

“A State In Disguise of a Merchant?”

The English East India Company as a Strategic Action Field, ca. 1763-1834

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Abstract

This paper considers the East India Company's emergence as a territorial power from the 1760s until the revocation of most of its commercial functions in 1834. While this period has been a key episode for historians of the British Empire and of South Asia, social scientists have struggled with the Company's ambiguous nature. In this article, I propose that a profitable way to grasp the Company's transformation is to consider it as a global strategic action field. This perspective clarifies two key processes in the Company's transition: the enlargement of its territorial possessions; and the increased exposure of its patrimonial network to intervention from British metropolitan politics. To further suggest the utility of this analytic perspective, I synthesize evidence from a various sources, including data concerning the East India Court of Directors and the career histories of Company servants in two of its key administrative regions, Bengal and Madras, during this period of transition.

...the India Company became to be what it is, a great Empire carrying on subordinately (under the public authority), a great commerce. It became that thing which was supposed by the Roman Law so unsuitable, the same power was a Trader, the same power was a Lord...In fact, [the Company] is a State in Disguise of a Merchant, a great public office in disguise of a Countinghouse...

--Edmund Burke, 1788

Introduction

Within the history of the British empire, and indeed in social-scientific understandings of state formation, the United Company of Merchants Trading to the East Indies, or English East India Company (hereafter also “the Company” or “English Company”) occupies a troubling position. From the standpoint of the history of the British empire, the Company’s history—lasting more than two and a half centuries, from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth—spans the unprecedented expansion of the British empire in the 17th and 18th centuries as well as the notorious turn from its “first,” largely European-settlement based colonialism, to its “second,” largely subjugating and non-European imperialism (Harlow 1952). Considered from the standpoint of state-formation theory, meanwhile, the Company stands as a “state-within-a-state,” that is, a kind of delegated sovereignty that commonly has been folded into a “national style” of imperialism or else subsumed into larger imperial projects. These approaches obliquely express a problem that Edmund Burke noted in the epigram: was the Company a state or merchant? Was it a commercial enterprise or a sovereign? The Company had elements of both, and recent scholarship has pointed out that the blending of commerce and sovereignty was far less problematic in early modernity than today (e.g., Erikson 2014; Stern 2011). Yet it is also true that the Company itself transformed profoundly over its history—from predominantly firm-like and commercial to predominantly state-like and political—as did key categories that its servants used to identify and understand their own activities and justify their behavior to one another and to outsiders. It is this transition in the Company’s nature that this article seeks to clarify.

It is a challenging task to analyze the Company’s transition without relying on critical moments of fundamental change or revelation of its latent “true” nature. Instead, in this article I suggest that the Company can be taken as a strategic action field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Steinmetz 2007, 2008)—that is, as a space wherein its servants, shareholders, and Directors vied for political power, social status, and economic profit while also struggling over the appropriate “rules of the game” governing their behavior—which spanned Britain and India. This framing also implies that the Company’s behavior was not caused primarily by events in London or Calcutta, but rather resulted from efforts to control and coordinate events along the whole length of the Company’s reach. Moreover, I suggest that the Company’s transition towards sovereign, territorial behavior in the second half of the eighteenth century emerged from a complex internal struggle to cope with metropolitan and colonial pressures while the Company’s organizational “membrane” protecting it from incursions partially decayed in London but was relatively strengthened in India.

The core of this article provides some quantitative evidence for this decay and how its aftermath affected the modernization of the Company's internal administration. I first spell out how the question of the English Company's transition has been posed to begin with, then briefly explain the utility of thinking of the the Company as a strategic action field. Thereafter, I lay out its "embedding" among other strategic action fields in Britain and India, and use a variety of indices to trace its transformation.

Views of the Company in Social Science and in History

Approaching the East India Company's history, and especially its transition from a predominantly commercial to a predominantly territorial entity, stretches modern explanatory and analytic categories near to their breaking point. Indeed, a key problem is that its very nature seems to shift over its history, making the selection of appropriate comparisons difficult. Is it like other merchant trading companies, other European empires, or other parts of the British Empire? Grappling with this question has left social scientists and historians casting a schizophrenic gaze at the Company's nature and transition. Indeed, when looking at the emergence of British territorial power in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries more generally, two intertwined questions about the Company's historical role stand out in sharp relief: how exactly did the Company transition from a predominantly commercial enterprise (albeit with many state-like features) to a territorial empire (albeit with major commercial functions remaining in place until 1834); and what role did the Company's organization and political relationships play in this transition?

--Table 1 About Here--

As Table 1 suggests, and this section seeks to demonstrate, the way that scholars have grappled with this problem can be categorized according to whether they strike a *coherentist* or *incoherentist* pose towards the Company's transition. For coherentist scholars, the Company's behavior—and its territorial transition—can be explained either because of the Company's changing role in the British empire and imperial economy, or because ideologically- or psychologically-motivated actors were able to dominate the Company's policy. Thus, on a large scale, for example in Cain and Hopkins' monumental treatise on the British Empire, the East India Company's accumulation of territory in India during the second half of the eighteenth century is coherently expresses an emerging alliance between new and old elites in Britain:

The emerging but still incomplete alliance between land and money in eighteenth-century England created a state that centred power on landed property and funded it by means of a

fiscal system that was designed to support privilege without provoking discontent on a scale sufficient to overturn it. These aims, and the values that accompanied them, were extended to India: power was to be founded ultimately on the land, and revenue became and remained the central preoccupation of policy, the more so because India's role was to be that of a tributary province...The East India Company was undoubtedly the most impressive overseas manifestation of the alliance between land and finance in the eighteenth century (Cain and Hopkins 1993:279).

When translated onto the plane of the Company's organizational politics, this view usually assumes an ideological coherence to administrative views of Indian policy or dwells on the motivations and personalities of particular colonial officials—particularly Governors of the Company's presidencies or Governors-General of India. Consider, for example, a recent major account of the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India:

By the time Hasting returned to London in 1785, he had changed the fundamental nature of Company rule in India. He had, in fact, established the foundations of the colonial state, setting up structures that were refined by Cornwallis and then appropriated by Wellesley for the administration of the next phase of imperial conquest (Dirks 2009:209–210).

Within this mode of explaining the Company's territorial transition, a single figure has the power not only to bend the Company's policy to his will, but also to alter the “fundamental nature” of empire's structure.¹

If the coherentist view overemphasizes the homogeneity of British imperial and Company activities, the *incoherentist* view pushes in the opposite direction. On the large scale, this view suggests that in fact there was no overarching logic to British imperial or colonial expansion, and instead expansion was driven by a multitude of different interests both in various colonies and the metropole. By this view, then, the “official mind” guiding colonial policy from the metropole, had no overarching vision. Instead, as a scholar of the nineteenth and twentieth century British Empire puts it,

The starting point is to recognise that, as in earlier periods, the initiative for British imperial expansion rarely if ever lay with governments, ministers and officials in London. The Colonial Office, remarked one ardent unofficial imperialist, could not be a creative force: it was 'the “governor” of the steam-engine, not the boiler' (Darwin 2009:89)

This view places the agency of imperial expansion on the periphery, and casts India, as it was

1 This kind of account appears frequently in studies of the eighteenth century Company, as it provides the benefit of focusing empirical investigation and disciplining narratives to a manageable scale. For another example, consider the extraordinary weight given to Robert Clive's actions between his activities in Southern India in the 1740s (Dodwell 1920) to his later Governorship of Bengal and British political activities (Bence-Jones 1974; Edwardes 1966; Forrest 1918; Harvey 1998; Lenman and Lawson 1983; Philips 1948).

famously put, as having been conquered in “a fit of absence of mind” (Seeley 1891:8). Like the coherentist view, the incoherentist position has specific implications for the organizational politics of the Company, namely that by the second half of the eighteenth century it had become internally ungovernable. As the author of a textbook of on Indian history puts it,

...British government policy would often be at variance with that of the Company’s London director, London directives (if still relevant by the time they reaches India) would often be ignored by the Company’s senior administration in Calcutta, and Calcutta’s interests were often flouted by the subsidiary administrations in Madras and Bombay. Coherent policies are hard to distinguish; it was the ad hoc and reactive nature of British expansion which convinced so many that dominion was fortuitous (Keay 2010:343).

Within this incoherentist approach, accounts of the eighteenth century Company focus on the fragile political coalitions assembled among Company servants in India (e.g., Marshall 1976), among Company Directors in London and between the Directorate and different factions of the British Government (e.g., Philips 1961; Sutherland 1952), and among British administrators as they attempted to construct a workable approach to practically governing India (Travers 2007; Jon E. Wilson 2011, Nicholas H. Wilson 2011).

Both the coherentist and incoherentist views have the benefit of analytic clarity and the virtue of simplifying the Company’s complex history for the purposes of causal explanation, but when taken in their extreme forms, each also risks distorting important historical factors at work in the Company’s transition. Coherentist views risk exaggerating the Company’s ability to coordinate its action across the six-month one-way journey from London to India and taking an explicit, discursive understanding of actors’ policy goals and personal motivations. Moreover, by emphasizing the ability of individuals or small groups of ideologically-motivated people to alter the course of the Company’s history, these coherentist approaches diminish the importance of conflict within the Company and significant moments when the Company’s course could have been different. Finally, coherentist views of the Company’s history tend also to analytically diminish the behavior of these historical “losers” of within-Company struggles as simply self-interested or cynical political operatives.

On the other hand, incoherentist views struggle with the “key” moment when the Company’s transition to territorial empire (and consequently its decisive tack away from commercial endeavours) became institutionally “locked in” or causally inevitable. Was it the beginning of military competition between the French and British in Southern India in the 1740s (Dodwell 1920)? The battle of Plassey, when Company forces managed to defeat an evenly-matched coalition of indigenous opponents (Bayly 1988; Marshall 1987)? Was it the acquisition of administrative power in Bengal by the Company, in the form of the *diwani*, or was it the

assumption of direct administrative power sweeping aside Mughal officials (Marshall 1997)? Was it with the ascension of self-consciously imperial Governors-General like the Marquess Wellesley and his famous assertion that he was a “dreadful tyrant” (Dundas, Wellesley, and Ingram 1970)? Or was it even later, in the aftermath of the Sepoy uprising of 1857, when Company and British Imperial policy shifted decisively to viewing Indians as culturally and institutionally different from the British (Metcalf 1994)? And, on the domestic side, when and how did the British state's authority over Company affairs begin or strengthen decisively? Did it always have such power, via its ability to grant and revoke the Company's monopoly charter; did its involvement deepen with the Company's increasing financial entanglement with the British treasury; or was it one of the multitude of legislative Acts which altered the statutory relationship between the two bodies (some of which are summarized in Table 2)?

--Table 2 About Here--

Of course, few recent works of history instantiate pure incoherentist or coherentist positions. Instead, most provide insightful readings of the Company's history, and work hard to represent the full complexity of its transition to a territorial power, emphasizing the complex conjunctures of events that pushed and pulled the Company into territorial power in South Asia and diminished its organizational independence in Britain.² Yet to express such complexity, these accounts generally push deep into the particularity of the Company's history, leaving aside questions of broader generalizability and comparison of the Company's territorial transition. In other words, to balance the analytic impulse to simplify, compare and generalize with the historical imperative to accurately represent the relevant detail and context of the Company's transition to a territorial power still requires a supple analytic and explanatory vocabulary. Given the foregoing discussion of the coherentist and incoherentist positions, this vocabulary should achieve three core goals. First, it should grasp the variability of the Company's boundaries—that while the Company seemed like a recognizably “modern” formal organization, its precise boundaries, sovereign reach, legitimate organizational powers, and indeed its very organizational identity was variable during its history. Second, it should encompass the variability of the Company's internal organization, because while there were periods when the Company indeed operated like a precursor of modern bureaucracies, at other periods its different internal stakeholders—Directors and shareholders in Britain, and Governors and minor servants in India—were consequentially disjointed from one another. Put differently, coherence was a potentially-fleeting organizational achievement for the Company, and its presence or absence should be an empirical question, not an analytic assumption. Third and finally, building from these first

2 See Bayly (1990), Furber (1948:esp. 321–323), Marshall (1987), Stern (2011:esp. 212–214), and Sen (1998, 2002) for particularly stellar and searching examples of this conjunctural history.

two desiderata, this vocabulary should be able to recognize that a key part of the Company's transition came from its efforts to control action, and, by extension, its own “external” environment and survival, in *both* South Asia and Britain. Consequently, its behavior cannot be reduced to either location, but rather is caused by the relationship between them.

Strategic Action Fields: The Company As A Russian Doll

The challenge in grasping the Company’s territorialization in the late eighteenth century, then, is a matter of distinguishing the motors of its organizational behavior while recognizing that it was semi-independent from British control and also a formal organization that contained a semi-coherent space of conflict among administrators. This section outlines a useful analytic vocabulary to do so: that of strategic action fields.

This vocabulary, which originates at the intersection of social movements theory and neoinstitutional thought, derives from relationalism (Emirbayer 1997; Erikson 2013) and defines a strategic action field 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 rules governing legitimate action in the field” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:9). The structure of strategic action fields’ relationships to one another is perhaps the central syntax of this vocabulary, since these relationships transmit crucial resources from one strategic action field to another and also provide avenues for actors in one strategic action field to exert influence on the behavior of the actors in another strategic action field. In some cases, these relationships may be “horizontal,” with no one strategic action field clearly providing all resources or dominating the behavior of others; in other cases, such as formal organizations like the English Company,³ the relationship of dependence and domination among so strong among strategic action fields that they are embedded within one another like “Russian dolls” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:60) under the larger formal boundaries of the organization (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:esp. 64–68). Given this dynamic set of links to other strategic action fields and its constitution by subsidiary strategic action fields of its own, any given strategic action field possesses a kind of dual embeddedness: it is both “shaped by dynamics ‘internal’ to the field and by events in a host of ‘external’ strategic action fields with which the field in question has very close and sometimes dependent ties” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:57–58). The internal structure of a given strategic action field, finally, therefore results, on the one hand, from the apparently “external” events which create the universe of action available to dominant actors within the strategic action field, and on the other hand from those dominant actors’ ability to

³ As Fligstein and McAdam note, “All collective actors...are themselves made up of strategic action fields” (2012:9).

stably reproduce their internal position by marshaling effective and legitimate resources to do so (Fligstein and McAdam 2012:96–97).

Although this vocabulary of strategic action fields appears abstract at first, it has two advantages when applied to the English Company. First, thinking of the East India Company as a strategic action field helps to “unpack” the Company's internal structure. For when it is viewed “externally” the English Company appeared to be a relatively homogeneous and coherent formal organization (especially for the early modern world!), in fact it was internally constituted by several subsidiary strategic action fields. Three of these were especially important in the decades just prior to its territorial transition (essentially between the period when the Company was unified with its competitor at the beginning of the eighteenth century and Peace of Paris ending the Seven Years War in 1763).⁴ In London, the Company's affairs were guided by two key bodies. Its Court of Directors, constituted by twenty-four elected stockholders and responsible for the Company's financial and organizational policy and for overseeing its commercial strategy and affairs in India through subcommittees like the Committee on Correspondence (with British agents in India) and its Secret Committee (directing what would normally be thought of as affairs of state like treaty negotiations with Indian rulers). Meanwhile, the personnel serving on the Court of Directors could be replaced and the policies it chose to pursue could, until the 1770s, be overridden by the Company's Court of Proprietors, sometimes loosely called the “General Court” after its meetings to debate Company policy and elect Directors. Until the Company's internal affairs grew increasingly contentious with news of the Battle of Plassey in 1757, General Courts were usually dedicated to re-electing the “house list” to the Court of Directors and of little public consequence, and the Company's affairs only came into the public eye occasionally when its perceived role in British state finance was at stake (through its complicated fiscal relationship to the state as both a creditor and debtor) and when its charter came up for periodic parliamentary renewal. Finally, both the Courts of Directors and Proprietors had hands in controlling the behavior of Company agents in India, whether they were the Governors or Factors of the Company's various trading posts or lowly “writers” charged with copying Company correspondence in triplicate. These agents were tightly organized in individual trading depots, where the most senior Company officer was charged with keeping order, and each of the Company's “presidencies” operated semi-autonomously from the others and with only retrospective censure possible from London.⁵

4 See Sutherland (1947, 1952) for good discussions of the Company's domestic structure during this period, and Bowen (1991) for its tumultuous course during the 1760s and 1770s. More recently, a spate of excellent new work has refocused attention on the Company's internal administrative politics in the second half of the eighteenth century (Leonard 2010, 2014; Vaughn 2009)

5 For an excellent overview of the Company's accountability structure before and after the reforms of Pitt's

From the perspective of strategic action fields, the Company structure thus had three gross distinctions that appear familiar today: executives, guided by shareholders, directing agents in the field who were conducting the organization's commercial affairs. Yet pushing the strategic action field imagery further yields two complications for thinking about the company that are less familiar. First, each of the constitutive strategic action fields within the Company further decomposed during its history. The Court of Directors, for example, famously grew increasingly divided among competing factions in the crucial two decades following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 (see esp. Leonard 2014; Sutherland 1947, 1952), and thereafter split among competing commercial and political “interests” until at least 1834 (Philips 1961). Different factions were also evident in the Court of Proprietors and could be mobilized to push the Company's overall policy in different directions. The practice of “splitting” voting stock just prior to Director's elections was used for this purpose and became increasingly common in the 1760s and was only forbidden in 1773 (Bowen 1991, 2006). And there was further little guarantee that Company servants in India would put coordinated policy above internal factional disputes or, indeed, even bother to coordinate their behavior in the first place.⁶

Beyond this internal decomposition of the Company's strategic action fields, the perspective adopted here also draws our attention to the membrane that held the Company together overall as an organization. Here, of course, the boundaries of the Company was defined by its charter from the Crown and Parliament, the “covenants” signed by its servants prior to their departure for India, and the fiduciary obligations the Company held to its shareholders (and the legal consequences of ignoring that obligation). Yet in another sense, these boundaries appear less sharp when we ask how exactly the Company mobilized people and resources across them from other adjacent Strategic Action Fields.

In Britain, for example, the Company had to marshal capital, the political privileges necessary to maintain its chartered monopoly, favorable tax status from the government, and skilled agents to act on its behalf in India. As has so admirably traced in close detail (especially by Bowen 2006; and Sutherland 1952), maintaining these flows of resources meant embedding the Company deeply in the world of elite eighteenth century British politics, even

India Act in 1784, see Breitmeyer (1984:27). For the organization of the Company's Indian factories prior to its territorialization, see Spear (1963).

6 This state of disorder among the Company's presidencies in India became especially evident at times of crisis. Thus, for example, cohorts of administrators were referred to in the popular press during the 1760s as self-interested “factions,” (see, e.g., the reference to the “Bombay faction’s” interference with Court of Directors elections in Anon. 1764:7), and, even more troublingly, when the Madras council overthrew its Governor, George Pigot, at the height of the “Nawab of Arcot's Debts” scandal (Gurney 1968), the Governor General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, refused to intervene despite his explicit authority to do so (Dodwell 1925)

if few members of Parliament and the public at large were familiar with Company affairs in India prior to the 1760s. Practically, this meant that the eighteenth century British array of strategic action fields was connected by deeply patrimonial links (similar to the Dutch East India Company, see Adams 1996, 2007): large gentry, merchant, and aristocratic families had members linking the British commercial, political, and imperial world in the eighteenth century. In the case of India, to take only a few examples, the Johnstone family linked Scottish enlightenment intellectuals, Atlantic planters, Company Directors, and members of Parliament (Rothschild 2011), Robert Clive's ambitious father relentlessly promoted his exploits to the British ministry (Bence-Jones 1974), and the colonial administrator Thomas Munro went to India because of the failure of his father's Atlantic tobacco business (Stein 1989), and more broadly, London, the Caribbean, American colonies, and Indian commerce were linked together by a network of semi-private merchants with family connections to the Company (Mentz 2005).

In India, meanwhile, the Company's constituent strategic action fields also abutted and depended upon adjacent fields. Most basically, the Company required concessions from Indian rulers (varying from the Mughal emperor to local Nawabs and Rajahs empowered as the Mughal empire began to fall apart after Aurangzeb's death in 1707) to establish forts, factories, and trade with Indian producers on favorable terms (Marshall 1987:esp. Ch. 1). Especially in an environment of escalating competition among European trading companies with footholds on the subcontinent (Dodwell 1920; Furber 1976), Company officials carefully monitored their political relationships with Indian rulers, usually establishing the equivalent of diplomatic embassies in the rulers' courts. But beyond explicit Company trade and overt political discourse, Company officials were also pulled into Indian society through a variety of other channels, above all the "country trade" which allowed Company servants to supplement their meager salaries by trading within South Asia (Erikson 2014; Furber 1948; Hejeebu 2005; Watson 1980). Among Company servants, this trade commonly occurred through Indian middlemen called "banians" or "dubashes" (Neild-Basu 1984) and was extremely widespread during the second half of the Eighteenth Century, with virtually every Company servant taking part in one respect or another (Marshall 1976). And while the British community in India never became creole like the Portuguese had (Ghosh 1970), as the British began assuming territorial power in India with the assumption of the *diwani* at the treaty of Allahabad in 1765, worries about the "corrupting" influence of various Indian cultures and fortunes won on the subcontinent raised significant alarms in Britain, to the point that returning servants were excoriated as "nabobs" and referred as "our execrable banditti" (Holzman 1926; Lawson and Phillips 1984; Nechtman 2010). These concerns were amplified, moreover, by the fact that the Company often allowed seemingly unscrupulous "adventurers" to hang around at its organizational edges in India, since such characters often possessed

crucial skills and Indian contacts that made the Company's presence more efficacious.⁷

The views of this link between Company officials and Indian society contrasted sharply from “inside” and “outside” the Company's strategic action field. From “inside,” among long-time servants and Directors who were familiar with the Company's procedures, the EIC's links to Indian society, politics, and commerce fed an early-modern strategy combining personal “fortune and integrity” (Nightingale 1985), leading both to prosperity for the Company and a comfortable personal fortune at home. As one historian aptly summarizes the traditional self-understanding of Company servants,

A man should if he survived (as many of course did not) make a considerable fortune in the Company's service, but only if he had worked his twelve or fifteen years through the ranks and given the Company the benefit of his industry and acquired experience. While making this fortune through the recognized channels of perquisite, private trade, and money-lending, he need not reject presents from wealthy and important Indians, but he ought to do so if in return he had to sacrifice his employers' pecuniary interests, and he must not permit his private concerns to monopolize his attention to the detriment of his public duties (Sutherland 1952:53).

Yet as those “outside” the Company's organization examined officials' links with Indian society, they more often saw corruption and exploitation. As the Company's behavior was described by characters in Samuel Foote's 1776 popular satirical play *The Nabob*,

TOUCHIT. ...Why, here are a body of merchants that bed to be admitted as friends, and take possession of a small spot in a country, and carry on a beneficial commerce with the inoffensive and innocent people, to which they kindly give their consent...Upon which...we cunningly encroach, and fortify by little and by little, till at length, we growing too strong for the natives, we turn them out of their lands, and take possession of their money and jewels...[Company servants] are but a little better than Tarars and Turks (1799:308).

Taken as a whole, examining the Company through the analytic lens provided by strategic action fields suggests that the Company's organization is much more complex than is usually taken into account in both internal and external respects. Externally, by the middle of the eighteenth century it was deeply embedded into “neighborhoods” of other strategic action fields. In Britain and Europe, its investors, the British government, and the larger politically- and commercially-aware public stood capable of affecting the Company's behavior—and even survival. And in India, the Company faced other, competing merchant trading companies, precariously-affiliated indigenous rulers, and a political and commercial system that rewarded deeper involvement by Company officials. Internally, the Company was made up of a tangle

⁷ Three examples of type are Paul Benfield (Moles 2000), John Macpherson (deGategno 2004), and William Bolts (Kuiters 2002).

of competing interests contained loosely within three strategic action fields—the Court of Directors, officials in India, and shareholders in the General Court.

Considering the Company as a strategic action field attempting to manage its embeddedness in both of these “neighborhoods” helps recast the approach to its territorial transition. To the extent that the Company could balance the need to maintain flows of resources from both these neighborhoods as an early-modern hybrid, it could continue to operate as it had. This continuation, however, paradoxically depended on the Company's strategic action field being semi-insulated from surrounding strategic action fields in both Britain and India. To the extent that its officials could pursue their “fortune and integrity” while serving the Company; to the extent that the Court of Directors could manage its relationship with its shareholders and Parliament in relative quiet; to the extent that Factors and Governors in India could control their staffs by managing the Company's seniority system; and to the extent that EIC officials could relate to Indian merchants and rulers in ways that preserved the balance between Company and personal interest, the EIC could persist. But, as the next section suggests, the Seven Years War acted as a massive exogenous shock that eroded the insulation protecting Company operations in both Britain and India and, through its ongoing reverberations, permanently transformed the Company's character.

Indices of Transformation

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) formed a watershed in the Company's history indirectly, because of how it restructured the Company's relationship with its neighboring strategic action fields in Britain and India. In India, the indirect effect of the war was huge, for it decisively injected the Company into South Asian politics as a military force after Robert Clive's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. This victory empowered Company officials in Bengal to be kingmakers, in the sense that they gained a *de facto* veto of who would sit as the Nawab of Bengal. After 1765, moreover, when the Company again defeated a coalition of Indian opponents, the Company's relationship with the Mughal empire was formalized by the grant of the *diwani*, or right to collect territorial revenue (and technically created the Company as a vassal of the Mughal emperor) and remit only a part of the huge revenues to the Mughal emperor, keeping the difference as tribute (Dodwell 1920; Marshall 1987). Moreover, the EIC's power position meant that it had to rapidly expand its staff in India, and several of its officials began abusing the Company's new position by demanding personally favorable trading concessions (e.g., Kuiters 2002). In Britain, meanwhile, the war's huge cost—and the extent to which the British state indirectly subsidized the Company in India by providing naval support for it against the French—meant that ministers cast a jealous eye towards the Company's rumored profits from the *diwani* (Bowen 1988).

News of the Company's *diwani*—and of severe political instability in India more generally—meant that the relationship between the Court of Directors and the General Court became much more contentious during and after the Seven Years War (Bowen 1991; Leonard 2014). Figures 1 and 2 provide an illustration of this phenomenon. As figure 1 shows, until 1764 the EIC's General Court met the statutory minimum number of times, five, annually, while in the crucial transformative years between 1765 and 1775, and particularly in the particularly contentious years of 1767, 1769, and 1773, it met well above thirty times a year. These General Court meetings featured heavily contested elections for the Directorate as well as fierce debate about how the *diwani* and Company territorial revenues should be disposed of, as well as efforts to use EIC statutory control over the remittances of officials' private fortunes as a means of regulating their political behavior within the Company and upon their return (Leonard 2010; Sutherland 1952).⁸ Such contentious elections, in turn, supercharged the process of “stock-splitting” used to create voting coalitions in the General Court. Stock splitting was put to two purposes in the 1760s: radicals and opponents of the Directorate who wanted to quickly disburse the revenues promised by the *diwani* through high dividend payments; and a more conservative Directorate that feared such behavior would bankrupt the Company (Bowen 1991; Sutherland 1952). As Figure 2 shows, between 1763 and 1773⁹ the number of stock transfers—which can be taken as a proxy for efforts to create support in the General Court prior to elections—skyrocketed, and the dividend granted by the Company almost doubled.

--Figure 1 and Figure 2 About Here--

This contention between the Court of Directors and the Company's shareholders in the General Court, unsurprisingly, drew the attention of the British public at large, as reported in Figure 3. For the whole of the eighteenth century prior to the acquisition of the *diwani*, there had never been more than thirty publications a year concerning the Company's affairs in Britain, but after the Seven Years War attention to the Company's affairs increased markedly. Publications in the popular press ranged from histories of the “revolution” in the Company's Indian position (e.g., Watts 1760) to officials' defenses of their personal conduct while carrying out company affairs (e.g., Clive 1764; Johnstone 1766) to explicit prescriptions for EIC policy (Anon. 1767) and even to a dueling series of weekly pamphlets published at the height of the dividend struggles within the Company (Anon 1766a, Anon 1766b). The

8 This was most famously the case with Laurence Sullivan's threat to have the Company take over Robert Clive's jagir, or prebendal annuity, which he had been awarded by a “grateful” Nawab of Bengal (Lenman and Lawson 1983).

9 1773 and Lord North Regulating Act marked the end of several spasmodic Parliamentary efforts to reform stock splitting (Bowen 2006:70).

tone of these publications was often strikingly polemical and moralized the behavior of Company officials in India. To take a typical example of this rhetoric, in *A Vindication of Mr. Holwell's Character*, the authors defended John Zephaniah Holwell, an official who had written about the rise of Company power in Bengal, by painting his attackers in the following way:

The title page of this Pamphlet says it is wrote "By a *Gentleman* long resident in India;" but surely no Gentleman could fall so much below that character, as this anonymous author does, in low personal abuse and scurrility; though the obvious venom of the heart that dictates through the whole, will defend against its influence and intended impressions;—We rather think, from the mixed style, that this production is the joint efforts of *two small geniuses*; the *one*, pert, cox-comical, affecting wit and metaphor; the *other*, of meagre, dusky aspect, *stalking* forth with pompous diction! founding epithets! long-winded, metaphorical bombast! and tedious declamations!—From the *bilious* complection of this Shakespear's Cassius, what can flow, but envy, rancour, and *bitterest reflections*? Whether these *things* clubb'd their geniuses, or transfused each to other his spirit for this paltry talk, is not very material;—none but *they*, or *such-like*, could surely be capable of *such* a performance (Anon. 1764:3, spelling and emphasis original).

--Figure 3 About Here--

While such furious public discourse surrounding the Company in Britain intensified, the Court of Directors itself was undergoing significant changes. In the disputes of the 1760s, both the conservatives and radicals in the Court of Directors mobilized support from outside traditional Company ranks, and especially by invoking Parliamentary support onto both sides of Company elections (Bowen 1991, 2006; Leonard 2014; Sutherland 1952). This mobilization, in turn, elevated the importance of political connections both to Parliament and to officials service in India, as Figure 4 illustrates. As with previous Figures, the composition of Directorate swung violently between 1762 and 1773, with the number of Directors having served *only* in India at some point in their lives plummeting in favor of those who had either *only* served in Parliament at some point in their lives and those who had *both* been to India at some point and served in Parliament. Thus whereas in the exceptional year of 1762, there were no directors with only political or political and indian experience while over 40% of the directorate had only Indian experience, by 1769 those with Indian and Political experience (5 of 23) and only political experience (7 of 23) constituted a slim majority of the Court in total while only 2 Directors (Charles Boddam and William Webber) remained who had *only* Indian experience. In other words, in a trend that continued until at least the 1790s, the Court increasingly became an open battleground in the larger British political sphere, in which even resistance to external incursions into Company affairs required membership in the larger political field. Moreover, this erosion of the organizational independence of the Company's

senior leadership in London went hand in hand with Parliamentary attempts to more explicitly intervene in Company affairs.

--Figure 4 About Here--

The British government had sporadically sought to bring the Company in India under some kind of external control since the 1760s, with efforts ranging from the limited recognition of the rights of Indian rulers by George III in the Peace of Paris in 1763 to attempts to secure a share of the *diwani* in 1766 and 1767 to the appointment of Crown plenipotentiaries in 1769 (who died enroute) to the uncomfortable arrangement of Lord North's Regulating Act, in which a veteran of Company affairs in India, Warren Hastings, served as the first Governor General with a council populated by newcomers appointed through Parliamentary negotiation, most notably Philip Francis.¹⁰ Yet as this kind of arrangement proved increasingly unworkable, the Court of Directors and the Ministry worked out an arrangement: Governors and Governors-General would generally be appointed through negotiation between the Ministry and the Court of Directors but would henceforth be drawn from the pool of elite British semi-professional administrators outside the Company's ranks. This arrangement, begun with Lord Macartney's appointment in 1780 through a collaboration between Laurence Sullivan and the North ministry in the Director's election of 1780 (Sutherland 1952:351, 279), was eventually recognized more explicitly in Pitt's India Act of 1784.

--Table 3 About Here--

As illustrated by Table 3, this shift in the Company's appointment system meant a decisive change in the backgrounds of its Governors. Table 3 shows relevant demographic information for the Governors of each presidency in India immediately before and after the appointment of the first outside Governors.¹¹ The contrast between predecessors and successors is stark, especially when it comes to two dimensions: the age of Governors when they first arrived in India (which goes from 18 for the predecessors to 50.7 for the successors) and the total years of service in India (which falls from 26.7 years for predecessors to 7.7 years for successors). Together, these two facts suggest that the Company's senior leadership during the period of transition went from an internal seniority system to one based on the circulation of leadership

10 The relationship was so acrimonious that the two fought a duel (see Weitzman 1929:esp. letter 15f).

11 This transition did not take place in Bombay until the beginning of the nineteenth century, with appointment of Evan Nepean, but Bombay remained a relative administrative backwater during the crucial phase of the Company's territorial transition from the 1770s to the 1790s. Moreover, during this period of transition its administration was taken over by a relative interloper, Jonathan Duncan, who was appointed by Charles Cornwallis from Bengal as a reliable man.

in from elsewhere in the global British administrative scene.¹²

In practice, this shift in senior leadership meant a radical reworking of how Governors related to their own councils and framed their behavior. Consider the contrast between the complaints of insubordination lodged by Harry Verelst, a typical example of Governors prior to this administrative shift, and George Macartney, who was the first external Governor of Madras. Verelst, defending himself in London against the attacks of William Bolts, an unscrupulous adventurer whom Verelst had deported, the former Governor described insubordination among Company servants as a loss of the Company's traditional means of slowly achieving fortune through seniority:

The dissolution of government in Calcutta kept pace with that of the country. A general contempt of superiors, a habit of equality among all orders of men had obliterated every idea of subjection. To reclaim men from dissipation, to revive a general spirit of industry, to lead the minds of all from gaudy dreams of sudden-acquired wealth to a patient expectation of growing fortunes, were no less difficult in execution than necessary to the existence of the company. Large sums of money, obtained by various means, had enabled many gentlemen to return to Europe. This cause...occasioned a very quick succession in the service, which encouraged a forward spirit of independency, and produced a total contempt of public orders, whenever obedience was found incompatible with private interest (Verelst 1772:56–57).

But while Governors prior to the shift could rely on (or at least complain about the loss of) earlier internal means of official self-regulation, those arriving after the shift had no such foundation of experience within the Company. Accordingly, George Macartney confidently declared prior to his appointment that

He found that prudence and integrity, temper and perseverance seldom failed to surmount the difficulties of public stations, and those difficulties for which they are established; that local knowledge, which is necessary to men in eminent offices, is indeed either quickly acquired or easily supplied by inferior persons on the spot; not the report of an individual, bur compared and collected from many. Any one man's local knowledge must be so corrected, or it will be found both lame and blind. The public man becomes the impartial judge, who gathers from the witnesses of the facts, the truth of the evidence (Barrow and Macartney 1807:75–76).

But over the course of his five years in Madras (1781-1786) and two duels fought with

12 Both Charles Cornwallis and George Macartney were appointed not only because they desired the healthy remuneration the Governorships brought, but also because they both existed in the semi-periphery of the British political elite and had held Imperial appointments elsewhere. Cornwallis famously as a General during the American War of Independence (Wickwire and Wickwire 1980), and Macartney as a Governor of Grenada before its capture by the French and as a special diplomatic envoy to Russia (Barrow and Macartney 1807).

subordinates, Macartney had turned much more bitter, complaining of the “the universal Intrigue and Duplicity which prevail here thro’ every department” (Macartney 1950:10). And upon his return, even more remarkably because of the sharp contrast with which it stood to previous, contextualized justifications for administrative behavior, Macartney explained his own behavior in a modern, universalistic language which made him a servant of an abstract sense of disinterested, impersonal duty:

...when Major-general Stuart thought fit in January last...to send a letter...censuring, in unqualified expressions, my public conduct in relation to him, and contradicting my assertions, I help it sufficient to observe, that those persons to whom I was accountable for my public conduct, if any such there were, who entertained a doubt of it, would ever find me ready to explain it to their satisfaction; but that I was long resigned to the consequences of having fulfilled the duties of my station, and to be exposed to the contradiction and opposition of those individuals, of whose misconduct in my official capacity I had been obliged to take notice... (Barrow and Macartney 1807:600).

--Table 4 About Here--

As a final index of the transformation of the Company after the Seven Years War, the transition in the Company’s senior levels of administration was also met by significant shifts in the EIC’s labor market within its “covenanted” civil service after 1784, as shown in Table 4.¹³ Table 4 compiles statistics on three cohorts of Company servants’ careers, noting their length and changes in both location and type of employment. As with the Governors’ demographics, subordinate officials’ careers also change, but at different paces in Bengal and Madras. While the universe of possible appointments expanded in both presidencies—because both were incorporating new territory during the period measured—the structure of Madras’ administrative labor market remained relatively stable while Bengal’s became considerably more dynamic. For instance, in the 1781-2 and 1801-2 cohorts, Bengal and Madras civil servants changed the type of position they held—that is, whether their position was in the Company’s revenue, judicial, or commercial divisions—at about the same rate, between 0.13 and 0.15 times per year on average. However, in 1821-2, the rate of job-type changes jumps in Bengal to 0.31, meaning that a Bengal civil servant in that cohort changed jobs about once every three years, while in Madras the rate remained relatively low, at 0.17.¹⁴ Additionally, Bengal civil servants appear to change locations much more frequently than their Madras counterparts as time goes on: while the Madras statistics for mean job location changes per

13 As noted above, previous to the beginning of the 19th Century, Bombay remained a relatively trivial administrative unit within the Company (Nightingale 1970).

14 This measure corrects for the problem of right-hand censoring of the career records in Bengal, since it is a per-year measure. I am completing these career records with information from the relevant *East India Registers*.

year rises modestly across the three cohorts—as one might expect in times of territorial expansion—in Bengal the rate more than tripled, from 0.11 to 0.35 location changes per year on average, between the 1781-2 and 1821-2 cohorts. Taken together, these statistics suggest that beginning with the reforms of Pitt's India Act, the Company's service grew more recognizably modern and bureaucratic, but at different paces in different presidencies.

Conclusion

The argument presented here and evidence given to support it only scratches the surface of the Company's territorial transition as a transforming strategic action field. This perspective seems particularly fruitful because it helps us see both the Company's strength and fragility in the same framework. The Company was strong because its internal heterogeneity and structure spanning the globe allowed it to flexibly react to changes that could have swamped many other organizations and provided it with resources from many sources. Yet that same strength also made it difficult to cope with an equally large-scale event: the Seven Years War, which altered nearby strategic action fields in both Britain and South Asia and exposed internal company practices to unfamiliar eyes. And as this article has suggested, this altered ecology of strategic action fields in turn triggered a complex set of internal institutional reactions that, as they reverberated back and forth from London to Calcutta, shifted the Company to the path of recognizably modern territorial empire in India.

This perspective, however useful it may be, remains limited. It emphasizes the internal aspects of the Company's efforts to maintain its own organizational coherence, and privileges the struggle among officials within the Company's strategic action field to the comparative neglect of the Company's larger-scale functional role in the British empire and at the expense of some of the rich historical details illuminating the emergence of British power in India. Additionally, the institutional complexity of the Company's behavior leaves open the question of how to compare and generalize the processes discussed to other imperial, commercial, political, and cultural contexts. Yet at the same time, this view of the Company's transition suggests useful traction for further extension.

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Table 1. Approaches to the English East India Company's Territorialization		
	Coherentists	Incoherentists
Systemic view of empire	Empire had a national style or imperative, making colonial domination coherent; the East India Company's behavior can be folded into an appendage of British or capitalistic imperatives	No recoverable general logic to colonialism/empire; overarching purpose of British colonial domination difficult to discern
Particular view of EIC	There was a recoverable "official mind" to Indian colonial activities—its officials' behavior was guided by overarching ideological/economic motivations.	Company officials reacted to political, economic, and organizational challenges <i>ad hoc</i> ; poor coordination and strategy on the ground
Cause of EIC's rise to territorial power	Changing functional role in the British imperial system.	Pragmatic bargain among stakeholders domesticating the Company's affairs.
Potential drawbacks of approach	Difficulty explaining the locus of action and internal resistance/disagreement within Company	Search for a crucial moment when territorial empire became inevitable; loses sight of the layered nature of transition.

Table 2. Key Events and Legislative Interventions into EIC Affairs, 1760-1790

Year	Legislation	Details
1763	End of Seven Years War	End of formal hostilities between France and England (and their respective trading companies)
1764	Battle of Buxar	EIC military defeats combined forces of several indigenous states including those of the Nawab of Bengal and Mughal Emperor
1765	Treaty of Allahabad	EIC made <i>diwan</i> of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; makes Company technical vassal of Mughal emperor and responsible for collection of land revenues
1773	Lord North's Regulating Act	Creates office of Governor General, residing in Bengal, formally controlling other presidencies in India; significantly reforms EIC's electoral practices (after failed attempts in the 1760s)
1783	East India Bill	Failed attempt at direct Crown takeover of Company affairs in India causes loss of parliamentary control by the Fox-North coalition
1784	Pitt's India Act	Established Board of Control; forbids Court of Proprietors' Veto of Court of Directors' policy
1786	Charles Cornwallis' Appointment as Governor-General	Strengthens Governor-General's internal position over other presidencies and his own council
1788	Impeachment of Warren Hastings begins	Ongoing, if sporadic, seven-year Parliamentary debate concerning EIC governance in India led by Edmund Burke

Table 3. Presidency Governors Before and After Pitt's India Act of 1784

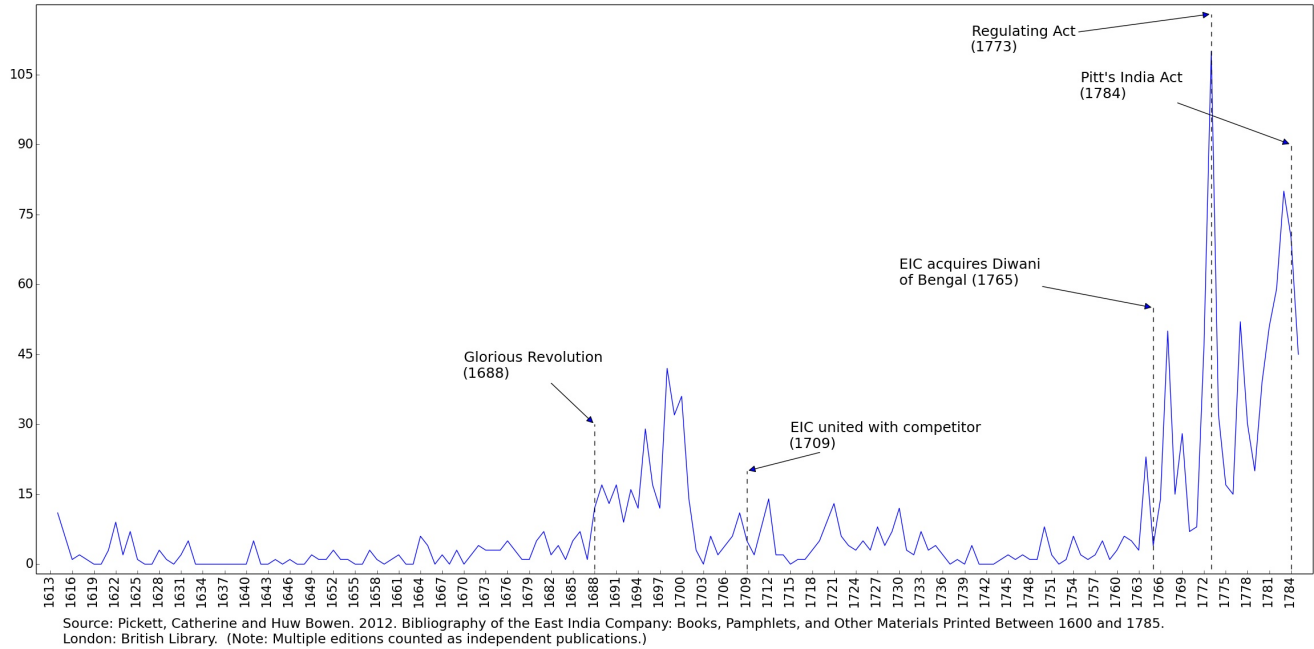
Province	Name	Born	Died	Age	Age When First In India	Years in India	% Life in India
Bengal	John Macpherson	1745	1821	76	22	12	0.16
	Charles Cornwallis	1738	1805	69	48	10	0.14
Madras	Thomas Rumbold	1736	1791	55	16	29	0.53
	George Macartney	1737	1806	69	44	5	0.07
Bombay	Jonathan Duncan	1756	1811	55	16	39	0.71
	Evan Nepean	1752	1822	70	60	8	0.11
Total	Predecessor	1746	1808	62	18	26.7	0.46
(Means)	Successor	1742	1811	69.3	50.7	7.7	0.11

Mobility Stats	1781-2		1801-2		1821-2	
	Bengal (N=29)	Madras (N=10)	Bengal (N=49)	Madras (N=20)	Bengal (N=37)	Madras (N=17)
% Ever Promoted	89.66	100.00	97.96	95.00	97.30	95.00
Mean Job Changes	5.86	4.50	8.29	5.50	7.59	7.29
Mean Job Changes per Year	0.27	0.28	0.34	0.24	0.59	0.29
Mean Time Each Job Held	3.64	3.57	2.94	4.15	1.69	3.45
Mean # of Location Changes	2.38	1.90	5.51	3.45	4.54	4.59
Average Location Changes per Year	0.11	0.11	0.23	0.15	0.35	0.18
Mean Time At Location	8.97	9.09	4.42	6.61	2.83	5.47
Mean Career Length in Years	21.34	17.00	24.35	22.80	12.86	25.12
Mean Job Type Changes	2.83	2.60	3.73	2.90	3.97	4.35
Mean Job Type Changes per Year	0.13	0.15	0.15	0.13	0.31	0.17
Right-Censored Records	0	0	5	0	25	0

Sources: Author's coding of career records in Prinsep, Charles C., *Record of Services of the honourable East India Company's civil service in the Madras presidency from 1741 to 1858* (1885) and Dodwell, Edward and James Samuel Miles, *Alphabetical list of the honourable East India Company's Bengal civil servants, from the year 1780...* (1839).

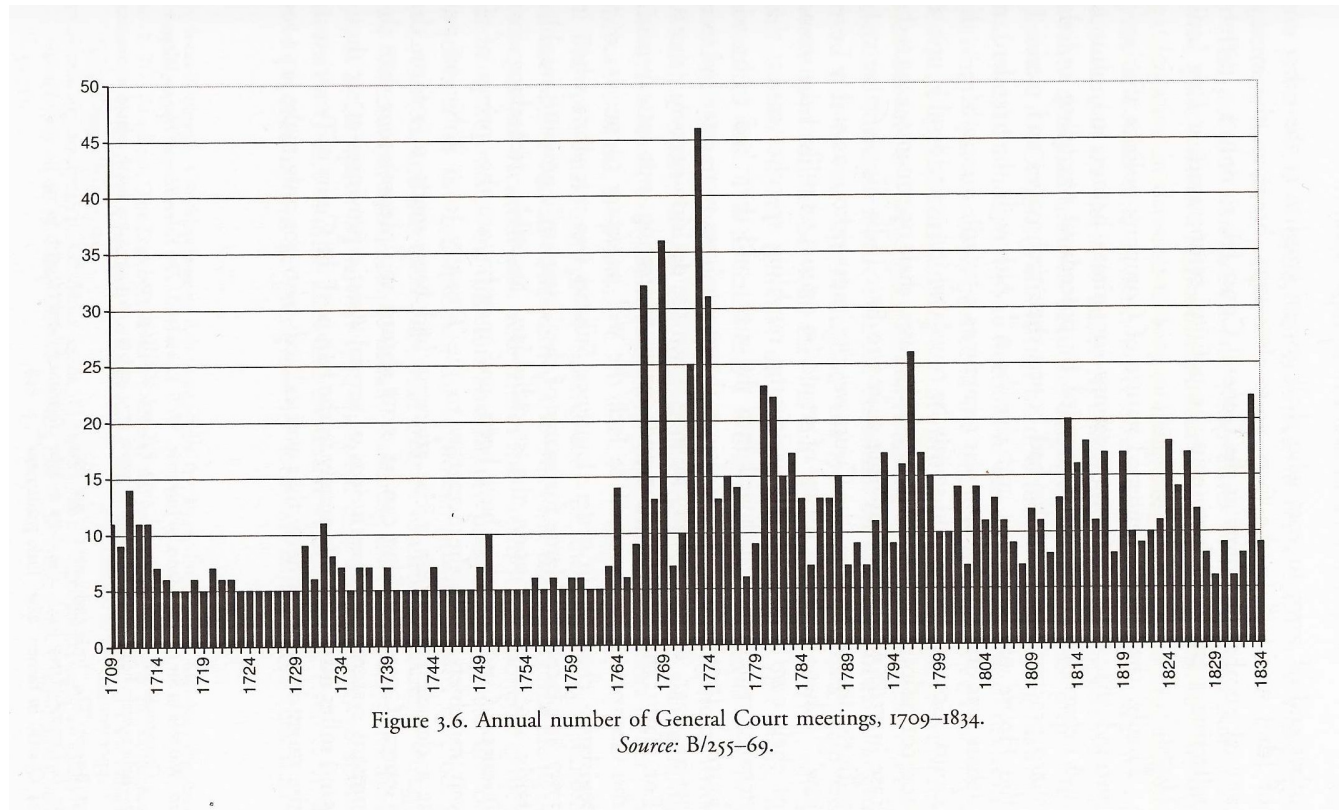
Figure 3. Publications concerning the East India Company, 1614-1785

Pamphlets Mentioning the East India Company, 1614-1785



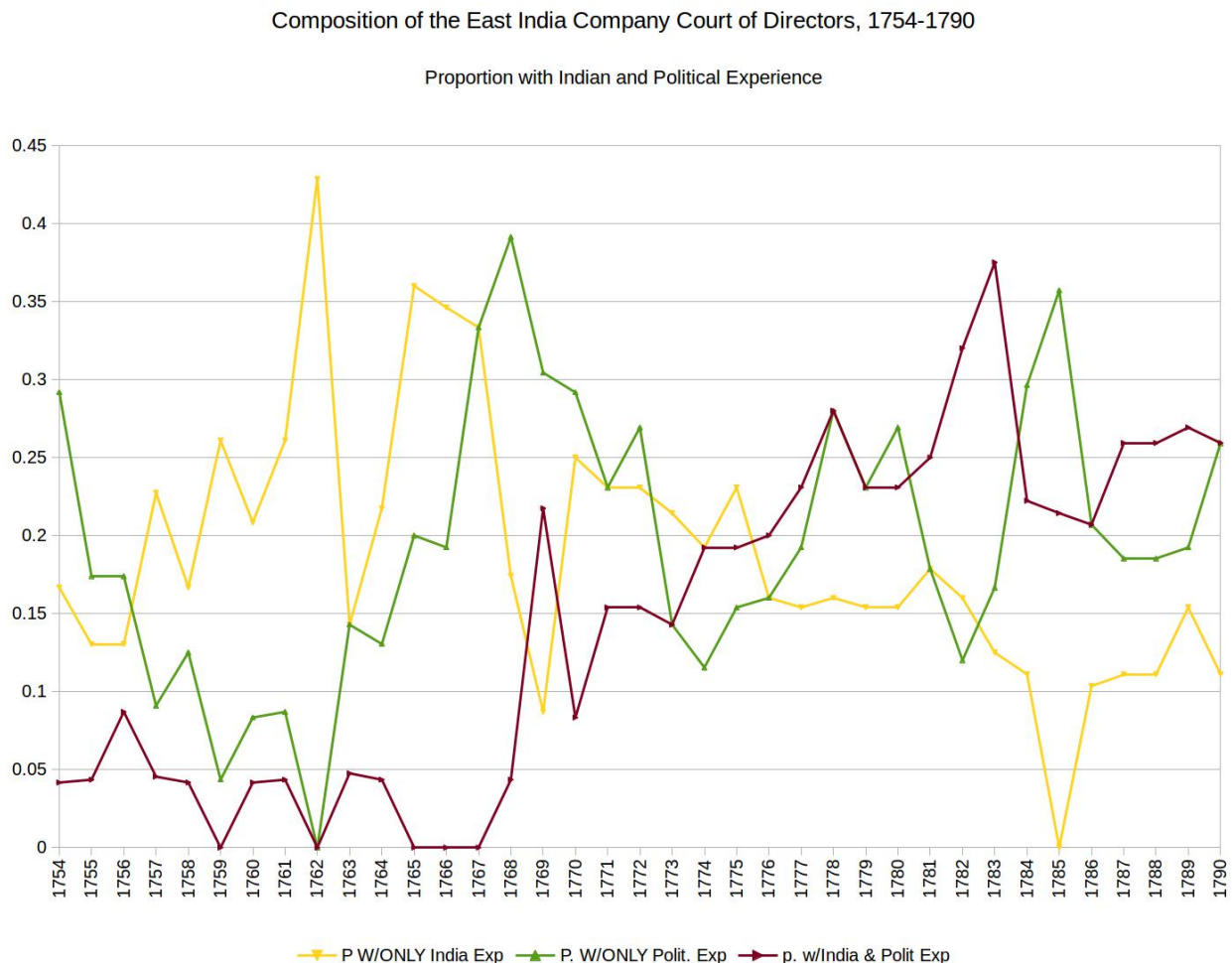
Source: Pickett, Catherine and H. V. Bowen, *Bibliography of the East India Company: Books, Pamphlets, and Other Materials Printed Between 1600 and 1785*. (Note: Multiple editions counted as independent publications.)

Figure 1. Frequency of General Court Meetings



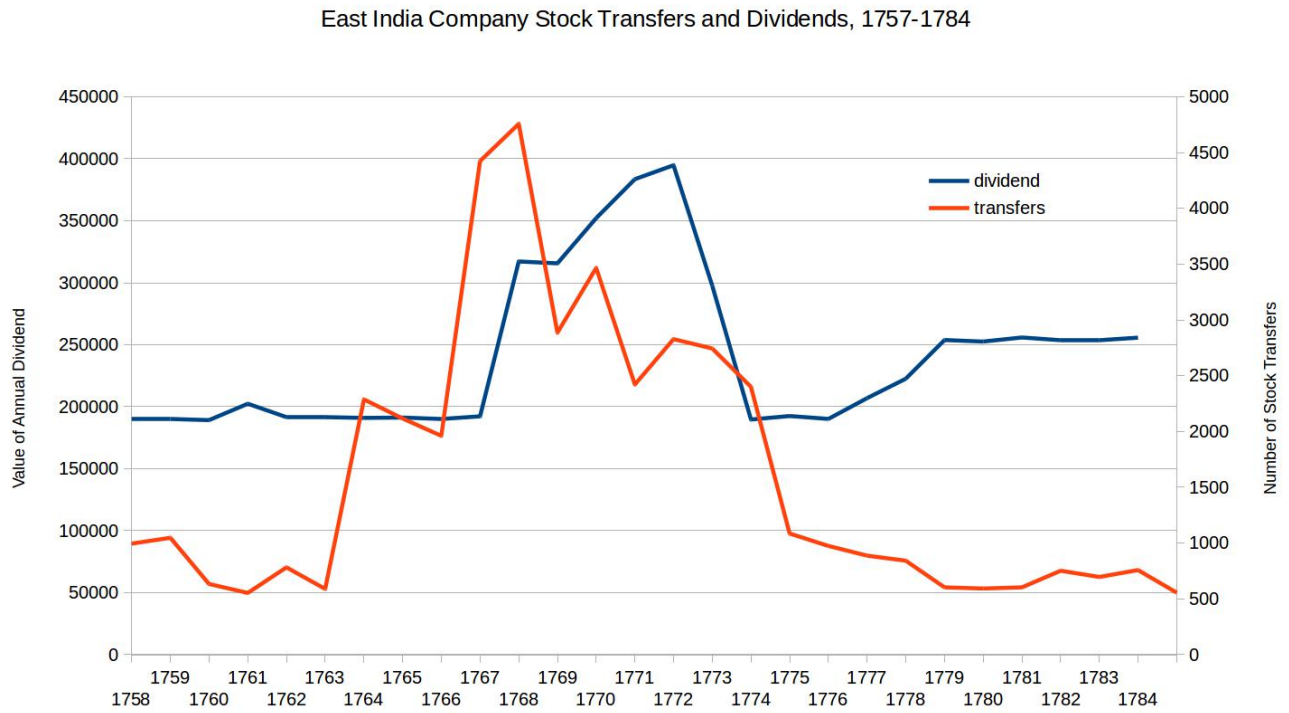
Source: Bowen, *The Business of Empire* (2006).

Figure 4. East India Company Court of Directors Composition, 1754-1790



Sources: J.G. Parker, *The Directors of the East India Company, 1754-1790* (1977); Cyril Philips, *The East India Company, 1784-1834* (1961); John Bourne, *The Civil and Military Patronage of the East India Company 1784-1858* (1977); the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (Buckland 1906).

Figure 2. English East India Company Dividends and Stock Transfers



Source: Database on East India Company: Trade and Domestic Financial Statistics, 1755-1838, H. V. Bowen, Principal Investigator (2007).