In a previous article I stressed the summary executions and rough justice of the immediate aftermath of the Vellore mutiny in 1806.\(^1\) The really significant feature of the Vellore Mutiny is not the brutality and savagery of the sepoys but the enormity of the British response. The most careful estimate of sepoy casualties on 10th July 1806 puts the figure of 650 or so. \(^2\) Contemporaries even spoke of near 800 sepoys dead. \(^3\) That we do not even know the true figure is symptomatic of the casual, careless brutality at work. The sepoys crime was irredeemable. What followed was that the Madras Government distanced itself from this initial and mistaken view. Lord William Bentinck felt that punishment of ordinary sepoys had gone far enough and, after September 1806, required the full justification of the law. By then it was becoming clear to him that against ordinary sepoys the evidence of premeditation, let alone conspiracy, was thin indeed. Behind the post-mutiny enquiries and their complexities this appears to be the crucial development.

Nevertheless the five months following the mutiny witnessed an extraordinary wave of panic spread throughout the European officers of the Madras army, primarily those who were ignorant of local vernaculars. Conspiracy and potential mutiny were detected everywhere. \(^4\) This crisis of confidence amongst some, though not all, of the officers was revealing of how little many of them understood the troops under their

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\(^1\) Jane Hathaway (ed.) *Rebellion, Repression, Re-invention: mutiny in comparative cross-cultural perspective* (Westport, Conn., USA: 2001)

\(^2\) A.D. Cameron, *The Vellore Mutiny*, University of Edinburgh PhD thesis (1984), 34

\(^3\) J. Blakiston, *Twelve Years Military Adventure* I, 299 (1829)

command. As acting Governor – General Sir George Hilaro Barlow had stiffened Lord William Bentinck’s resolve against falling prey to the panic of the Madras army officer's. The exoneration of the sepoy from the taint of mutiny was also the subject of Barlow’s General orders in 1809.

A Tale of Two Mutinies 2:
White Mutiny in Madras 1809: race, class and conciliation under the Raj

Introduction

Colonial adaptations of Foucault’s governmentality approach have been applied mainly to the later nineteenth century. Habermas’ notion of critical publics has been attached to some of the elite or articulate groups in Indian society. The hypothesis I will be exploring is that the attempted production of a public space for Madras Army officers was simultaneously the assertion of total control over their sepoys. The best previous view of these events as corporate self-assertion certainly encompasses their place within the series of civil-military disputes that rocked British India during the period of the hybrid Raj. An exploration of the ideological dimension of these struggles might throw light on the processes of construction of the mid-Victorian Raj.

Looking at the sepoys, victims and objects of these discourses illuminates
governmentality. There is also clear evidence that the growth of imperial
consciousness is very much in play during these events.

The historiography of the ‘White Mutiny’ of 1809 implicitly denies the reality of its
sepoy casualties, though it is notable that this historiography has been, perhaps
rightly, more limited than that of the more sanguinary Vellore mutiny. Very quickly it
seems the officers established the dominance of their version of events in memoirs
and even in Wilson’s History of the Madras Army. This was the line taken in the
Dictionary of National Biography. Only in the twentieth century did Sir George
Hilaro Barlow find a champion in Sir Alexander Cardew. This might be too
simplistic an overview but it highlights the issues I wish to pursue. What had
appeared at the time as a major ideological conflict becomes later transmuted into an
attack on the autocracy of one man.

The political interpretation for the defeat of Minto and Barlow at the time suggested that
the mutinous officers had been linked to the Foxite Whigs. Also the attacks on Barlow
were seen as way of challenging the group led by Charles Grant at the head of the Court
of Directors. The political contest was fraught during these years but there was much
common ground. What Linda Colley and David Cannadine attributed to a revivified
patriotic aristocracy and Chris Bayly has seen as gentry imperialism was the ideological

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7 W J Wilson, History of the Madras Army, III, chapter XX (Madras, 1883)
Army (London, 1929)
9 E E E Elliot - Murray- Kynynmound, Lord Minto in India: life and letters from
1807 to 1814 (1880), 323
10 A T Embree, Charles Grant and British Rule in India (1962), C H Philips, The East
India Company 1784-1834 (Manchester, 1961) chapter 6
ground on which all sides stood.\textsuperscript{11} It is unlikely that the officers were excused simply because of the East India Company and parliamentary politics in London. Nor is it sufficient to explain this by referring to the previous mutiny of Bengal officers in 1796. Certain aspects of the organisation of the mutiny do seem similar.\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps, though, the explanation can be found in the garrison state ideology that gave soldiers a disproportionate place in the government of British India. This view has been developed for a later period by Douglas Peers though he makes less appeal to it in his treatment of East India Company Army reforms.\textsuperscript{13} A more limited version of this is the idea that the officer corps was an assertive corporate body within the structures of the early Raj.

Sepoys died because their officers mutinied. Why were the officers so leniently treated afterwards? Was it a matter of class or of the inability of brother officers to punish their own within the small closed society of early colonial India? That must be part of the explanation. But the failure to punish was of much wider import. It involved the authority of government. There was a real mutiny. The language of the officer’s rebellion was libertarian to the point of treason, certainly in wartime. We need to study their rhetoric carefully. Habermas’s notion of a public sphere is only imperfectly applicable to early nineteenth South India but the very presence of a local version was predicated on the subordination of Indians. In this it differed from the development of a black public sphere in the U. S. early republic.\textsuperscript{14} Was the issue here ultimately one of racial order?

\textsuperscript{11} L Colley, \textit{Britons} (1996) esp. chapters 3 & 4 C A Bayly, \textit{Imperial Meridian}
\textsuperscript{12} R Callahan, \textit{The East India Company and army reform 1783-1798} (Harvard 1972)
\textsuperscript{13} D Peers, \textit{Between Mars and Mammon;} D M Peers, ‘Between Mars and Mammon; The East India Company and efforts to Reform Its Army, 1796-1832’ \textit{The Historical Journal}, Vol.33, No. 2. (Jun., 1990)
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{William and Mary Quarterly}, (Jan. 2005)
Disciplining the officers: the loyalty test, honour and subordination

One of the principal criticisms advanced against the Government line draws equally upon subordination – but it is the subordination of the sepoy to his officers that is at issue. One of the court martialed mutineers, Captain Thomas de Havilland could not support ‘seducing the sepoys from their fidelity to their European officers’ which would have ‘renewed the Vellore scenes’ (!). But he was only echoing a far more important voice: Sir James Mackintosh (1765-1832). In a letter to colonel John Malcolm written during the mutiny, he argued as follows:

‘An appeal to the privates against their immediate superiors is a wound in the vitals of an army. The relation of the private soldier to the subaltern is the keystone of the arch.’

He went on to note that the links of officers to superiors ‘are only the obediences of the few to a fewer’ and that ‘honour and obvious interest are sufficient to account for them’. His late old friend Edmund Burke was cited in the latter part of his Reflections on the

All this to show that ‘any compromise with British officers is a less evil than an appeal to sepoys or to rajahs.’ The undercurrent of racial order is very clear here. A later letter to Malcolm euphemised it slightly: ‘I strongly objected to the appeal to sepoys in the Madras army …[in General orders of 26th July 1809]…but my objection was founded on

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15 OIOC MSS Eur E232, Narrative by Captain Thomas Fiott de Havilland, 9
17 Ibid, 502
horror of mutiny and sacred regard to the most essential of all the principles of subordination.¹⁸ This of course was the youthful author of *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791) who had later been offered the Recordership of Bombay by Addington in 1803. He had been a judge since 1806.

Interesting in this context is the argument of Charles Marsh, an assiduous defender of the mutineers. He went so far as to argue in mitigation of the mutineers ‘for their temporary departure from duty and discipline’…[that at least]…”they abstained from seducing the native soldiers into the participation of their wrongs”…¹⁹ Thereby he unceremoniously disposed of the Indian corpses at Seringapatam whilst burying the officer’s misconduct.²⁰

Col. Malcolm had taken a slightly different tack during the mutiny by favouring a conciliatory policy towards the officers. This was partly because he had some sympathy with their complaints. Extra rewards were necessary to compensate for the difficulties of service in India. Though it was also because he considered the mutineers to be a set of ‘half – mad boys’. In the course of his negotiations with the mutinous officers in Masulipatnam he had gone out on a limb, even toasting the ‘Friends of the Army’.²¹ He had defended this line to the Madras governor, the King’s officers, and senior officers such as Barry Close and in pamphlet

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¹⁸ Ibid, 506 Mackintosh to Malcolm, Tarala, 2nd December 1809
¹⁹ Charles Marsh, *Review of some Important Passages in the late Administration of Sir George Hilaro Barlow, Bart. at Madras* (London, 1813), 370-71
²⁰ OIOC F/4/379 shows what they actually did.
²¹ Kaye, *Malcolm*, 474
controversy. Later historiography successfully integrated a number of themes in the rhetoric of the mutineers and their supporters. It was enabled to do so because Malcolm provided a respectable case against Sir George’s leadership.

The politics of the Madras army officers

The disciplinary crisis that afflicted the officer corps of the Madras army had its origins at the top. Without the impetus of the Commander – in – chief Lieutenant General Hay Macdowall there would probably have been no mutiny. His disenchantment with Government arose from the decision to deny him a seat in the Madras council, a position accorded to every previous commander of the Madras army. It was then that he began to develop dangerous doctrines about the distinctive military and civil spheres of government by describing the Governor and Council of Madras as the ‘Civil Government’, a distinction never before made ‘by any former commander – in – chief.’ In fact ‘the whole civil and military authority of the Presidency of Fort St. George [Madras] and its dependencies is expressly vested in the Governor and council’ by act of parliament (1793), went on the Judge Advocate General of the Army. It is interesting to reflect on this in the light of other discussions of the role of force in company power and self-image. ‘The commander – in – chief committed open sedition and sent forth an inflammatory appeal from the acts of Government.’ wrote Lord Minto soon afterwards in a private letter to the

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23 OIOC H/695, 139-40 Major James Leith’s opinion citing General Macdowall’s 28th January 1809 address to the army
24 ibid., 141
chairman of the East India Company. General Macdowall had indeed put himself at the head of the discontented officers. However their discontent had been noted just a year after the Vellore mutiny. On 21st October 1807 the Governor of Madras had written to the court of directors that ‘a spirit of insubordination and cabal has lately shown itself among several of your officers…[…which, after the events that have agitated the native army of this Presidency, might lead to consequences of the most fatal nature.’

What were their grievances? Some related to corporate privileges in an authoritarian state. These were soon to marry up with ideological themes of the Madras opposition, especially as articulated by the lawyer Charles Marsh. Both he and the officers, it seems, spoke in the language of the Foxite Whigs. An example will show this. ‘That Britons of the nineteenth century are equally free, and equally impatient of arbitrary and illegal impositions …[…is a fact that will not be doubted by any except those, who may have allowed the study of foreign constitutions to eradicate from their minds the knowledge of that of their own country.’ This comes a page after Barlow’s expertise in Hindu and Muslim law and Asian government had been noted.

Other issues were material but the immediate precipitants of the crisis were not of concern to most officers since they concerned regimental commanding officers. This was a rank to which very few would ascend. The tent contract had in part been compensated by other allowances. The court martial of Quarter Master General Lieutenant – Colonel John Munro clearly affected the Madras government closely. It

\[26\] Lord Minto in India, 207 letter April 25th, 1809.
\[27\] Observations on Lt. Col. Malcolm’s publication relative to the disturbances in the Madras Army (London, 1812), 10
\[28\] An Account of the origin, progress, and consequences of the late Discontents of THE ARMY on the Madras Establishment, (London, 1810), 95
was an issue of power. Questions of status and honour however bound them together. Behind this one may discern the discursive construction of class and identity by an insecure group. The officers of the company’s army had a notably lower social origin than those of the King’s army.

**Outcomes**

The Court Martial of Lieutenant – Colonel John Bell is a good place to trace some of the implicit assumptions about the basis of British rule. Charles Marsh put the case for him, not as the lawyer he was but as a ‘friend’ as permitted in the rules of Courts Martial. Lawyers were normally excluded. The deputy Judge Advocate Lieutenant W. Ormsby made the arguments for the prosecution.

Thus the issue here was ultimately made into one of racial order and solidarity.

Foucault, it could be said, argued against a simple view of power as possession of a property and in favour of seeing it as a kind of productivity. This is helpful in giving
us a sense of its fragility and contested character. But he did not for all that ignore class. The conflict between a rambunctious civil society and an autocratic government was a dispute within the ruling class. There were material issues of promotion and perquisites at issue, but also symbolic ones of honour and regard. Not least there was the question of power as between the Madras Governor and the Madras army. Significantly, Barlow’s successor was to be a general from a distinguished military family, Sir John Abercromby. He had been his father’s military secretary - and indeed eyes – when Sir Ralph Abercromby had restored the prestige of the British army in Egypt in 1801. However there emerged during the course of the struggle a much more significant issue – that of the locus of control of the sepoy force.

It is here that governmentality might be invoked. A society based on the triangle sovereignty – discipline – law comes under exceptional pressure. This is in part because there is a transition underway to a society based on political economy as its ideology, directed towards population as its object and utilising apparatus of security as its tool. Foucault would never have been so crude as to admit to a stage theory such as this: in fact he explicitly anathematised it. Nevertheless, as a working hypothesis there is much to commend it. Barlow was driven by the exigencies of economical reform. Metcalfe condemned ‘the determined spirit of penury ‘ in his government. As Secretary Buchan wrote to Col. Malcolm on Barlow ‘ his great object is reduction [of expenditure]; but the orders which he has received from home make it quite impossible for him to do otherwise.’ Minto was very clear on the economic pressure he was under as Governor General. ‘The smallest relaxation in the economical system which is known to be indispensable …[]…and … for avoiding present distress or embarrassment at our treasury, - the smallest departure, I say, from that severe principle creates

31 Kaye, *Malcolm*, vol. 1, 459 Buchan to Malcolm 1st May 1808
immediate speculation in the money market against us, and drives us back from eight to ten per cent interest.’\textsuperscript{32} Lord Cornwallis had begun the policy. Retrenchment had been prepared at Madras under Lord William Bentinck, Sir John Cradock and, one of Barlow’s critics, William Petrie.\textsuperscript{33}

That should establish the role of political economy here. Although Foucault expressed an interest in colonial societies – in South America – he did not address them. The key aspect was the control of the sepoy seen as a subject rather than a citizen to use a distinction clarified by Mahmood Mamdani. The officers were citizens, however bad. The sepoys were not. The argument hinged on where their allegiance lay. The assertion of a public space for the European officers became an implicit denial of one for the sepoys.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Lord Minto in India}, 52
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Observations on Lt. Col. Malcolm’s publication relative to the disturbances in the Madras army} (London, 1812), 11