

*I missionari dell'ordine*  
*Pensiero e amministrazione nell'Impero britannico*  
*(secoli XVIII–XIX)*

Matilde Cazzola  
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Matilde Cazzola's book reconstructs the transformations of the concepts of sovereignty and government in the political thought and practices of some of the most important administrators of the British Empire between the mid-eighteenth and the late nineteenth centuries. Drawn from her doctoral dissertation, Cazzola's research focuses on three moments of imperial crisis: the American Revolution, the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica, in 1865, and the Sepoy mutiny in India in 1857. For Cazzola, these three moments constitute an interesting point of view for reconstructing the 'semantic struggle' on the main modern political concepts, and the mutual influences between the theoretical conflicts and administrative practices deployed to preserve the political and social order of the British Empire. Quoting an essay by Thomas Carlyle entitled *Government* (1843), the Author reads British administrators as 'missionaries of Order': men endowed with a strong pragmatism, concerned with governing the constant insurgencies that undermined the stability of power relations to make colonial disorder an 'ordered world' (19).

The central thesis of the book is that the thinking and practices of colonial administrators show contradictions and aporias of both liberal political theory and colonial discourse. Defined by the Governor of Ceylon Thomas Maitland as the enforcers of a 'middle power' (12), standing between the high sphere of imperial institutions and the low sphere of social conflicts, administrators are thus for the Author particularly effective to highlight the tensions between political philosophy and practices of government. More specifically, the figures analysed challenge the spatial and temporal assumptions of liberalism. First, the distinction, already theorised by John Locke, between the colonial space dominated by despotism and the civil state theoretically grounded in representative sovereignty is blurred. Second, it emerges a reversal of the conception of historical time as progress led by civilised Europe and gradually extended from the centres of empires to the uncivilised colonial peripheries. On the contrary, according to some administrators of the

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second half of the nineteenth century, British India was an efficient model of political and legal order compared to the disordered Europe. Indeed, after the revolutions of 1848 and the extension of suffrage in England with the Reform Act of 1867, the problem of democracy was considered a spread of ‘barbarism’ that prefigured a ‘return of the past into the present’ (219).

From a methodological point of view, Cazzola’s research thus presents innovative aspects. On the one hand, different sources – such as ordinances, legal codes, minutes, memoirs, and private correspondences – are read as texts for the history of modern political thought and put in conversation to the great classics that formed the philosophical references of colonial administrators: from Hobbes to Locke, to Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. On the other hand, Cazzola’s research intersects different historiographical traditions: from the German *Begriffsgeschichte* to the history of political concepts developed in Italy; from the more recent works of legal and imperial history to the history from below and the different strands that have emerged from subaltern studies and post-colonial studies. The ambitious, and successful, goal is to contribute to the formation of a global history of political concepts that investigates the colonial foundations of Western modernity. In this sense, the methodological lesson of history from below is particularly important. For the Author, the transformations of the concepts of sovereignty and government are reactions to colonial insurgencies. Not surprisingly, this book comes out alongside another monograph by Cazzola devoted to the English thinker Thomas Spence (1750–1814), who theorised a revolutionary plot by the exploited workers of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup>

*I missionari dell’ordine*’s first chapter is devoted to Thomas Pownall (1722–1805), Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay between 1757 and 1760 and a member of the House of Commons from 1767 to 1780. The core of Pownall’s theory of government lies in what Cazzola defines as the ‘law of proprietary gravitation’ (33), which determines power relations both within states and internationally. Criticising contractualism in the wake of Hume, and anticipating the critique of Ferguson and Smith, Pownall argued that government should limit itself to ‘organise’ and making more efficient the order ‘naturally’ formed in civil society and characterised by property relations. Through metaphors drawn from Newtonian physics, Pownall thus thought a theory of ‘social gravity’: like celestial bodies, individuals and states are hierarchically ordered either as owners or as economic powers that attract weaker bodies into their orbit. Pownall measures this concept of government facing the American Revolution. At the outbreak of the Stamp Act crisis, he defended the stability of the British Empire by proposing the creation of an ‘imperial federation’ that recognised the ‘effective freedom’ of the thirteen colonies while safeguarding a ‘practicable sovereignty’ of the Crown and Parliament (63).

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<sup>1</sup> MATILDE CAZZOLA, *The Political Thought of Thomas Spence: Beyond Poverty and Empire* (London: Routledge, 2022).

During the 1770s, Pownall understood that the United States of America loomed as a new power in the Atlantic space that would form its own gravitational orbit, undermining the maritime supremacy of the British Empire (68). On the eve of the Treaty of Paris (1783), Pownall advanced the project of an 'Atlantic alliance': an Anglo-American 'family compact' based on common commercial interests and connected to a liberal turn against mercantilism in economic policy (79–81). It was a project that Pownall also tried to represent in different maps. In particular, in the map entitled *The Atlantic Ocean* (1787), the former governor depicted Britain as distinctly separated from continental Europe because of its imperial projection towards the 'Western Atlantic Ocean.'

The second chapter analyses the problem of 'free' labour government, which came to the fore with the abolition of slavery in 1834 and reached a turning point with the so-called Eyre controversy, the public debate on the brutal repression of the Morant Bay rebellion, ordered by Governor Edward Eyre in 1865. Before addressing these issues, the chapter reconstructs some eighteenth-century premises on labour management by analysing the thought of administrators who confronted the abolitionist movement, such as Edward Long (1734–1815), and the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution (97–103). Afterwards, the Author discusses Edward Gibbon Wakefield's colonisation project of Australia, according to which in the absence of slavery it was necessary to 'produce' the coercion to wage labour by making land ownership inaccessible to colonial workers. The chapter shows the global circulation of Wakefield's plan and its impact on former slave owners, jurists, academics and administrators throughout the British Empire and particularly in the Caribbean. Indeed, after emancipation, Caribbean colonies became a 'laboratory' for practices of labour government and the improvement of workers discipline that could be exported and applied also in Europe (122). However, the rebellion of former slaves undermined the earlier belief in the possibility of 'educating' black workers to 'freedom' and reinforced the spread of racial theories developed in the 1840s and 1850s – a very interesting aspect that could have been explored a little bit more by the Author. In particular, the Eyre controversy, which involved important figures such as Mill and Carlyle, reveals a conflict on the concept of 'sovereignty' won by the advocates of a strengthening of the executive power. Indeed, after this crisis Jamaica became a Crown colony. Through the debates on the abolition of slavery, the chapter reconstructs the emergence of a new notion of 'constitution' conceived as 'an instrument to govern social processes' (151).

Finally, the third chapter analyses the government of British India, and in particular the two most important codifiers of colonial law: Thomas Macaulay (1800–1859) and Fitzjames Stephen (1829–1894). Through these figures, the chapter outlines the dominant currents of colonial politics in India: the reformist and optimistic moment of the 1830s and the conservative and pessimistic turn of the 1860s. These positions are analysed in relation to the colonial discourse that represented Indian people according to temporal categories: 'barbarians' that lived in

an eternal past. In the first period, Macaulay is the most relevant interpreter of the ideology of ‘improvement,’ connected to the tradition of white abolitionism and the so-called civilising mission. Similarly to John Stuart Mill, Macaulay theorised a ‘despotic good government’ that aimed at civilising a population anchored in ‘anachronistic’ social and political forms (174–75). However, after the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, Stephen’s thought became predominant. Strongly influenced by Bentham, Stephen based his codification of colonial law on the idea of a despotic exercise of sovereignty, conceived as ‘the totality of social relations of power formalised by the law’ (203). For the Author, what is particularly interesting about Stephen is his ability to highlight both the ‘authoritarian’ aspects of liberalism and the repercussions of colonial power in metropolitan spaces (218). Indeed, Stephen believed that the Anglo-Indian regime was a model for solving the social problems of Great Britain, to correct the ‘fundamental fallacies of liberalism,’ which was unable to govern the irruption of the masses into politics. More specifically, Stephen did not oppose the Reform Act of 1867, but believed that this process should be governed by the elite in order to preserve social hierarchies. In this sense, his codification of Anglo-Indian law could inspire new forms of political and legal order for a Great Britain dangerously exposed to ‘social and racial degeneration,’ to the risk of becoming like a ‘colony’ (227).