Title: Power and Agency in Colonial Contexts: The Case of Hook-Swinging.

Abstract: The effects of power relationships are loud, but not every form of power is overt. Employing a Weberian approach to power, this article aims to disentangle whether and how a disciplining form of power has been employed by British missionaries in their proselytizing project in India during the XIX century. The case of hook-swinging, the rite of swinging on a pole being supported by hooks inserted on the participant’s back, is taken as a case study for this purpose. Missionaries performed forms of epistemic violence through the superimposition of European signified over Indian signifiers, employing European categories, such as those of agency, symbolic ritual, and body purity, in order to promote their civilizing mission. This paper reflects upon possible limits and opportunities to create a dialogue between postcolonial theory and sociology, proposing various ways in which to further explore these lines of inquiry.

Keywords: missionaries, hook-swinging, postcolonial sociology, power, discipline

**Introduction**

The effects of power relationships are loud, but not every form of power is overt. The Weberian theory of power maintains that the relationships between rulers and ruled, as well as the understanding of roles (who holds the power, who has to obey) and of scripts (why and how to obey), are driven by meaningful intents (or at least understandable through the interpretation of meanings given by the actors). That is, in power relationships, the stress is put on the interpretations that actors give to their position, vis-à-vis that of the others.

In this article, I propose an understanding of colonial power relationships based on the concept of discipline, intended as “the probability that by virtue of habituation a command will receive prompt and automatic obedience in stereotyped forms” (Weber, 1978: 53). In contrast to other forms of power (e.g. coercion or legitimate domination), the terms automatic and stereotyped highlight the ingrained and non-actively conscious disposition with which people in this type of relationship tend to act. This is not to say that every colonial relation is subtle and implicit; slavery and ghettoization are some of the forms with which power asymmetries have been explicitly established. My argument is that while active interpretations of coercive and legitimately dominating situations are immediately recognizable, disciplinary power unfolds in longer periods of time, is not always conscious from the point of view of the colonizer, and not immediately recognizable from the point of view of the colonized.

The controversy around the practice of hook swinging, the rite of swinging on a pole being supported by hooks inserted on the participant’s back, represents one of those instances in which discipline functioned as the primary mode for the establishment of power asymmetries. This happened through the superimposition of European signified (or meanings) over Indian signifiers (practices such as hook swinging). In this way, concepts with specific European meanings, such as body purity, pain, public space, and agency, were implanted on a different terrain in order to contaminate and extirpate its roots. Beyond explicit ways in which power differentials have been established, Europeans succeeded in their colonizing process also because of their use of symbolic violence and cultural appropriation.

One of the problem in the literature studying the colonization of hook-swinging is the limited attention paid to the type of colonization being enacted. While the content of the differences between colonizers and colonized’ categories (e.g. the degradation of the ritual from “sacred ritual” to “barbarous practice”, its performance in public spaces as problem of “public order” and “decency”, the question of agency in the swingers) has largely been addressed, its envelope, the type of power guiding these colonial relationships, remains unexplored.

Is using Weberian categories problematic in analyzing colonial relationships? As stated in Go (2016: 95):

metrocentrism, therefore, is when social scientists unreflexively apply those concepts and theories to the rest of the world under the assumption of universality. Of course, all knowledge emerges from a social location. It comes from a place. The problem is that while social science is located and hence provincial, it purports not to be.

This is not the goal of the present article for one reason: it does not aim at explaining native’s categories or applying Western (sociological) frameworks to non-Western context. On the contrary, it aims at unveiling Western actions (the use of discipline in colonial settings) through Western categories. Moreover, it is one of my aims to explain how certain Western concepts (e.g. agency, public space) has been used for the “disciplining project”. I will not touch the topic of how these concepts differ from those of the colonized: I will only apply a set of ideas to those who have forged them, for which, thus, they are applicable without committing epistemic violence.

**Church missionaries in the broader context of British colonialism**

According to Powell (1914), one of the earliest references to hook swinging dates back to the 16th century, for the hand of the Portuguese officer Duarte Barbosa. Contrary to the tone of many other spectators who followed him, Barbosa’s account is neutral in language and descriptive. On the contrary, as Dirks (1997) noted, most of the descriptions given by missionaries during the colonial period were highly condemnatory (“devil”, “degenerated”, “horrible”) or pitying (“poor”, “wretched”). It is here relevant to highlight two aspects of these descriptions. The first is the broader context of colonization that gave these words the possibility to exist and to be attached to certain individuals and practice; the second is the group of people who made these remarks, namely missionaries.

The process of European domination over the Orient is guided by three ideas:

First, there is the idea that the world is divided (polarised) into two camps, Europe and the Orient; second, Europe has defined itself over against the Orient which for Europeans constitutes 'the other' - something which is in essence, different, abnormal and inferior; and third and most important, European knowledge of the Orient was for the purpose of sustaining or increasing European power and dominion over the Orient.” (Oddie, 1994: 27)

This primarily means that Europeans were guided by the belief in a civilizing mission. As noted by Oddie (1994), though, the British Empire was not a monolithic body, but it was composed of different subjects with idiosyncratic purposes. While in the British officials’ mentality the differentiation between Europeans and Orientals resided in a polarity in terms of race and culture, for the missionaries the main distinction was between saved and lost (or “to be saved”). Another peculiar aspect of the missionary enterprise was the humanitarian impulse leading their mentality: “a growing interest in the general welfare, including material and spiritual progress of converts […], involvement in social and economic reform” (Oddie, 1994: 31).

Due to their civilizing mission guided by a salvation spirit, missionaries were part and parcel of the British colonizing enterprise. And still, they could be considered a specific subfield of this process, one in which a disciplinary attitude was more present than in others. This is true not only for their efforts to educate and make proselytes but also in their portrayal of ritual practices such as hook-swinging. From this perspective, two sets of questions emerge. The first considers the relationship between the purposes of the British empire and those of the missionaries: what is considerable as an action of disciplinary colonization? Is it possible to distinguish these two bodies in terms of the power relationships they were more prone to enact? Is it possible to conceive missionaries as actively engaged in the process of submission and subjugation enacted by the British empire? The second set regards the distinction between explicit and implicit actions of discipline, peculiar of the missionary enterprise: among the missionaries, is it possible to distinguish actions overtly meant to establish differentials in power relationships and actions that implicitly (not deliberately for the exploiters, not immediately clear for the exploited) served this purpose?

*Colonial sources and their problematics*

In order to start addressing some of these questions, I will use missionaries’ records from newspapers and magazines written by missionaries for other missionaries. The online Adam Matthew archive provides a rich variety of sources, and documents are scanned in such a way to allow a research by keywords. The following analyses stem from the reading of every source including the term “hook swinging”. In order to accurately read these sources, some preliminary considerations should be done. As already mentioned, the records are first-person accounts of missionaries made for a European audience of missionaries. This means that there are no first-person accounts of other British personnel, nor of the natives. As highlighted by the Subaltern Studies school (Gyan Prakash, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty), it is especially this last point that constitutes a problem in how colonial relationships are studied. The “impossibility of subaltern histories” (Prakash, 2000), that is the lack of first-person accounts of natives and colonized people, results particularly problematic in the reconstruction of how colonialism has enacted forms of epistemic violence and cultural appropriation. In most of the cases, though, it is mostly a matter of archival availability (or research interests, such as for this essay) rather than the unwillingness to give justice to the unheard voices of the oppressed.

Moreover, they are not official documents but are meant to provide information for a European audience with descriptions and personal opinions. Hence, from these documents, it is not possible to answer important questions about the relationships between the British Empire and missionaries, nor those regarding Indians opinions about hook-swinging. If some of these are present, it should be taken into account the vitiation of the source, that is the fact that it is still a missionary who reports what said by others. This consideration reverberates with what already said by Dirks (1997: 199) “the uncritical belief that colonial sources can shed light on precolonial meanings when read through conventional interpretive lenses is as problematic as the faith in anthropological intuition that confers the ring of truth to standard interpretations”. This said, these records constitute a florid source of information about a specific group, with specific motives (Oddie, 1994).

*Missionaries’ portraits*

First of all, how do missionaries portray hook-swinging? Most of the sources describing the ritual focus on the moral statue of the swingers (and of the participants more in general), and on the motives for which this event takes place. Participants are mostly described as ignorant (or immoral, or misguided, or folly), implying a need of redemption. Moreover, these adjectives are not only meant to justify the reasons for a missionary intervention but constitute also a baseline to define a comparison with the civilized Europeans. Even among natives, comparisons are made between converted and follies. Illuminating on this point is the “Tale of two mothers” (The CMS Juvenile Instructor, 1865: 40-41): a “poor woman” is described performing “the horrid rite”, while a “much happier” story narrates the miracle of a woman who was not able to have a child, but received a son thanks to her prayers to God. Often times, distinction is also created about the same religious aspect: while miracles are legitimate when received by the Christian God, swingers’ motives to perform the ritual, such as the propitiation for a good crop or a child, are depicted as superstition, something that “probably never existed except in their imagination” (CMS Awake!, 1904: 74). Even though participants explicitly states that “God told [them] to do so”, the overarching picture is a mocking and pitying portray of wretched people in need of salvation. This leads to the second topic, that of motives.

One preponderant motive attached to the swingers is earning money. This is done not only explicitly, but also highlighting the supposed pain that swingers avoid numbing themselves with alcohol or drugs, in order to perform the show (in one occasion the ritual is described as a “fair”) as fast as possible. The ritual is hence portrayed as something instrumental in reaching other, materialistic, interests. In this way, the event is completely stripped off of its own dignity and reason to exist. To do so, the missionaries stressed the lack of religious status hook-swinging had in the broader caste system, due to the fact that it was mostly performed by the low-caste people, more a folk and custom ritual rather than a legitimately recognized practice. In this regard, Dirks (1997: 191) considers the connection between official religion (Brahmans’) and economic interests as crucial in the definition of this stratification of legitimacy.

But missionaries also actively contributed to the construction of this status. Sometimes, the ritual is a “huge sham” (Church Missionary Record, 1860: 230), with cords instead of hooks sustaining the weight of the body; others, it is an excuse and a “prelude for drink and unrestrained debauchery” (CMS Awake!, 1904: 80). I am not purporting that what missionaries report might not be true: it is possible that swingers used to drink alcohol and take drugs before and after the ritual; it might also be true that they used to earn money for the ritual. The main problem when analyzing the encroachment of disciplinary forms of power is the attribution that missionaries made to these details as the guiding and main reasons for this performance. In this way, the rite was actively abased by the missionaries from religious practice to custom: “it was performed in the name of religion only to mislead the public and subvert religion itself – that hook swinging was done for the private profit not just of the swinger but, more critically, the corrupt and self-serving temple priests” (Dirks, 1997: 189). In some occasions, missionaries report that the ritual is performed to fulfill a vow, to have a good crop, or to have a child. As noted earlier, though, these accounts are inserted into the broader narrative about the “folly” and “sinful” relationship that swingers have with their Gods. One record in particular (Church Missionary Paper, 1836: 2) indicates that Hindus “bargain with their Gods” in a “flattering, cajoling, bargaining, and threatening” relationship, once more highlighting the wickedness and damnation of these people from the point of view of the missionaries. For them, “darkness [was] still fearfully dense” (The CMS Juvenile Instructor, 1851-1852: 253): a moral revolution against “inhuman costumes” (The Church Missionary Intelligencer, 1894: 334) became their priority.

*Missionaries’ reasons*

As highlighted in Dirk (1997: 185), one of the most salient reasons for the efforts made to delegitimize the ritual was its public nature: “missionaries viewed hook swinging as a major distraction from their own proselytizing efforts and as a public profanation of space that colonial rule should have reserved for civilized purposes”. The records provide various instances in which this is done. A trope used to support this perspective is the dichotomy between pollution and purity. The ritual was public and its sinfulness made it “loathsome” and “horrible”; nevertheless, swingers are often described as obsessively engaged in a numberless minute and ridiculous acts of cleanness and purity. This dichotomy resonates with Bhabha’s Freudian conceptualization of ambivalence in colonial discourses (1994): the co-presence of a touch-phobia toward a filthy object, and a skirmish for its meticulous cleanness. A body purity was contrasted with a spiritual corruption: the public space represented the place where to exhibit spiritual cleanness and purity. How deal with this contradiction? “[I]ts suppression should be left to the spread of education, and to the feelings and wishes of the better classes of the native themselves.” (Church Missionary Record, 1860: 203)

This highlights another important motive present in Dirk’s account: missionaries were primarily interested in making proselytes and educating the colonized, in a civilizing project. Hook swinging stymied this process, embodying the persistence of Indians’ cultural and religious roots. This is clear in various accounts in which missionaries enumerate the many things done for “the good of the people” by the British government and the Christian workers in making illegal:

“murder of parents by suttee, by exposure on the banks of rivers, by burial alive. Murder of children by dedication to the Ganges, to be devoured by crocodiles, by Rajpoot infanticide. Human sacrifices, temple sacrifices, by wild tribes-Meriabs of the Khonds. Suicide crushing by idol cars, devotees drowning themselves in rivers, devotees casting themselves from precipices, leaping into wells-widows, by Traga. Voluntary torment, by hook swinging, by thigh piercing, by tongue-extraction, by falling on knives”, and many others (Zenana: Or, Woman’s Work in India, 1900: 98).

The construction of difference that justifies this colonizing process was possible exactly because of the depiction of these practices as “inhumane costumes”. Sometimes, this disdain was backed by the construction of narratives of rivalry and disrespect, such as the recurrent emphasis put on the fact that hook-swinging was frequently performed on Sunday (“the Lord’s Day”), and symbolized the crucifixion. Natives were seen as desecrators of Christianity in its symbology and practice.

Why did missionaries assume that the concepts and symbols valid for them maintained the same valence also for the Hindus, while the contrary (Hindus’ symbols valid also for Christians) was not considered? The answer to this question should be searched in the broader mentality of the colonizing project. The so-called first-wave of colonial studies (Franz Fanon, William E. B. Du Bois, Amílcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire) considers Enlightenment the main framework justifying three themes promoting the imperial episteme: humanism, universalism, and positivism.

[H]umanism maintains that there is ‘a universal and given human nature [i.e., ‘Man’]’ that can be known and improved on the basis of Reason […] universalism [regards] the notion that the world can be fully known and understood in terms of basic truths independent of space and time. By this view, not only does Reason allow us to access truths, but those truths are applicable everywhere. Furthermore, humanism and universalism both depend upon a notion, largely traceable to Descartes, of ‘objective’ and ‘impartial’ observers who are themselves unconstrained by space and time […] positivism [regards] the set of philosophies that reject metaphysics and heralds Reason, and its presumed practical form of the ‘scientific’ method, as the best approach for knowing human nature and the world in general – if only so that humans can control both. (Go, 2016: 29)

Missionaries took part in this enterprise as active participants, working not on laws or wars of conquest (overt forms of power carried out by the British government), but on an educating project. To see how this happened, the next section analyzes how missionaries made use of the concept of agency in order to shift the focus from a relationship between people and Gods to one between people and materialistic interests, leaving Indians with nothing else than the British empire to rely on in order to face the reality that was constructed for them.

**Power and Agency**

Having laid out some of the missionaries’ perspectives on hook swinging, this section aims at sketching a possible way in which to delineate how missionaries worked toward the construction of disciplinary power. To do so, one concept is central in almost every record analyzed, that of agency. Swingers are always portrayed as willful in the performance of the ritual, with an agency not directed toward the ritual itself (i.e. will to perform the ritual because of the beliefs in the ritual itself), but toward other interests: as explained earlier, the ritual was portrayed as instrumental to reach other purposes. Moreover, the ritual is often described as accompanied by percussions (“tom-toms”), chants, and dances, all of which are portrayed as wild, cruel, and primitive. These two characteristics, the instrumental agency and the barbarity of the ritual context, are the most relevant points that missionaries stressed in order to destroy the symbolic environment surrounding the rite. In order to understand why a shift of agency produces a disciplining effect, I will employ recent works about power and agency from Reed (2017) and Reed and Weinman (2018).

For Reed (2017), a power relationship can be dissected in three components: rector, actor, and other

The person who pursues a project via recruiting and controlling allies takes on a position as a kind of ruler or overseer. In sending someone to act for him, and in binding that someone to his own project, the original person-with-a-project becomes a rector. The person who the rector sends, and who may only partially or ambivalently take up the rector’s project, and who always in some sense has projects of her own, is an actor. Finally, the person who is outside the power dyad of rector and actor, the relation in which projects are conceived, planned, and pursued, is an other. (Reed, 2017: 93)

In the case of hook-swinging, different narratives depict particular configurations of these elements. Powell (1914: 153-154) reports a description of the origin of the ritual from a native: the God Siva and Durga gave to a poor Brahman and his wife a child and rice crops if they would have performed the hook-swinging. The Brahman went to the village “acting as priest while the lower castes of the people were being ‘swung’”. In this narrative, the Gods are rectors, the Brahman is both an actor and an other – because of his position as intermediary between the Gods and the lower castes – and the lower castes are the actors, the performers of the rite. In attaching material and instrumental motives to the swingers, the missionaries eradicated the relationship between rector and actor, instituting money and drunkenness as principal rectors. In the most extreme cases, swingers are completely deprived of any motive (they took part in the ritual for no reason but foolishness), skirmished when seen meditating and when responding that the reason for which they took part in the rite was because “God told [them] to” (The Church Missionary Gleaner, 1893: 136). Figure 1 shows the translation of agentic relationships through a process of resignification (Reed, 2015).

Figure 1: resignification in agentic relationships

[insert figure 1 here]

In this way, missionaries enacted the pars destruens of their disciplining project, which became effective only when followed by a pars costruens. This was enacted mainly with the establishment of schools and the making of proselytes in situations of difficulty, for example with people close to their death. For what concerns education, there are several occasions in which missionaries proudly remark the virtuous circle of education in the colonies: “all the inhabitants of several Islands have cast their idols into the fire, and profess themselves Christians; attending Public Worship in multitudes, learning to read, and eager to get copies of the Scripture […] the funds will be sent to England to enable the Society to support more Missionaries.” (Church Missionary Paper, 1819: 3) Figure 2 represents the pars costruens enacted through missionaries’ educative projects.

Figure 2: disciplining virtuous circle

[insert figure 2 here]

The pars costruens has a self-reinforcing nature, which flanks the resignification process enacted through the narration of hook-swinging (and other practices such as sati) in Western terms. The double arrow between these two parts means that they are performed in parallel, constituting one the necessary element for the other to take place. This is clear in some records where Indians are converted when close to their death:

Early in the morning, I set out to visit the old man and his neighborhood […] he was sitting on the floor, ill with fever, and in all probability near his end. He again expressed his desire to be baptized […] To the question, ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ he answered, ‘Jesus Christ is God’. Earnestly I hope that he was so taught by the Holy Ghost, without whose teaching no man can savingly say that Jesus is the Lord. I forthwith baptized the old man […] a very member incorporated in the mystical body of Christ! (Church Missionary Record, 1831: 66)

Having a continuous comparison between the newly defined brutal rituals and the imported terms of civilization and salvation, the missionaries destroyed and reconstructed the symbolic environment in which Indians were living, taming them through the exertion of discipline. If this disciplining chain was really ingrained in Indians, and thus if it was really effective, it is hard to say from these records. As already mentioned, first-person accounts should be considered in order to have a complete picture of these relationships. What is clear, is that the missionary enterprise created discipline making barren an epistemic terrain, and providing new seeds for the lay of civilized roots.

*A note on hook-swinging as symbolic ritual*

What is peculiar about the colonizing project of the missionaries is, as mentioned in the introduction, the superimposition of European signified over Indian signifiers. In order to do so, practices such as hook-swinging have to be considered as symbolic rituals, a definition not without problems for two reasons: the religious dimension of the ritual is considered universal, while it is contextual; to define a ritual as a symbolic system means taking for granted that the nature of a ritual is symbolic and not pragmatic.

When mocking the meditative state in which swingers used to enter before the performance of the rite, and when shifting the power relationships involved in the rite, missionaries are guided by the idea that “practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.” (Asad, 1993: 36) It is not only the belief that it should be the Christian creed to define what is religious, but also the conviction that a typically Christian-Catholic idea of religious rite, such as the mass, is translatable for other religions. Impregnated with symbolic references, the Christian-Catholic mass is a specific type of ritual, where a community gathers together and follows a script throughout the celebration. There are symbolic actions that define different moments of the ritual (e.g. the Communion, the hand-shaking, the kneeling) but none of them is public nor involves physical pain. Hook-swinging does not resemble the same format nor the same intent as the Christian-Catholic mass: it is public, individual and social at the same time (involving the performance of a single person at the time, and including the participation of the whole community to reestablish the course of social life), and it involves pain1. The process of religious extirpation enacted by the missionaries was also done subsuming contextual ways in which to conceive and perform rites under a single umbrella: “from being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized.” (Asad, 1993: 42) In their enlightening endeavor, missionaries did not consider symbols as a direct product of the social conditions in which they were embedded, assuming that only one religion and one form of ritual was possible. These beliefs guided their behaviors.

A second problem refers to the conception of religious ritual as symbolic system instead of as a system of practical reason. This is based on the Cartesian idea of mind-body dualism, justifying a conception of religious experience in terms of private feelings instead of public practices. In this sense, the ritual is conceived as a manual or a script with which to perform a series of symbolic actions that constitute a rite. As shown before, a Christian-Catholic mass resembles this idea. Missionaries, though, assumed that hook-swinging could have been interpreted in the same way as a mass, with hidden symbols to be interpreted in order to explain the meanings of the ritual. They considered “the body as a medium of symbolic meanings” instead of as “an assemblage of embodied aptitudes” (Asad, 1993: 75). Once again, understanding missionaries’ beliefs helps to explain their behaviors.

This gloss does not only serve the purpose to explicate the underlying beliefs that missionaries relied upon to enact their disciplining process. It is also necessary to provide an example of how colonial analyses could work when approaching the intersection of different systems of knowledge. As proposed by Asad (1993: 53) “religious symbols – whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion – cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial.”

**Conclusion and future directions**

In the unfolding of power relationships in a colonial setting, this paper focuses on missionaries, a specific group, with specific motives, studied through a specific lens. How did the formation of discipline serve the missionaries’ main goal, that of proselytization? First of all, it has to be recognized the failure of the Christian mission in Asia, which has “the worst record of success in mission and India has an all time lowest percentages of Christians” (Shullai, 2017: 331). As highlighted by Jeyakumar (2002), this was mainly because the Christian message was not indigenized, exerting, as shown in this paper, a form of symbolic violence through a mere transposition of signified. This failure, though, should be better contextualized, especially distinguishing the aspects in which the missionary project has met his purposes from those in which it failed. Adopting a disciplining conception of power, with the stress put on the acquisition of automatic and stereotypical cultural schema, broadens the ways in which to read the relationship between aims and achievements. A long-term perspective should be adopted, with the intent to identify which seeds have germinated and which have withered. Considering language and religion in contemporary India, for example, English is one of the official and most widespread languages2, while only 2.3% of the total population is Christian3. Culture, though, encompasses a much broader spectrum of elements than language and religion. In order to evaluate the success of the disciplining project, the missionary enterprise should be inserted into a fabric of relationships with other actors.

Two, in particular, should be considered for this purpose, namely the British Empire and the Indians. Scattered are the occasions in which it is possible to sound the relationships between the missionaries and the Empire. Was the disciplining process exploited by the British officers? Was it a precondition for the establishment of more overt forms of power or one of their consequences? According to Stanley (1990) and Porter (2004), the relationship between the church and the empire was not as mutually supportive as generally believed: “the revisionists demonstrate that colonial officialdom was often, perhaps more often than not, cool towards missionary proselytizing. For example, Stanley [1990] shows that in British East Africa missions were generally regarded as a source of 'embarrassment’” (Coplend, 2006: 1029). Even though the two colonizing projects, that of the missionaries and of the British empire, can be considered as two sides of the same coin, it is not clear whether the discipline created by the former might have facilitated the goals of the latter.

Various sources should be taken into account to address this question, such as official reports from British generals or the legislative corpus redacted to support the colonizing process. The subsequent challenge would be to draw a connection between the materials analyzed in this work and these official documents. First of all, the relationships between missionaries and the military and jurisprudential body should be traced in terms of channels of communication: did they communicate? How often? Were their projects complementary? If so, was that explicitly established or implicitly stated? Moreover, when official documents are analyzed, how much do they rely on the process enacted by the missionaries? A chronological matching of missionaries’ accomplishments and legislative or political decisions could provide an eventful explanation of this relationship, showing the sequential correspondence of disciplining forms of power as principal source to level off the path for political and legislative decisions. In this perspective, crucial events such as the “petition war” (Dirk, 1997: 199) against the abolition of the ritual might be analyzed constructing a chronology, and studying how decisions and actions intermingle with each other in the construction of narratives at different levels (natives, missionaries, generals, legislators). Legislative sources are social processes in the same way as rituals are: studying their construction necessarily involves the attention to different actors within a temporal perspective.

Even less present is the voice of the people directly involved in this disciplining process. Did they perceive these mechanisms being at play? The “petition war” presented in Dirk (1997), as well as the persistence of illegal performances in certain regions are indicators of subaltern forms of resistance (Schröder, 2012), which testify the perception of an epistemic violence, and the need to perform actions of cultural re-appropriation. These broad and public events are not always easy to find in contexts of strict and disciplined control, and other sources should be considered. Where to find them? It should be taken in mind that postcolonial theory took its first steps in the field of literature. A cultural analysis of letters, artworks, and literature produced during the colonial domination could be not only particularly useful in addressing this issue, probably also the only way to do so.

A final remark is about the broader scope of this study. Since its introduction, it has immediately inserted itself in between of two universes, sociology and postcolonial theory. Various problematics stem from working in this position: sociology is often depicted as a product of the very project leading colonization, something suffocating at its beginning the possibility to analyze postcolonial issues, because of the risk to reproduce a colonial mentality. Moreover, sociology is a discipline with a specific tradition, ingrained in European-American societies, with idiosyncratic concepts and theories. A process of translation and reconfiguration should be undertaken in order to be generative of new concepts, problems, and theories. Once this process has started, would its outcome be generalizable? Would the issue of generalizability, one pillar of Western social sciences, be even desirable? In this regard, the perspectivism upon which postcolonial theory relies would be in danger. Go (2016: 196) proposes a solution to (or at least a possible direction in which to investigate) this conundrum: “postcolonial-perspectival realism […] cannot demand another universal knowledge in place of the old, but neither can it resort to particularistic knowledge only.” Stemming from the idea that social reality is irreducible to the theories constructed to explain it, and hence that no discourse can ever exhaust the object it is describing, postcolonial theory today should engage in a process of critique and reconstruction.

Postcolonial social theory is a way of looking at the world that recognizes that social forms, relations, social knowledge, and culture generally – as well the social sciences themselves – are embedded within a history and structure of global hierarchy and relations of power. Empire, both in the past and in the current moment, *has a social presence*. Postcolonial social theory recognizes this presence and seeks to dislodge social knowledge from it. (Go, 2016: 197)

Is the disciplining project promoted with the resignification of hook-swinging a generalizable way in which to approach how different forms of power work and interact in colonial settings? What matters, I think, is not much a final answer to this question; rather, in order to let critical categories to emerge, it is important to ask: what does it mean to generalize colonial contexts? What is the role played by power in this context? How much symbolic exploitation are sociologists involved with when approaching these issues? Asking these questions is the first step toward a possible dialogue between sociology and postcolonial studies: reflecting on the past, addressing the future, with a second-level thinking about where our thoughts are reading one dimension with anachronistic categories.

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**Notes**

1. The shift from a medieval to a modern valorization of pain in Catholic perception might guide the idea that rituals involving pain are symbols of a backward society: “The medieval valorization of pain as the mode of participating in Christ’s suffering contrasts sharply with the modern Catholic perception of pain as an evil to be fought against and overcome as Christ the Healer did.” (Asad, 1993, p. 46)
2. <http://rajbhasha.nic.in/en/constitutional-provisions>
3. <https://data.gov.in/resources/population-religion-2011-census>

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