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BRITISH IMPERIAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE "THIN CRUST OF ORDER": SOCIETY, CONSTITUTION, AND DIPLOMACY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF LORD ELGIN

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses the thought of Lord Elgin in relation to his transnational colonial service in Jamaica, Canada, China, Japan, and India between the 1840s and the 1860s. Elgin was implicated in the most eventful processes of the Victorian age: the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean, the implementation of "responsible government" in Canada, the Second Opium War, and the establishment of the Indian Raj. In the course of his 20-year imperial career, Elgin expressed original views on politics and society, which were first inspired by his knowledge of Aristotle, the Scottish Enlightenment, and Coleridge, then influenced by his militancy among the Peelite liberal conservatives, and eventually developed during his administration of the colonial empire. After detailing Elgin's view of social order, this essay examines the constitution as a tool of government of colonial societies, and focuses on the figure of the Governor as a fundamental constitutional actor. The article concludes by considering Elgin's liberal imperialism as a lens through which to rethink notions of civilization and barbarism on the imperial scale.

Keywords: Lord Elgin, British Empire, Colonial Administration, Constitution, Diplomacy.
JEL Codes: F54, N40.

Introduction

This essay surveys the political thought of James Bruce, the eighth Earl of Elgin and Kincardine (1811-1863) as connected to his transnational ad-

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ministrative and diplomatic career in the mid-nineteenth century. Elgin occupied the most prominent positions in different colonial and extra-colonial sites on a global scale, corresponding to as many cultural, linguistic, religious, and racial "regions" (Aydin 2019): he was Governor of Jamaica (1842-1846) in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery; Governor-General of Canada (1847-1854) in the decade following the great rebellions of 1837-1838 (when the French majority of Lower Canada revolted against the British minority of Upper Canada); Plenipotentiary Envoy to China and Japan (1857-1860) during the Second Opium War; and Viceroy of India (1862-1863) in the aftermath of the disestablishment of the East India Company following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

Lord Elgin is here assumed as a relevant case study for the analysis of British imperial administration as a fruitful historical and epistemological field of investigation of social and political concepts. According to the lesson of the *Begriffsgeschichte*, concepts featured a "constitutional" dimension, insofar as they not only "registered" historical processes and social and political transformations, but they also "ordered" and organized them "through language" [Koselleck 2011 (1972): 8-21; Schiera 1996: 408]. The study of the thought and practice of imperial administrators is paradigmatic of this kind of approach, as they historically adopted and adapted, interpreted and employed, the concepts of their own epoch; their policies, by encapsulating a combination of ideologies and technologies of government, can therefore be assumed as a privileged terrain for a conceptual analysis (Samaddar 2007: 14-15; Chatterjee 2012: 338). Imperial administrators were located between theory and praxis as much as they operated at the intersection of state and society: their administrative role coupled a necessary knowledge of social forces and conflicts with their practical management at the institutional level (Gherardi and Gozzi 1995: 225-248).

But these figures were also midway between metropole and colony, as they reconsidered key concepts of European political thought and experimented *ad hoc* implementations of crucial processes of the English legal tradition in their attempt to respond against the challenges posed by colonial contexts. When they ruled several consecutive colonies, as Elgin did, administrators linked distant imperial and extra-imperial spaces to one another through their own biographies and careers, fostering connections and comparisons among different parts of the imperial framework. This paper adopts a comparative and transnational approach, the same developed by Elgin himself as he drew analogies and transferred 'lessons' of government across imperial borders. The analysis of Elgin's intellectual and governmental vicissitudes sheds light on how social and political concepts and administrative policies were articulated as they moved from one colonial site to another, following the circulation of people (Lambert and

Lester 2006: 2). This essay, therefore, presents Elgin as a relevant case study for a history of political thought which does not rely on philosophical treatises, but on the concrete processes of colonial government and law-making (Dorsett and Hunter 2010: 1-7; Benton and Ford 2016: 21).

While existing scholarship on Elgin has followed the chronological succession and the geographical stages of his career sequentially, the present analysis is organized differently: after a first section summarizing Elgin's biography, the following paragraphs focus on theoretical notions, such as society, constitution, conservatism, liberalism, and civilization. By connecting the dots of Elgin's career from a thematic perspective, this essay sheds light on the transplant and reframing of his political thought and administrative practice in the different contexts he governed and visited, retracing the imperial networks his tenures and travels outlined beyond a strict chronological order.

1. Elgin: A transnational career

As the heir of a Scottish aristocratic family experiencing financial difficulties (mainly due to his father's expensive and controversial removal of the so-called "Elgin Marbles" from the Parthenon), after graduating from Oxford and shortly holding a seat at the Commons in 1841, Lord Elgin pursued a career in the British colonial service (Walrond 1872: 1-11). Although Elgin's appointment for different consecutive tenures was quite a common feature of the nineteenth-century imperial careering, the escalation of prestige that characterized his *cursus honorum* provides the evidence of his uncommon success: at each stage, he had to preside over the most important social and political transformations of the Victorian age.

In post-emancipation Jamaica, Elgin was committed to promoting the "education" of the formerly enslaved to wage labour, and reconciling imperial authorities with the planter élite in the aftermath of the Slavery Abolition Act. In Canada, Elgin aimed at the pacification between British settlers and the "old" French colonists (who had been 'conquered' by Britain at the French defeat in the Seven Years' War). For this purpose, he incorporated the French into public life and implemented "responsible government", a form of colonial parliamentary system outlined by his father-in-law Lord Durham in his *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (1839). The establishment of responsible government, however, was not smooth: in 1849, the Canadian Parliament introduced the so-called "Rebellion Losses Bill", aimed at compensating those who had lost properties in the (mainly French) Province of Lower Canada during the 1837 Rebellion. Even if the Tories (the conservative British Canadian party hostile to the French) im-

mediately denounced the Bill as a measure for "indemnifying rebels", Elgin gave his royal assent. This caused a major revolt in Montreal: the Tories set the Houses of Parliament on fire and physically assaulted Elgin. As Governor of Canada, Elgin also had to face the interrelated issues of immigration (mostly of Irish poor in the aftermath of the Potato Famine) and colonization of the "wilderness" of the Province, as well as the concerning proximity of the United States, which roused the increasingly pressing demands for annexation of British Canadians. To counter these demands, in 1854 Elgin fostered the commercial Reciprocity Treaty between Canada and the US, which granted fishing and navigation rights to US citizens in exchange for the duty-free entry of Canadian goods (Morison 1912; Morison 1928: 42-190; Checkland 1988: 108-138).

Once back in Britain in 1854, Elgin, who had supported the Whig government of Lord Palmerston, was elected to the House of Lords, where he held a seat between 1855 and 1856. It was indeed Palmerston who, in 1857, after precipitating the Second Opium War, sent Elgin as Special Commissioner to China to settle the dispute with the Chinese government originated by the Arrow case of 1856. While he was on his way to China, Elgin was reached by the news of the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny: demonstrating his abnegation to the imperial cause, he diverted his troops to India to aid the Anglo-Indian government against the mutineers. In China in 1858, allied with France and supported by the United States and Russia, Elgin negotiated the unequal Treaty of Tientsin, which, among other measures, opened ten additional Chinese ports to British trade and established a British ambassador in China; Frederick Bruce – Elgin's brother – was appointed to that post. The establishment of diplomatic channels between the East and the West was at the root of Elgin's missions: the exchange of permanent ambassadors would draw the Chinese empire, as Elgin repeatedly wrote, into the Eurocentric "community of nations" (Walrond 1872: 394; Ringmar 2013: 116). After Tientsin, Elgin visited Nagasaki, Japan, where he negotiated the Treaty of Yeddo, which opened three Japanese ports to British commerce as well as diplomatic relations between the two countries (Morison 1928: 192-240; Checkland 1988: 139-163).

In 1859, once back in Britain from the East, Elgin was welcomed as a hero, for having saved India and humbled the Eastern empires. He was appointed as Postmaster General of Palmerston's Ministry and elected Rector of the University of Glasgow. In 1860, after the Taku Forts repulse (when the British troops in China, led by Frederick Bruce, were attacked and defeated by the Chinese while triumphally marching towards the capital for the ratification of Tientsin), Elgin was sent back to the East. This second diplomatic mission soon turned into a military expedition: British and French troops advanced towards Beijing where, in October 1860, in retali-

ation for the Chinese capture of British hostages, the Yuanmingyuan, the Emperor's Summer Palace, was burnt and levelled to the ground. Few days later, the Treaty of Tientsin was ratified, with further concessions to Britain: the Convention of Peking of 1860 established the cession of the Kowloon peninsula, allowed missionary evangelism in China, and, most importantly, legalized the opium trade, the crucial British export to China in exchange for tea and silks. Elgin returned home in 1861, and in March 1862 he was appointed as Viceroy of India, the apex of the nineteenth-century British imperial service. In India, he committed himself to promoting legal equality between British and native subjects and a policy of modernization and infrastructural development. After almost a year spent in Calcutta, he embarked on a tour across the subcontinent; he fell ill during his march to Peshawur and died in Dhurmsala in November 1863 (Morison 1924; Morison 1928: 243-311; Checkland 1988: 164-200).

A few months before his death, while he was in Calcutta, Elgin assessed his own administrative career by writing in an official despatch that, "during a public service of twenty years, I have always sided with the weaker party" – the Jamaican former slaves, the French-Canadian *Habitants*, the Chinese population, and the natives of India (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/4, 123).[1] Elgin's self-indulgence was assimilated by all major studies on him, which appear to be vitiated by the weight of an apologetic and imperialistic mortgage (Walrond 1872; Morison 1928; Checkland 1988). This essay seeks to reconsider Elgin not as a philanthropic and enlightened statesman, but as the representative of a specific phase of Victorian imperial service and the contriver of crucial notions of colonial government.

2. A conservative view of society

Elgin's conception of society was framed in the context of his Oxford education. At Christ Church, he studied classical thought and read modern poetry, finding particularly congenial Aristotle among the ancients, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge among the moderns (Checkland 1988: 99-100). From Aristotle's *Politics*, Elgin drew the idea that human communities were not homogeneous wholes but were made up of different groups and unequal subjects; it was precisely this inequality that made relations of government (namely, of command and obedience) possible among human beings (Colombo 2003: 8). Elgin assimilated this classical conceptualization and updated it with the lesson of the Scottish Enlightenment: he

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1 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 23/12/1862.

recovered Adam Smith's notion of "interest", which implied the existence of a plurality of interests along with the possibility to reconcile individual advantage with collective utility [Hirschman 1997 (1977): 7-65]. For Scottish thinkers, the union of society did not depend on a Hobbesian swarm of identical individuals, whose differences were neutralized in the private sphere: social order was, instead, the product of the concatenation of inequalities of property and different social functions (Ricciardi 2010: 9-53). As a Scot, Elgin viewed social unity as the outcome of the interdependence of inequalities and differences among individuals and classes. This conception was also confirmed by his reading of Coleridge. It was from that Romantic theorist of organic society, and one of his favourite authors, that Elgin drew inspiration for the key notion which informed his political thought, harmony (Aherne 2018: 239-277). "Harmony" was, to Elgin, the most complete manifestation of social order: pointing, etymologically, at the connection among a variety of diversified components, harmony was the making of social and political unity by means of the interconnection of apparently disjointed elements (blacks and whites, French and British, legislature and executive) rather than of melting and assimilation. Notably, Elgin compared the duties of the Governor to those of an architect, as both were committed to "combining the multifarious details into a consistent whole" (Walrond 1872: 68).

Japan, which he visited in 1858, was where Elgin found his ideal of social harmony fulfilled. Having left Britain during the heated debates over parliamentary reform and the protests of the working classes, Elgin saw Japan as a positive counterpart to the metropole shaken by class conflict. Featuring a hierarchical yet harmonious community, Japan amounted to a feudal utopia:

> Every man, from the Emperor to the humblest labourer, lives under a rigid rule, and should fill the place and perform the function which custom and law prescribe. […] All seem to think it the most natural thing in the world that they should move in the orbit in which they are placed. […] A perfectly paternal government; a perfectly filial people; no ill-will between classes (Elgin 1864: 116-121).[2]

Japan, however, was very far from the colonial societies that Elgin ruled, where the "thin crust of order" was at risk of cracking into pieces under the "anarchical" pressure of competing interests and social and racial conflicts (Doughty 1937: I, 350).[3] Those societies had to be governed by means of a careful management of colonial constitutions. "Constitu-

[2] Elgin to his wife, Yeddo, 14-22/08/1858.

[3] Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 30/04/1849.

tion" was for Elgin not a foundational legislative act which established the institutions of the colony (either a charter or an Act of Parliament) but an instrument which administered already-existing social forces and processes (Rudan 2019: 267). To Elgin, to "govern constitutionally" meant, therefore, to rule having previously become acquainted with society and its conflicts (Doughty 1937: II, 666).[4] This way of conceiving of the constitution was tightly related to Elgin's self-perception as a conservative. In 1841, the year of his first brief parliamentary experience, Elgin stated:

> I am a Conservative, not because I am adverse to improvement, not because I am unwilling to […] supply what is defective in the political fabric, but because I am satisfied that, in order to improve effectually, you must be resolved most religiously to preserve. I am a Conservative, because I believe that the institutions of our country, religious as well as civil, are wisely adapted, when duly and faithfully administered, to promote, not the interest of any class or classes exclusively, but the happiness and welfare of the great body of the people. […] I believe that our admirable Constitution rests on principles more exalted and holy than those which Owenism or Socialism can boast, as it proclaims between men of all classes and degrees in the body politic a sacred bond of brotherhood (Walrond 1872: 9-10).

As a follower of the liberal-conservative Robert Peel (whose support for free trade would split the conservative party in 1846), Elgin distinguished between conservatism and reaction: differently from the latter, the former implied institutional preservation but was not disjointed from improvement and reform. Elgin's colonial service would reveal his strong commitment to reform policies, in the fields of technical improvement, education, free trade, and representative government (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/275, 231).[5] For having established parliamentary government in Canada, Elgin was even accused of "ultra-liberalism" in colonial matters (Morison 1928: 141). Indeed, Elgin's conservatism was not inconsistent with his liberalism: as he thought that the first and most important fruit of "order" was "true freedom", he was a liberal, namely, someone for whom the existence of power was not incompatible with the preservation of liberty, which, in turn, coincided with the defence of private property (Doughty 1937: I, 357).[6] Elgin's liberal conservatism was intimately connected to his reverence for the "constitution" as interrelated with his conception of society. For Elgin, classes existed but their conflict, in contradiction with "Owen-

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[4] Elgin to H. Grey, Toronto, 23/05/1850.

[5] Elgin to Stanley, Kingston, 8/11/1843.

[6] Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 21/05/1849.

ism and Socialism", was only seemingly inevitable: the social "fabric" was kept together by an invisible "bond", which ultimately made the different interests of social groups mutually consistent. This was the notion of society as made up of a concatenation of productive functions of the Scottish Enlightenment, sublimated into the organic vision of Romanticism. It was the constitution that offered the formal means to reconcile conflicting interests, by mirroring social components and organizing them at the institutional level in an ordered way. The best means for accomplishing the twin achievement of liberty and order was, for Elgin, through a constitutional promotion of "conservative" social forces. This was the theoretical principle that he put into practice as soon as he became colonial Governor.

3. Constitutional management: Jamaica, Canada, India

As soon as he landed in Jamaica in 1842, Elgin realized that the island was afflicted by a constitutional anomaly. While the Governor was formally the holder of the executive, the representative House of Assembly had, over the centuries, accumulated several financial and administrative powers to his detriment; moreover, an "entire irresponsibility" existed between the legislative and the executive, as they acted independently from each other (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/284, 247).[7] At the beginning of the 1840s, Jamaica had a population of over 378,000 non-white subjects (mostly former slaves) and only 16,000 whites. The electoral requirements had traditionally been very low, in order for the whites of all classes to vote; after emancipation, when several former slaves became proprietors of small landholdings, these low requirements could hugely impact the composition of the electorate and, over time, also of the Assembly (Heuman 1981: 119-131). Elgin realized that the "constitution of society" of Jamaica had recently passed through an epochal "shock": what would have happened to the political constitution of the island, if former slaves had accumulated enough land and money to increase their "social influence" at the polls? (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/284, 438-439).[8] Elgin saw the growing economic independence of the emancipated as a social problem, and was committed to finding solutions to preserve Jamaican society in its traditional composition: a minority of white proprietors, who were employers of labour, electors, and lawmakers, surrounded by a majority of non-white workers, excluded from both the franchise and the membership in the Assembly. In Jamaica, Elgin took great

[7] Elgin to Stanley, Kingston, 5/08/1845.
[8] Elgin to Stanley, Kingston, 23/09/1845.

pains to promote a system of "industrial education", as a way to "educate" former slaves to become disciplined wage workers by means of the application of industrial machinery to the cultivation of the sugar cane. The introduction of machines would produce competition for employment among the labouring population, while also 'refining' their work habits. In fact, the prospect to earn higher wages by operating machines would improve, Elgin thought, the tastes and customs of labourers, by instilling a desire for social advancement and, over time, shaping a "middle class" among them (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/288, 239-261).[9] "Industrial education" was also a way to fulfil social harmony, by accomplishing the "coincidence between the material interests of one class" – the planters' need for labourers – "and the moral interests of the other" – the former slaves' alleged need for improvement (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/280, 243-244).[10]

However, as a black "middle class" did not exist yet, Elgin thought it was dangerous to alter the composition of the Assembly by allowing too many former slaves to vote. As soon as he arrived in Jamaica, he affirmed that "I regard our local constitution as a *fait accompli*, and have no desire to remove a stone of the fabric". Even if he added that "a popular representative system is the best expedient that can be devised for blending into one harmonious whole a community composed of diverse races and colour", he did not mean that the blacks should become a constituent part of this "popular system" (Walrond 1872: 27). Quite the contrary: he regarded with contempt the "miserable parody of European and American institutions" that had recently been established in Haiti, as he was most sceptical about a "free system constructed out of the wreck of a broken down African slave trade" (Walrond 1872: 26-27). The only way to "blend" into a "harmonious whole" the different components of Jamaican society was by neither removing nor adding "a stone of the fabric", and pursuing, after emancipation, the same political system which had existed under slavery. This was what Elgin did as soon as the opportunity presented itself. In 1844, facing the campaign organized by Baptist missionaries to mobilize black voters by registering them for the general elections of 1845, Elgin dissolved the House of Assembly one year in advance and precipitated the elections, thus eluding the Baptist registration and preventing most former slaves from voting (Gocking 1960; Cooper, Holt and Scott 2000: 33-59). In the act of explaining his conduct to the Secretary for the Colonies Lord Stanley, Elgin stressed the necessity to hinder traumatic alterations of the Assembly by relying on the "conservative and consolidating influences" of those who

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[9] Elgin to Gladstone, Kingston, 6/05/1846.

[10] Elgin to Stanley, Kingston, 23/10/1844.

were naturally under the "influence of property" (Elgin 1843-1846: CO 137/284, 448).[11] It was a matter of which social group was able to play a conservative role in society, being committed to the preservation of private property: before becoming a middle class, the emancipated, who were poor, still influenced by African customs, and animated by hatred against the whites, could not perform any "conservative" or "consolidating" function. Moreover, the structural "irresponsibility" of the Assembly made the attempt to leave it into the hands of former slaves even more hazardous. As remarked by Elgin's contemporary Charles Buller, a representative system without responsibility was like "a fire without a chimney" (Buller 1840: 8).

The situation was very different in Canada, where Elgin landed in 1847. The Province had gone through a major French rebellion in 1837-1838. In 1839, Lord Durham had proposed a "responsible government" able to overcome Canadian conflicts, which, as much as Jamaican, were perceived in racial terms: as the opposition between an Anglo-Saxon and industrious minority, naturally qualified for representative institutions, and a backward majority, unripe for self-government (Holt 1992: 237-250). Under responsible government, the holders of the executive would remain in office until they maintained the confidence of the local Parliament: this would produce a mutual "responsibility" between the legislature and the executive of the colony (Ward 1976: 38-81; Buckner 1985: 291-339). Coupled with the Union of Lower and Upper Canada in 1840, this form of government would, according to Durham, foster the immigration of British colonists to Canada, who, by rapidly outnumbering French *Habitants*, would alter the national balance of the Province [Durham 1912 (1839): II, 64]. After less than a year since his arrival, Elgin established responsible government in Canada: this was the nearest approximation to the metropolitan parliamentary system ever established in a colonial possession. For Elgin, the key feature of this form of government was the alternation between ministries of different parties, which consecutively held the confidence of colonial Parliament. This was, indeed, "the most conservative element" of British constitution: being appointed to an official position in turn, all political parties were forced to mitigate their demands (Doughty 1937: I, 46-47). In this way, colonial Parliament was turned from a field of civil warfare into a "neutral territory" where opposite political factions could engage with one another. Being the condition which institutionalized conflict into party politics, political responsibility was thereby the surest check against abuse of power (Walrond 1872: 168).

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[11] Elgin to Stanley, Kingston, 23/09/1845.

The concurrent action between the different sinews of the "political machine" produced a "balance of powers" which was not merely institutional but most importantly social: in Canada as much as in Jamaica, the political constitution mirrored the constitution of society. For this reason, Elgin's responsible government featured a crucial difference from Durham's original formulation. While Durham had devised responsible government as the direct consequence of the colonization of Canada by British subjects, Elgin's administration conferred an unprecedented weight to the French. The new Governor realized that the French could be beneficially settled along the border with the US: in this way, they would constitute a social, linguistic, and religious 'buffer' between the British Canadian population, who were dangerously asking for annexation, and the powerful North American Republic (Doughty 1937: I, 191-192).[12] While Durham wanted to see French Canadians assimilated to British subjects, Elgin opposed any policy aimed at "denationaliz[ing] the French": he appreciated French difference as instrumental to preserve the imperial connection between Canada and Britain (Doughty 1937: I, 149).[13] Differently from British Canadians (who craved annexation and looked up to US American republicanism) and Irish Canadians (whose disaffection was fuelled by the revolts in Ireland), French Canadians appeared to Elgin as an "essentially conservative element in the Canadian compound". In spite of the French Revolution of 1848, Elgin believed that the French were a "decidedly antirevolutionary" nationality, being Catholics, socially far less "progressive" than the Anglo-Saxons, and accustomed to absolutist government for centuries (Doughty 1937: II, 706-707).[14] While in Jamaica the most conservative Assembly was the one bequeathed by the slavery era, the Canadian Parliament and ministry would become conservative by including the French. Elgin not only established a responsible government: he also assigned the same political weight to French and British parties. In 1848, after general elections, responsible government in Canada was inaugurated by a ministry based upon an alliance between British liberals and French moderate politicians (Walrond 1872: 50-51). Despite the remonstrances of the Tories, Elgin was determined to govern with any cabinet holding the confidence of the legislature. Tories were taught a most important "constitutional lesson" in 1849, during the Rebellion Losses crisis: some of them appealed to the imperial Parliament to disallow the contested Bill, but the metropole did not intervene in their favour (Morison 1928: 140-142). This was a constitutional precedent of cru-

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[12] Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 29/06/1848.

[13] Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 4/05/1848.

[14] Elgin to H. Grey, Toronto, 2/08/1850.

cial importance, as it sanctioned that those decisions of internal colonial policy, which did not involve imperial interests, would no longer be overturned by the mother country.

In Jamaica and Canada, Elgin was appointed to govern two societies which needed to be, as he wrote to Colonial Secretary Henry Grey, "handled with caution" (Doughty 1937: I, 128; Martin 2015).[15] In both cases, the paramount task of the Governor was to promote the most "conservative" social forces: the white planters in Jamaica, and the French *Habitants* in Canada. The extension of representation and the establishment of responsible government were supported in Canada but were hindered in Jamaica, as its population was mainly constituted by former slaves, whose capability to be tempered by the "influence of property" and become a "conservative" social force was deemed most uncertain. Elgin specified that the representative system of Jamaica and Canadian responsible government were suited to two different "stages" of development: while black Jamaica was not sufficiently "civilized" yet and was therefore doomed to keep its old imperfect representative system, white Canada was ripe for responsible government (Doughty 1937: IV, 1377).[16] In the mid-1860s, the Jamaican House of Assembly abolished itself, radically altering the constitution of the island: the last, ultimate effort of the whites to prevent non-whites from entering the Assembly was by abrogating representative institutions altogether (Murray 1965: 218-230). This constitutional development, which Elgin did not witness, was somehow implicit in his own discourse on Jamaica.

Being influenced by his Jamaican and Canadian experience, Elgin assigned a crucial role to the colonial Legislative Council when he became Viceroy of India, the first directly nominated by the Crown. While the Secretary of State for India Charles Wood believed that "the home government is the absolute power" and that, in India, "representative bodies, in any real sense, you cannot have", Elgin thought that India had to be governed in India (Wood 1862: F83/7, 111-123, 177-181; Moore 1966).[17] To this purpose, he stressed the importance of admitting native members into the Viceroy's Legislative Council: in 1863, he stated that "the native gentlemen of India shall be duly represented in the Council of the Gov. Genl. in order that, when laws are enacted for India, their feelings, opinions and wishes might receive proper consideration" (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/30, 17).[18] This would not only reconcile native élites to British rulers but would also provide the

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15 Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 2/03/1848.

16 Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 25/09/1847.

17 Wood to Elgin, London, 7/04/1862; Wood to Elgin, London, 19/05/1862.

18 Elgin to the Queen, Muttra, 21/02/1863.

Council itself with that specific knowledge needed to counter the claims for local autonomy of the presidencies of Madras and Bombay. Furthermore, in order to make it more "popular" and "catholic" (i.e., inclusive), Elgin argued that the Council should not be convened in Calcutta only, but in different parts of India: he thereby proposed a system of sessions and long adjournments that would allow native members to actively participate in the meetings (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/2, 71).[19] Elgin assigned a crucial role to the natives in the government of the Raj: he actively contributed to the post-Mutiny conceptualization of a new "sociology of power", according to which Europeans, consistently with their feudal imagery, began to represent Indian élites as a natural aristocracy (Cohn 1983: 206-209). The Viceroy's appreciation for native élites would, according to Elgin, avert a second Mutiny: that "class of natives who consider they have a natural right to be leaders of men and to occupy the first places in India" had to be gratified in their ambitions of power and political responsibility; conversely, if the British had attempted to "crush all superiorities", they would have "united the native populations in a homogeneous mass" against themselves (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/3, 117).[20] Order was, again, the outcome not of homogeneity but of hierarchies and differences. In his relations with indigenous principalities, Elgin disavowed the annexation policy pursued by Lord Dalhousie in the early 1850s and adopted his predecessor Lord Canning's non-interference strategy with native states. By notably comparing Canning's "liberal" and almost "deferent" policy towards native rulers to his own behaviour with French Canadians, Elgin remarked that, as much as Canning, he did not intend to "lose his hold" over local chiefs – quite the contrary: by "riding them with a loose rein", the Viceroy would control and keep them weak and, therefore, loyal to the Raj (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/3, 121).[21] Canadian "constitutional lessons" had landed in South Asia.

4. The governor, the diplomat, and the viceroy: western influence and eastern prestige

But what was the role that Elgin himself, as the *in loco* representative of the Crown, played in colonial and extra-colonial political orders? In the Americas, Elgin thought he performed a key social and constitutional function. In Jamaica, the Governor had to hinder too rapid changes in both

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[19] Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 19/04/1862.

[20] Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/09/1862.

[21] Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/09/1862.

the composition of society and the constitution of the colony: by showing a conciliatory attitude towards the planter élite in the House of Assembly, the Governor would supply a "bond of mutual dependence" between the executive and the legislature, something that Jamaican "irresponsible" system formally lacked (Doughty 1937: IV, 1377).[22] In Canada, the Governor-General was the supervisor of the proper working of responsible government and the *super partes* moderator of party oppositions, but also the promoter of colonial interests and, as such, the holder of constitutional "influence". Elgin explicitly distinguished political "power", the authority to directly decide and be obeyed, from "influence", a notion inspired by Jeremy Bentham which pointed at that "wholly moral" ability to suggest the course of action of colonial politicians and indirectly control public opinion (Walrond 1872: 126; Parsons 1963: 38-42); so understood, influence was a peculiar form of non-political power with politically relevant outcomes (Rudan 2019: 265-268). In Canada, the Governor had for Elgin to elevate himself *above* competing factions (as he had to support any party holding the confidence of the legislature, without identifying himself in any of them) but at the same time he had to position himself *in the middle* of colonial society as its leading benefactor (Francis 1992: 238-259). This is the reason why his influence was not directly political, but moral and social: his power was not an absolute command, but rather a personal ascendancy, founded upon his competence and reputation. It was the Governor's main duty to represent and promote those interests which united different social groups (colonization, commerce, education, and public works) at the expense of the passions which divided them. For Elgin, the Governor was not only a "quasi-monarch", the traditional symbol of the metropolitan-colonial connection, but also the leader of the colonial community: Elgin sought to become the very embodiment of that system of interests which united colonial society (Francis 1992: 247-249). Among the conservative forces of the colony, the Governor played the most conservative role: that of pursuing "social harmony" by means of an attentive constitutional management (Elgin 1854: CO 42/595, 5).[23] This provided the Governor himself, Elgin thought, with an unparalleled capacity to direct political developments. Despite the several efforts he did to strengthen legislative powers in Canada (he supported an Act to extend the representation of the Lower House and another one to make the Upper House elective), he understood "responsible government", consistently with Durham, as something ultimately able to reinforce the executive, by providing the ministers and the

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22 Elgin to H. Grey, Montreal, 25/09/1847.

23 Elgin to G. Grey, Québec, 6/09/1854.

Governor with an effective "influence" over the legislature [Elgin 1864: 2; Durham 1912 (1839): II, 101-103].[24] When he left Canada in 1854, Elgin was proud to have established one of the "strongest governments" that the colony had ever seen (Elgin 1854: CO 42/595, 75).[25]

Once in the Far East in 1857, the "influence" that Elgin had learnt in North America turned out to be useless. There, in relations with emperors, dignitaries, and the native population, Western Envoys had to assimilate that peculiar kind of authority exhibited by Eastern monarchs: "the doctrine of 'prestige'", as "prestige is everything in the East" (Elgin 1859b: 43; Elgin 1864: 114).[26] By "prestige", Elgin understood a form of power founded on appearance and outward performance: this was no mere empty exteriority but rather the ability to "direct the popular mind" by making clever use of symbols and public ceremonies (Elgin 1859b: 178).[27] Most Europeans, Elgin thought, erroneously presumed that "all Orientals" were childishly

> amused and gratified by external trappings and ceremonies and titles, and ready to put up with the loss of real dignity and power if things are duly permitted to enjoy the semblance of it. […] I believe on the contrary, that the Eastern imagination is singularly prone to invest outward things with a symbolic character, and that relaxations on points of form are valued by them chiefly because they are held necessarily to imply concessions on substantial matters (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/2, 105).[28]

During the Second Opium War, Elgin acknowledged that the Chinese Emperor should be forced to surrender to Western commercial claims but his "prestige" should not be impaired, in order to prevent the country from sinking into anarchy during the Taiping Rebellion (Elgin 1859b: 140).[29] But the integrity of "prestige" was also crucial to Elgin himself, who had to incorporate this specifically Eastern mode of authority: the "full powers" granted by the British government had to be supplemented by an additional aura of dignity and prominence (Elgin 1864: 114).[30] Prestige was, in fact, absolutely needed for Elgin's diplomatic mission to succeed: by means of a "policy of combined moderation and firmness", Elgin aimed to "stand

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24 Elgin to his wife, Montreal, 31/01/1847.

25 Elgin to G. Grey, Québec, 10/10/1854.

26 Robertson to Elgin, Shanghai, 1/09/1857; Elgin to his wife, Simoda, 12/08/1858.

27 Elgin to Pih-kwei, Canton, 4/02/1858.

28 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/05/1862.

29 Elgin to Clarendon, Canton, 9/01/1858.

30 Elgin to his wife, Simoda, 12/08/1858.

towering above all, using calm and dignified language" (Checkland 1988: 150). The burning of the Yuanmingyuan, and his triumphal march into the Forbidden City for the ratification of Tientsin that followed, were the most striking demonstrations of the British Envoy's overwhelming prestige. While, in Canada, Elgin had exercised his "influence" as an indirect and covert social and moral ascendancy (as he repeatedly wrote, he had manoeuvred the behaviour of the members of the legislature and the ministry, while convincing them that *they* governed), his Eastern "prestige" was a manifest and patent exhibition of power, in which "trappings and ceremonies" were not redundant but essential (Doughty 1937: I, 120).[31] These two modes of power were aimed, however, at the same outcome: "direct[ing] the popular mind".

When he landed in India in 1862, Elgin already knew how important symbolic rites and ceremonies were in maximizing his power in the East. For this purpose, he convened durbars on a large scale. The durbar was a huge assembly of native princes, drawn and adapted from the Mughal tradition, in which the supreme ruler incorporated the power of other chiefs into his own person, by distributing honours and presents. While, before the Mutiny, the British rarely performed native rites, after the Government of India Act of 1858 (when, at the disestablishment of the East India Company, Britain was integrated into local politics by investing the Queen with the sovereignty on India), the organization of durbars became instrumental in symbolically representing the new order (Cohn 1983: 165-209). Elgin was a crucial actor in this process: during his tour across the subcontinent in 1863, he convened several durbars, included the Grand Durbar in Agra of February 1863, the largest one ever held in India until that moment. It was by presenting himself as a powerful ruler, preeminent over crowds of native princes and adorned by a combination of British and Mughal emblems, that Elgin wanted to strengthen the prestige of Great Britain in the East: through the figure of the local representative of the Crown, whose decisions should sound to the natives as the irrevocable "decree of fate", Britain would "establish the reputation of being all-just and all-powerful" (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/5, 178).[32] Indeed, Elgin thought that this prestige was needed to compensate for the Viceroy's lack of actual power. He repeatedly expressed regret that the times of his predecessors Dalhousie and Canning had offered more opportunities for "vigorous action" than his own: as nobody "can win a name here unless there be some great events, such as the Mutiny, Dalhousie's annexations, etc.", the peaceful condition in which

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[31] H. Grey to Elgin, London, 22/02/1847.

[32] Elgin to Wood, Simla, 21/05/1863.

Elgin found the subcontinent forced him to "content himself with maturing measures of improvement and progress", which were "humble" compared to the memorable accomplishments of former Governors-General (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/30, 6-7; Elgin 1864: 261; Elgin 1862-1863: F83/5, 18).[33]

However, times of peace, if less favourable to vigorous exertions of power, could be fit for "the discovery of the true theory according to which our relations with native States ought to be conducted" (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/3, 125).[34] As an expert constitutionalist, Elgin pondered over what it meant to be the Viceroy of India after 1858: while the Charter Act of 1833 had centralized Anglo-Indian government, sanctioning the authority of the Governor-General in Council, the post-Mutiny reassertion of metropolitan supremacy reduced the Viceroy to the "mentor of a public debating club" (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/2, 72; Metcalf 1991).[35] While the Secretary of State for India and his Council in London amounted to "real power", Elgin was disappointed that, in his years, no circumstance seemed "to justify [the Viceroy] [for] his taking the reins of government into his own hands" (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/4, 113).[36] By comparing the subtle but powerful "influence" he had exercised as Governor-General of Canada with his prestigious yet comparatively unauthoritative role as Viceroy, Elgin confessed to Wood that,

> If I were to tell you what I *now* think of the relative amount of influence which I exercised on the march of affairs in Canada, where I governed on strictly constitutional principles, and with a free parliament, as compared with that which the Governor-General wields in India, when at peace, you would accuse me of paradox (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/4, 115).[37]

In India, Elgin sought to increase his power and prestige, in order to make his Viceroyalty memorable even in times of peace. Influenced by his Canadian experience, he viewed his Legislative Council in Calcutta as a means to strengthen his authority against both the interference of metropolitan government and the pretended autonomy of the presidencies of Madras and Bombay. The natives could be exploited to this purpose: the "popularization" of the Council by means of the admission of Indian members, coupled with the organization of durbars, had to mark the privi-

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33 Elgin to the Queen, Muttra, 21/01/1863; Elgin to his wife, Barrackpore, 13/07/1862; Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 20/01/1863.

34 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/09/1862.

35 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 19/04/1862.

36 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/12/1862.

37 Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 9/12/1862.

leged relation existing between local princes and the Viceroy, who aspired to become the new "Great Moghul" of the subcontinent (Elgin 1862-1863: F83/5, 46).[38]

Conclusion: A civilized barbarian

Elgin was a *sui generis* representative of the British imperial 'civilizing mission'. He often found his appointments annoying, he repeatedly blamed British settlers and conquerors, and expressed humanitarian concerns about colonized peoples (Newsinger 2002). The whole East was, he wrote, "strewed all over with the records of our violence and fraud": the Arrow case which initiated the Second Opium War was a "contemptible" *casus belli*, while the Sepoy Mutiny had been a reaction against "the scandalous treatment which the natives receive at our hands in India" (Elgin 1864: 123, 67, 184).[39] Elgin was indignant about the "detestation, contempt, ferocity, and vengeance" displayed by most Britons towards the natives, whom they treated "not as dogs, because in that case one would whistle to them and pat them, but as machines with which one can have no communion or sympathy" (Elgin 1864: 45).[40] Distancing himself from the violently racist "turn" that growingly characterized British public opinion after the Mutiny, Elgin was the spokesman of a liberal imperialism and paternalistic racism (Pitts 2005: 150-162; Tagliaferri 2012: 78-79). For him, both the Chinese and the Indians were "inferior orders of men"; however, his monogenetic belief in a "common humanity" between them and Europeans led him to condemn any treatment of natives as either beasts or "machines", and to consider imperial administrators as charged with a paternal "responsibility" in their "dominion over inferior races", whom they had to patiently carry to Western standards (Elgin 1864: 231; Elgin 1859a: 4).[41] Elgin hoped that his liberal attitude and philanthropic concerns would temper the arrogant pretentions of his fellow-countrymen in the East: presenting himself as the protector of the natives, he envisaged that "no human power shall induce me to accept the office of oppressor of the feeble" (Elgin 1864: 73).[42] Nonetheless, he presided over the bombardment of Canton, extorted the

[38] Elgin to Wood, Calcutta, 5/03/1863.

[39] Elgin to his wife, Shanghai, 30/08/1858; Elgin to his wife, Canton, 24/12/1857; Elgin to his wife, Ceylon, 22/05/1860.

[40] Elgin to his wife, Calcutta, 21/08/1857.

[41] Elgin to his wife, Manila, 26/01/1861.

[42] Elgin to his wife, Canton, 16/01/1858.

Treaty of Tientsin, and ordered the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan: his sense of duty and commitment to the imperial cause ultimately overcame his hesitation and moral revulsion.

It was the "brutalities" committed by Britons in the East on "feeble Oriental races" that demonstrated, for Elgin, "how hollow and superficial their civilisation" was (Elgin 1864: 184).[43] Indeed, Elgin's Eastern appointments, especially his Chinese missions, partially unsettled his notions of civilization and barbarism. If, on the one hand, he acknowledged that, in China, "the Christian civilisation of the West finds itself face to face, not with barbarism, but with an ancient civilisation […] not without claims on our sympathy and respect", on the other, he found the Chinese custom to refer to Europeans with the character 夷 ("yi", which the British translated as "barbarians") ridiculous and insulting (Elgin 1859b: 240-241).[44] "Yi", by marking cultural strangeness, pointed at outsiders, without featuring the contemptuous connotation of the English "barbarians" (Ringmar 2013: 5; Liu 2004: 31-69). But Elgin thought that the time had come for China to abandon "her vain pretensions of superiority over other States", in both trade and vocabulary: Article 51 of the Treaty of Tientsin sanctioned that "yi" should no longer be used in reference to the British government and British subjects (Elgin 1859b: 385, 354).[45] However, while informing his wife that the Treaty had been forcibly extorted, Elgin sarcastically joked on the Chinese "yi", confessing that "I made up my mind […] to act the role of the 'uncontrollably fierce barbarian'" (Elgin 1864, 103).[46] But it was Elgin's second embassy that deeply questioned British self-arrogated notion of civilization. Mindful of the retreat from Kabul in 1842, when over 100 British hostages had been seized, Elgin thought that the Chinese capture and murder of British hostages deserved a "lesson" they would never forget. The Emperor had to be humbled by a performance of the destructive power of Britain: in his despatches, Elgin repeatedly stressed that he had ordered the destruction of the Palace after considerable reflection, as the best method to launch a "blow to the pride and feelings" of the Manchu. The British attacked the Palace, in fact, "not to pillage, but to mark, by a solemn act of retribution, the horror and indignation with which we were inspired by the perpetration of a great crime" (Elgin 1861: 215).[47] In the same years in which European states were adopting international laws

43 Elgin to his wife, Ceylon, 22/05/1860.

44 Elgin to English Merchants, Shanghai, 29/03/1858.

45 Elgin to Malmesbury, Shanghai, 17/09/1858.

46 Elgin to his wife, Tientsin, 5/06/1858.

47 Elgin to Russell, Peking, 25/10/1860.

to prevent the destruction of historical and artistic sites on the continent, the magnificent ensemble of kiosks, palaces, gardens, and temples collectively known as the Yuanmingyuan were burnt. General Montauban, the Commander of the French troops, bitterly remarked that "this vengeance is worthy of a people more barbarian than the Chinese themselves" (Ringmar 2013: 80; Dormandy 2012: 149). In Beijing, October 1860, to borrow Marx's words, it was the "inherent barbarism of [European] civilization" that took its "respectable" clothes off, and "went naked" on the ashes of the Summer Palace [Marx 2007 (1853): 224].

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