From the History of the Empire to World History.
The Historiographical Itinerary of Christopher A. Bayly

Edited by Maurizio Griffo and Teodoro Tagliaferri

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On the front cover: Embroidered Map Shawl of Srinagar, Kashmir (detail).

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Information, Communication and Knowledge in the Government of the Empire. Reflections on Bayly's *Empire and Information*

When he published *Empire and Information*,[1] Bayly had already written three major books: *The Local Roots of Indian Politics* (1975), *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1780-1870* (1983) and *Imperial Meridian* (1989),[2] all works strongly connected with the 1996 book. In other words, *Empire and Information* is the culmination of an already very rich research path on the history of colonial India, which began with the 1975 book on Allahabad derived from the doctoral thesis carried out under the guidance of Jack Gallagher. Thanks to this path, Bayly has been able to put to good use his knowledge of the archives of the Benares region, a knowledge of previously unexplored sources to which the Cambridge historian had access thanks to his linguistic knowledge and the intermediacy of consultants, making the 1996 book a pioneering and highly innovative work which has profoundly changed the way we look at the history of modern India, the dynamics of the construction of British imperial power, and the birth of Indian nationalism.

In *Empire and Information*, if we want to simplify to the maximum, Bayly brings into the open, with reference to Northern India (i.e. the central region of Benares, the so-called United Provinces of the British period, between Bengal

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[1] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Quotations from this text are referenced with page numbers in brackets.

[2] C.A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics. Allahabad 1880-1920* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); idem, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); idem, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

and Rajputana) between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the complex world of Indian spies, informers, mediators, couriers, messengers and political secretaries. These were figures the English recruited and on whom they relied to collect, through the exploitation of personal networks—family, parental, social networks of which those characters were part—information about the territory, the cities, their inhabitants and the Indian reality as a whole. But the heuristic and interpretative scope of the book goes far beyond these aspects of social and political history. The book aims at demonstrating how the forms assumed by British politics in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the result of a complex mechanism of interaction between pre-colonial local traditions and new structures of imperial power, according to a historiographic perspective that was no longer Anglocentric, but capable of placing at the centre of the observation Indian reality, as would happen in subsequent books such as *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (1998) and *Recovering Liberties* (2011).[3]

Indeed, through field experimentation, *Empire and Information* directly touches some of the key issues of historiographical (and literary, historical-anthropological and sociological) debate from the 1770s onwards: the nature of colonial power between domination and negotiation; the complex set of phenomena included under the category of 'Orientalism', introduced by Said, caught in its most immediately performative dimension; the relationship between forms of knowledge and exercise of power; the forms and role of the public sphere; and the nature of national sentiment as the result of complex cultural constructions and representations. From this point of view, Bayly's interpretation—thanks, too, to the teaching of Eric Stokes—comes into direct contact with the works by authors such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Benedict Anderson, who, from the early 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, contributed to a profound redefinition of how we conceive the ways of exercising power, the historical phenomena of colonial and imperial domination, the interaction between Western and Asian cultures, and the problem of 'native agency', understood through a dimension of historical temporality focused on continuity

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[3] C.A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia. Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); idem, *Recovering Liberties. Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

and permanence rather than on breakages. At the same time, it dialogues with interpretations by scholars who, in turn, have modified the way we understand the most specific phenomena of birth, nature and evolution of British imperial domination in India, like Ranajit Guha, the guru of the Subaltern Studies, or the historian of anthropological formation Bernard Cohn, but also Eugene F. Irschick and Nicholas B. Dirks.[4]

Strengthened by this complex critical and historiographical background, Bayly traces in *Empire and Information* an analytical path through three main phases of the history of the advent and structuring of British power in Northern India. In Bayly's book, the treatment of the pre-1765 period is characterized by the description of Mughal power in the northern areas as already traditionally based on networks of personal relationships, structured information-gathering systems, and the implementation of political control through information coming from networks of political and social mediators, and on the affirmation of a highly literate public sphere, certainly limited and elitist but nevertheless essential to the orderly development of the administrative work under the control of the Mughal imperial authority. In describing this "indigenous public sphere" (180), Bayly emphasizes the presence of factors such as the existence of limits to the political authority deriving from Islamic law and the relative vision of society and religious life; a relative idea of a just and unjust government; the existence of an apparatus of juridical schools and jurisconsults with independent opinions and a strong idea of custom; and the existence of a multiplicity of places and actors carrying a lively political debate even in the absence of the market, as a separate area from the family and private domestic sphere and periodical press communication. Bayly's is a representation that arises from the analysis of very rich unpublished materials preserved in the Indian archives (memorials, notes, instructions, correspondences, reports).

We must also observe how that representation has exerted a considerable influence, beyond the sphere of academic historiography, on a certain progressive Indi-

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[4] B. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); E.F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); N.B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993); idem, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); idem, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

an public discourse. Take, for example, the case of Amartya Sen, tending to depict Mughal India from the age of Akbar as an open, tolerant society characterized by the form and exercise of negotiated and consensual authority, which would have sown the seeds of democracy before the advent of European domination.

The second fundamental moment of Bayly's periodization is that which goes from 1785 to the 1820s, which the Cambridge historian analyses from the point of view of the creation of a refined intelligence system capable of identifying and relying on pre-existing networks, informants and the indigenous public sphere. In short, the British power, expanding in the centre-north starting from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, aims to become part of the public sphere, using it to its own ends and building in synergy with it an Anglo-Indian cognitive "ecumene" that allows the accumulation of a "colonial knowledge" (6) in crucial matters such as taxation; topographical, economic and fiscal control of the territory; public order; defence; identification; description and repression of crime; and administrative management of the caste system. It is therefore a period of high commingling and negotiation with the local elites by the exponents of British power, whose operational effectiveness develops parallel to the ability to collect and use information for the purpose of building an information order managed by an expert bureaucracy, who, in turn, inherit the relational and sapiential heritage of traditional bureaucracies. In this process, which Bayly analyses through an original conceptual instrumentation, the two orders of knowledge—the "patrimonial" or "affective" one of Moghul ancestry and the "incorporated" or "abstract" and "institutional" (7-8, 179) one of the British matrix—interact, balancing reciprocally in a dialectic between native agency and instances of colonial politics through which is recognizable what Bayly, alluding to the real forms and protagonists of the knowledge of Oriental realities behind the stimuli of government practice, calls an "orientalism in action" (144).

The importance of this interpretation concerning the mechanisms of formation of colonial knowledge is perfectly understandable when compared with the vision developed by Bernard Cohn. According to Cohn, colonial knowledge is structured autonomously and unilaterally as a direct projection of power. For Bayly, though, the imperial power cannot amount to sheer domination, but can consolidate itself through the construction of an efficient informational order, the realization of which can take place only through interaction with local forces and their active participation.

The third moment of Bayly's periodization is that from the 1830s to the 1850s, with the date limit inevitably fixed at 1857 with the Great Mutiny. This is a phase

of crucial importance, during which negotiated and participated colonial knowledge tends to be supplanted by the entrance of "useful knowledge" (212-246), an expression that is only apparently generic: in reality—as well demonstrated by the use that Joel Mokyr makes of it in his book *The Enlightened Economy* (2009) with reference to the economic and social modernization of England in the early 1800s[5]—it is able to synthesize an idea of typical Enlightenment ancestry, pertaining to a Westernizing brand of progress through public education, Western scientific and technological knowledge, and the diffusion of communication through the press, especially the periodical press. The intent of modernizing India by disseminating "useful knowledge" and its interaction with "native knowledge" (273) is documented by Bayly in the central chapters of the book with reference to the fields of astronomy, medicine, language and geography, wherein the projects and the cognitive energies of the Anglo-Indian government unfolded to the highest degree. Projects, programmes, institutional initiatives and major publications of fundamental importance began at this stage, giving substance to an "orientalism in action" through which a reclassification of colonial knowledge was realized on the basis of hierarchies, reflecting the vision of the world proper to the Britons of the beginning of the nineteenth century. This process also involved the introduction of educational systems often linked to missionary initiatives; technical and agronomic literacy initiatives; the construction of a modern, efficient and low-cost postal system; the birth of a publishing industry; and the dissemination of printed books in a reality that a generation before had been totally devoid of it but which now substantially helped the emergence of a culture that was not only anglophone, but also vernacular.

However, even in this case, the process was not totally detached from the traditional forms of local knowledge, but rather a bi-directional process. As Bayly points out, "These institutionalised forms of knowing, however, were still influenced by people present—and presenting themselves—in Indian society. The colonial information order was erected on the foundations of its Indian precursors" (179). It was not a process that Indian society suffered passively. On the contrary, Bayly speaks explicitly of a "colonial paradox" according to which traditional information, cultural and sapiential networks continued to exist alongside the order of imperial knowledge, giving rise to a "juxtaposition" rather than to the re-

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[5] J. Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain 1700-1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

placement of one order with another (ibid.). If the order of information available to British power was extraordinarily rich and structured, still quite out of British control were Indian sensibilities, experience and visions of life and society, which remained impervious to the British power and strengthened themselves by developing from within a criticism of sociologies, interpretations of religious systems, and ideas of crime elaborated by British institutions. In short, the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century is presented as a monster, an information-devouring system, according to the suggestive image by Rudyard Kipling[6]—a creator of mechanisms of development of local opinion without the ability to control and orient it, so that precisely these areas of interaction became, as Bayly demonstrates, the most fruitful places for the incubation of nationalist ideas. Precisely these kinds of cultural experience, if adequately understood, reveal the limits of Orientalism, which does not appear, in the manner of Said (and Cohn), as the fruit of a political agenda that generates its own denigrated 'otherness', but rather as a complex fabric of relationships and interactions.

From this point of view, the revolt of 1857 only revealed the "paradox of colonial rule" (ibid.). A government devoted to information-gathering and structuring dramatically realized its own inadequacy, ignorance and weakness in the face of the onset of forces that it had contributed to create but had not been able to control. Bayly's conclusion is that "the new media and the diffusion of western knowledge had unsettled society. The dissidents saw the changes not so much as a contest between a stagnant Orient and dynamic western science, as one between still-vital Indian knowledges and the foreigners' abstract rule-making, which divorced information from godly wisdom" (246).

Ultimately, the first major crisis of the British Empire in India is presented by Bayly as a crisis in the order of information—what he calls the most dramatic example of "information panics" (143). This is demonstrated by the inability to foresee, anticipate or even think about the possibility of a great uprising revealed by a dominant power endowed with great influence, great means and solid convictions about the superiority of Western knowledge, and the inertia and immobility of traditional ones—a dominant power inadequate, though, not only to achieve a complete control of the society under its government, but also to realize the depth of the forces of change that it had triggered.

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[6] R. Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (London: Macmillan, 1899; first edition 1888), 224.

One of the most interesting and lasting conclusions of *Empire and Information* concerns the concept of Orientalism itself. Bayly convincingly proves that, if observed in the concrete practice of the exercise of power, one cannot speak of Orientalism as an indistinct cultural attitude generated by the hierarchically superior position of the West over the Eastern world. Studied in British India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the concrete practice of power management—or what Foucault terms 'governmentality'—Orientalism was a diversified complex of notions stemming from mediation, negotiation, collaboration, and interaction between a culture in power and local traditions, to the elaboration of which local groups contributed directly in a process not unilaterally directed from above according to the needs of power.

Empire and Information is a fundamental contribution that has radically changed the way of looking at the history of modern India under English domination, demonstrating at the same time the relativity of a periodization that, from the perspective of imperial and global history, cuts across traditional chronological limits. It is also a great reservoir of ideas for studying forms of imperial domination based on the collection and use of information, and the creation of colonial knowledge.