

Oriental despotism and the political monsters of

Michel Foucault's *Les anormaux*

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Abstract

On 29 January 1975 Foucault spoke of two political monsters in revolutionary France: one of them incestuous (the king), the other cannibalistic (the crowd). The figure of the despot constitutes a norm of political conduct, if we understand the 'normal' as constituted in its relation to its spectral, abnormal 'others'. In 1959 Foucault's tutor Louis Althusser had suggested that the 'oriental despot' was a spectre [*épouvantail*] constitutive of western political thought. Foucault's lecture, on the other hand, discussed how the despot and the rebellious people became political monsters during the French Revolution. This paper considers the oversight of Foucault's work relative to Asia and extends his account of political monstrosity through an analysis of how James Mill articulated his political theory in *The history of British India* (1858) around the thesis that 'the fear of insurrection' constitutes the necessary impetus for the movement from 'semi-barbarous' to 'civilised' society.

Biography

David McInerney is a lecturer in the University of South Australia's School of Communication, International Studies and Languages. He is completing a book on James Mill for publication in 2009, and has been involved in the *borderlands* project since 1996, including editing a 2005 special issue of *borderlands* e-journal on 'Althusser and us'.