Introduction

The weight of the occasion was palpable. Representatives of the state and, surrounding them, members of the press and public filled the august chamber. At the front of this great assembly sat the diminutive company executive, flanked by his lawyers and facing a committee of legislators. In the hearings that followed, one speaker after another accused the executive and the company of grave offenses. Under his leadership, had the company not exceeded its bounds at home and abroad, amassing power to rival that of an independent state? Had it not subverted governments, trampled individual rights, caused violence, all in the name of profit? In and out of doors, the executive and his advocates put forward various defenses. One stood out for its boldness. They claimed that the company had been concerned not merely with profit but, moreover, with gathering and disseminating the world's knowledge. Under the executive's leadership, had it not fostered research, sponsored scholars, and endowed colleges? The committee would have none of this. Its members denounced the company's involvement in science and the humanities as window dressing or, worse, another outlet for its greed. Neither side, however, could hope to settle conclusively what had become a sprawling debate over the proper relations among companies, states, and knowledge. Indeed, this debate remains unsettled – over two centuries later.

If this scene seems familiar, this may be because ones like it have transpired around the world in recent years. Charged by critics in government and the media with malfeasance or overreach, technology giants, in particular, have committed themselves to the cause of knowledge.[1] Nor have they been alone. These encounters have

[1] Hence Google's stated mission "to organize the world's information." For a skeptical view, see Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, 2007).

played out against the backdrop of a growing "knowledge sector," into which corporate idealism and investment have increasingly flowed. By encroaching on science, education, and other spheres long deemed the preserves of states, companies seem to have mixed commerce, politics, and knowledge as never before.[2] And yet the scene described above took place not recently but rather in the eighteenth century. The occasion was the impeachment of Warren Hastings in the British House of Commons. The company in question was the East India Company.

While the East India Company has been known to posterity as, among other things, "the world's most powerful corporation," several generations of its advocates echoed Hastings' claim that it was also the world's most enlightened one.[3] It is easy to dismiss this claim. From its setting up in 1600 until its winding down in 1858, the Company was distinguished for profit seeking on a global scale. Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, moreover, it subjugated vast swathes of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The Company was no benevolent organization. And yet, to assume that its interest in knowledge was merely incidental, or instrumental, is to overlook the significance of knowledge in its ideology.[4] The greatest challenge for the Company's advocates was to justify to audiences in Britain and India its dual character as a company and a state. When this union came under intense strain, beginning in the 1770s, they made the support of knowledge a cornerstone of its legitimacy.

[2] See, for example, Richard S. Ruch, *Higher Ed, Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University* (Baltimore, 2001); Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Princeton, 2003); Sheldon Krimsky, *Science in the Private Interest: Has the Lure of Profits Corrupted Biomedical Research?* (Oxford, 2003); Jennifer Washburn, *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (New York, 2006); Philip Mirowski, *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (New York, 2018).

[3] Tirthankar Roy, *The East India Company: The World's Most Powerful Corporation* (New Delhi, 2012).

[4] This book understands ideology simply as "a language of politics deployed to legitimate political action." For this definition, which summarizes comments by James Tully on the work of Quentin Skinner, see Aletta J. Norval, "The Things We Do with Words – Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Ideology," *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (2000), p. 320.

The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge is about a moment, like the present one, in which the roles of companies and states overlapped in the realm of knowledge. It reveals how the Company, like many companies today, drew upon ideas about knowledge to legitimize its evolving mix of concerns. The Company may not have been a lineal ancestor of today's "knowledge enterprises," but it generated a rich body of thought and debate on many of the questions they raise.[5] Is knowledge a public good or a private commodity? Are the values of scholarship and business compatible? Should companies be entrusted to provide education and promote intellectual discovery? For that matter, should states? Can states effectively tend transnational fields of knowledge? Are they less, or are they more, likely than companies to corrupt knowledge? These are questions for our time, but they did not originate in it. To address them requires a historical perspective.

Accordingly, the book aims not only to show how "the politics of knowledge" and "ideologies about knowledge" shaped the politics and ideology of the Company but also to develop a general approach to the study of these phenomena in history.[6] The history *of ideas* of knowledge promises to do for knowledge what other approaches have begun to do for the company and the state: It promises to recover that concept's past meanings and uses and make them available in the present. As pursued in this book, it offers a reminder that the company, the state, and knowledge have been fluid concepts relatable to each other in myriad ways. To restore a sense of the historical amplitude and interrelation of these concepts is to empower stakeholders, citizens, and scholars to mold them anew.

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[5] For cautions about drawing structural analogies between the Company and the modern corporation, see Philip J. Stern, "English East India Company-State and the Modern Corporation: The Google of Its Time?," in Thomas Clarke, Justin O'Brien, and Charles R. T. O'Kelley, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Corporation* (Oxford, 2019).

[6] The business theorist Peter Drucker coined these terms to describe what he saw as future phenomena unprecedented in history. Peter F. Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society* (New York, 1969), pp. 340–7.

The histories of the company, the state, and knowledge have been studied often, yet seldom have they been studied together. Indeed, the history of the East India Company has never been studied in the context of the relations among these three entities. Even much-discussed episodes in its annals, like the Hastings trial, have not been seen to involve the kinds of questions raised above. Why this should be so, why the Company's political ideas about knowledge remain to be investigated, requires explanation.

Most often linked have been the histories of the company and the state, and the link has been best established for the early modern period. Historians of the Company, prominently, have challenged modern distinctions between companies and states by demonstrating the extent to which trade and politics once blurred into each other. And yet only rarely and tentatively have they carried this line of inquiry beyond the middle of the eighteenth century. While these historians have illuminated the origins of the Company's hybrid constitution, they have scarcely inquired into its later persistence.

In the South Asian context, these origins can be traced at least as far back as the sixteenth century. At that time, even powerful rulers of the subcontinent like the Mughals governed according to a "shared and layered" understanding of sovereignty.[7] The Mughal administrative center functioned as more of a "coordinating agency" than a commanding authority.[8] It expanded its reach by incorporating local powerholders, who, more often than not, had one foot in the world of trade. Sometimes they came from that world, as evidenced by the Hindustani proverb, "the father a merchant, the son a nawab."[9] In any case, they increasingly relied for capital and credit

[7] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 25.

[8] Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48*, 2nd edn (New Delhi, 2013), p. 5.

[9] Thomas Roebuck, *A Collection of Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases in the Persian and Hindoostanee Languages*, ed. H. H. Wilson (Calcutta, 1824), part 2, p. 27 [translation amended]. For examples, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, introduction to Alam and Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (Delhi, 1998), pp. 53–5.

on merchant bodies, which they wooed and rewarded with "'shares' in sovereignty."[10] This pattern of exchange fueled not only the "commercialization" of Indian politics, but also, in turn, the political rise of the Company.[11] For by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, powerholders were granting extensive rights not only to local merchant bodies but also to European ones.[12]

Nowhere was this phenomenon more pronounced than in Bengal, where the Company first acquired extensive territory. From the turn of the eighteenth century, as the ruling nawabs claimed more and more independence from Delhi, commercial interests captured more and more of the newly accessible political sphere.[13] One sign of the growing interpenetration of politics and trade was the appearance among political elites of a solicitude, even a sense of responsibility, toward merchants.[14] Another was the rise of a group of Asian "merchant princes," who acted as middlemen among bazaar, court, and factory.[15] Both developments facilitated the Company's gradual insinuation into the politics of the province. At least as significant in this respect was the local reformulation of Mughal ideas of government and sovereignty. By mid-century, nobles and bureaucrats were espousing the happiness and welfare of the people as the ultimate

[10] Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 126.

[11] The classic account is C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1987).

[12] P. J. Marshall, introduction to Marshall, ed., *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Revolution or Evolution?* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 21–3. For a detailed study, see David Veevers, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 2020).

[13] Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal, 1700–1740," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970). On the extent of commercialization in Bengal, see John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 6; and, for a later period, Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy, and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, c. 1760–1800* (Delhi, 2000).

[14] Kumkum Chatterjee, *Merchants, Politics and Society in Early Modern India: Bihar, 1733–1820* (Leiden, 1996); Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi, 2013), ch. 5.

[15] Sushil Chaudhury, "Merchants, Companies and Rulers: Bengal in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 31 (1988); Chatterjee, *Merchants*, chs. 3–4.

test of a good ruler, displacing, or at least downgrading, once paramount considerations of pedigree and faith.[16] Might even the rule of a foreign trading company be rendered legitimate? This was the question that loomed on the eve of the Company's ascendancy.

Meanwhile, the same question was being asked in Britain. For here as well, commerce and politics mixed, and concepts that would later be reserved for one or the other sphere straddled the two. In the early modern archipelago, the state was a diffuse complex of individuals and institutions that included ones devoted to trade.[17] Companies were knots within the tangled and indistinct webs of market, state, and society.[18] Corporations ranged from business associations to municipal and national governments, and even to the Crown.[19] And sovereignty – composite rather than unitary – extended to these and many other kinds of entities.[20] All of this explains why, as works focused on the seventeenth century have shown, the Company formed part of the English state and even a state in its own right.[21] All of this also explains how the Company managed to gain a foothold in both Britain and India, half a world apart. To quote one study,

[16] Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 165–80.

[17] Michael J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2000).

[18] Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005), chs. 5–6; Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (London, 2010), ch. 4.

[19] Henry S. Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth: Pluralism and Political Fictions in England, 1516–1651* (Chicago, 2016).

[20] For "composite," "fragmented," "layered," or "divisible" sovereignty as an enduring feature of European states and empires, see J. H. Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," *Past and Present* 137 (1992); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Malden, MA, 1992); Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010); Alison L. LaCroix, *The Ideological Origins of American Federalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

[21] Philip J. Stern, "'A Politie of Civill and Military Power': Political Thought and the Late Seventeenth-Century Foundations of the East India Company-State," *Journal of British Studies* 47 (2008); Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011); Rupali Mishra, *A Business of State: Commerce, Politics, and the Birth of the East India Company* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

imarat (government) and *tijarat* (trade) were "adjunct and at times overlapping spheres" for Europeans as well as South Asians.[22] As another has it, "blurring the boundaries between politics and trade" was a game Europeans already knew how to play.[23] The public–private, politico-economic constitution of the Company was unexceptional, whether judged by Indian or by British standards.[24] It may even have been typical across an early modern world that abounded with "company-states" and other hybrid entities.[25] By the late eighteenth century, however, company-states were under pressure; by the early nineteenth century, they were anomalous.[26] What demands further consideration is how the Company was able to adapt to these changing circumstances.

For all of the attention to the ideas and arrangements that shaped the Company's hybrid constitution in the seventeenth century, there has been little to those that sustained it from the middle of the eighteenth century. Generations of commentators have narrated the history of the Company following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 as one of utter transformation: from trade to empire, and from independence to integration with the British government. Revisionist claims that the Company was a state, and was part of other states, long before that watershed have not sparked a parallel interest in the ways in which it remained a company long thereafter. To be sure, there have been hints in this direction. Recent works have pointed out that the Company's organizational structure was essentially constant;

[22] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Of *Imârat* and *Tijârat*: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995), p. 750.

[23] Jon E. Wilson, "Early Colonial India beyond Empire," *Historical Journal* 50 (2007), p. 958.

[24] On the Company as a constitutional entity, see William A. Pettigrew, "Corporate Constitutionalism and the Dialogue between the Global and Local in Seventeenth-Century English History," *Itinerario* 39 (2015).

[25] Stern, *Company-State*, p. 3; Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman, *Outsourcing Empire: How Company-States Made the Modern World* (Princeton, 2020), chs. 1–2.

[26] Timothy Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (London, 1998), p. 7; Phillips and Sharman, *Outsourcing Empire*, ch. 3.

that its "commercial sovereignty" found defenders well into the nineteenth century; that regulation by the British government was sporadic and often resembled collusion; and that, until the very end, the Company paid a dividend and maintained a role in commercial affairs.[27] Still, these facts have barely registered in broader assessments of how the later Company was conceptualized, justified, and criticized. Histories of the ideological foundations and false starts of the Raj have largely neglected the Company qua company.[28] Their common, if variously woven, thread has been a concern with efforts to legitimize British rule over subjects and territories. What remains to be studied is how these efforts related to those to legitimize the Company state. How did the Company's supporters defend its "commercial sovereignty" when others increasingly saw it as a territorial ruler? This book reveals one important answer: They turned to ideas about knowledge.

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[27] Respectively, H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 182–9; Anna Gambles, *Protection and Politics: Conservative Economic Discourse, 1815–1852* (Woodbridge, UK, 1998), pp. 158–65; Douglas M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819–1835* (London, 1995), pp. 21–4; Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company: The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics 1790–1860* (Woodbridge, UK, 2009), pp. 13, 106, 160–1. The phrase "commercial sovereignty" had been used in reference to the Company as early as the 1770s, for example, in John Morrison, *The Advantages of an Alliance with the Great Mogul* (London, 1774), p. 99.

[28] For example, Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1995); Sudipta Sen, *Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (New York, 2002); P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c. 1750–1783* (Oxford, 2005); Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India: The British in Bengal* (Cambridge, 2007); James M. Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain's Imperial State* (New Haven, 2019); Robert Travers, *Empires of Complaints: Mughal Law and the Making of British India, 1765–1793* (Cambridge, 2022). Popular histories have more often treated the later Company as a company but have generally ignored its ideology. They have also risked overstating similarities between the Company and the modern corporation. For example, Nick Robins, *The Corporation That Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational*, 2nd edn (London, 2012); William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire* (London, 2019).

If knowledge is power, as the aphorism goes, then it would seem to follow that knowledge is political. The venerable history of political thought has not dealt much with knowledge, however, nor has the upstart history of knowledge dealt much with political thought. This book attempts to remedy this mutual oversight by adapting the methods of the old field to the concerns of the new one. In doing so, it also addresses some of the limitations of previous studies of the Company's engagements with knowledge. The history *of ideas* of knowledge does not obviate existing approaches but does challenge and supplement them. Knowledge debates in the present would benefit from an understanding of knowledge debates in the past, including prominently those of the Company.

The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge is intended at one level as a contribution to the history of knowledge. As an outgrowth of social history, cultural history, and the history of science, however, that field has inherited a cultural-structural emphasis.[29] Leading studies have chronicled the rise and fall of institutions, forms, or systems – "from Alexandria to the Internet," for instance, or "from Gutenberg to Google."[30] They have eschewed the characteristic focus of contextualist intellectual history on the utterances and aims of historical actors.[31] The first classic in the field has examined "intellectual environments rather than intellectual problems," including the culture but not the contents of political discourse.[32] Other studies have analyzed discourse from a Foucauldian perspective equally dismissive of authorship and agency.[33] A history

[29] On these various origins, see Johan Östling et al., introduction to Östling et al., eds., *Circulation of Knowledge: Explorations in the History of Knowledge* (Lund, 2018).

[30] Ian F. McNeely with Lisa Wolverton, *Reinventing Knowledge: From Alexandria to the Internet* (New York, 2008); Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2000–2012), vol. II, p. 1.

[31] The classic statement of this method is Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969).

[32] Burke, *Social History of Knowledge*, vol. I, p. 4.

[33] On this tendency, see Suzanne Marchand, "How Much Knowledge Is Worth Knowing? An American Intellectual Historian's Thoughts on the *Geschichte des Wissens*," *Berichte zur Wissenschafts-Geschichte* 42 (2019), pp. 142–4.

of cultures or structures of knowledge may offer something "more than intellectual history."[34] It also surely offers something less. To examine past "knowledge economies," "knowledge revolutions," and the like by analogy with those of today may be valid, but such phenomena are difficult to delimit without a genealogy, not to say a definition, of the concept of knowledge. For that matter, if another aim of the history of knowledge is to inform present knowledge debates, then the field must be devoted in part to the recovery of past such debates in the terms in which they were waged.

What is needed, in other words, is a history *of ideas* of knowledge that might elucidate the concept of knowledge and its discursive uses past and present. This approach promises to enrich not only the history of knowledge but also the history of ideas, including the history of political thought. Intellectual historians in the contextualist tradition have yet to respond adequately to the claim at the heart of Michel Foucault's famous power/knowledge coupling: that power and knowledge are so closely and innately related as to be inseparable from each other.[35] While these historians have focused often on power, in a political connection, and sometimes on its relations with certain branches of knowledge, seldom if ever have they treated the concept of knowledge at large or its political implications.[36] A recognition that this concept is analytically meaningful forms the basis – perhaps the only common one – of the new history of knowledge. A recognition that it has been so too for historical actors ought to form the basis of a distinct yet complementary history of ideas of knowledge. Studies under this heading might track changing meanings of the word "knowledge" and of its cognates and alternatives – a

[34] Daniel Speich Chassé, "The History of Knowledge: Limits and Potentials of a New Approach," *History of Knowledge* (3 Apr. 2017), https://historyofknowledge.net/2017/04/03/the-history-of-knowledge-limits-and-potentials-of-a-new-approach/.

[35] See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (New York, 1995), pp. 27–8.

[36] J. G. A. Pocock, for instance, has treated "the politics of historiography" but not the larger politics of knowledge. J. G. A. Pocock, "The Politics of Historiography," *Historical Research* 78 (2005).