



INTRODUCTION

Looping Bureaucracies. Imperial Administrations and Socio-Political Change in Asia (1750–1950)

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Abstract

From the early modern period onwards, European dynasties sought to expand their power in South and Southeast Asia, establishing localised institutions that incorporated both European models and precolonial Asian practices. Studies on local resistance to imposed bureaucratisation overlook how locals navigated the bureaucracy for societal or political change. In this special issue, historians of colonial India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia investigate how knowledge products of European bureaucracies provided unintended opportunities for local agents to navigate the imperial state, and moreover to alter said knowledge products or bureaucracies. The authors critically engage with the concept of the “looping effect,” coined by the late Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking, to describe a process where administrative practices led to social mobilisation in colonial contexts.

Keywords: Colonial administrations; South and South East Asia; Looping Effect; Ian Hacking

Administrative Routine in Imperial Histories

Driven by commercial and territorial ambitions, European dynasties from the early modern period onwards continuously sought to expand their dominion in South and Southeast Asia. In order to consolidate their power in peripheral territories, the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and later the French and British installed a variety of localised institutions, sometimes copy-pasting European models into local contexts but equally incorporating precolonial Asian practices. Their administrative efforts to make the imperial state “legible” and to efficiently extract resources, reform societies, secure trade, and ensure control resulted in an ever-expanding bureaucratic apparatus that created novel regimes of legality and registration practices. These European imperial bureaucracies interacted in multiple ways with the people they encountered and claimed governance over across South and Southeast Asia, impacting everyday life in the colonies, but also, in return, being shaped by it.

Following Crook and Parsons in their 2016 seminal work *Empires and Bureaucracy in World History*, *bureaucracy* is defined here as routine administrative activity, conducted on the basis of records, delegated to office holders hierarchically organised in specialised offices, relying on systems of communication.¹ These bureaucracies carried out diplomacy,

¹ Peter Crook and Timothy Parsons, *Empires and Bureaucracy in World History: From Late Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 17–8.

administered rulings, classified populations, educated, policed, and coerced. They collected data and revenue, and surveyed territory and populations. They mobilised people for work and war. Within limits, they shaped the environment they were to administer.

With their routine, day-to-day activities, imperial bureaucracies created precedence for what they perceived to be appropriate action. Backed by disciplinary power, these activities were also performative: they proposed to indigenous actors ways in which a foreign power intended to handle an identified problem or question of significance. Research in the past two decades has shifted attention away from a traditional top-down narrative of how such procedures were conceived and carried out. In 2005 Frederick Cooper suggested to complement the Foucauldian paradigm on colonial modernisation and bureaucratic organisation with a perspective that allowed to study multidirectional flows of colonial power.² Because administrative routines in colonial and imperial bureaucracies as such—inadvertently—created regimes that offered subjects distinct avenues to actively participate in (post-) colonial governments.³ Since Cooper's call, historians of South and Southeast Asia have identified scope for indigenous agency to go beyond mere consumption of bureaucratic practices and study their ability to impact administrative interventions, due to structural inefficiency of imperial bureaucracy, the parallel existence of indigenous institutions, and the activity of individuals.⁴ Novel concepts such as negotiation, navigation, and recognition have entered imperial histories and allowed for thorough analysis of bottom-up individual and group dynamics impacting the workings of bureaucratic structures and political and legal institutions.⁵

However, despite the undeniable merits of this burgeoning literature, we are still only beginning to grasp how local responses to bureaucratic procedures not only fed into the

² Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134.

³ See, for example, on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Pakistan, Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

⁴ Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, ed., *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Rosalind O'Hanlon, "The Social Worth of Scribes: Brahmins, Kāyasthas and the Social Order in Early Modern India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47:4 (2010), 563–95; Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Nandini Chatterjee, *Negotiating Mughal Law: A Family of Landlords Across Three Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁵ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012). For work in legal imperial history, see, e.g., Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow, "Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law" in *The Cambridge World History, volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE*, ed. Jerry Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80–100; and for a recent volume, Griet Vermeesch, Manon van der Heijden, and Jaco Zuiderduijn, eds., *The Uses of Justice in Global Perspective, 1600–1900* (London: Routledge, 2019). Recent additions to such debates for South and Southeast Asia are Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Leonard Hodges, "Between Litigation and Arbitration: Administering Legal Pluralism in Eighteenth-Century Bombay," *Itinerario* 42:3 (2018), 490–515; Mahmood Kooria, "The Dutch Mogharaer, Arabic Muharrar, and Javanese Law Books: A VOC Experiment with Muslim Law in Java, 1747–1767," *Itinerario* 42:3 (2018), 202–19; Sanne Ravensbergen, "Courtrooms of Conflict: Criminal Law, Local Elites and Legal Pluralities in Colonial Java" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2018); Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Do You Know the Ninth Commandment? Tensions of the Oath in Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka," *Comparative Legal History* 7:1 (2019), 37–66; Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020).

collective memory of imperial institutions but in turn also influenced the agendas of indigenous actors. As Cooper argued, too often these interactions and their afterlives are placed in “a vaguely defined metahistory rather than in the situations in which people actually acted.”⁶ When, for example, revenue collectors entered a village to demand land deeds and take cash or kind, routines on display offered up possibilities of people making use of the performance, materiality, or nomenclature of authority. Similarly, by applying new social classifications, or new ways of representing authority through insignia, imperial bureaucracies rolled out procedures for indigenous actors to engage with—sometimes to their own advantage. Moreover, such engagements could in turn potentially impact said procedures, creating an interplay between imperial-bureaucratic standards of conduct and local behaviours, knowledge, and customs.

Key Questions for the Special Issue

The six papers in this special issue collectively examine the idea of specific official knowledge, terms, or documentation, being returned to imperial authorities by indigenous actors loaded with new meaning. The authors investigate how diverse actors in South and Southeast Asia seized on specific, routine administrative activities. How did they translate, manipulate, negotiate, or appropriate knowledge, procedures, and mechanisms introduced by foreign powers, to their own advantage? And how can we as historians conceptualise the sometimes unreflected, sometimes tactical—or even strategic—utilisation of particular imperial bureaucratic procedures by those subjected to them?

In this special issue, historians of colonial India and Sri Lanka join hands with historians of Indonesia to investigate how knowledge products of imperial European bureaucracies afforded local agents unintended opportunities to navigate that same imperial state, unveiling similarities and differences between bureaucratic practices across South and Southeast Asia. The papers in this collection deal with contexts from the early colonial transition in the eighteenth century, as well as high colonialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and cover both Dutch and British colonial regimes.⁷ The following contributions will not narrate everyday forms of anticolonial resistance to imperial bureaucratic authority.⁸ Rather, they centre mundane activities of administrations across modern and early modern European empires in Asia, and how such interactions between these administrations and the people administered by them in turn affected (or “looped”) colonial bureaucracies. While scholars have successfully pursued domestic and imperial bureaucratic routines as knowledge-producing processes,⁹ we will instead recalibrate this lens to study indigenous actors engaging those processes and working up “capacity for turning bureaucracy to their own advantage.”¹⁰ Only then, we suggest, will we be able to eventually say if and how these bottom-up dynamics influenced policy making as well as indigenous calls for change in an imperial context.

While studying these interactions between subjects and imperial bureaucracies, the authors are very much aware of the underlying power imbalance and the inherent

⁶ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 54.

⁷ Seminal works on these concepts for South Asia are Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004); and David Washbrook, “South India 1770–1840: The Colonial Transition,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38:3 (2004), 479–516.

⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁹ Sebastian Felten and Christine von Oertzen, “Bureaucracy as Knowledge,” *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1:1 (2020), 1–16.

¹⁰ Crook and Parsons, *Empires and Bureaucracy*, 18.

inequality between the negotiating parties. Still, bureaucratic routines provided openings for alternative activities, as indigenous actors began recharging the practices of officials and institutions with meaning more beneficial to themselves. As historians, we rarely analyse these unequal exchanges occurring around imperial bureaucracies as isolated from the larger picture of a given setting or period. In our failure to map these occurrences, we are missing out on possible patterns across geographical locations and periods in how local actors turned the tools of bureaucracy back on itself. Subsequently historical research up to now cannot yet say if and how these bottom-up dynamics in turn influenced policy making, and if or how they made social change possible in an imperial context.

Looping Bureaucracies

The formative discussions leading up to this special issue were inspired by the work of the late Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking.¹¹ His concept of the “looping effect” was designed to analyse social effects of administrative classification in the contemporary world. As he pointed out himself, his theory needs to be positioned between the rigid top-down approach of Foucault and the bottom-up approach of Goffman, as it assumes a cycle of changes between the top and bottom, affecting both.¹² Building upon Foucault’s analysis of homosexuality and deviance, Hacking identified how administrative authorities, experts, and institutions in the medical and psychiatric fields “make up” categories of people. While Hacking’s classification process highlights how institutional and parainstitutional epistemologies shape human behaviour, he cautions against perceiving these classifications as fixed. Through the concept of the “looping effect,” he elucidates the dynamic interaction between the act of description and classification and the individuals being described/classified.¹³ Hacking additionally assumes that those classified eventually interact with authorities responsible for their classification, with an aim to impact the preconditions of their labelling. The looping effect acknowledges the responses of individuals who are being classified, as they either conform to the classification or resist it. This interactive process between the classification and the affected individuals forms a circuit, leading to the kind being classified becoming a dynamic and ever-evolving concept. In Hacking’s words, it “creates a feedback loop that renders the kind a moving target.”¹⁴ Despite efforts to apply this concept to other forms of state/society interactions, the model has not yet generated enough studies of the agency of those affected by bureaucratic procedures. The looping effect through which reform and change is made possible, as it were, is underexplored.

However, it is our firm conviction that Hacking’s thinking can be useful to reconsider subject-state interactions through imperial bureaucracies. Drawing inspiration from Hacking’s emphasis on exploring the everyday aspects of institutional identity formation, we argue that social categorisations by European bureaucracies through continued

¹¹ These discussions had been ongoing for quite some time before the news of his passing reached us in Spring 2023. For his obituary, see <https://philosophy.utoronto.ca/news/in-memoriam-ian-hacking-1936-2023/>.

¹² Ian Hacking, “Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: Between Discourse in the Abstract and Face-to-Face Interaction,” *Economy and Society* 33:3 (2004), 277–302, 297.

¹³ Ian Hacking, “Making-Up People,” in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Welbery (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 161–71; Hacking, “Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman”; Davide Sparti, “Making Up People: On Some Looping Effects of the Human Kind—Institutional Reflexivity or Social Control?” *European Journal of Social Theory* 4:3 (2001), 331–4.

¹⁴ Tuomas Vesterinen, “Identifying the Explanatory Domain of the Looping Effect: Congruent and Incongruent Feedback Mechanisms of Interactive Kinds,” *Journal of Social Ontology* 6:2 (2020), 159–85, 160.

negotiations in middle- to long-term processes could result in quasi realities.¹⁵ These categories could find their origins in political language and administration practices, but because they organize people's socioeconomic and political lives, the categories eventually took the shape of "real" social and cultural groups. By fixing individuals and groups in predetermined categories, this two-way "making up" process had the potential to contribute to stability in colonial societies, but at the same time we have to acknowledge they could also fuel social tensions, especially because categories often involve power differences through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and submission, and/or normalization and deviance. Therefore, definitions, limits, and moral qualities of these categories have nearly always been contested, and it is precisely these contestations through "looping bureaucracies" onto themselves that this special issue will address.

Additionally, the behaviour of these constructed social groups and their encounters with the bureaucracies that (in Hacking's terms) "made them up" could eventually influence the way the categories were formulated and understood by both bureaucracy and society. It is this looping interaction between administrative institutions and administered populations that the authors in this collection identify and analyse. The contributions shed light on how the looping effect occurs in several domains simultaneously. Authors Anubha Anushree and Henrik Chetan Aspengren analyse in their respective papers ways in which indigenous actors utilised vocabularies, concepts, and data originally employed for official purposes, in political and public debate and court procedures, in attempts to turn the tables on imperial and colonial administrations. Anushree revisits the Mamlatdar-Crawford controversy unfolding in the Bombay Presidency during the late nineteenth century, where a high-profile administrator was accused of taking bribes from local actors. Perceptions of indigenous society as corrupt, while British officialdom was moral and even-handed, worked as a foundational myth and legitimising idea of empire. A growing Indian bourgeoisie, Anushree argues, imploded that binary by highlighting imperial corruption. Aspengren, in turn, analyses how a newly designed political category of "minorities" entered political debates in India between the World Wars. He suggests that Indian politicians and activists were able to advance their own political agendas through close studies of official statistics linked to social groups in India. While the statistics were originally part of a massive British undertaking of mapping the social landscape in India, Indian politicians were able to embed data in arguments for political reforms.

Authors Andi Schubert, Luc Bulten, and Maarten Manse zoom in on indigenous actors' engagement with major imperial knowledge-producing activities of census taking, registration procedures, and taxation. Schubert discusses how Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, an indigenous civil servant in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), managed not only to meteorically rise within the local administration but to effectively shape colonial census taking in his society. Arunachalam was the first ever indigenous actor in charge of census taking within the British Empire, and his intimate knowledge of the society he surveyed had clear implications on the design of the census. Through the story of Ceylon's 1901 census and Arunachalam's role in it, Schubert explores wider questions of indigenous agency in shaping the relationship between classification and identification. Bulten analyses extracts from land and population registers that were used by local litigants in eighteenth-century Dutch colonial Sri Lanka. He shows how local actors were not passively registered by Dutch authorities, but instead worked with registers to produce evidence to have their property legally recognised. He also shows how residents altered official procedures and employed alternative knowledge forms in Dutch courts to advance their cause, reshaping colonial knowledge in the process.

¹⁵ Ian Hacking, "Kinds of People: Moving Targets," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 151 (2007), 285–318.

Manse takes the reader to early twentieth-century Indonesia and views Dutch efforts to tax local residents through the lens of Hacking's looping effect. He shows how taxation was influenced by interaction between the coloniser and indigenous society and its complexes of "local" or "practical knowledge," social organisation, mentalities, and behaviour of indigenous populations as expressed through *adat* (Indonesian systems of political-social norms and customary law). *Adat*, he argues, was internalised in colonial systems of thought and started working reciprocally with colonial tax policy.

Lastly, Philip Post analyses separate instances of the looping effect in the Dutch Moluccas around 1800. Although he presents three distinct episodes, they are bridged through Hacking's concept and combined into a discussion about continuity and change under colonial rule—as viewed from the perspective of indigenous regents. Post specifically studies the interplay between local regents who faced changing European authority of trading companies and colonial administration, of British and Dutch origin. He shows how these regents referenced not only alleged European Christian virtues but also actual instructions and insignia of European origin to place demands on other European authorities later in time.

Altogether the respective contributions to this issue engage implicitly and explicitly with a framework for understanding the looping effect, as it was originally proposed in Hacking's work.¹⁶ Hacking bases his premises on a distinct classification of people. In our case, we focus on the broader concept of "colonial knowledge" rather than the distinct classification. Hacking goes on to describe how a group of people is affected by this classification, or, in our case, knowledge and its effect on colonised peoples. Additional to agents, the classification is subjected to institutions. Hacking refers to organisations such as clinics and annual meetings on mental health; however, for this context we focus on colonial legal, fiscal, and bureaucratic institutions, which both produced and made use of "colonial knowledge" of "colonised peoples." Another element is conjectural knowledge or "facts." Similar to how Hacking describes how proposed facts about those classified are accepted as such, documents as found in the colonial archives were increasingly accepted as factual by both the colonial state and the local agents at the time. Finally, Hacking describes how there are medical experts or professionals who create and maintain the knowledge. In this case, it is the colonial state (and more precisely their bureaucratic commissioners) who produce knowledge by compiling the aforementioned "facts" into the plethora of archival documents cited throughout all the articles in this issue, as well as manifest "fact"-based knowledge through practices and administrative routines. According to Hacking, this creation of knowledge is based on the behaviour and perception of the people described in it, which is a continuous process, hence the looping effect.

In this issue we will not focus on the creation of the knowledge per se, but put emphasis on how local actors could appropriate this knowledge and even change it, thus looping the knowledge back to their own advantage, to the bureaucracy in which it originated. In concrete terms, this means we will highlight how the utilisation of colonial concepts, vocabularies, artefacts, and documents by local actors could see them (and thus colonial knowledge) *altered*, sometimes in the favour of these actors. Local knowledge would often impact colonial knowledge, thus highlighting the looping effect as it took place in a colonial, bureaucratic context. In this way, in several instances this collection of articles reflects on how looping effects could change, when "new modes of description," to quote Hacking, come into being.

In doing so, the aim of this issue is not so much as to highlight the utility of Hacking's theories for other disciplines and fields, or to change or critically analyse the looping

¹⁶ Hacking, "Making-Up People".

effect as a concept. Rather, the contributors connect with Hacking's work when striving to stress the dynamic nature of colonial knowledge production processes as found throughout early modern and modern colonial South and Southeast Asia. The collection showcases how colonial knowledge was not just based on, or interwoven with, local practices and information, but also used and changed by said practices and information. As such, we try to depart from earlier historiographies wherein knowledge production is seen as a one-dimensional or static process, as well as from legal histories where colonial judicial structures were merely described as being "used" by local subjects, rather than being shaped by them. Moreover, we intend to showcase that colonial subjects did not just respond to categories or knowledge imposed on them by colonial powers, but that these categories and epistemologies were in flux and directly influenced by local actions, classifications, and knowledge.¹⁷

By using Hacking's thinking in imperial histories as described above, the contributions to this special issue follow the trend set by historians who suggest that change and transition in a colonial context must be viewed through a wider lens than the outcome of a benevolent empire, a perpetual battle between repression and resistance, or manifestations of autonomous indigenous consciousness. Hacking's looping effect links up to the context of upward and downward hermeneutics, as used in intellectual histories of empire.¹⁸ These concepts question the dialectical interaction between ideas and practices, and how social, cultural, and political practices articulated and guided ideas. Supplementing these intellectual histories of empire, this special issue keeps the focus on how practices influenced practices, and questions how performative actions of colonial authorities vis-à-vis subjects through everyday bureaucratic routines had potentially transforming effects for society at large. The six articles will provide ample examples of occasions on which administrative routine activities of classification, surveying, or taxation were at the centre of indigenous calls for recognition of positions, identities, or alternative approaches. By studying processes of looping, we are able to better understand how knowledge of administrative procedures was generated, brokered, and disseminated among indigenous actors; how individuals established parallel institutions, or initiated social movements or groups in relation to administrative interventions; and how colonial data and bureaucratic knowledge resurfaced in indigenous political arguments. On a discursive level we are able to further explore how bureaucratic narratives travelled and merged with local narratives of rights, governance, security, and ownership. Not least, we are able to learn more about local forms of influencing the conduct of administrative institutions, of swaying individuals within state structures, and rallying and enlisting local public opinion for change.

It is important to note, however, that groups also failed in setting a looping effect in motion. Hacking himself did not engage with looping failure in a systematic way. Both conscious and subconscious efforts to effectuate the looping effect might not just fail more easily in a colonial context than in a medical context—because of the striking lack of reciprocity between institutions and people in such a context—but it might actually be a dangerous road to pursue for colonial subjects because of the inherently violent nature of colonialism. Similarly, in a world where authority, sovereignty, and influence changed and exchanged frequently, by both domestic and invasive authorities, could

¹⁷ Not all too dissimilar to contemporary understandings as to how caste historically worked in South Asia, during the era this region increasingly came under European colonial rule, as proposed by the authors cited in note 4. For this dynamic between classifier and classified in a colonial context, also see Dries Lyna and Luc Bulten, "Classifications at Work: Categories and Dutch Bureaucracy in Colonial Sri Lanka," *Itinerario* 45:2 (2021), 252–78.

¹⁸ For a recent application of these concepts in imperial histories, see René Koekoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard, and Arthur Weststeijn, eds., *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

transitions or simultaneously existing multiplications of power distort a potential looping effect? In short, what happens when the looping effect is distorted, or never takes place at all? Despite not engaging with explicit cases of looping failures in this special issue as such, we do identify this as potential area for future research.

In the case studies incorporated in this issue, despite violence, corruption, invention, transition, or other disruptive events, there always was some semblance of a looping effect when it came to the production, utilisation, and alteration of colonial knowledge, documents, or institutions. Because of this, these case studies help us think further about the processes, motivations, and modalities through which indigenous actors turned the procedures of an inherently “foreign” administration back on itself. They also raise and discuss questions about the role of local elites and a need of procedural literacy among those trying to incorporate bureaucratic interventions in their own repertoire. Ultimately, they invite the reader to consider further the “range of possibilities,” “constraints,” and “possibilities of realizing” imaginations, which local actors faced in front of imperial authority, to lend from Cooper and to go beyond Hacking.¹⁹ The articles will hopefully help advance debates whether the looping of routines is simply a reaffirmation of an imperial power’s ability to establish parameters for action, or if it reflects perhaps unintended openings, which could, eventually, bring beneficial outcomes to indigenous actors and communities, and change knowledge structures from the bottom up.

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¹⁹ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 231.

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