rights of the elite hill lineages was calculatedly overwritten with a preprogrammed question of slavery and wage labor, it analyzes the various considerations, discriminations and contradictions involved in the process of settlement. Through these and other related histories, it tries to recognize the emergence of a new discursive regime where the sense of collective belongingness had to invariably express itself through the thicket of bordered, compacted and sedentary territorialities. The opening up of the cold abstractions of productivity, utility and labor to reinterrogation allows Chapter Seven to revisit the relationship between commodities and the social. In discussing how opium and tea came to be understood as primary focal points into which the relationships of governmentality could

68 Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda", in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), 18
be condensed in a plantation province, it attends to the connections between the taxonomic operations of the scientific disciplines, the revenue calculations of Government and the norms of the new work regime.

In the regime of modern facts, as described by Poovey, the world represented "a problem that required a professional (or disciplinary) solution." In the three chapters of the third part, "The Metropolitan Imaginary", we try to understand the flows between professional expertise, disciplinary practices and untutored imaginations in order to identify a structural dynamic that was central to both the production and the performance of "Assamese" identity. Through a reading of the medical debate regarding the nosological status of a disease called "the Assam fever," Chapter Eight points at a particular way of place making in the expert medical discourse which was simultaneously incited and interrupted by the contending requirements of the imperial administration. The next chapter pushes the question of expertise a little further. It deals with the expert historians' dilemma as they were compelled to address a series of stories which their modernist common sense readily identified as absurd and incredible but which their unshakable faith in the complete interpretability of every past could not afford to sidestep. In discussing the ensuing multiplicity of spatial fantasies, Chapter Nine also suggests a particular relationship between the abstract and the absurd. Through a small, connected history of orthographic contests, grammarians' debates and print-capitalism, Chapter Ten explores the powers of abstraction in another terrain. It narrates the story of the metropolis-oriented production of linguistic knowledge that came to hypostatize an abstract grid of standard language within which the mutable, heterogeneous and fluctuating speech practices (and the corresponding scribal culture) had to be mobilized. The ensuing debates regarding the alleged dialectal status of "Assamese" are closely analyzed, which allow us to trace some connections between spatial sequence, linguistic imagination and proprietorial logic. It ends with an indication of how the realignments of these connections animated the contending nationalist discourses of the early twentieth century all of which claimed to represent the ever-present social.

Such is the rough, schematic "plan of the work." However, the "work," we hope, does much more, or much less — spills over, goes across and shifts the boundaries laid down by the scheme. But haven't we already made enough fuss about our intentions and impressions? Let

us begin instead where the subtitle has promised to begin: the seventeen nineties, the decade which Foucault identifies as the approximate period of emergence of "the new empiricities" in metropolitan Europe, of "the 'quasi-transcendentals' of Life, Labor, and Language." It is in this period, according to Foucault, when the European culture is inventing for itself a depth in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their possible paths and routes, but great hidden forces developed on the basis of their primitive and inaccessible nucleus, origin, causality, and history. From now on things will be represented only from the depths of this density withdrawn into itself, perhaps blurred and darkened by its obscurity, but bound tightly to themselves, assembled or divided, inescapably grouped by the vigor that is hidden down below, in those depths.71

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Part I

Scandals of Territoriality

If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regards to its contents and thus seems to be 'purely' formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used.

Henri Lefebvre