Colonial governmentality appraised, from the Danish West Indies

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Kristoffer Christiansen, *Governing Black and White: A History of Governmentality in Denmark and the Danish West* Indies, *1770–1900* (Lund: Department of History 2023). 394 pp.

Recent years have seen questions of race and the legacies of racial violence taken up by social movements and social media campaigns across the globe. The representation of colonialism and colonisers is being debated in comparable but very different ways in what were colonial "peripheries" and what may still be imperial "cores", and in parts of both larger and smaller empires. The Danish empire was one of Europe's smaller imperial networks, but this thesis makes clear that it was no less violent, and that its histories and geographies are no less deserving of critical scrutiny than those of the British, French, Portuguese or Spanish empires.[1] The means of applying that scrutiny vary by discipline, the means vary also by theoretical basis, from contemporary interests in the coloniality of the Anthropocene or of more-than-human relations, to older liberal or Marxist critiques of empire. Sitting between, and in some ways bridging, the two is a substantial body of work that has used French philosopher Michel Foucault to think about colonialism as a discourse.

This endeavour is as old as, and at the heart of, postcolonial studies. Edward Said famously, if ultimately unsuccessfully, hybridised the discourse analysis of Foucault with the cultural hegemony approach of Antonio Gramsci in his study of western conceptions of its colonial east, Orientalism.[2] Said, however, relied solely on Foucault's "archaeological" analysis of discourse as a largely representational affair. In his "genealogical" work

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1. Gunvor Simonsen, *Slave Stories: Law, Representation, and Gender in the Danish West Indies* (Aarhus 2017).

2. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London, 1978).

from the 1970s onwards Foucault turned to an analysis of power as it was exerted on, through, and in human bodies. Alongside longer standing sovereign powers, in modernity discipline normalised under-performing bodies, while regulation normalised broader populations from a distance. The resulting triangulation of techniques of power were referred to by Foucault as governmental rationalities, or governmentalities.[3]

In his thesis Kristoffer Christensen makes a compelling case that this governmentality approach has much to offer the study of colonialism, especially in settings where it has not so far been applied. David C. Scott argued in 1995 that we should explore the lived regimes of slavery and colonial governmentality in all their specificity, their fragility, and their moments of violent rage.[4] This call has partly been taken up, especially regarding colonial India and settler colonies where racially differentiated but recognisable forms of western, liberal governmentalities were experimented with.[5] In African colonial territories and slavery-based plantation colonies, governmentality has been less used as a frame. It is argued that in these spaces, absent of representational government and exposed to the unchecked violence of sovereign power, there was less biopower (power over life) and more necropolitics (the politics of death).[6]

Christensen argues that we should revisit this assumption. He uses a governmentality approach to explore connections between Denmark and the Danish West Indies (DWI) from the late eighteenth-century to the cusp of the twentieth.[7] Eschewing easy assumptions about colonial difference, he asks whether the DWI were specifically colonial, and if so, how? Often beginning from the Caribbean and reading back to northern Europe, interesting parallels are raised and pursued, between slave society and peasant society, between plantocracies and autocracies, and between labour markets adapting to both the abolition of slavery and the birth of constitutional monarchy.

The innovative framing produces many stunning results. It becomes clear that slavery, corporal punishment, social segregation, and execution were the subjects of clinically cool governmental rationalities, debated and devised between and in the Danish West Indies and Denmark. These

3. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78* (Basingstoke 1977–78 [2007]), Williant Walters and Martina Tazzioli (Eds.), *Handbook on Governmentality* (London 2023).

4. David Scott, Colonial governmentality, *Social Text* 43 (1995) pp. 191–220.

5. Stephen Legg and Deana Heath (eds.), *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings* (Cambridge 2018).

6. Achilles Mbembe, Necropolitics, *Public Culture* 15 (2003) pp. 11–40.

7. Also see, Rasmus Sielemen *Natures of Conduct: Governmentality and the Danish West Indies* (Copenhagen 2015).

governmentalities are tracked across sites often studied separately in the Foucauldian canon, from the law, prisons, societal norms, and the police to labour discipline in the fields of Scandinavia and the Caribbean. Geographical comparisons are made across two periods, 1770–1800 and 1840–1900, to reach an unexpected conclusion: European and colonial territories became *less* rather than more alike over the nineteenth-century. That is, in the eighteenth-century they were distinct but familiar worlds ("commensurate and translatable") while in the late nineteenth-century they had become unique ("incommensurate and divorced") (p. 15). While this journey is complex and respected in its detail, the prominent explanation for this difference is that the strengthening of nationalism drove a wedge between these Danish territories, divided by the Atlantic Ocean and by the deeper chasm of national identity.

The thesis is structured into two unequal halves. The first, much larger, section covers the period 1770–1800, comprising five chapters which compare and contrast developments in the DWI and Denmark. Chapter two explores the relations between masters and slaves in the Caribbean and masters and peasants in Denmark. Late-eighteenth century shifts in philosophical and governmental thought in Europe suggested that despotism killed people's "passions", making them lazy and inefficient (p. 60). Rural reforms would seek to cultivate these passions (self-interest, civic virtue, and honour) so as to create a self-governing peasant class. While comparable logics informed the regulation of master-slave relations in the DWI, the logic here was of discipline and not proto-liberalism.

Chapter three explores the violent punishment of crime in the poorer social classes and considers how this violence was appraised and regulated in terms of its proportionality. Reforms in the DWI worked to distinguish the infamy of the gallows from the use of the whipping post for less serious crimes; minor gradations within the extremity of colonial violence. This was a familiar distinction in Denmark, even if the violence was not, where the punishment of crime was crafted around the emerging sense of protecting and cultivating the passions of the liberal subject.

Chapter four moves to a semiological analysis of the structuring of these hierarchical societies, in terms of race and class, which attempted to cultivate public performances of obedience and even reverence in both domains. Chapter five explores the function of the police as regulators of social dis/order more broadly, rather than of narrower definitions of crime. Chapter six anticipates the focus of the second half of the thesis in its detailed exploration of the question of economic productiveness in the broader context of societies with a limited sense of free labour and little sense of a free market. There was, however, a sense that both slaves and peasants were part

of sub-populations with regularities and traits that could be monitored and managed.

Christensen doesn't attempt to force all elements of the analysis above into the anticipated argument that the eighteenth-century colonial territory and metropolitan core had more in common than might commonly be assumed. While reforms were underway in the DWI akin to those in Denmark, the differences between the two spaces were obvious. The limiting of the powers of masters over their slaves did not allow for the emergence of honour or a sense of citizenship, rather the controls were focused on reducing the chances of insurrection; humanizing laws still discriminated in favour of whites and allowed the continued torture of slaves; the police regulated society not in favour of order more generally but in terms of the suppression of unwieldy black desires; and it was believed that a sense of economic productiveness would only emerge under the controlling hand of a master.

These were, however, comparable modes of governing to a not totally dissimilar set of governmentalities operating in Europe. *Husbonds* (masters) in Europe acted as models for humane slave masters in the Caribbean; penal reforms acknowledged slaves as potentially capable of honour and distinguishing honourable from dishonourable punishment; slaves interpreted and responded to signs indicating social hierarchies; and idle slaves, in the field or in the home, were economic problems, not just problems of faulty surveillance or sovereignty. While the slave was undoubtedly governed as a racial subject, they were comprehended through a more universal sense of humans as calculating subjects.

The second half of the thesis jumps forward to focus on the period 1840–1900. In its opening decade both territories underwent seismic political shifts. 1848 saw the formal abolition of slavery in the DWI. The inadequate translation of formal into lived freedom led to the incendiary "fireburn" riots of 1878, producing a "second freedom" after 1878 when something more like free labour emerged on the islands. Across the Atlantic, 1849 saw the birth of a Danish constitutional monarchy and accelerated steps towards labour freedom. The two chapters in this half focus more squarely on labour and the economy, though situated in broader social changes and institutions.

Chapter seven explores debates about "economic man" in Denmark and the levers and forces which could best be used to make him most productive. Chapter eight, in contrast, explores the dislocated liberalism of post-abolition reform in the DWI, whereby the fairness and productivity of labour regulations were debated and the most efficient means for dealing with vagrants, beggars and thieves were considered.

There were similarities between debates in post-abolition DWI and post-autocratic Denmark. Poor relief and its impacts on the will to work were

debated in both locations; the exposure to poverty and its effects were studied, in relation to the mediating role of the natural environment; while the labourers who negotiated the conditions were considered to all be free and calculating subjects. However, it is argued that the DWI were now read as spaces of radical differences. While calculating, these were subjects unable or unwilling to care for themselves and still in need of mastership; that is, these people were now read as primarily racial rather than economic subjects.

Appraising the appraisal

This thesis is inherently a work of comparison and it is explicit in recommending the sort of comparison we should be doing. Colonial governmentality studies to date are critiqued for having generalised too much about a generic "colonial" (p. 21). The work of Kenneth Pomoranz is appealed to, guarding us against incomparable units of comparison (colonies vs Europe); against lazy stereotypes of norms vs deviants; and against endogenous explanations that presume a singular colonial form. Christensen's solution is to focus solely on comparing the DWI and Denmark, not attempting inter-imperial comparisons or even intra-imperial comparison, with Greenland or Tranquebar in India. Secondly, the comparisons are said to be analytic and not connective, that is to not be totally behoven to connections noted and recorded in the archive. And, finally, the comparison is not symmetrical, starting with more detail on the DWI and then detouring to Europe for comparisons, if not origins.

There is a sense of having one's cake and eating it here, appealing to comparisons when connections are not found (they often are); appealing to asymmetry when equal argument cannot be made (it often is); and comparing to other empires when it justifies the method, but not when it doesn't (no mention on the impact of policy in the DWI of the Morant Bay uprising in neighbouring Jamaica in 1865, or the legacies of the American Revolution from 1765, the Haitian Revolution from 1791, or of the Indian "Mutiny" from 1857 onward). In damning colonial governmentality studies for a deficient sense of the colonial, this reads the analytical generalisations of someone like Partha Chatterjee or Gyan Prakash without accounting for the decades of careful archival and textual analysis that sits behind their much-used tabulations and theoretical formulations (of which Christensen has some excellent examples in his conclusion, which I hope will also be much used). Against these generalisations, the method developed here is held up as a solution, doing the detailed work of reading metropole and periphery in deep and intricate relation.

The question, however, is how many other nineteenth-century empires

would benefit from such an analysis? How many of them had comparable empirical connections that would allow this sort of comparison? By European standards this was a small empire with a contained number of operators and a central state that could and did take the time to consider, revise, reform and occasionally admonish its colony. Would this be an appropriate model for the British empire? Though with its own Secretary of State, India was governed on increasingly different lines to Britain through the 1800s, way before the increase of self-government and the devolution or authority in the 1920s. Recent work led by Alan Lester has explored the Foreign, India and and Colonial Offices in London responding to ever more chaotic demands and developments through the nineteenth century.[8] Perhaps the more centralised French system would present an imperial geography more suited to Christensen's comparative method, but this would be a radical upscaling of the method trialled here.

The thesis strikes an excellent balance between the pursuit of analytical and empirical findings, the governmentality of the passions being particularly effective. Each chapter concludes with very rewarding readings across the material presented, teasing out recurring forms of knowledge formation, arts of governing, and problematisation. Though serving a rich enough function, the latter category represents something of a misstep. The thesis unfortunately conflates problems and problematisations. Every governmentality thrives on problems. They feed its rationalities, justify its government, and allow the tweaking and tailoring of its techniques. Problematisations, however, bring about crises of governmentalities. This is not to say that they cannot be solved, surmounted, internalised and ingested. But they have the potential to ruin a governmentality, to expose its discriminatory ethos, to highlight its denied ineffectiveness, to produce a technical failure.[9]

The problematisations identified in the thesis are actually problems. Discourses around slave maltreatment create new ways of thinking about abuse, that is, as problems for not problems of governmentalities; the police are described as problematising public order, which is their target, not the thing that problematises them; while idle slaves are a problem for government, their intransigence not evidence of a broader problematisation of the intimidatory potential of imperial sovereign power (pp. 86, 215, 246).

Is this significant? If so, what does it signify? What it may signal is the point at which we enter, as historians and historical geographers, into the circuits of power. The problems in this thesis tend to come later, after gov-

8. Alan Lester, Kate Boehme & Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge 2021).

9. Clive Barnett, On Problematization: Elaborations on a Theme in "Late Foucault", *nonsite.org* 16 (2015).

ernmentalities have unfurled themselves. A study which places problematisations first protects itself in several ways. Rather than assuming the font of governmentalities to be the will, reason or intent of the governor, starting with problematisations reminds us that most governmentalities emerge from crises and that, in colonies in particular, money was made available for new modes of governing only at the very last instance, not because the episteme had shifted. Evoking a much-contested term and contention, reading Foucault, Gilles Deleuze insisted that "...resistance comes first".[10] What more-than-human studies have reminded us of is that it is not just humans who problematise. Blocked drains or over-budget subways can bring down local governments.[11] Changing climates can oust unchanging governmentalities. But perhaps it is humans who most often problematise our ways of doing, which for this thesis brings us back to the trajectory of postcolonial studies.

For 45 years postcolonial scholars have been appraising the representations, governmentalities and contemporary manifestations of imperial will. For many commentators, the results of this work are insufficient, and a more radical agenda is required. In supposedly "ex" settler colonies, the rallying cry of new movements is to decolonise; to give land back to First Nation communities.[12] But the rallying call has also spread wider, to a more deep-seated demand that we decolonise all spaces, including the academy and its structures of knowledge. This poses specific questions to those of us studying colonialism. Do we risk replicating colonial governmentalities in our lives and our studies?

I was struck by one sentence in Christensen's introduction: "This book examines colonial power from the point of view of those white European men who governed the colonized population of the Danish West Indies." (p. 12) This is an accurate description of the thesis, and this work is vital and fascinating. But the question emerges of the complicity with coloniality, or not, of the point of view of European academies and the European institutions which colonised so much of the world, for so long. In terms of the theoretical manifesto at the heart of this thesis, the question reposes itself: who had governmentalities? Can acts of insurrection indicate counter-conducts or counter governmentalities, such as the 1878 fireburn rebellion? Can we piece together elementary aspects of a more coherent insurgency logic in the DWI?[13] Might we identify coherent governmentalities (with their own

10. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London 1988), p. 89, emphasis in original. Cited in Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Oxford 2007) p. 13.

11. Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London 2003).

12. Sarah Radcliffe, *Decolonizing Geography: An Introduction* (Cambridge 2022).

13. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi 1983).

forms of knowledge, arts of government, and problematisations) in resistant cultures?[14] This question doesn't arise in the thesis, but nor do slaves and freed slaves as agents of problematisations, leaving us with a point of view in the islands where the objects, things and subjects of government are always just off-picture, or out of focus. The thesis enriches our understanding of the Government of Black and White in the DWI and Denmark, with black individuals and communities as agents of their own governing by white officials and planters. The question of the anticolonial governmentalities of slave and ex-slave populations remains unanalysed here, its archive dispersed and fragmentary, but its potential contemporary audience never larger.

14. Stephen Legg, Subjects of truth: Resisting governmentality in Foucault's 1980s, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37 (2019) pp. 27–45.