Moral Accounting as Field Foundation in an Early Modern Empire:

The English East India Company in the Late 18th Century

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Abstract: Field analysis—and the relational approach to historical social-scientific explanation of which it is an instance—helps illuminate the administrative dynamics of empires. While most studies of imperial dynamics emphasize the "high imperialism" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article extends field analysis to a crucial case from the second half of the eighteenth century: the English East India Company's transition from a (largely) merchant trading company to a territorial power. In this disordered space of administration, officials struggling with one another for metropolitan recognition provided moral accounts of themselves which, on the one hand, explained their behavior in terms drawn from abstract, purportedly-universal social spaces, and, on the other hand, claimed credibility through a personal "interest in disinterest." I argue that these moral accounts helped delimit the boundaries of and shape the dynamics within a distinctively imperial administrative field. To analyze this transformation, I suggest a synthesis of three varieties of relational analysis: Bourdieu's field theory, Fligstein and McAdam's analysis of strategic action fields, and Padgett and Powell's work on network folding and robust action.

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Introduction

In recent years, social scientists have increasingly used the concept of a "field" and more generally have adopted "relational" approaches in their research. Thanks largely to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and buttressed by developments in areas as diverse as organizational analysis to international relations, the concept of a field has provided crucial intellectual purchase on the behavior of global processes. This article extends this robust body of work to explore further a crucial aspect of field analysis—where, how, and why fields emerge in the first place. In so doing, it suggests a synthesis among (and probes the boundaries of) three popular field-theoretic and relational approaches to the issue of field emergence: Bourdieu's approach and work inspired by it; Fligstein and McAdam's concept of "strategic action fields"; and Padgett and Powell's perspective on network folding and robust action.

A limited synthesis among these three approaches is important because it serves a substantive aim: to contribute to burgeoning work on relational and field analysis of imperial administrations. This work has advanced our understanding of what empires are and how they work, but they also tend to lay aside a key historical transition: the movement from early-modern patrimonial administrations, in which the line between metropolitan and imperial administrative politics was significantly blurred, to a more recognizably "modern" bifurcation in the official imagination between colony and metropole. This article seeks to hold just such a transition at the center of its empirical frame, focusing on aspects of a key early-modern case: the English East India Company (hereafter "EIC" or "Company") in the late eighteenth century.

The case of the EIC, as I will suggest below, reveals key layers of imperial field-foundation. The argument is relational at each of these layers, meaning that the "essence" of Company agents—and indeed, the identity of the Company as a whole—is determined by how they are embedded in relationships with other actors, corporate or individual (Abbott, 1995; Emirbayer, 1997; Fuchs, 2005). At the layer of the EIC's structural relationship with the English (after the 1707 Act of Union, "British") state, the Company entered a profound period of crisis (driven by the fiscal and military complications of acquiring territory in India after 1765) which eroded the insulation of its administrative affairs in India from metropolitan politics. In another layer, the decay of this insulation opened new avenues of appeal for officials in India bitterly struggling with one another to appeal home for help. And, in a final layer, these altered

paths of appeal meant that the substance of the officials' appeals shifted as well: from "insider" accounts emphasizing the particularity of Indian administration to more abstract moral narratives stressing the derivation of official behavior from universal justifications. As I seek to show using an initial struggle from the early 1770s between two EIC officials, which played out before a broad metropolitan audience, this transformed process of moral accounting was an indirect struggle over the limits and scope of imperial administrative politics. In other words, it represented unintentional efforts to organize the boundaries and logic of a field.

I unfold this argument in three main parts. First, I discuss several field-analytic approaches to imperial administration, and suggest that they are challenged by the ambiguities of early-modern empires. Second, I suggest a synthesis among the three varieties of field analysis and relationalism mentioned above. In particular, I examine Bourdieu's account of the "interest in disinterest" and its conditions, Fligstein and McAdam's useful attention to the external mobilization of resources (and state recognition) into a field, and Padgett and Powell's focus on the structural positioning of actors in networks of exchange and their ability to leverage "robust action." I then suggest all three can be placed in useful dialog to account for the EIC's transition. Third, I apply this suggested synthesis to the exchange between Harry Verelst and William Bolts—two important EIC officials in the early 1770s—showing how Bolts offered a view of universal economic exchange as the key dynamic of imperial administration while Verelst emphasized the power of the state (based on a strict partition of Indian and British administrative orders) as the key anchor of his moral accounting.

Contemporary Sociology and Relational Analysis of Empire

Recent years have seen a proliferation of field-theoretic, and more broadly relational, studies of empires[1] and their dynamics. These include works focusing on German colonialism (Steinmetz, 2007, 2008), the United States (Go, 2008a)—including a comparison of it with the British empire (Go, 2008b, 2011)—China's grasp of inner

1 "Empire" is a difficult term to define. See Go (2011: 5–12), Steinmetz (2014: 78–81), and Mann (2012: 12) for recent efforts. Here, I employ it in Steinmetz's sense: "expansive, militarized, and multiethnic political organizations that significantly limit the sovereignty of the peoples and polities they conquer" (2014: 79).

Mongolia (Wang, Forthcoming), the Ottoman empire (Barkey, 1994, 2008), the making of colonial and postcolonial states in French North Africa (Wyrtzen, Forthcoming, 2011), and the relationship between British commercial practices and market formation and integration (Erikson, 2014). Taken together, these studies emphasize that the details of imperial administration, and especially the way that metropolitan control is linked with the projection of control into colonies, are crucially important to understand outcomes as various as the nature of postcolonial identity (Kumar, 2010), modern social sciences (Steinmetz, 2013), the contemporary structure of postcolonial politics (e.g., Goswami, 2004; Wyrtzen, Forthcoming), as well as a variety of other contemporary political and economic outcomes (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2001; Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

While these studies have provided excellent insight into the dynamics of empires and, indeed, have stretched the conceptual apparatus of social-scientific analysis by emphasizing the empirical persistence of imperial behavior into the present day (e.g., Calhoun, Cooper & Moore, 2006; Mann, 2005; Wyrtzen, 2011), their striking tendency is also to concentrate on the moments of "high imperialism" in the 19th and 20th centuries. Consider two important recent examples. Go's recent comparative analysis (2011) of American exceptionalism and the British empire centers around the comparison of equivalent hegemonic phases in relation to the global system as a whole (pp. 19-24), which for Britain stretches back to the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Yet the logic of comparing equivalent phases (rather than at the same time in history) entails, as Go recognizes (p. 23), deemphasizing "world developments across...time periods" (p. 23) and invites viewing both empires as occupying a similar, homogeneous analytic space. Meanwhile, Steinmetz's otherwise excellent edited volume exploring the "Imperial Entanglements" between sociological thought and empire (2013) contains few studies addressing periods prior to 1800 in its section of substantive historical studies of empire.

Although these foci are sensible given the authors' substantive aims, attention to the dynamics of early-modern empires is warranted. One important reason is simple: modern empires arose against the backdrop, and in interaction with, their early-modern ancestors. Indeed, as Steinmetz demonstrated in *The Devil's Handwriting* (2007), modern native policies pursued in German colonies cannot be understood without appreciating the centuries-long ethnographic contact between Europeans and Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Africans. Moreover, the emergence of Britain's 19th century "second" empire in Asia and Africa emerged out of a troubled dialog with it's "first"

settler empire in the Americas (Chatterjee, 2012: 51–54; Harlow, 1952; Marshall, 2005).

Yet in spite of these continuities, early-modern and modern empires still operated in very different ways. Early-modern empires were often settler societies founded on more-or-less direct rule which tended to annihilate the societies they encountered. Modern empires, meanwhile, often pursued "indirect" rule through indigenous elites and preserved (albeit in distorted form based on colonial prejudices) a simulacrum of indigenous society. This problem of governing different, established societies from a social and physical distance, moreover, introduced a second distinction: whereas early modern empires tended to emphasize administrative flexibility and ecumenical accommodation of difference within a patrimonial matrix emphasizing concrete connections among officials to the metropole (as, for example, Barkey (2008) traces in the case of the Ottoman empire), modern empires tended to operate according to the "rule of colonial difference" (Chatterjee, 1993), logically separating colonizer in colonized in pseudo-essential ways that reproduced themselves over time and legitimated colonial rule (see also Steinmetz, 2014: 83).

When considering this transition between early-modern and modern empires as an analytic puzzle, it is crucial not to overdraw the distinction between them. After all, the orientalist tropes founding the rule of colonial difference have deep historical roots (Chatterjee, 2012: esp. 33–35). Even Europeans emigrating to settler colonies occasionally found themselves described using "the language of alterity or otherness" by those remaining at home (Greene, 2013: 50). Beyond this, the British state at the heart of what would become a world-historical empire was in the eighteenth century was fundamentally "enigmatic" (Adams, 2007), on the one hand showing precious aspects of modern bureaucratic and fiscal organization (Brewer, 1990) and "cultural infrastructure" (Norton, 2014), while on the other hand remaining organizationally fragmented and administratively patrimonial (e.g., Black, 1990; Harling, 1996).

Given all of this ambiguity, the strategy of this article is to use field analysis to help account for the transition between early-modern and modern forms of empire. It does so by examining a quintessentially enigmatic and important case: Britain's crossing of its "imperial meridian" (Bayly, 1989) as the EIC became a territorial power in India after 1765. Field analysis is well-suited to this task, because from its vantage point modern empires are characterized by a specific kind of administrative field: one guided by the rule of colonial difference. More specifically, field analysis guides us to ask more

pointed questions about officials within the EIC during the period of transition: how were they positioned in relation to their metropolitan authorities and colonial elites; how did these positions change during periods of perceived crisis; and how did these changes alter the kinds of claims officials made about themselves and their actions?

The goal of this article is to show how answers to these interrelated questions shaped how the EIC's administration modernized, and how the rule of colonial difference emerged as it did. To pursue that goal, I first suggest a synthesis of several varieties of field and relational analysis.

Three Varieties of Relationalism

Although the terms "field theory" and "relational sociology" are singular, upon closer examination they represent multiple approaches. This section distinguishes three strands of relational and field analysis and suggests connections among them to help explain the transition between the early-modern and high-modern eras of EIC colonialism in India.

Arguably the best-known of the three perspectives is to be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It revolves around a tight link between the concepts of habitus and field, representing people's pre-reflexive principles of judgment and the social spaces they occupy depending on their endowments of different forms of meaningful capital, respectively, as well as the subsidiary concepts of illusio and doxa, which respectively represent the kind of beliefs people hold about the nature of their behavior and the self-evident logics which give behavior in a field meaning. Thus people's position-takings (how they actually behave) are motivated by their illusio, drawn from their habitus, and interpreted in terms of their doxic understandings of their positions and action, which is in turn drawn from an interaction of their habitus with their position in a field.[2]

This tangle of concepts may appear daunting, but a key virtue of the approach is how they work together.[3] Consider, for example, how a person's habitus and their position

2 The clearest introduction to all of these terms is in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), especially their discussion of fields (pp. 94-115).

3 Bourdieu himself took a strong stance on the nature of his concepts, namely that "...concepts have no definition other than systemic ones, and are designed to be put to work empirically in systemic fashion. Such notions as habitus, field, and capital can be defined, but only within the theoretical system they constitute, not in isolation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 96).

in a field together shape the "space of possibles" for their behavior. This space of possibles does not strictly determine action, but rather opens a range of potential lines of action. Yet it still

> impresses itself on all those who have interiorized the logic and necessity of the field as a sort of *historical transcendental*, a system of (social) categories of perception and appreciation, of social conditions of possibility and legitimacy which, like the concepts of genres, schools, manners and forms, define and delimit the universe of the thinkable and the unthinkable, that is to say, both the finite universe of potentialities capable of being thought and realized at a given moment—freedom—and the system of constraints inside which is determined what is to be done and to be thought—necessity (Bourdieu, 1996: 326; emphasis original).

The initial clause of this passage is especially striking: "on all those who have interiorized the logic and necessity of the field..." Who takes such a step, given that doing so implies accepting limits on thinkable action within the field? For Bourdieu, the question cannot be put in this way, because

> [i]t is one and the same thing to enter into a field of cultural production, by settling an entrance fee which consists essentially of the acquisition of a *specific code* of conduct and expression, and to discover the finite universe of *freedom under constraints* and *objective potentialities* which it offers: problems to resolve, stylistic or theatric possibilities to exploit, contradictions to overcome, even revolutionary ruptures to effect (Bourdieu, 1996: 235; emphasis original).

In other words, for the stakes of behavior in a field to appear meaningful and comprehensible to someone, they must already have adopted the illusio and doxa of a particular field; to understand it they must already be in it.[4]

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4 Another example is brought out in Bourdieu's discussion of artistic innovation:

> For bold strokes of innovation or revolutionary research to have some chance of even being conceived, it is necessary for them to exist in a potential state at the heart of the system of already realized possibles, like *structural lacunae* which appear to wait for an call for fulfillment, like potential directions of development, possible avenues of research (Bourdieu, 1996: 235; emphasis original).

Bourdieu again argues that it is impossible to disentangle the perception of a person's agency (here the heroic and revolutionary reconstruction of a field) from the structure of positions they occupy and possible behaviors they perceive, which in turn would be imperceptible without them having already accepted the stakes of the field.

Given that fields, subsuming freedom and necessity as they do, have histories, how and why do they emerge? The above passages from Bourdieu are drawn from his *The Rules of Art* (1996), which is his most systematic investigation of the emergence of a field—that of literature in nineteenth-century France. To briefly summarize his nuanced and rich analysis, a group of overeducated, underemployed, newly city-dwelling producers of cultural works were incubated in the "bastard institutions" of the Paris salons in the early nineteenth century, allowing the field of artistic production to root itself on the one hand in a particular lifestyle (Bourdieu calls it an "art of living") and on the other hand in a rejection of the Bourgeoisie, which had "never before asserted so bluntly its values and its pretension to control the instruments of legitimation, both in the domain of art and in the domain of literature, and which, through the press and its hacks, now aim[ed] to impose a degraded and degrading definition of cultural production" (1996: 58). As the literary field grew increasingly autonomous in its *avant-garde* definition of "pure" literature (and yet simultaneously dependent upon markets for its products among like-minded consumers; see Bourdieu 1996 esp. Ch. 2 and pp. 252-256), moreover, it increasingly fragmented among competing internal forms and genres which aligned relative to one another according to their relationship to commercial production. In other words, for Bourdieu, the field of artistic production arose because a group of cultural producers found themselves at the intersection of social forces which created a niche where they could assert their particular "interest in disinterest," which in turn could be institutionalized into a regular system of one-upsmanship as different authors attempted to produce ever-more "artistic" literature.

This concept of an "interest in disinterest" is crucial when thinking about the transition between early-modern and modern imperial fields. For this kind of claim—where an actor *dis*claims personal interest in the name of a higher principle, whether artistic, political, philosophical, or scientific—constitutes for Bourdieu the motor of modern "universal" fields of practice like science and bureaucracy. Indeed, according to Bourdieu disinterested duty to the state, for instance, emerged because "social groups [who made up bureaucratic cadres] had an interest in the universal, and they had to invent the universal (the law, the idea of public service, the idea of general interest, etc.) and, if one may put it this way, domination in the name of the universal in order to accede to domination" (Bourdieu, 1998: 90). In sum, while his perspective depends on a tightly intertwined set of concepts that seem to emerge as a field became autonomous because of a complex conjuncture of events, a central sign of a field's delimitation for Bourdieu

is the emergence of a particular style of claim: one that marries personal disinterest to a set of universal motivators.[5]

If the bulk of Bourdieu's work examines the ongoing operation of fields once they are relatively well-established, the second variety of field-theory and relational analysis, that of "strategic action fields," contains a more explicit treatment of how and where fields emerge. In their overview of the perspective, Fligstein and McAdam define strategic action fields as "a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors...are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared...understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field...and the rules governing legitimate action in the field" (2012: 24–25). The dynamics of these strategic action fields, moreover, depend on actors' "social skill," or "that complex mix of cognitive, affective, and linguistic facilities that render individuals more or less effective as skilled strategic actors supremely well adapted to the demands of collective action" (2012: 61) which marshals people's "seemingly unique human capacity for collaborative symbolic activity and *need* for meaning and membership" (2012: 108; emphasis original). In other words, strategic action fields depend on two levels of organization: on the one hand, of a mid-level social space and its government by some shared logic and sense of purpose, and on the other hand, of people into groups by individuals more-or-less skilled at doing so.

This emphasis on organization figures into the emergence of strategic action fields in important ways (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 107–112). In the first place, strategic action fields come from "emergent mobilization," in which

> collective actors fashion new lines of interaction with other actors based on altered understandings of the opportunities or threats to group interests they perceive. Typically the process is set in motion by some exogenous change that is perceived by at least two actors as posing a significant new threat to, or opportunity for, the realization of group interests (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:107).

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5 Careful readers may note that this reading of Bourdieu is somewhat against the grain. Indeed, Bourdieu himself warned against just such an attempt to trace field emergence back to the emergence of a particular socio-historical figure, since it is possible to find, in the case of the literary field in France, "the personage of the writer," albeit one still "[dependent] on the state for the recognition and official status that it accords them" well before "the system of characteristics constitutive of an autonomous field is found assembled together" (Bourdieu 1996:367, n.1). Yet my aim here is less to trace the emergence of a habitus, or even illusio, characteristic of an imperial interest in disinterest, and more to understand how claims to such disinterest could become stakes the EIC in the second half of the eighteenth century.

In building up strategic action fields, Fligstein and McAdam emphasize how collective actors strategize with and against one another in both horizontal and vertical ways. On the one hand, people and groups in strategic action fields are locked in "an inherently conflictual world where change is ubiquitous, incumbents worry daily about how to maintain their advantages, and challengers search for and seek to exploit any 'cracks' they discern in the system" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012: 97). Yet on the other hand, any given strategic action field is dependent for its ongoing stability on alliances with the larger strategic action fields of which it is a part (as would be a department within a corporation, for example) or the horizontal fields on which it depends for crucial resources (2012: 3). Put differently, an entity like the early-modern British empire or the EIC itself can be viewed from one angle as a single unit, but also, as we shall see, as a set of interrelated and even competing collective actors whose mutual coordination and interest is far from a given. Thus appeals to and alliances with outsiders are a crucial way that strategic action fields are formed and maintain stability.

If Bourdieu's perspective on fields provides a useful frame for understanding the "interest in disinterest" while Fligstein and McAdam emphasize the ongoing exchange of resources among strategic action fields which are embedded in one another, the final variety of relationalism used here articulates how and why those claims of disinterest might actually be successful in mobilizing resources. This third perspective, which is rooted in network analysis, finds systematic examination of the question of how new structural forms emerge in Padgett and Powell's *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets* (2012).

The work is organized around the concept of "autocatalysis," a network characteristic wherein "all nodes [in the network] are reconstructed through transformations among nodes in the set" (Padgett & Powell, 2012: loc 640). Abstracted from its origin in chemistry, the problem for Padgett and Powell is to explain how sets of relationships among people, firms, and so on can become durable over time, creating innovative social structures and even new kinds of roles and actors. In turn, the whole system of inter- and intra-network dynamism is driven by "network folding" (2012: loc 594), one constitutive mechanism of which is "the emergence of a new open elite of biographical flows, which broke down previous social boundaries" (2012:loc 790). This movement of people from one kind of network to another leads to a dynamic wherein "people, practices, and relational protocols being recombined are attached to networks, with

percolation consequences" (2012:locs 762–769). In other words, the durable organizations and institutionalized procedures that stabilize social life emerge because the churn of people moving among different networks puts certain actors in brokerage positions. These positions then allow people to transpose and connect procedures from one network or domain of social life into another.

Beyond their emphasis on the concrete biographical flows from one network "domain" to another—that is, the movement from people from one concrete set of relations to another (see 2012: 700-745)—Padgett and Powell's emphasis on multivocality and robust action is especially useful to understand the EIC's transformation. Like Fligstein and McAdam's concept of social skill, multi-vocal "robust action" appears as something akin to agency for Padgett and Powell. Robust action is "the tactical capacity…to sustain multiple attributions of identity through uttering sphinx-like statements that plausibly can be interpreted in multiple ways" (2012:loc 978) and is a strategy best pursued by people at the intersection of otherwise separated networks, such that they can utter ambiguous enough statements (or act unpredictably enough) to persuade their connected parties that support is plausible, if not forthcoming. This strategy is evident in the behavior of leaders like the "quiescent sphinxes" (Obert & Padgett, 2012: loc 8020) Cosimo de' Medici and Deng Xiaophong (see Padgett, 2012; Padgett & Ansell, 1993), as well as Otto von Biscmarck's notorious blustering style (Obert and Padgett 2012:loc 8034).

To sum up Padgett and Powell's relational perspective for our purposes, a key dynamic of relational social life is the biographical movement of people among a variety of network domains and the alternative procedures and ideas they carry with them. Moreover, their capacity to effectively behave ambiguously—like "quiescent sphinxes"—and hence to maintain a form of agency and power by strategically marshaling that very ambiguity, is driven by their ability to appear to be serving the interests of sometimes very different networks and political factions.

Standing back, it is hopefully evident that this synthesis is geared towards informing the EIC's transition from early-modern to modern imperial administration and as such is meant to be limited. Each relational and field-analytic approach still rests on very different epistemological foundations, and each is in turn embedded in very different sociological traditions of analysis. Yet there is profit in their combination. Bourdieu emphasizes the power of universal claims to operate in the "interest of disinterest," showing how such claims (insofar as they are recognized by others) lead to the

autonomization and foundation of new social fields. In turn, Fligstein and McAdam suggest how such claims to disinterest might be used to durably mobilize resources among a shifting terrain of interlocked (and sometimes overlapping) strategic action fields by people struggling to maintain their incumbency or challenging those incumbents. Finally, Padgett and Powell suggest that biographical flows along networks (and through fields) and the dynamics of multivocal action at the intersection of such structures might reveal key patterns of agency during periods of field-foundation.

Synthesizing these previously disparate approaches further contributes by specifying the analysis of imperial fields. To ask how and why early-modern, patrimonial forms of imperial administration transformed into a modern rule of colonial difference means investigating the structural conditions that transformed the relationship among different parts of both the imperial and metropolitan strategic action fields. Moreover, it also requires understanding how this first transformation was shaped by and shaped the context of struggles among particular administrators (whether they would later be categorized as "indigenous" or "imperial") as they sought to mobilize resources to their side. Finally, it is to ask how these two changing contexts in turn affected how administrators presented themselves and one another during these struggles—that is, how they described their motivations and their social worlds.

The next section explores these themes through an analysis of the EIC's transformation in the late eighteenth century.

The Case: Bolts and Verelst

This section expounds a key episode in the history of the EIC's transformation from a largely-merchant organization to the major territorial power in South Asia using the analytic frame developed above. Founded in 1600 and despite its abortive military adventures at the end of the seventeenth century (see Stern, 2011), the EIC's territorial expansion only became sustained after it began military competition with French and Dutch merchant companies. The competition intensified amid the decaying central authority of the Mughal empire, and as succession disputes among its increasingly independent satraps promised a mixture of political and commercial opportunity (Marshall, 1987). The Mughal empire's decline is usually dated to the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, and military competition between the French and English began in South India in the 1740s (Dodwell, 1920), but a key moment of the emergence of Company territorial power was surely the Battle of Buxar in 1764, when Company

forces defeated an indigenous coalition including the Mughal emperor. Shortly thereafter, the EIC signed the treaty of Allahahbad, which made it a legal vassal of the Mughal emperor and granted it revenue authority over the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.[6]

Considered as a strategic action field during this period, the Company's behavior in both Britain and India can was a response to the very different demands being placed on it in both places. In London, the Company's stock, fiscal resources, and patronage appointments had long been an integral part of British elite politics (Bowen, 2006; Sutherland, 1952), and the EIC's Court of Directors enjoyed a usually-cozy relationship with the Whig ministries, especially under its power mid-eighteenth century Chairman, Laurence Sulivan (McGilvary, 2006). Meanwhile, the Company's servants in India, who were increasingly made up of second and third sons of well-to-do merchant and gentry families in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century (Cohn, 1987; Ghosh, 1970), depended on indigenous Indian rulers for permission and security to conduct the trade in goods that generated the Company's profit.

As the Company militarized and particularly as it fought proxy wars against the French during the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the relationship among the EIC's constitutive strategic action fields and to those it depended on in India and Britain transformed. The Company's military expenditures and uncertain profits and stock prices upended domestic fiscal markets (since it was the most important joint-stock firm in Britain at the time) as well as threatening the solvency of the Treasury (since it became both a creditor and debtor to the state). And in India, new military power meant increasing involvement in local affairs, as well as the frequently-indulged temptation (both for the Company as a whole as for servants personally profiting through local trade) to garner tax exemptions, direct military subsidies, and other commercial concessions as part of treaties. This process certainly enriched Company servants (Marshall, 1976) and promised windfall, if risky, profits to the company as a whole (Bowen, 1991). Accordingly, Company shareholder "general courts" and elections to the Court of Directors became increasingly tumultuous "theatre[s] of disputes" (Leonard, 2014) among anxious government ministers intervening directly in Company affairs, old-guard Directors seeking to protect the long-term viability of the EIC, returning Company "nabobs" (Lawson & Phillips, 1984; Nechtman, 2010) anxious to protect their personal and potentially ill-gotten fortunes, and stock speculators attempting to inflate the

6 Bowen (1991, 2006) and Marshall (1987, 2005) provide more detail on this transition.

Company's share price and dividends at the cost of its long-term health.

This chaotic state of affairs among the Company's internal strategic action fields and those it depended on in Britain and India opened new fissures for officials struggling with one another within the EIC's organizational framework. Since territorial expansion had been coupled with difficult-to-control servants partly remunerated by the profits they could make as private traders (Furber, 1948; Hejeebu, 2005; Marshall, 1976), disputes among officials were not rare throughout the eighteenth century, and became bitter and more intense in the decades after Allahabad. What changed decisively, however, was the *audience* for these disputes. The Company's fiscal troubles and internal political chaos created an audience of previously-unfamiliar readers and listeners in Britain, who were eager—beyond the often-salacious details of the disputes and potential corruption of "asiatic despotism"—for information that could affect the Company's political and commercial fortunes. As the 1760s and 1770s wore on (that is, particularly prior to the decades-long settlement entailed by Pitt's India Act of 1784, which established ministerial oversight of many Company affairs through the Board of Control), then, there was a new kind of general political audience to struggles taking place within the Company.[7]

This changing context of disputes among Company officials altered the possibility of what could (successfully) be claimed as those disputes migrated back to Britain. For much of its history and the eighteenth century, moral regulation among Company servants was based on a model of politeness (Klein, 1994) which defined propriety as an embedded judgment of "impartial spectators" who were "independent" of influence yet were ambiguously also members of concrete networks of peers (Smith, 2002).[8] As struggles among administrators increasingly played out in front of audiences unfamiliar with such contextual detail, the structural position of complaining officials, between the unfamiliar world of Indian administration and metropolitan politics, offered the chance to exercise a form of robust action by translating and abstracting the administrative detail that formed the background of official struggle. However, these struggles had a more complicated structure than straightforward robust action: because they almost always involved the escalation of a multi-party dispute from colony to metropole, at least two officials disputing each others' acts of abstraction and translation of Indian affairs actually stood in the brokerage position. Because they could challenge each

7 For a more detailed discussion of the points in the last two paragraphs, see Wilson (Forthcoming).

8 For more detail on this point, see Wilson (2012: esp. Chs. 1 and 2).

others accounts (and could usually both lay claim to equal expertise and embeddedness within Company administration in India), their recourse was not to "multivocal" ambiguity, but instead to a kind of moral earnestness that laid claim to their own "interest in distinterest" as a basis for their appeals to outsiders in their disputes.[9]

An Illustration: William Bolts, Harry Verelst, and the EIC, 1772-1775

An extended example can help clarify this process. In 1768, amid the larger conflict over the future of the Company, in India, the Governor of the Bengal "presidency" (i.e., province), Harry Verelst, deported a nettlesome former official, William Bolts.[10] Verelst's reason was that Bolts misrepresented his position as a Company official to gain trading privileges from the (now relatively subordinated) Nawab of Bengal. Upon returning to England, Bolts appealed first to the Court of Directors for reprieve, but failing there, sued (and was counter-sued by) Verelst in the Court of Chancery (Bowen, 2004; Kuiters, 2002). When these suits failed, in turn, Bolts took up the pen, and, listing himself as "Merchant and Alderman, or Judge of the Hon. The Mayor's Court of Calcutta," published *Considerations on East India Company Affairs* (in 1772), which Verelst felt the need to answer "The Misrepresentations of Mr. Bolts, and other writers" in his *A View of Rise, Progress, and Present State of the English Government in Bengal (also 1772)*. This published debate between Bolts and Verelst has been identified as the first serious discussion of the details of Indian administration in the eighteenth century public sphere (Bowen, 2006).

A full analysis of these documents is outside the scope of this article, so this illustration will concentrate on two features: how each text expresses an interest in disinterest, claiming credibility through a holistic moral narrative; and how both texts root their justifications in morally disembedded spaces (namely "the sate" and the "the economy"), yet take radically different stances towards the limits of those spaces.

Consider, to start, how Bolts described his own position, at once portraying himself as "disinterested" victim of "oppression" at Verelst's hands in Bengal:

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9 This line of argument is in dialog with McLean (2007) and follows Greenblatt (1980).

10 Bolts has been the subject of two biographies (Hallward, 1920; Kuiters, 2002) and an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography (Bowen, 2004) and other scholarly interest, while interest in Verlest has been comparative scanty (Kuiters, 2004).

> The Writer of these sheets, who was many years in the service of the Company in Bengal, as is an Alderman or Judge of the Mayor's Court of Calcutta, agreeably to the charter, writes not with any view of advantage to himself. He has felt the iron rod of oppression from the Company and their servants, in many instances equally grievous with any that are herein laid before the public; but having appealed for justice to the laws of this country, (though it must be some years before he can obtain it) he forbears at present to say more of himself or his cause than, that he was marked out for vengeance in Bengal, for his professional abilities, even small as they were, and his success in such mercantile undertakings as rather entitled him to the blessings of the natives and approbation of his country, as they usefully obstructive to mischievous monopolists, and of service to the Company, though offensive to their principal servants (Bolts 1772:x–xi).[11]

In this passage, Bolts marries a disclaimer of his own interest to a moral account by which his own "success in such mercantile undertakings" as had gotten him ejected by Verelst to his ability to simultaneously "usefully [obstruct]" monopoly and serve the Company though not "their principal servants." As his jab against monopoly suggests it might, the remainder of *Considerations* is occupied by a radical call for the installation of a universalizing free-trade relationship between Indian and Britain to be overseen by the direct extension of British parliamentary jurisdiction to India and the extension of quasi-citizenship rights to Indians themselves. As Bolts put it:

> It is the wisdom and power of the Legislature alone that can prevent the total improverishment or less of the Bengal provinces, either of which misfortunes might now prove fatal in its consequences to this kingdom. This can only be effected by laws for securing the impartial administration of justice throughout those dominions; for preventing the commission of those oppressions and irregularities which have of late years prevailed, to the disgrace of a British government; for more easily and effectually punishing in India the authors of such enormities when committed, and for improving and rendering permanent those resources which the nation has a right to expect from the conquered countries. Such laws would equally tend to promote the laudable and desirable object of regaining and securing an interest in the hearts of the subjected natives, who wish only to receive their protection and happiness from a British Sovereign; in which state of things this nation might long possess the Bengal provinces, even against the combined efforts of Indian enemies and European rivals (Bolts 1772:x).

From Verelst's perspective, however, it was precisely the lack of power given to the Company state in India that was responsible for the immiseration of the Indian people (at the hands of men like Bolts.) Even as he, too, coupled his moral account to a

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11 In each of the quotes below, I have preserved the sometimes-eccentric spelling and capitalization conventions of eighteenth century texts.

claimed interest in disinterest (or as he put it, without a "rapacious spirit"), Verelst argued that

> ...the evils complained of in Bengal, have arisen...[more] from the inability of the governor and council to restrain the daring and pernicious projects of private interest in others, than from a rapacious spirit in themselves. Had the higher servants of the company, as [Bolts] would wish us to believe, been alone the oppressors of Bengal, the evil could not have extended far. But when the rapacity of all who assume the English name, is let loose upon a harmless and inoffensive race of men....every attempt of the governor and council to restrain these lawless traders, is represented as a violation of property, and [an] infringement of those laws by which only Europeans can be governed; and...this spirit, supported by interested men, proceeds so far, that the governor, council, and commander in chief, are presented to the grand jury as conspirators against the life and fortune of an individual... (Verelst 1772:42).

Of course, Verelst recognized that the kind of power he asked for in the above passage, which would ratify the ability of Governors to unilaterally deport Europeans living in India and overrule their own councils, ran far beyond the imagined British citizenship protections elsewhere (as would so violently be demonstrated in the coming years in the American colonies). To justify this, however, not only did Verelst carefully attach his desire for ratified power to a disinterested moral-self presentation as a dutiful Company servant, he also carefully delimited the reach of this Company state. Bolts' argument to extend direct Parliamentary control to India would never work, Verelst argued, because after all they were radically different places, where different "manners and habits of a people" were to be found:

> If in Great Britain, where the form of our government has grown up to maturity in the course of several ages; where the power of each magistrate has undergone frequent discussions from the united wisdom of successive generations; where all authority is committed to the hands of men formed by education for their several stations, and where the effects of its exertion may be traced in our history; if, in a country like this, we are perpetually alarmed with supposed invasions of our rights, and frightful pictures of encreasing despotism are daily held forth to terrify the people, what a portrait might the dullest imagination exhibit of Bengal? By minds open to such impressions, little regard will be had to the different manners and habits of a people; to the enterprising Mahomedan or Armenian opposed to the gentle native of India; to the condition of conquerors living amidst a timid and submissive race, like soldiers unrestrained by discipline; of men clamorously demanding the protections of laws ill understood and worse applied, where interest and passion unite to confound all order, and where lordly traders, impatient of controul, hope to gratify their own sordid avarice in the general wreck (Verelst 1772:130).

To summarize this illustration: as intra-administrative squabbling spilled over the boundaries of the Company's organization and into the larger British public sphere, we can see strong moral claims and narratives about behavior taking place in India. These claims not only purported to describe the rightness or wrongness of action taking place within the Company (but in a setting so distant that the claims could not be verified by anyone other than other "interested" actors), they also appealed for intervention (being published in books meant for the general reading public in Britain) into the EIC's affairs in India. And yet to the extent that these accounts were recognized as effective and shaped subsequent such appeals, they also prospectively delimited the field of Company administration in India and transformed its nature. What had once been comprehensible as the pursuit of both "fortune and integrity" (Nightingale, 1985) for oneself and the Company became a conflict over what Company rule in Bengal was and should represent. For Verelst, it was a carefully delimited space in which action was to be rooted in an empowered state, and which depended on a careful argument about the "difference" of Indian people from the British. For Bolts, meanwhile, economic exchange and its stabilizing influence was the moral key to his argument (and account of himself) and that form of exchange meant that there was no meaningful, essential difference between British people and Indians. In other words, through the debate between these two officials of the Company, the terms were set for the recognizably modern character of imperial administration.

Conclusion

The account offered here of the transformation of a field of imperial administration and the emergence of a recognizably modern rule of colonial difference is only suggestive, based as it is on a small part of a single, albeit important, case. In analyzing the importance moral self-accounts of imperial administrators during moments of field-foundation and transformation, however, I hope to have shown not just that such moral accounts are important, but also the value of synthesizing different varieties of relational and field analysis. Roughly put, Fligstein and McAdam provide an analysis of complex organizations as they transform during exogenous shocks that disrupt their stability; Padgett and Powell supply provocative ideas about how certain actors come to exploit gaps in networks created in those fissures; and Bourdieu suggests how the content of those actors' claims can become an interest in disinterest. When assembled in this way, I have suggested that these three approaches allow us to see how escalating disputes

among EIC officials came to resemble a modern rule of colonial difference.

This analysis can be carried forward in two main ways. First, a comparative analysis of similar cases where colonial affairs were subjected to public metropolitan scrutiny could be used to establish the generality of the phenomenon of moral accounting I have described. Second, while this analysis has suggested how the "interest in disinterest" became a stake in colonial administrative politics—because it supplied a ready means of appealing to observers who did not possess knowledge of the detail of administration—it did not trace out the consequence of this form of politics for the subsequent history of the colonial administrative field. Further work might, for example, examine how this emergent form of recognition affected the shape of indigenous politics, or perhaps distorted or foreclosed lines of appeal that had previously been open during administrative struggles.

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