

The Colonial Unconscious: Empire, Ideology, and the Cabinet of ‘Trivialities’

This paper approaches the colonial archive not as a passive repository of records but as a dynamic instrument of imperial power. Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s concept of the *political unconscious* and Antonio Gramsci’s *theory of hegemony* and the *integral state*, it argues that archives do more than document authority—they actively structure, codify, and legitimize it. Archival practices embed economic, social, and institutional logics within both the content of records and the systems through which they are organized, reflecting the broader colonial mode of production. By reading archival texts as structured narratives, the paper demonstrates how omissions, classifications, and silences function as mechanisms of control, masking contradictions while consolidating colonial power.

Methodologically, using British colonial archives from South Asia, the study conceptualizes the archive as a relational apparatus in which narrative form, institutional procedure, and material conditions converge. The novelty of the paper lies in bringing Jameson’s interpretive model of textual totality into dialogue with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to theorize the archive as both ideological and material. This combined framework allows the archive to be understood not merely as a repository of colonial knowledge, but as a constitutive mechanism of colonial modernity itself. By foregrounding the archive’s role in structuring social relations—rather than simply representing them—the paper demonstrates how archival systems actively consolidate, normalize, and reproduce colonial governance. By tracing the intertwined material and ideological dimensions of archival production, the paper positions the archive as a crucial apparatus of colonial rule—historically specific in its operation yet enduring in its effects.