**Colonial Violence**

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**The following primary sources discussed in this chapter are available to view within the 'Colonial Violence' collection on Biblioboard:**

[A] ‘Torture in Madras’, *Hansard, House of Lords*, 14 April 1856, vol. 141, cc. 964–99.

[B] Chevers, Norman. *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence for Bengal and the North-Western Provinces* (Calcutta: F. Carbery, Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1856).

[C] Lewin, Malcolm. *Is the Practice of Torture in Madras with the Sanction of the Authorities of leadenhall Street*? (London: Thomas Brettell, 1856).

[D] Lewin, Malcolm. *Torture in Madras,* 2nd ed. (London: James Ridgway, 1857).

[E] Smollet, Tobias. *Madras: Its Civil Administration: Rough Notes from Personal Observation, Written in 1855 & 1856* (London: Richardson Brothers, 1858).

[F] *Report of the Indian police commission, 1902–03* (Simla: Printed at the Government Central Printing Office, 1903).

[G] ‘The Torture Commission’, *Allen’s Indian Mail*, July 17, 1855, p.384.

[H] ‘Efforts by the Madras and Punjab Governments to Extinguish the System of Torture’, *Allen’s Indian Mail*, Oct. 2, 1855, pp.543-44.

[I] Marx, Karl. ‘Investigations of Tortures in India’, *New York Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1857

[J] ‘Whipping of a Fugitive Slave, French West Indies, 1840s’ (Marcel Verdier, 1849).

[K] ‘Singe’, *L’Assiette au Beurre*, 20 December, 1902.

[L] ‘Punishment Aboard a Slave Ship, 1792’ (Isaac Cruickshank, 1792).

[M] ‘Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave’ (William Blake, 1793).

**Introduction**

Empires are made and maintained through violence. In the case of the modern European empires, such violence ranged from acts of conquest to the appropriation of land and resources and the decimation of indigenous social, cultural, economic, and political systems. Yet, bizarrely, relatively little attention has been paid to violence and its effects on both the colonised and the colonisers. Such amnesia is even more marked when it comes to popular memory, at least among colonising societies (those that were colonised obviously have a rather different take on empire) – in a Yougov poll conducted in Britain in January 2016, 43% of respondents maintained that empire was a ‘good thing’, and in a similar poll conducted two years previously, [49% of respondents maintained that the peoples colonised by Britain are now better off than they would have been had they not been colonised](https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/01/18/rhodes-must-not-fall/). Such respondents were clearly not aware that, when Britain began trading in India in the early seventeenth century, India was responsible for a quarter of the world’s manufacturing (in contrast to the 2% that Britain contributed to the global GDP) and that per-capita income, food consumption, and life expectancy were considerably higher than in British India – or, for that matter, in Britain (Davis, 2001). India was not alone in such experiences. By the end of the First World War – a war in which millions of colonised peoples had participated, many in the hope of securing independence, or at least ‘concessions’, from their colonisers (although this, too, has been erased from popular memory in the West) – the British empire reached its apogee, spanning a quarter of the earth’s land mass and encompassing almost half a billion people. Such a feat could not have been possible without the imposition of myriad, endemic, and ongoing forms of violence.

There are a number of reasons that the violence of empire has been largely erased both from scholarship on empire and from historical memory, at least in Europe and the USA. To begin with, imperial and colonial regimes were tremendously skilful in generating, to borrow from Gauri Viswanathan (1989), ‘masks of conquest’ to hide the violent and extractive nature of colonial rule. While Viswanathan revealed the way in which English education, in particular English literature, was used in India as a tool of cultural colonialism (in order to enshrine in the colonised a belief in the purported superiority of the English language, and with it British ideas, values, and beliefs), in the British case law was arguably a more powerful colonising tool. Rather than decimating existing legal and political systems, the British claimed, instead, that they were bringing the ‘rule of law’ (namely their law) to peoples who were governed despotically – although the irony that the British were themselves despots, because they governed in an authoritarian manner, was not lost on proponents of this belief. Law, like the English language and literature, thus operated as what Michel Foucault has termed ‘discourses’, which are ways of constructing knowledge, and with it social practices and subjectivities (Foucault, 2002). They serve, in other words, to construct understandings of truth, or reality. Discourses are therefore central to the ways in which power relations operate. The tremendous and enduring power of the dominant discourses of colonialism – about the purported racial, civilisational, and cultural superiority of the West over the ‘inferior’, ‘degenerate’, ‘irrational’, ‘unlawful’, and ‘effeminate’ ‘natives’ – is evident not only in the YouGov poll but in much of the scholarship on empire.

The rise of postcolonial studies in the 1980s, with its attention to the power of colonial discourse, undoubtedly challenged many of the assumptions that sustained empire and the ways in which histories of empire were written. However, while postcolonial scholarship mined imperial and colonial texts (books, newspapers, government documents, and so on) to interrogate the epistemological violence of colonialism – of the way, in other words, that it transformed understandings about peoples and cultures (including the cultures of the colonisers) – such a focus on the effects of colonialism on the minds of the colonisers and the colonised served to continue to elide the nature and effects of the violence done to their bodies. This is not to say that the violence of empire has been completely ignored, but the historiography on imperial and colonial violence falls prey to the problems inherent in the wider historiography of violence, in which violence is treated either as heroic grand narrative or as aberrant and deviant, and in which the focus is on everything that happens *around* violence rather than on the nature of the violence itself, its causes, and its effects.

Moreover, postcolonial scholarship has done little to transform the historical memory of empire in colonising countries such as France, Britain, or the Netherlands – or in their settler off-shoots such as the USA and Australia. Part of the reason for this is the ongoing whitewashing of empire in school curricula. For example, while England’s national history curriculum for 5- to 14-year-olds, which was launched in 2013, does cover the slave trade, [it manages to completely avoid addressing any other aspects of imperial or colonial violence](https://theconversation.com/school-curriculum-continues-to-whitewash-britains-imperial-past-53577). So while most British students, like their counterparts elsewhere, leave school knowing a considerable amount about the Holocaust, in which 12 million people died, they remain blissfully ignorant about colonial genocides, or the estimated 30–60 million people who starved to death in famines largely induced by colonial *laissez-faire* economic policies (Davis, 2001).

This chapter aims, firstly, to change the way we generally talk about empire. As William Dalrymple observes in the case of the conquest of India, we can hardly view such a process as benign if we view India as being conquered not by Britain but by the actual agent of conquest, the most powerful ‘multinational corporation’ the world has ever seen – a trading company by the name of the East India Company – which was not only ‘dangerously unregulated’ but had its own ‘private army’ (which, at a strength of 260,000 men by 1803, made it one of the most powerful armies in the world), and which it used to conquer, subjugate, and plunder vast tracts of Asia in [‘the supreme act of corporate violence in world history’](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders). A second goal of this chapter is to interrogate a wide range of sources that demonstrate the nature of colonial violence, from official and semi-official documents such as parliamentary debates, reports, manuals, and pamphlets to unofficial sources such as newspaper accounts, paintings, cartoons, and other images. In spite of the lacunae of scholarship on colonial violence, there is a wealth of evidence to enable us to document and analyse it.

**Overview**

To begin thinking about colonial violence we need to reconceptualise our understanding of violence. Violence is generally regarded as an act – as something that is, in other words, carried out by clearly identifiable agents. When it comes to writing the history of violence, therefore, scholars tend to concentrate on events such as wars, battles, uprisings, and genocides, as well as forms of interpersonal violence such as torture, rape, or murder. Such ‘subjective’ forms of violence, as Slavoj Žižek (2008) terms them, are, however, only the most visible forms; we are aware of them because they disrupt the normal order of everyday life. But to truly understand the nature of violence and its effects we need to pay attention to forms of violence that are largely invisible and that lack clear and identifiable agents, such as structural, social, or symbolic violence (which may be generated, for example, by administrative systems or economic policies) – what Žižek terms ‘objective’ forms of violence. Because objective forms of violence often underpin subjective ones, what we regard as violence may simply be a symptom of deeper, hidden layers of violence. Such violence remains hidden, however, because it is central to the construction of what we regard as normality. It is because such forms of violence remain largely hidden, moreover, that scholars of empire have devoted more attention to the violence of those who resist empire (which is often, furthermore, de-legitimated by the use of words such as ‘terrorism’ and ‘insurgency’ to describe such violence) than to the myriad violent and quotidian processes through which societies are transformed – or as the colonisers put it, ‘modernised’ – by empire (Iadicola, 2009).

There are two main reasons that European colonialism was inherently violent. The first relates to the nature of colonial law. Although European colonial regimes strove to represent themselves as bringing law to lawless places, the act of colonisation entails a process that Walter Benjamin (1978) refers to as ‘lawmaking violence’. Such violence is inherent to the establishment of all legal regimes, and in colonial contexts establishing new regimes of law was crucial to the establishment of the sovereignty of colonial states, not to mention their claims to legitimacy. However, as colonial states were, in essence, states of exception, because they operated outside the accepted rule of law in imperial metropoles, such claims to legitimacy were always fraught (Hussain, 2003). But the violence of colonial legal regimes did not end with the imposition of new legal norms because of the nature of what Benjamin terms ‘law-preserving violence’ in colonial contexts. Violence, of course, underpins the maintenance of all legal regimes, and common to all such regimes is that the ultimate aim of monopolizing violence is ‘that of preserving the law itself’ (281). But what made law-preserving violence so brutal in European colonies was that colonial states were predicated on the notion of racial difference – what Partha Chatterjee (1993) has termed ‘the rule of colonial difference’. It was such notions of difference that ensured that, even if the colonised undertook processes of self-colonisation (a process that is itself inherently violent) that made them conform to the ostensible goal of the ‘civilising mission’, namely to render the colonised, in the words of the architect of India’s colonial legal system, Thomas Macaulay, ‘[English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)’, they could never be accepted as equals, or as ‘civilised’ – if only because to do so would be to destroy the justification for colonialism. They would continue to be, in the words of Homi Bhabha (1989, p.235), ‘always the same, but not quite’. Colonial legal systems – not to mention, of course, social, cultural, political, and economic norms – were as a result framed upon, and operated through, such notions of difference. The ultimate aim of colonial law was therefore to preserve the power of the colonisers, which of course came at the expense of the colonised.

The second reason European colonialism was inherently violent is that the colonised were viewed as being innately violent, and hence as only being governable through violence. The fact that the colonised were supposedly intrinsically violent was one of the ultimate markers of difference between colonisers and colonised, and perhaps the most significant; violence, in other words, was seen as being central to the natures of the colonised. That the colonised were viewed as inherently violent was, of course, more a result of the fears and insecurities of the colonisers than the nature of colonial reality – about their fragile systems of rule, their tenuous claims to cultural and racial superiority, their insecurities about gender roles and norms (particularly about the masculinity of European men), and the precarious dividing line between rulers and ruled. Colonial policies and practices ranging from the exaction of high-revenue demands to the forced settlement of ‘tribal’ populations, a variety of forms of forced labour, and even torture were, ironically, regarded as being central to ‘civilising’ the colonised (Asad, 1997). Violence was central, therefore, to disciplining colonised peoples, as well as to producing knowledge about them for the benefit of colonial regimes (Rao and Pierce, 2006).

But expanding our notion of the nature of colonial violence to include ‘objective’ forms also entails that we look beyond the policies and actions of the colonisers to consider interpersonal violence among the colonised, as the social dislocation and economic disorder generated by colonialism led to an upsurge of violent crime (Arnold, 1979). However, as colonialism operates as a form of unmaking or unworlding that fractures the world of the colonised, then we also need to look at other forms of interpersonal violence among the colonised in order to understand the effects of colonialism (Heath, 2016). For rather than targeting the source of such unworlding, namely the colonisers, as the Martiniquan psychiatrist and anti-colonial intellectual Frantz Fanon (1967) contended the colonised instead turned their frustrations and aggressions ‘against their own people’. As I have argued in the case of sexual violence against men in colonial India, such violence was generally carried out by men who either felt disempowered by colonialism, and for whom sexual violence was a means of regaining a sense of control and restoring a sense of lost masculinity, or who sought to take advantage of the social and economic turmoil generated by colonialism (Heath, 2016). The Reuters correspondent for Sierra Leone, Simon Akam, has aptly termed such violence, the remnants of which still endure in post-colonial contexts, ‘[the domestic wreckage of empire](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/88797/british-empire-queen-elizabeth-india-ireland-africa-imperial).’

For Fanon the origins of interpersonal violence among the colonised were clear. He located them in the trauma unleashed by colonial violence. Such violence, Fanon contended (1967), was as much discursive and epistemological as it was physical, generated by the colonisers’ belief in the superiority of their own cultures and languages and a violating gaze that denied the humanity of the colonised and, with it, their subjectivity. Fanon was aware, and subsequent scholars have demonstrated, that such trauma does not need to be experienced directly to have a damaging effect; it can, instead, be transmitted intergenerationally. In the case of slavery, for example, the trauma experienced by slaves in the USA continues to haunt their descendants (see, for example, Graff, 2014). Although there is currently little scholarship on colonial trauma and its legacies, scholars have begun to delineate the sorts of issues to consider, and the challenges in doing so (Ward, 2015).

I will now turn to consider the sorts of source materials that can be valuable for analysing and understanding colonial violence. I will look at official sources – i.e. those generated by state bureaucracies, legal systems, or officials – as well as unofficial sources and images. Such sources offer varying perspectives on the nature and causes of colonial violence, as well as its effects. They also, perhaps unsurprisingly, focus on the infliction of violence on the colonised. Although some scholars have observed that colonialism had as profound an impact on the colonisers as on the colonised (Nandy, 1983), and Frantz Fanon (1963) examined the trauma experienced by European perpetrators of colonial violence, there has been little analysis of the impact of colonial violence on the colonisers or in shaping European society and culture. I will therefore restrict my focus to the colonised. I will concentrate, in particular, on British colonialism, especially in regard to India, although I will also consider other contexts.

**Selecting and interpreting sources**

I will start by analysing official sources, which can be the best place to begin to explore the history of colonial violence. One of the many ironies about colonial violence is that although all European colonial regimes sought to deny the role of violence in constructing and maintaining their systems of rule, their official records are in fact awash with evidence to the contrary. This is in part because such records were only intended for official eyes, and in part because blame for colonial violence was invariably displaced onto its victims. We need to read such sources, however, against the grain – or, as Ann Stoler (2002, p.101) argues, ‘along the grain’ in order to understand the ‘consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake’ in colonial official archives. This is because, as noted above, they are part of the official discourse of colonialism, and as such the statistics, ‘facts’, and ‘truths’ that they claim to embody are instead a projection of how the colonisers envisioned and sought to legitimate their rule. They were, in other words, constructed by particular understandings of the world as well as by particular configurations of power. We therefore need to read them extremely critically to reassess their world view as well as their claims to truth and authenticity. We also need to be cautious in what we hope to extract from such sources. We may feel tempted, for example, to use them to recover the subjectivities of the colonised – to use them, in other words, to understand their sense of self and how this was shaped by colonial violence. Postcolonial scholars have, however, questioned the possibility of recovering the voices of the colonised from official records (Spivak, 1988). I will analyse unofficial sources in more detail below.

*Sources with an official origin*

In the British case (although not in the French or Dutch), former colonies are generally the best places to locate official documents that relate to colonial violence, not least because British colonial bureaucracies produced reams of documents that were then inherited by postcolonial states. Because the British government was primarily interested in matters that affected the stability of colonial rule, it only involved itself in matters deemed of importance to such stability. Archives in former British colonies can therefore reveal important information about, for example, the banal, everyday nature of colonial violence that British archives cannot, but a surprising amount can still be gleaned from British archives. Many records from the East India Company and later what was known as the ‘Raj’ (the period of British rule in India between 1858 and 1947), for example, are available in the [India Office Records and Private Papers at the British Library](http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?dscnt=1&fromLogin=true&dstmp=1474295172806&vid=IAMS_VU2&fromLogin=true). Accessing such material requires a trip to the British Library. For other colonial contexts a good place to search is the National Archives, which houses records from the Colonial Office, and whose searchable database offers details not only of collections at the National Archives in Kew, but at over 2,500 other archives in the United Kingdom. However, little of this material is available online. A gold mine of material that is available online, if your library subscribes to it, is the [U.K. Parliamentary Papers Database](http://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers). It contains material such as Parliamentary Debates, which periodically dealt with colonial matters, and official reports which, in the case of colonial violence, relate to subjects ranging from policing to matters such as torture and genocide.

Government documents are not, however, the only place to look for official evidence of colonial violence. In addition to generating reams of paper for colonial regimes, colonial officials were often prolific commentators on colonial matters. They published books, articles, and occasionally polemics on subjects ranging from anthropology, history and geography to colonial legal and political systems. As such works were generally not published for government purposes or by official presses they cannot, technically, be labelled ‘official documents’. We can instead view them as ‘semi-official’ documents, as they were often produced by individuals who were acting in their official capacity. As such, like official sources they reveal a great deal about the ‘official mind’ of colonialism.

Such materials can be analysed to reveal official attitudes regarding colonialism in a variety of contexts, as well as of how these changed over time. They can also be used to explore tensions among the colonisers about official policies and procedures, as well as between different branches of colonial bureaucracies, such as the judiciary and executive, and between colonial governments and Parliament. Colonial judges, for example, were often highly critical of the policies of colonial administrators, and the policies of the latter were often exposed to scrutiny and critique – and sometimes even thwarted – by the former through their judicial verdicts. The same was true of Parliament and the Indian and Colonial Offices, which often critiqued and challenged the policies of colonial governments. Because such governments were ultimately subject to Parliament, they were therefore often forced to change aspects of how they sought to govern. The ‘official mind’ of colonialism was therefore neither uniform nor constant, but was subject to constant questioning, critique, and negotiation.

*Non-official sources*

There is, as noted above, a somewhat blurry boundary between official and non-official sources when it comes to the writings of colonial officials, but there are reams of other non-official sources that do not have such a cosy relationship with colonial regimes, although they may replicate the views of colonial and metropolitan officials. Sources such as diaries, memoirs, travel literature, and various forms of fiction (such as novels and short stories) produced by Europeans during or after a colonial career often contributed to the fashioning of colonial discourse. So too did newspapers, in both colonial contexts and their metropoles. Newspapers produced by colonised peoples, not surprisingly, tended to have a different take on matters such as colonial violence than those produced by the colonisers – although not always (most Indian newspapers, for example, were extremely hostile to the wave of anti-colonial violence – referred to by detractors as ‘anarchism’ or ‘terrorism’ – that began to rock parts of India in the early twentieth century). They were also often tentative in their critiques of colonial violence. When they did critique it, they focused largely on subjective over objective forms (such as, for example, police oppression). However, newspapers published by expatriate colonised peoples living in Europe or the USA, such as the *Hindustan Ghadar* (which began publishing in 1913 and remained in print for just a few years thereafter), tended to be much more vocal in their critique of colonial rule, as was the case with pamphlets and polemics published by expatriates or migrants. Colonised individuals also, like the colonisers, produced a great many books, articles and other material that offer insights into the nature of colonial violence and its effects.

When analysing such sources, it is important to be aware of the contexts in which they were produced, and the factors that shaped their production. It can seem surprising, for example, when reading newspapers produced by colonised peoples, at how effusively supportive they often seemed of their colonial rulers, and how mild their critiques of life under an alien, racially structured and authoritarian system of rule. But we need to bear in mind that such newspapers tended to be produced by those groups of elites who had benefitted from, or had the most to gain, from colonialism, and were frightened of losing their livelihoods and status in the face of a mass anti-colonial uprising (Fanon, 1963) – and who were, moreover, fearful of falling foul of their colonisers. To take the case of India, the Indian press was closely monitored from the late 1860s, with provinces compiling weekly reports of the content of the hundreds of both Indian-language and English newspapers that had begun to mushroom in this period. The provincial and Indian governments used such reports to monitor public attitudes (which made them a vital tool of governance for an autocratic state) and, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, to prosecute Indian publishers for sedition – the punishment for which was severe. Free speech was further curtailed with the passage of the Press Act in 1910, which provided provincial governments with very wide-ranging censorship powers. The Indian press was, therefore, severely restricted in what it could print. It is also important to bear in mind the ways in which colonialism shaped the psyches of the colonised (Fanon, 1963; 1967; Nandy, 1983) in assessing such sources, particularly in instilling a sense of racial and cultural inferiority. We cannot, therefore, take what may seem to be effusive support of colonial rule, and lack of critique of the many forms of colonial violence, at face value. It is vital, instead, to contextualise such sources and to consider the many limitations their producers faced in regard to free speech and self-expression.

There are a number of places to locate such materials. For material housed in Britain, the [British Library’s catalogue](http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?vid=BLVU1) is a good place to begin. In addition to books, newspapers, and other materials published in Britain, the library also holds an impressive collection of material published in former British colonies, including newspapers. While accessing such material generally requires a visit to the British Library, some of it may be available through inter-library loan. For digitized materials sites such as [archive.org](https://archive.org) and [google books](https://books.google.co.uk/) provide full-text editions of a surprising number of colonial books and periodicals. The British Library offers a free online searchable [database of British newspapers](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/) that can, again, turn up a surprising amount of material on colonial matters. There are now a wonderful array of websites and databases that provide full-text access to newspapers, periodicals, and other materials published in colonial contexts, such as [the collection of African, Caribbean and South Asian newspapers](https://www.crl.edu/collaborations/global-resources-partnerships/news/world-newspaper-archive) that have been digitised by the Center for Research Libraries. Unfortunately, such material can only be accessed if your library subscribes to it, although [many of these databases are available free to use in the reading rooms at the British Library](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/eresblrr/eres.html).

*Artefacts and images*

Artefacts of empire literally litter the British landscape, not to mention a myriad cultural and architectural traces. Visit virtually any churchyard, in fact, and you’ll find the graves of individuals who had sought their fortunes in colonial climes, while the insides of churches are bedecked with plaques commemorating the British men who died in imperial and colonial campaigns of conquest and suppression. Statues of imperial ‘heroes’ bedeck our public places and institutions (a matter brought to our attention by [the student campaign to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from Oxford University in 2015](https://theconversation.com/museums-have-long-overlooked-the-violence-of-empire-51269)), our museums and stately homes are full of looted and purloined artefacts, and the wealth derived from imperial and colonial violence and exploitation fuelled the development of some of our most spectacular cityscapes in cities such as London and Liverpool. Scholars such as Edward Said (1993) have explored the ways in which British culture – not to mention the English language and literature, and Britain’s political, legal, and education systems – has been constructed through, and continues to be saturated with, imperialism and colonialism. We don’t need to go far, therefore, to find remnants of the structural, symbolic and discursive violence of colonialism, although we rarely see them as such. If you pay attention, however, you’ll start seeing them everywhere.

A final group of sources that can prove fruitful for the study of colonial violence are images ranging from paintings, drawings and cartoons to photographs and films. [Artistic representations](http://www.britishempire.co.uk/art/artandempire.htm) of Britain’s imperial and colonial violence are, ironically, fairly ubiquitous – generally because such moments were depicted in terms of imperial glory. So, too, are cartoons; try searching the database of the [British Cartoon Archive](https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/) for commentary on aspects of colonial violence. For photographs, the [British Library’s Online Gallery](http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/index.html) offers a free, searchable database of thousands of photographs, including from colonies such as India. Although such images generally depict colonialism as benign, they can be examined to explore how violence is erased or aestheticized in colonial photography (Chowdhury, 2012). There are many images, however, that do not strive to erase violence, such as the wealth of imagery produced to support the eradication of slavery, some of which I analyse below. While the intent of the producers of such images may have been noble, they often functioned as what Marior Klarer (2005) has termed ‘humanitarian pornography’ through eroticising the infliction of pain on non-white bodies. Such images therefore reveal the ways in which violence can be turned into spectacle, which serves to reinforce particular power dynamics. Finally, films ranging from newsreels and educational films to movies can be a valuable source for studying colonial violence, although as with all of the above sources it is vital to deconstruct the ways in which they serve to depict both colonised and colonisers and the nature of colonial rule. An amazing archive of over 6,000 films about colonialism (150 of which can be viewed free online) is available at <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/>.

**Practical advice**

I will conclude this chapter by offering some practical advice on how to use and interpret sources relating to colonial violence, including on analysing language and imagery. The sources concentrate primarily on torture in colonial India, which is a form of subjective violence that is underpinned by a variety of objective forms, but I will also examine a selection of anti-slavery images, through which we can also read various forms of subjective and objective violence.

*Official and semi-official sources*

In the mid-1850s the East India Company was rocked by a scandal about the use of torture in the collection of revenue in the province of Madras, in southern India. Accusations made by a member of Parliament about torture led to the establishment of a commission to investigate the subject, the outcome of which was a report that white-washed the role of the colonial regime in the systematisation of torture as a means of collecting excessive revenue demands from impoverished peasants (*Report of the Commissioners,* 1855). A debate in the House of Lords in the aftermath of the publication of the report **[A]** offers interesting insights into British attitudes towards India and Indians, as well as about Britain’s right to ‘rule’ (colonise) India, and the extent and nature of the torture inflicted on Indian peasants and who was to blame for it. While few of the participants in the debate denied the existence of torture, they largely displaced blame for it on both Indian ‘character’ and on the previous rulers of India, the Mughals. The first colonial medical jurisprudence manual **[B]**, published by Dr William Chevers (Secretary to the Medical Board) a year after the torture commission’s report, reveals how torture was constructed as being inherent to Indians’ ‘degraded’ character, wrought by centuries of ‘despotic’ rule.

However, although some members of the debate admitted that the Company was ultimately responsible for such systematised brutality, none of them suggested that the root of the problem was the occupation of India by a militarised trading company backed up by the British government, nor of its authoritarian system of government. Indeed, although some commentators on the report, such as Malcolm Lewin **[C]**, a former Madras judge, went so far as to accuse the Company not only of repeatedly ignoring evidence of the pervasive use of torture in the collection of the revenue in Madras (including his own report from 1840 **[D]**), but of governing through terror, their ultimate concern, in Lewin’s words, was how this reflected on the ‘character of the British nation’. As Nicholas Dirks (2006) has revealed, scandal was central to the construction and maintenance of empire. He argues that the intent behind inquiries such as that of the Madras torture commission was ultimately not to eradicate a brutal and corrupt system of government, but to purge colonial rule of its worst excesses in order to legitimise it, bring it more firmly under parliamentary control, protect the British ‘character’ – and, in turn, make the colony ripe for more effective exploitation. As Tobias Smollett, agent to the Government of Madras, urged **[E]**, eradicating torture in Madras would provide greater opportunities for capital, but as torture ultimately benefitted the colonial regime – it was a cheap and relatively effective method of extracting revenue, and served to legitimate colonial rule by displacing blame for it onto Indian ‘barbarism’ – it continued to persist, and to provoke further scandals, as the report of the Indian Police Commission, set up in 1902, demonstrates **[F].** Because such sources are part of the official discourse of colonialism, it is therefore important to be critical of the purported ‘facts’ that they contain. Rather than revealing truths about the colonised, such official and semi-official sources are valuable for exposing the ‘official mind’ of colonialism, particularly the attitudes of the colonisers towards the colonised and the rationales that the former used to justify their conquest of the latter.

*Unofficial sources*

That the systematised use of torture to oppress the Indian peasantry was allowed to persist, not just in Madras but in other provinces, was doubtless helped by the attitudes of both the Anglo-Indian (i.e. British Indian) and British press. As two articles reprinted from the Anglo-Indian newspaper *The Friend of India* in the British publication *Allen’s Indian Mail* reveal **[G]** and **[H],** the general concern was to absolve the Madras Government from being implicated in the perpetuation of such a system – a task the papers felt could sufficiently be accomplished by simply declaring the practice of torture to be both endemic in Indian society and ‘repugnant to the national character of England’. British officials were instead depicted as valiant heroes, doing their duty under impossible circumstances, which had in fact been worsened by the publication of the Report, as Indian peasants were now using it to threaten revenue officials and were refusing to pay taxes (the proposed solution for which was to call out the military). There were exceptions to such attitudes, such as among newspapers published outside of India. The *New York Daily Tribune*, for example, carried an article by Karl Marx **[I]**, who challenged the self-perception of the British as ‘mild and spotless benefactors of the Indian people’ and accused British colonial officials of being both cognisant of, and complicit in, the systematisation of torture in Madras, and the British government of trying to hide the truth. Marx was convinced, moreover, that if the British could enact such cruelties ‘in cold blood’, it was little surprise that Indians could enact torture ‘in the fury of revolt and conflict’. Such unofficial sources were therefore largely uncritical about the perpetration of violence by colonial regimes. They consequently reveal a great deal about not only why colonial violence was perpetuated by colonial regimes, but why colonialism was able to persist – namely because there was little public debate about its unjustness. Unofficial sources, particularly newspapers like those cited here, were instead generally supportive of such colonising endeavours.

*Images*

In turning to consider images as possible sources for analysing colonial violence I will shift my focus away from torture in Madras to consider the torture of slaves in European slavery in order to think about how European cultures have historically regarded the pain of non-white bodies (Sontag, 2003). I wish, in particular, to suggest sources for analysing the way in which images that sought to expose colonial violence could intersect with, and even function as, pornography – and, by objectifying the victims of colonial violence, could thus operate as a form of objective colonial violence. Take, for example, ‘Le Supplice de Fouet’ (The Agony of the Whip) **[J],** painted by Marcel Verdier in 1849, a year after the abolition of slavery in French colonies. There are several notable aspects of this image, including: the nudity of the man being whipped (and the semi-nudity of another male, looking on, whose lower garment barely conceals his genitals) while the slave women in the picture are almost all completely clothed; the eroticised form and pose of the slave being whipped, as well as of the man (presumably a slave overseer) doing the whipping; the fact that the act of violence is being carried out by a black man on the body of another black man at the behest of his European master; and that a European family, including a small child, watch the scene with fascination (albeit some reluctance on the part of the woman and child) and in the case of the man with what may be an element of desire. The scene is evocative of both horror and desire, in this case not for the female but for the black male body – evidence, perhaps, both of the ways anti-slavery propaganda sought to appeal to women, who were its largest consumers, and of the complex web of white male desire for and disavowal of non-white male bodies (Heath, 2016). Such a scene was by no means unique; indeed, the image published in the French magazine *L’Assiette au Buerre* in 1902 **[K]** is almost identical, although in this instance the white coloniser is looking nonchalantly away from the scene before him while his wife and daughter look on eagerly (albeit with pretensions, in the case of the woman, to modesty).

Images of black women suffering at the hands of their torturers, such as this anti-slavery cartoon from 1792 **[L]** and drawing from 1793 **[M]**, generally depicted the victims as even more passive (in contrast, for example, to the agency of the man being whipped in the *L’Assiette au Buerre* image)and fetishized (note the exposed breasts and torn or dishevelled clothing). As the cartoon reveals, such scenes, and with it the images that depicted them, were intended for a desiring, white male gaze. If, as Anne McClintock (1995) and others have argued, the white male body felt under threat when entering imperial spaces, such images suggest that for colonising men the infliction or witnessing of pain on nude and pliant non-white bodies afforded a sense of both empowerment and pleasure.

The potential source base for studying colonial violence is therefore rich and varied. All such sources must, however, be assessed extremely critically, particularly when it comes to what they say about the colonised or about their justifications for colonialism, as well as for the often cruel and violent behaviour of the colonisers. There are also limitations to sources produced by the colonisers, particularly official and semi-official ones, because of their virtual erasure of the voices and actual experiences of the colonised. Nonetheless, they can reveal a great deal about both the subjective and objective nature of colonial violence, and not just on the colonisers. For the perpetuation of such violence also shaped the psyches and cultures of the colonisers – effects that, as the discussion above of contemporary attitudes towards empire in Britain reveals, have proven extremely enduring.

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