

Invisibilities

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National and global markets as well as globally integrated operations require central places where the *work of globalization* gets done. (Sassen 1998, xii; emphasis added)

Globalisation, labour, and the silences of modern history

Globalisation has a storied historical provenance. As a process of connections, indeed connectivity, it predates formalization in academic discourse and naming, especially via the Global Studies paradigm in the 1990s. Human contact through trade, religious exchange, drives of exploration and conquest, maritime routes, pathogen transfer, confessional and pilgrimage sites, and colonization and empires foundationally shaped our understanding of the intertwined pre-modern and modern worlds long before terms such as ‘globalism’, ‘globalisation’ or ‘globality’ entered our disciplinary vocabulary.¹

My task in this essay is not to enter into the full analytic range and depth of these historical frameworks and lived pasts. Instead, I trace the invisible, unremarked, and forgotten corollaries of our received understanding of globalisation as a notable, tangible presence and phenomenon in our lives. In doing so, I make a heuristic distinction between the *temporal* universality of globalisation as a ‘process’ and the *spatiality* of making-the-global that are always tied to specific places, works, and bodies. To that end, this essay will analytically distinguish between what the sociologist Manfred Steger calls ‘disembodied globalization’ (an ‘idea’) (Steger 2023) versus the ‘embodied absence’ that inheres in such place-based histories of the global (a ‘silence’). These theoretical concerns will be explored by looking at the forgotten histories of industrial ailments, especially occupational health and disease in British and contemporary India. These disabilities remained a constant presence in the lives and livelihoods of the hundreds and thousands of workers that made the British Empire a veritable industrial powerhouse in this period. It is also a presence that closely followed the career and making of our modern, global energy regimes—and yet one that remains largely forgotten in the annals of globalisation studies and globality. This essay foregrounds this ‘absent-present’ (→ **Absences**) in the history of industrialization as a way to rethink the role of silences, disjunctures, and absences *alongside* connectivity, presence, and networks in globalisation and Global Studies. To that end, my use of the ‘absent-present’ is a conceptual rethink-

¹ For a recent work on the role of disease in reframing our understanding of globalisation, see Harper 2021.

ing of the very logic of globalisation—one that obscures and renders imperceptible its inner workings while keeping the mandate of market integration visible and in the running. The ‘absent-present’ is at the very heart of globalisation’s disconnections and dis:connectivity: not a binary by any means, but an integral, if oxymoronic component of its worldwide entanglements, past and present.

Globalisation and embodied absence

Steger proffers four distinct, albeit interlinked social forms through which the dynamics of globalisation have been visible through the ages. He calls the first, ‘embodied globalization’, manifested in and through the movement and mobility of peoples through the world. Steger terms the second form ‘disembodied globalization’, or the worldwide networks of inanimate ideas, data points, and information technologies (→ **Communication Technologies**). ‘Objectified globalization’ or the interconnectedness and transfer of things and objects forms his third form, while ‘institutional globalization’, corresponding to the worldwide diffusion and mobility of social and political formations and entities, rounds off Steger fourth form of globalisation (Steger 2023).

While these four, admittedly analytic subsets of the praxis of globalisation are worth noting, this essay argues that connections, praxis, and networks do not exhaust the conditions and processes that undergird the *work-making* of globalisation, and especially as it relates to the formerly colonized world. For much of the burden of this work—and what made globality possible in the first place—was borne by lives and landscapes outside the gaze of recognition, epistemology, or even history. As Raj Patel and Jason Moore put it:

The rise of capitalism gave us the idea not only that society was relatively independent of the web of life but also that most women, Indigenous Peoples, slaves, and colonized peoples everywhere were not fully human and thus not full members of society. These were people who were not—or were only barely—human. They were part of Nature, treated as social outcasts—they were *cheapened*. (Patel and Moore 2017, 24)

As many humanists have commented, these correlated economic, ideological, and social foundations of early capitalism (→ **Capital**)—another synonym for the birth of our globalising world—hid an insidious logic of devaluation at their heart: that certain bodies, certain places, and certain social formations were less worthy, less valuable, and less necessary to recognize and account for in the story of global power and networks (→ **Networks**) of exchange.² For they were allegedly neither

² For a classic instance of this insidious logic, see Locke [1660] 1960, and especially the chapter ‘On Property’ (Locke [1660] 1960: 285–302).

fully human, nor fully ‘modern’ enough to participate in the weighty task of global power-and-history making. Forever condemned to be in the ‘waiting room of history’ (Chakrabarty 2000), these places, peoples, and landscapes were only to provide the largely unseen, and rarely acknowledged labours of that globalising world, never its intellectual producers. In drawing their largely invisible manual work—and their epidemiological burdens—back into the circuit of globalisation history and theory, this essay utilizes the concept of ‘embodied absence’ to make its case. As the editors of this volume persuasively suggest, ‘as more places, regions and people around the globe integrate, the corollary is that others cannot (or don’t want to) participate in those integrative processes to the same degree, and they will be left behind, relatively speaking’ (→ **Introduction**).³ Let us turn to a slice of the industrial history of British India, and especially to worker diseases and ailments in the coal mining sector to examine this story of personified erasure. After all, coal, and imperial mining were indelibly linked, and continue to be linked to the making of globalisation and power.

As far as the Indian coalfields and colliery labour are concerned, commentators have long argued that an unholy nexus of managerial apathy, medical oversight, and politics of profit drove a near total refusal to acknowledge the presence of occupational hazards in this industry. In their study of coal mine workers in the Raniganj district of West Bengal, for instance, Debasree Dhar and Dhiraj K. Nite argue that the period between 1946 and 1971 saw protracted and reluctant acknowledgment by the post-independent Indian State and colliery management regarding the existence and compensability of silicosis, pneumoconiosis, and fibrosis. Despite advancements in medical technology, scientific knowhow, and legislative provisions, Dhar and Nite suggest that coal companies regularly ‘under-reported’, ‘contrived to invisibilise’, or ‘erased’ cases of these disease cases among afflicted workers (Dhar and Nite 2022).

To reiterate, such willing misrecognition of the dangers of the workplace, or refusal to acknowledge their presence was not a post-independent phenomenon in India. Soon after the landmark Johannesburg International Conference on Silicosis on 13–27 August 1930, the International Labour Organization (hereafter ILO) sent several correspondences to the Government of India (hereafter GOI) seeking cooperation and collaboration in research on the subject. In a terse letter dated 28 April 1932, the Deputy Secretary to the GOI reminded the Director of the ILO

3 Andre Gunder Frank’s well-known hypothesis of ‘dependency theory’ is instructive in this instance. As he famously argued: ‘We must conclude, in short, that underdevelopment is not due to the survival of archaic institutions and the existence of capital shortage in regions that have remained isolated from the stream of world history. On the contrary, underdevelopment was and still is generated by the very same historical process which also generated economic development: the development of capitalism itself.’ (Frank 1989); in this regard, also see Parthasarathi 2011.

that medical researchers in the country had to concentrate on matters of urgent and special interest, and that silicosis was not one of them (ILO 1932). Requests for collaboration on the topic were therefore summarily refused. Importantly, this Conference raised several questions around silicosis that ILO member states were asked to reflect on. Chief among them was the issue of size frequency of silica dust and its correlation with radiographic appearance, morbid anatomy, and symptomatology of silicosis and silicosis with tuberculosis among workers. The importance of general and localized ventilation in dusty industries, periodic medical examination of workers, and the desirability of studying the relationship between length of employment, dust size and exposure, and aetiology of silicosis progression were also stressed in the Johannesburg meeting. Indeed, this Conference categorically recommended that ‘silicosis complicated or not by tuberculosis constitutes an occupational disease which may involve reduction of working capacity’ (ILO 1932, 15). Given the GOI’s deliberations on occupational hazards as indicated above, its refusal to entertain the question of silicosis in coal mines appears at first glance to be a puzzling anomaly. Indeed, for close to a decade before this exchange between the ILO and the GOI, the condition of coal miners had repeatedly come up for discussion and legislative regulation in India. Poor wages, concerns around women’s and children’s work underground, fires, accidents, coal dust explosions, epidemic diseases (especially cholera, hookworm, and malaria) in and around the mines, and the general condition of colliery workers in the subcontinent were constant talking points during this period and beyond.⁴ Despite being consumed by these concerns about coal and coal workers, however, a theme, to wit trope, that repeatedly stood out in governmental and non-governmental discussions was the idea of Indian ‘exceptionalism’. In other words, the GOI, the Indian Mining Federation, and the provincial governments were often at pains to put on record that the on-ground (and below-ground) situation in Indian coal mines—and the psycho-social and ethnic characteristics and customs of Indian miners—were different and unique from their European counterparts, and that attempts to adopt or enforce uniform

4 Instituted primarily to investigate the dangers and explosibility of coal dust in Indian mines, the Coal Dust Committee headed by Mr. R. R. Simpson, the Chief Inspector of Mines in India in its Report of 1924 noted that the natural ash content—a factor connected to coal’s flammability—was significantly high in India. The Committee also noted that out of the 35 collieries in the Raniganj and Jharia coalfields surveyed, only 17 were equipped with some form of ventilation; see *First Report of the Coal Dust Committee* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1924). Though the *Annual Reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India* would continue to draw attention to concerns of fire-damp accidents, suffocations, explosions, and deaths due to epidemic diseases in the Indian coalfields, it would take almost two decades and more before analytic correlations between dust and silicosis (and silicosis with tuberculosis, and pneumoconiosis) were drawn. For an analysis into this question with a specific focus on the Raniganj colliery, see Dhar and Nite 2022.

regulatory measures on wages, hours of work, and sanitation were both socially unwise and economically disastrous. Consider, for instance, that in response to a question raised in the House of Commons on 9 April 1924 regarding the desirability of a public investigation on the condition of men and women in the mines of India, deaths due to coal dust explosions, inadequacy of wages, and general health and safety conditions of workers underground, the government of Bihar and Orissa sent in their furious rejection on the need for any further inquiries into these questions (Department of Industries and Labour 1925). In a confidential letter dated 29 July 1924, Mr. J. R. Dain, Esq., Secretary to the Government of Bihar and Orissa bemoaned to the GOI there was no *prima facie* evidence in the coal mines in his province to sanction further public investigations that would only have far-reaching consequences in increasing costs. (Department of Industries and Labour 1925, 29). For the Secretary, a large amount of legislation, founded for the most part on Western experience, had recently been forced upon mine owners, and had materially increased the premia and expenditure of the employers. Mr. A. Marr, Secretary to the Government of Bengal was even more caustic in his assessment of the House of Commons question. In a long letter dated 20 August 1924, the Secretary asserted to the GOI that there was no ‘proof’ that colliery labour in Bengal were being ‘exploited’ and that it would be most ‘iniquitous’ to put further burdens and restrictions upon the industry than had already been cast by the amending mines legislation of 1923 (Department of Industries and Labour 1925, 34).⁵ He also critiqued the value of an all-encompassing survey of coal labour wages across India that flattened distinctions of local customs, ‘type’ of worker, and cost of living in that area. For Mr. Marr, the aboriginal miner of Bengal was vastly different from those in the Punjab or Burma, much less than those in the Bengal jute industries or the cotton textile mills of Bombay. As the Secretary put it:

The aboriginal does not work for a big weekly wage: he works till he makes what he *thinks* enough for his weekly needs. Having earned it, he goes home, to return with a view to earning the same amount next week. He works to suit himself, not to suit the mine manager. . . Mining wages are piece-work wages; and when we reckon up actual wages, we must at the same time keep in mind the possible earnings of a miner producing a reasonable output in a week of reasonable duration. The possible wage must be the standard more than the actual earnings

5 For context, the Indian Workmen’s Compensation Act (hereafter IWCA) had just come into force in 1924, making mine owners liable for payment of compensation for work-related accidents. Though followed mostly in the breach as has been remarked, and then including only three occupational diseases, the IWCA nonetheless introduced an element of workplace insurances that employers paid a premium for.

because of the *particular type of persons* with whom we have to deal. (Department of Industries and Labour 1925, 38–39; italics added)⁶

For Mr. Marr, therefore, the question of wages was much more than a fiscal calculation; it devolved into understanding the nature and quantum of work in the coal mines, the system of calculating earnings, and the localized variations of ethnic labour employed. To him, the possibility of government intervention into fixing wages was unthinkable, if not ‘new. . .and revolutionary’ in India (Department of Industries and Labour 1925, 41). Along these lines, consider also, for instance, that when the ILO sent out a questionnaire to member states regarding ‘regulating hours of work in coal mines’ to be included as a draft convention in their forthcoming XVth session in Geneva between 28 May and 18 June 1931, the Indian Mining Federation (hereafter IMF) was categorical that the country be kept out of binding stipulations on the matter. In their letter dated 6 February 1931, the IMF deposed to the GOI that the conditions of work in the Indian coal industry were ‘entirely different from those. . .in the European countries’ (Department of Industries and Labour 1932). Indeed, the Federation went to the extent of suggesting that the subcontinent ‘did not have a mining labour as such. . .the bulk of the labourers working in the coal mines pursuing agriculture as their principal occupation and depending on work in the mines as a more or less subsidiary occupation,’ (Department of Industries and Labour 1932, Letter No. LN. 3/27). The IMF used this ‘observation’ to contend that since Indian mine labour did not entirely sever ties to their village homes and homesteads, strict regulation of working hours as commonplace for their Western counterparts was uncalled for. Given this context, it was not entirely surprising that the GOI wanted to sidestep and bury the issue of silicosis as an urgent matter of industrial action during this period.

‘Slow violence’ and globalisation’s absent-present

Why are these histories of occupational disease and labour ailment so rarely told and begrudgingly acknowledged in global energy histories? Why are they so infrequently visible, if at all, in discourses of globalisation’s reach and supposed emancipatory potential? Why are concerns of worker disability, compensation, and embodied ill-health—all direct consequences of globalisation’s demands and consumer desires—rarely part of our daily reckoning and realization?

⁶ The fetishizing of ‘aboriginal’ exceptionalism, native ‘habits,’ and local ‘customs’ by colonial British and European factory managers, planters and plantation officials, and other industrial overseers to explain incidents of workplace accidents and disease environments in India remains a familiar theme in the study of this history; see Nite 2019, Simeon 1995 and 1996, and Dey 2018.

In this concluding segment, I reflect on some conceptual categories through which a tentative assessment of these questions can be made. In doing so, I also show how these histories of labour health and occupation disease—subsets of a vast repertoire of globalisation's forgotten legacies—provide a compelling case to foreground the processes of disconnections, absences, and silences in reorienting our understanding of global history and its afterlives.

Part of the reason why labour ailments and occupational hazards rarely feature in the industrial history of India or are privileged in discourses of the social significance of globalisation is because they were silently borne by those very same 'dispensable' millions in this task of a rapidly industrializing world. Unlike the paradigmatic diseases such as cholera, plague, or malaria, these industrial ailments rarely caused mass epidemics, and therefore fewer public panics as far as the colonial State or post-independent government was concerned. These diseases, and their aftereffects, were embodied in the lives and limbs of those who toiled in the vast and expansive industrial architecture of the emerging globalising world, debilitating or killing hundreds and thousands of men, women, and children in their wake. Their effects were immediate and generational, although seldom visible to the untrained eye, commoner or physician. To that end, occupational hazards—and their harmful legacy—belong to what Rob Nixon has termed the 'slow violence' of our globalising past and present. Such violence, as Nixon argues, is attritional and halting; it is non-spectacular:

The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time. In an age that venerates instant spectacle, slow violence is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theatres and boost ratings on TV. . . attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs. Such displacements smooth the way for *amnesia*, as places are rendered irretrievable to those who once inhabited them, places that ordinarily pass unmourned in the corporate media. (Nixon 2011, 6–7)

Nixon's emphasis on the 'un-mournability' of places, peoples, and landscapes that face slow violence, and its aftermath—and the amnesia it produces thereof—brings us back to the cost-benefit logics that underpin much of globalisation's history. It takes us back to Locke's assessment of 'value' and 'value-lessness' of certain populations and environments (→ **Ecologies**), and to Moore and Patel's conceptualization of 'cheapness'. It is this exceptionalism, dispensability, and non-spectacularity of occupational diseases—among a plethora of similar embodied histories within globalisation—that renders their assessment unremarkable and invisible in standardized histories of global political economy, global energy regimes, and global labour more generally. Industrial epidemiology remains the absent-present in this story

of global capital—and globalisation more generally. While the end-producer—the mine worker, the glass maker, the textile and mill hands, or the jute labourer to name just a few—bore the full weight of these occupational hazards and ailments, there was but a passing reference to the problem for almost the entirety of the period under review, and beyond. Though the provenance and extent of industrial disease was certainly not unknown across the imperial and metropolitan divide, it was made nearly imperceptible in the records of public health management and aetiological consciousness in British and post-independent India. Recovering that history calls for a slow, protracted negotiation between two conjoined parts of globalisation's understanding—the received *epistemology* of globalisation, with its processes, pasts, and modalities alongside the induced *agnotology* of globalisation, with its ignorance, silences, and disjunctures, whether inadvertent, willed, or constructed.⁷

An orientation and sensitivity towards these disruptive, displaced, indeed disconnected antecedents of the globalisation paradigm that has long privileged linkage, exchanges, and connectedness is urgently called for. Lest our amnesia for the non-spectacular, the non-perceptible, and the non-connected take hold of our historical and everyday consciousness, this essay, and this volume, asks us to pay attention to these embodied absences in the making of our modern world.

'Invisibilities', as used in this essay, therefore, does not just refer to that which is non-visible or absent in processes of globalisation; instead, it refers to the logics, presumptions, and epistemologies that obscured and sidelined those processes in the first place. It is a strategic act, and a necessary, even insidious correlative and co-component of globalisation's integrative ambitions—a 'willed' disjuncture alongside its networks and convergences. As the editors of this collection write: 'dis:connective phenomena should not be understood and studied as the opposite of interconnectedness, but as integral components of it. The term privileges neither connecting nor disconnecting processes, but focuses instead on their turbulent interplay, which is the decisive factor in grasping the social significance of globalisation' (→ **Introduction**).

⁷ 'Agnotology' is the study of historical ignorance-making; for an excellent study, see Proctor and Schiebinger 2008. They write: 'we need to think about the conscious, unconscious, and structural *production* of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or *suppression*,' (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, 3; emphasis added). An attention to the disjunctive and absent processes of globalisation history, this essay suggests, keeps the structural production of its unknowable pasts continually in tension with its more privileged forms of knowing.

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