

Editorial Foreword

To describe power as rhizomatic four decades after the publication of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* seems a shallow cliché. But in this issue, the tropes of roots and soil again become fertile by excavating how power is not only metaphorically but *organically* sedimented in actual earth and the human communities organized around its tending. These histories show the degree to which words like empire, ethnicity, and colony are soiled: Empire with its etymological roots in notions of the control of production in a given territory, and ethnicity by virtue of its hybrid splice of land and blood. Colony, too, as Krishan Kumar shows, derives from cultivation and planting. This issue of *CSSH*, then, explores how the histories of political life are knee-deep in the muck of organic and animal life, yielding authoritarian soil, colonial tea, and empires made of elephants. Here, hybrid words and phrases like “geopolitics” and “political ecology” make more than old hay. They grow green again, and yield new fruit.

EMPIRE AND ETHNICITY How to analytically and historically distinguish between colonialism and imperialism? asks **Krishan Kumar**, to lead off our issue. His article presents a sustained reflection on the risks of conflating the two terms, as is too often uncritically done. But he also observes what allowing the two categories to remain closely adjacent, even to bleed into each other and overlap, affords. It offers opportunities for comparing widely separated historical periods and places otherwise seen as unrelated.

Victor Lieberman's contribution, “Ethnic Hatred and Universal Benevolence: Ethnicity and Loyalty in Precolonial Myanmar, and Britain,” shows the potential of such audacious, surprising comparisons. Juxtaposing the histories of these two societies from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries, Lieberman traces the notion of political ethnicity in relation to later models of nation-states. He argues that stable political-territorial-cultural clusters with clear boundaries and a sense of their own identity were present much earlier than most theories of the modern nation-state have supposed, even as early as the eleventh century. This does not mean that such political entities were “the same” as post-1750 European states, however, and Lieberman makes the comparison pay off in terms of salient distinctions and ruptures as much as in observed continuities. Nevertheless, in Lieberman's handiwork, a new macro-historical picture of a shared Euro-Asian paradigm emerges that destabilizes precious ideas of European uniqueness.

Thomas R. Trautmann's "Megasthenes on the Military Livestock of Chandragupta and the Making of the First Indian Empire," leads us back to the fourth century BCE to examine what forging an empire actually required in terms of ecological and animal sources of life. Drawing on clues from Megasthenes' fragments, Trautmann paints a full military-pastoral complex onto the landscape, populated by humans, horses, oxen, and especially elephants, most valuable of all. The soil was also crucial. The wheat, rice, and millets the farmers generated fed the enormous army, as well as the oxen, horses, and elephants now also roped into the human political ecology. Trautmann shows how only the careful shepherding of all these parts of the living world together allowed the project of empire to work.

SUBTERRANEAN POLITICS: SOIL AND COAL The next essays excavate the political power deposited in the composition of soil and in subterranean mineral veins. In these studies of the underground—again, in a material rather than metaphorical sense—they mark out the political stakes of dark, unseen territories, and the ecological dynamics of sociopolitical systems. **Roberta Biasillo** and **Claiton Marcio da Silva**, in "The Very Grounds Underlying Twentieth-Century Authoritarian Regimes: Building Soil Fertility in Italian Libya and the Brazilian Cerrado," present the idea of "authoritarian soil." They compare national soil-improvement projects under dictatorial regimes in Italian Libya (1920s–1930s), and in Brazil (1964–1985). Technological efforts toward improving soil fertilization and composition mirrored discourses on the national population, turning the "blood and soil" figuration of nationalism into something more than fascist poetics, but rather an actual technological project. Most troubling, they show, is that authoritarian soils last much longer than authoritarian regimes, leaving wounds in the land that mitigate against long-term ecological sustainability.

In "Subterranean Properties: India's Political Ecology of Coal, 1870–1975," **Matthew Shutzer** considers underground property claims in relation to laws of ground rent and asks how the terms of agrarian law and customs that had evolved to regulate land use on India's surface were leveraged by extractive industries to take control *under* the earth's crust, with disastrous consequences. At stake is nothing less than what is "land." Shutzer's essay points to the historical lack of three-dimensional laws of land claims that take verticality and the subterranean into account, a lacuna with implications even in the present.

TEA LEAVES **Sarah Besky** is also invested in land use and law in India, not least in how British colonial law was diffused onto the land and into legal, economic and ethical postures towards it. In her essay, "The Plantation's Outsidings: The Work of Settlement in Kalimpong, India," Besky refers to the "sedimentation of sociospatial relations" to explore how tea plantations—the main colonial cash crop—were surrounded by lands managed to support

the plantation, as adjuncts to empire. It wasn't only crop diversity being managed but also human diversity, as different ethnic and racial groups were allocated through residential sorting into distinct zones of the plantation and its supporting surround. Importantly, Besky also draws readers' attention to comparisons between India's teaworks and the history of Caribbean plantations, their geographies, and management.

In "Ceremony, Medicine, Caffeinated Tea: Unearthing the Forgotten Faces of the North American Stimulant Yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*)," **Christine Folch** offers a completely different reading of the tea leaves. Her work considers the ways that a North American native tea, yaupon, infused the habits and lifeways of its indigenous, enslaved, and colonial users—shifting between ceremonial, medicinal, psychoactive, and recreational uses, among others—even as they imposed their own versions of human sociality onto the herb, shaping the arc of its career. Folch poses the question of why yaupon resisted becoming transformed into a commodity for extraction, unlike coffee, mate, and other teas, and uses that question as a window onto the issue of how distinct forms of knowledge-transmission shape the life of a plant.

EMBODIED READING Reading is not only a semiotic act but also a sensory, material, and corporeal one. Reading pulls together posture, touch, sight, smell, and sound, and it is performed in a space with its own variables of light, shape, temperature, and texture. Reading happens in bodies that are already situated, already classed, raced, and gendered, long before a text can ever begin to speak. **Britt Halvorson** and **Ingie Hovland's** contribution, "Reconnecting Language and Materiality in Christian Reading: A Comparative Analysis of Two Groups of Protestant Women," shows the extent to which reading is an embodied act. In their study, biblical words have a visceral dimension, a "language materiality." Even more, their essay shows how textual interpretation and embodied practice interact to generate particular forms of interpretation and inspiration. Comparing Protestant women reading in 1920s Norway and in the 1950s United States, they show how two different groups engaged with the very same text nevertheless derived distinct experiences and implications for proper action. A religious text's "meaning," Halvorson and Hovland show, is a complex alchemy, a word magic brewed of bodies, things, and movements, of specific moments and places. Perhaps not unlike reading *CSSH* in confinement, and during the time of COVID, quite unlike reading it a year ago, or a year ahead.
