

Editorial Foreword

CONCEALMENT, DECEIT, AND THE HUMAN What is specific about humans? Johann Gottfried Herder thought religion was the uniquely human thing, while Heidegger was sure it was the ability to ponder one's own Being. Ernst Cassirer supposed it was the capacity for self-fashioning. In a famous essay from 1906, Georg Simmel offered a more surprising response. He called the capacity for secrecy one of humanity's greatest achievements since it requires the maintenance of interior mental worlds different from those of the immediate social and material context. Simmel was confident that deceit and occultation were distinctly human talents. Perhaps that assertion seems less secure now than it was in Simmel's time, and for multiple reasons, not least the ambiguity of what exactly constitutes the human in a time when animal life, on one side, and artificial intelligence, on the other, push the bounds of humanness into an ever-narrower slot. Under this rubric, both contributions consider secrecy, deceit, and the occult: one considering artificial intelligence, the other taking up animal life.

Courtney Handman's "Language at the Limits of the Human: Deceit, Invention, and the Specter of the Unshared Symbol," uses an unexpected comparison to revisit the limits of the human by examining deceit and secrecy, or unshared language. She compares the language of Tok Pisin as used by Christian converts in Papua New Guinea, and the new forms of English developed by certain artificial intelligence chatbots. In the former case, unshared language seems to register a bona fide religious subject able to engage in a relationship with God. In the latter, chatbots' secret language signals the possibility of more-than-human powers. Yet in both instances, opaque or concealed language indexes the edges of the human.

In "The Owl and the Occult: Popular Politics and Social Liminality in Early Modern South Asia," **Divya Cherian** leads us toward a different application of secrecy, namely its use as a political technology of non-elite actors, and a form of expertise that often strategically blurred the human-animal divide. In early modern South Asia, certain liminal animals (like owls) were seen as co-inhabitants of the same ontological world as humans, and for that reason as able to act in and on it, opening new vistas onto otherwise secret knowledge. Attempts to control occult practices involving liminal animals suggest at once their perceived danger to elites and their political potency for those kept on the margins of power. Cherian helps us see the central role of non-human animals in practices used to level the all-too-human proclivities for hierarchy.

ORIGAMI AND THE SIDES OF STATES In "Religion in the Folded City: Origami and the Boundaries of the Chronotope," **Robert P. Weller** and **Keping Wu** present a fascinating juxtaposition of folds and time, joined together through Bakhtin's now-famous intervention on the chronotope. He pointed out the ways in which, in literary works, time is always experienced in relation to particular places, and space is always

situated in time. Weller and Wu examine the limits of this idea by guiding readers to an industrial park in China where everything of the past—farms, villages, temples, graves—was bulldozed and buried, covered with a completely new urban development erected on the surface. Where is the past now? And when is the new industrial park? They propose the figure of “the fold” to suggest ways that lived chronotopes constantly meet each other, like distant corners of a piece of paper, suddenly joined. In ritual practices involving spirit possession, for example, distant time-spaces are pulled into contiguity, creating novel ways of being situated in history, as a series of interfolding time-spaces, the time-space buried below with the time-space of the urban development above.

In “German Lessons: Comparative Constitutionalism, States’ Rights, and Federalist Imaginaries in Interwar India,” **Sarath Pillai** indirectly takes up an analogous project. He presents an alternative genealogy of constitutional thought in India by showing how German imperial traditions and models from as early as 1871 were folded into the fashioning of Indian futures in the 1930s and the decades thereafter. Imperial German models seemed to offer viable federalist models to resist colonialism and a centralized state (even as many interwar German thinkers looked abroad to England for their own new constitutional blueprints). Pillai encourages us to open our perspective to see how these entanglements—the histories of comparative constitutional thought—helped to institute a new global order.

Richard Cole’s contribution, “Runes and Rye: Administration in Denmark and the Emergence of the Younger Futhark, 500–800,” considers the proto-states of Scandinavia to revisit James Scott’s famous thesis on the links between writing, regulation, and political control in early states whose growth was based on cereal production. If Scott’s thesis was correct, would it obtain even for eighth- and ninth-century runic scripts in emergent Scandinavian states? Against Scott, Cole argues that certain forms of writing resisted state domestication and remained “wild,” serving as sites for rude jokes, the casting of spells, commemorations for rivals of the king, and other forms of corrosive speech. Or, as in this case, corrosive carving.

RETHINKING WORK IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOCIALISM

Political transformations are dependent upon, among other things, new patterns of production and labor. These shifts may be imposed, enforced by the state, readily adopted by the people, or, perhaps in most cases, implemented and resisted all at once, unevenly remade between elites and the *hoi polloi*. **Tasha Rijke-Epstein** explores exactly this uneasy balance between elite and popular uses of state development policies centered on cattle (*zebu*) raising and beef sales in the newly independent Madagascar. In “Making Malagasy *Zebu*: The Biopolitics of Cattle Commodification in Socialist Madagascar, 1960–1978,” she takes a cattle-centered approach to socio-political change, revealing the agency of animals in shaping the conditions of human life and even the fates of nations. Malagasy *zebu* entered the transnational market as sheer objects and commodities, but for many at home remained embedded in other knowledge systems and ancestor-focused cosmologies. Cattle served as shifters between cultural worlds in a time of radical political change and transnational connection.

In **Artemy Kalinovsky’s** essay, “Exceptions to Socialism: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Transformation of Soviet Development in Comparative Perspective,” we travel to Central Asia, where 1970s and 1980s Soviet planners sought to draw rural peasants

into the industrial workforce. Seeking especially to attract female laborers, planners developed systems of home labor that included artisanal products like blankets and baskets, but also family-based farming within and alongside collective agricultural work. Planners' attention to the family in this new mixed economy mirrored, in certain respects, similar moves in international development programs sponsored by the World Bank, and even welfare programs in the United States. With these surprising comparisons, Kalinovsky shows how neoliberal attentions to "the family" as key to economic reform were less a uniquely U.S. export than a transnational trend that penetrated even the bureaucratic centers of Soviet policy. Neoliberal trends emerged everywhere that universalist economic programs reached their limits and required new regional solutions.

IDEOLOGIES OF IMPERIAL REVENUE Empires, whether Ming China or the twentieth-century United States, require enormous revenue streams to sustain themselves. Their expanding economic demands generate new ethical pressures. Political economy inevitably veers into ideology, and empires are notoriously sluggish in their efforts at critique or reform, more readily responding to economic pressures with ideological drift. **Harriet Zurndorfer's** "Human Trafficking and Piracy in Early Modern East Asia: Maritime Challenges to the Ming Dynasty Economy, 1370–1565," shows how the Ming Dynasty moved from a strict "no-slaving zone" to an imperfect not-too-much-slaving zone over the course of two centuries. Human trafficking came to be more tolerated, or at least overlooked, as the Ming economy was increasingly challenged on multiple fronts. Zurndorfer's article expands our comparative understanding of human trafficking and slavery both geographically and temporally. Her work also sets formal slavery usefully in conversation with other forms of coerced servitude—indentured labor, bondservanthood, sex-work, children sold by parents, and more.

Maximilien Zahnd turns his gaze on the United States, settler colonialism, and the use of tax laws to pressure Indigenous peoples in Alaska toward sedentary and agricultural lifeways. His article, "Praise the Gardeners, Dun the Hunters: Alaska Natives, Taxation, and Settler Colonialism," demonstrates how a 1921 fur tax weighed heaviest on native trappers. The law's announced objectives were economic and assimilationist, but the real goal was to force native Alaskans into the status of "civilized" yet second-class reindeer herders and farmers. Only thus could Alaska be made truly "American." Though the 1921 law was short-lived, Zahnd plots it in a longer comparative history, including cases from Siberia to South Africa, that shows how even so-called neutral taxes were (and perhaps still are) a form of governmentality that sought to make Indigenous peoples into law-abiding subjects of the state. Tax rules, no less than human trafficking laws in Ming China, were firmly embedded in the shifting political ideologies of the places that gave them life.