

Editorial Foreword

MAKING ILLEGIBILITY The great decipherments of defunct writing systems—of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, the cuneiform script of the Sumerians and Akkadians, the Brahmi of Ashoka, Linear B, the Mayan glyphs—have vastly increased the extent of the past accessible to history. Decipherment of lost scripts is a decidedly modern impulse. The ancients showed little inclination to rescue lost scripts or save dying ones; John Leyden wrote (about 1810) of the Romans in Egypt that they did nothing to preserve Egyptian literature, leaving us “nothing but the hieroglyphics as a riddle to perplex future ages, a cipher of which they destroyed the key.” The modernist imperative to decode past scripts has been exercised to great effect since the early nineteenth century, but there has been little scholarly attention to the causes of the extinction of scripts. The opening essay is, as far as we know, the first comparative study of how scripts die.

Stephen Houston, John Baines, and Jerrold Cooper examine the death of Egyptian hieroglyphics, cuneiform of Mesopotamia, and the Mayan glyphs of Mesoamerica. Scripts die because “script communities” that sustain them cease to reproduce themselves, when the social costs of maintaining these communities cease to be paid. As scripts lose function they seem to shrink to the cultural high ground of religion, astronomy, and calendrics. In these three cases, the lost functions were replaced by competing scripts, but that is not always the case: the Indus script and Linear B are examples of scripts that expired without replacement, followed by long periods of illiteracy. Literacy, unlike language, is not universal and, on this evidence, can be lost.

SPEAKING LIKE A STATE Two essays analyze, in different ways, the linguistic style and text-production of socialist states, the first under the idea of a “hegemony of form” and “language ideology,” the second under the idea of censorship. (For another example of the “language ideology” approach, see Kathryn A. Woolard, “Bernardo de Aldrete and the Morisco Problem: A Study in Early Modern Spanish Language Ideology,” 2002:446–80).

Alexei Yurchak asks what made the collapse of the Soviet Union so sudden and so completely unexpected to the people who grew up and lived within it. Rejecting an analysis based on a dynamic of oppression and resistance, the author finds that Stalin transformed the Soviet discursive regime, pushing it in the direction of an objective formalism whose anonymity was consolidated by Krushchev with his attack on Stalin’s “cult of personality.” While the frozen ideological forms of the newly codified manner of representation created a sense of unchanging, immanent permanence that came from nowhere, they ren-

dered opaque the transformations of meanings these forms held in the lives of individuals who continued to observe them and consider themselves good socialists. Perestroika, when it came, was the culmination of this process but it nevertheless came as a surprise. Everything was forever, until, suddenly, it was no more.

Dominic Boyer wants to examine the newly accessible archive of censorship in the German Democratic Republic not as a form of anti-intellectualism but rather as a form of productive intellectual practices like any other, even as an intellectual vocation. This normalizing strategy involves situating GDR censorship practices in a long history of German intellectual production from the nineteenth-century nationalists through the Nazi party-state to the GDR party-state. The author proposes that this new framework will better illuminate not only the work of the censor but also familiar modes of conditioning intellectual production, including peer-review. “The specialization and diversification of intellectual labor creates a permanent state of crisis,” he believes, in which no settlement of knowledge can claim to be absolute or authentic. The figure of the censor is a symbolic condensation of that anxiety for you and me, which cannot be cured but can be made visible.

ECONOMIC REASONS A pair of articles considers aspects of economic activity that most resist analysis, whether of beliefs and personal values, or of various forms of normalized illegality grouped under the term, the “informal economy.”

The work of Douglass North, Nobel Prize-winning contributor to the new economic history, is critically examined by **Ben Fine** and **Dimitris Milonakis** as a telling case through which to better understand the limitations of rational models in economics, which have become widely influential in the social sciences. North’s commitment to go beyond rational choice is exemplary, and richer than the newer economic history in this respect. What is missing, according to this analysis, is the social as starting-point; at best the social is reconstructed on the basis of methodological individualism.

Julia Elyachar examines the ways in which squatting on land in Cairo, both illegal and an everyday practice, gets complicated, and “informal practices” get raised to a higher power when the squatter is a branch of government and there are no maps to be found which will untangle the matter for the aggrieved owner of a bodyshop. Informal housing, and the informal economy in general, has become so normalized that what was outside economics and government statistics has now to be mapped and included, the impetus coming not from the state but from the great international monetary and development bodies. The “informal sector” is now formally recognized and theorized about, and the state is increasingly seen as the problem for those in informal housing. But much remains stubbornly off the map for economic analysis, and under world conditions of rapid borderless flows of money, whether legitimate, informal, or criminal.

GENDER DIFFERENCE Witchcraft and witchcraft accusations are strongly gendered, though not always in ways one would expect, as the next article shows.

In Western Europe and America witchcraft accusations were directed at women very much more often than men, and recent analyses of witchhunting have fixed upon that gender difference as a capital fact. **Valerie Kivelson** wonders why, in early modern Russia, the far greater number of reported accusations fell on men, and how historical explanations have to be modified as a result of *that* fact. Gender differences were differently construed in Russia than in Western Europe, she finds. Orthodox theology provides little ground for attributing greater emotionality, lack of reason, or excess of carnality to women than to men. In the end, witchcraft accusations tended to fall on foreigners, most often itinerants and vagabonds, among others marginal to the norm of stable, settled, domestic populations, and these were almost entirely male.

CSSH DISCUSSION **Luise White** reviews two important and valuable ethnographies, attentive to “local experiences, local knowledge, and local anguish,” that can help us to think critically and seriously about present-day Africa and its problems. One of them (by Stephen Ellis) is an analysis of the role of religion in the making of the Liberian civil war, and the other (by James Ferguson) is about the lives of laborers in the Zambian copper belt. (See also two excellent *CSSH* articles on Africa: Mahmood Mamdani, “Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism,” 2001:651–64; and Sara Berry, “Debating the Land Question in Africa,” 2002:638–68.)