

Editorial Foreword

CULTURE POWER Being in the habit of taking the temperature of anthropology from time to time (Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” *CSSH* 1984: 174–90; “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” 1995: 173–93; Webb Keane, “Self-Interpretation, Agency and the Objects of Anthropology: Reflections on a Genealogy,” 2003: 222–48), we take a keen interest in the health of the culture concept. News of its demise may be exaggerated, judging by the first article, which draws our attention to its worldwide spread and tries to account for it.

Andrew Sartori sifts through the global concept-history of “culture” and finds, not the instability and endless complexity of meaning we have become accustomed to expect, but a unitary connecting thread that remains the same across languages and discursive territories. Culture has “consistently articulated a claim about the fundamental underdetermination of human subjectivity.” With this finding as our starting-point we can re-conceptualize the problem of its global dissemination, asking why it is that autonomous subjective agency has spread around the world.

LEGAL DISTINCTIONS The next two articles explore ways that laws govern places. The first concerns the extension of law into the sea in the era of the global expansion of European power, and the second concerns law-made distinctions among citizen rights in the state of Israel.

Lauren Benton finds that the process by which the law of the sea came into existence was anything but simple and one-sided. So far from it being a European imposition, there was a pervasive legal pluralism from the beginning, and multiple connections with non-European law, direct and indirect. So far from the sea being a legal desert, pirates sought and adopted legal pretenses where they could, as insurance against being brought to court. In the Indian Ocean, the English and Dutch continued the system, started by the Portuguese, of restricting the shipping of other nations by requiring passes (*cartaz*), and the Mughals used the existence of this system to get the Europeans to patrol the waters against European pirates. An effect of the projection of European law into the Indian Ocean is that it simultaneously promoted the solidification of Mughal sovereignty on the land. Another was the capture and trial of Captain Kidd, to which the Mughals sent observers. (See also the author’s “Colonial Law and Cultural Defense: Jurisdictional Politics and the Formation of the Colonial State,” 1999: 563–88.)

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Robert Blecher argues that the idea of ethnic cleansing has too strong a grip on our ethical imagination, and has made it difficult to perceive varieties of ethnic “unmixing” that are *not* accompanied by overt violence. The case he has in mind and documents at length is the chipping away of the rights of those Palestinians who are Israeli citizens, under the notion of “transfer.” Thus persons who are citizens and not refugees are nevertheless also denied, in the phrase of Hannah Arndt, the “right to have rights” by acts of state that silence this group and restrict its rights.

CHANGING RELIGIONS Religious change, in the senses of change from one religion to another (in Nepal), and of change within a religion (in Africa), is the theme of the next two articles.

David Gellner writes about the changing meaning of conversion in Nepal over four periods of history from the thirteenth century to the present, using a single kingdom (Lalitpur) of the Kathmandu Valley as the starting point and continuing through the period of the Ranas and the constitutional Hindu monarchy of today. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Hinduism and Buddhism were in hierarchical relation: both were essentially the same kind of thing, but (depending on one’s point of view) one was better than the other. In the twentieth century the view gradually took root that they are essentially different entities and that they should be treated as equal.

New Christianities are of continuing interest to *CSSH* (see the pair of articles by David Maxwell on Southern Africa, and Joel Robbins on Papua New Guinea in 2001: 502–51; and Michael Scott on the Solomon Islands in 2005: 190–216). **Matthew Engelke** examines an African religion founded in the 1930s by Johane Masowe, who called himself Africa’s John the Baptist. The founder died in 1974, having acquired a following of about 100,000 in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, split between two groups—those observing the sabbath on Friday and those observing on Saturday. The object of the study is uncertainty in religion and what Susan Harding calls “coming under conviction,” using a term of American Baptists. The trial-and-error of the early years of Masowe’s mission is as important to the religion he fashioned as the certainty of his ultimate position, the author argues.

SCIENCE TRANSLATED The next two articles follow the adventures of science as it gets written up in textbooks of British India and invoked in a notorious murder case in Iran.

Michael Dodson analyses how a modern science, chemistry, gets translated into Sanskrit, Urdu, and Hindi in India under British rule. The project is one of creating textbooks for colonial schools in a country that has its own traditions of science. The problem of terminology—finding suitable words for oxygen, nitrogen, magnesium, acid, and so forth—is acute, and it does not stop at the borders of science. When the God of the Bible creates the heaven and the earth,

since sky (*akasha*) and earth (*bhu*) are two of the five elements of Indian philosophy, an Indian reader will want to know how it is that the text leaves unexplained the creation of water and other elements.

Cyrus Schayegh examines the treatment of science in the outpouring of texts that followed the confession, in 1934 Tehran, of “Asghar the Murderer,” to having killed thirty-three adolescent boys after having had sex with them. New interpretations of human behavior deployed European knowledge in medicine, psychology, and criminology. Iranian modernists professed faith in the progressive course and usefulness of scientific knowledge, but they also feared what they saw as the pathologies of lower class life, and believed that social reform could be undermined by it; an oscillation between pessimism and optimism in science that Marshall Berman (*All that Is Solid Melts into Air*) has charted for Europe. In the semi-colonial conditions of Iran, however, Iranian modernists lacked the institutions that would make their interventions effective and lasting.

GOVERNMENT IN PIECES The final essay examines continuities of government under conditions not conducive to success.

Ilana Feldman gives us an ethnology of making government *in extremis* in Gaza during the British Mandate, 1917–1948, and the Egyptian Administration, 1948–1967—both of them administrations that were not intended to be lasting, were not grounded in the will of the governed, and were in other ways deprived of circumstances making for effective government. How was government made and its continuity secured across two different regimes, absent a framework of authority and stability? In the highly liminal conditions of Gaza, the author shows, through examination of the quotidian practices of government in such matters as the system of government files, habits of government service, and government disposition of housing, that government gained solidity and continuity through its practices alone, and that these, in the absence of a higher source of authority to appeal to, were of necessity self-referential. The extremity of the overall circumstances makes the significance of everyday practices much more salient and available to inspection, but the findings should be valuable for the investigation of governments of all kinds.