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Review of Michael Kläger, *Zivilisieren durch Strafen: Britisch-Indiens  
Gefängnisse in der globalen Wissenszirkulation über die strafende Haft,  
1820–1889*

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MICHAEL KLÄGER, *Zivilisieren durch Strafen: Britisch-Indiens Gefängnisse in der globalen Wissenszirkulation über die strafende Haft, 1820–1889*, Beiträge zur Europäischen Überseegeschichte, 113 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2022), 377 pp. ISBN 978 3 515 13217 6 (hardcover), €69.00; ISBN 978 3 515 13221 3 (open access e-book)<sup>1</sup>

Michael Kläger's first monograph is a nuanced study of the development of the penal system in nineteenth-century British India, with a focus on Madras, the North-Western Provinces, and Punjab. It contributes to a body of literature on crime, punishment, and penology in colonial South Asia that has grown significantly in the past two decades. For instance, Taylor Sherman's call to consider penal institutions as part of a wider 'coercive network' of the colonial state has helped to broaden the conceptual framework and connect the histories of prisons and of colonial violence.<sup>2</sup> Kläger does not dispute the fact that prisons were part of a patchy but powerful system of coercion and violence, but neither does he adopt this framework in his study. He concentrates exclusively on the prison as an institution that was introduced and reformed during the colonial period in India. What appears to be a conceptual limitation, however, must be read in light of the book's main purpose: to write a history of knowledge on the prison in colonial India from a global perspective. *Zivilisieren durch Strafen* joins a generation of histories of knowledge that, in contrast to earlier works, give greater attention to the vectors of knowledge transfer and the agency of people previously considered merely passive receivers.<sup>3</sup> The effects of these new studies on this dynamic field of historical research are its liberation from national and imperial

<sup>1</sup> Can be downloaded at [<https://www.steiner-verlag.de/Zivilisieren-durch-Strafen/9783515132213>].

<sup>2</sup> Taylor C. Sherman, 'Tensions of Colonial Punishment: Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Study of Coercive Networks in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean', *History Compass*, 7/3 (2009), 659–77; ead., *State Violence and Punishment in India* (London, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> To give just two examples: Rebekka Habermas and Alexandra Przyrembel (eds.), *Von Käfern, Märkten und Menschen: Kolonialismus und Wissen in der Moderne* (Göttingen, 2013); Katharina Kreuder-Sonnen, *Wie man Mikroben auf Reisen schickt: Zirkulierendes bakteriologisches Wissen und die polnische Medizin 1885–1939* (Tübingen, 2018).

frames of analysis on the one hand, and the decentring of Europe as a site of knowledge production on the other.

It is in this context that Kläger traces the emergence and dissemination of knowledge about prisons in British India, as well as the impact of external stimuli on the development of the Indian penal system and, lastly, the influence of knowledge generated in India on penal practice throughout and beyond the British Empire. Readers expecting to learn about the enduring legacy of the British Indian penal system on the management of prisons and the punishment of convicts outside India will, however, be disappointed, as will those wanting to read about the gradual modernization of prisons in India under the influence of British colonialism. As Kläger convincingly argues, the dissemination of knowledge did not inevitably bring about a change in practice. Building on previous historians' admission that identifying connections and entanglements is merely the first step in writing global histories, Kläger seeks out the parallel forces of integration (*Verflechtung*) and disintegration (*Entflechtung*). He does so in order to discuss in detail the extent to which the British Indian penal system evolved in conversation with (mostly) European and North American debates and practices of prison management and institutional punishment—a conversation that did not result in greater conformity, however. Colonial officers explained the difficulty of applying European standards to Indian prisons by pointing to the particularities of a colony which ostensibly defied modernization and hence required a penal system that met Indian needs (as defined by the colonizer).

The study is organized chronologically into nine chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) that link the early history of prisons in colonial South Asia to the post-1857 period, demonstrating the continuity of penal practice across this divide. Chapter two deals with the early history of colonial prisons in Madras from the 1800s to the 1830s. It demonstrates that the reform of the prison system in this period of company rule did not result in a fundamental overhaul of penal practice. Although the colonizers sought to buttress their legitimacy early on by promising to modernize the penal system in Madras, it was only from the 1820s onwards that a gradual institutionalization of penal practice indicated actual reform. Prison reform in Madras was already inspired by new ideas on punishment emanating from Europe

and North America at this time, but the inability to reconcile the needs of the administration in Madras with changing notions of corrective punishment prevented a transfer of practices. As Kläger reveals, the introduction of treadmills—touted as a modern means of instilling discipline through labour in Britain and across Europe—largely failed in Madras. Prisons instead adopted the ‘road gang system’ from Bengal, which pressed hundreds of prisoners into groups who built roads and camped near labour sites under the supervision of engineers from the Military Board. The author therefore concludes that ideas developed or tested in India itself had a greater influence on prison reform than those popular in Europe at the time.

Kläger examines the report by the colonial Committee on Prison Discipline (1836–8) in chapter three, identifying the concepts and bodies of knowledge that informed its work and findings. In congruence with dominant colonial appraisals of the allegedly ‘oriental’ nature of Indians and their supposed resistance to modernization, and due to opposition to rising investments, the committee’s reform recommendations were rejected by the East India Company directors. Kläger acknowledges the limited impact of the Committee on Prison Discipline on the penal system in India, as attested by earlier historians; but he also demonstrates how later sporadic experiments in prison reform were informed by the committee’s findings and designed to assess the applicability of its recommendations. These experiments come into focus in the fourth chapter of the book.

The building of modern prisons based on the model of Pentonville in London and the introduction of new dietary regimes were two recommendations tested in India. Both were subsequently deemed unsuitable for wider application. The building of new institutions was never taken beyond the planning stage in northern India and was severely delayed in Madras, where it fell far short of the committee’s recommendations. The introduction of messing, which substituted the previous practice of financial allowances for prisoners with the provision of cooked meals, resulted in more deaths and revolts and ultimately led to a reassessment of the practice. Prison reform in India, as noted in chapter five, took off in the 1840s and 1850s with the creation of the new position of the prison inspector and the appointment of William Woodcock in the North-Western Provinces in particular.

Woodcock oversaw the expansion of administrative structures and the exchange of information on prison management between Indian institutions. The introduction of central prisons in Madras, the North-Western Provinces, and Punjab, as well as the emergence of a group of colonial prison experts, are reasons why Kläger dates the professionalization and institutionalization of penal knowledge in colonial India to the 1840s and 1850s. Previously siloed Indian prisons were now integrated into a British Indian penal system—a process helped by the circulation of institutional reports, which allowed for practices tested and approved in one particular prison to be applied in another.

From the 1860s onwards, strict control and physical labour were the main modes of discipline and punishment employed in exerting colonial rule over the convicts' bodies in Indian penal institutions. But as Kläger notes in chapter six, colonial expectations of prisons and the actual conditions inside them differed considerably. Reports on Indian prisons led to a public outcry in Britain in 1864 and, according to Kläger, sparked an interest in Indian prison administration that had been conspicuously absent in Britain in earlier decades. Against this background, the seventh chapter explores the role of the penal system in India within global debates on penal institutions in the 1860s and 1870s. Despite growing interest in Indian prisons outside the sub-continent, no increased transfer of knowledge to and from India was discernible. The opposite was the case: the emphasis on India's otherness and distinctiveness resonated with earlier statements on the particularities of the colonial environment that supposedly prevented the transfer of models and technologies. Indian prisons were primarily cited to denote difference in this process.

In keeping with the chronology of the book, the last chapter (prior to the conclusion) zooms in on the 1870s and 1880s. The drive for reform and experimentation waned after the establishment of a particular colonial penal system in India. Modernization was now focused on the inner life of individual institutions, which became increasingly repressive. The density of information generated on prisons in colonial India continued to grow in these decades. The introduction of European-style penal institutions was still considered impracticable, as was the transfer to other countries of knowledge acquired about prisons in India.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Despite the length of the book, Kläger skilfully maintains the thread and summarizes intermediate findings at the end of each chapter. Occasional excursions, for example into the organization of prisoners' daily lives, the responses of inmates, or the career paths of prison inspectors, bring a welcome change of pace and perspective. *Zivilisieren durch Strafen* is written in German (and in the format of a Swiss-German dissertation), which is likely to limit the book's appeal and accessibility. However, specialist readers will find the detailed analysis, including a compilation of primary materials in the appendix, particularly useful. The monograph caters to a wide audience, including historians of South Asia and the British Empire, as well as scholars interested in the global history of prisons. Because of its perceptive methodological considerations, the book will also find favour with historians of knowledge.

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