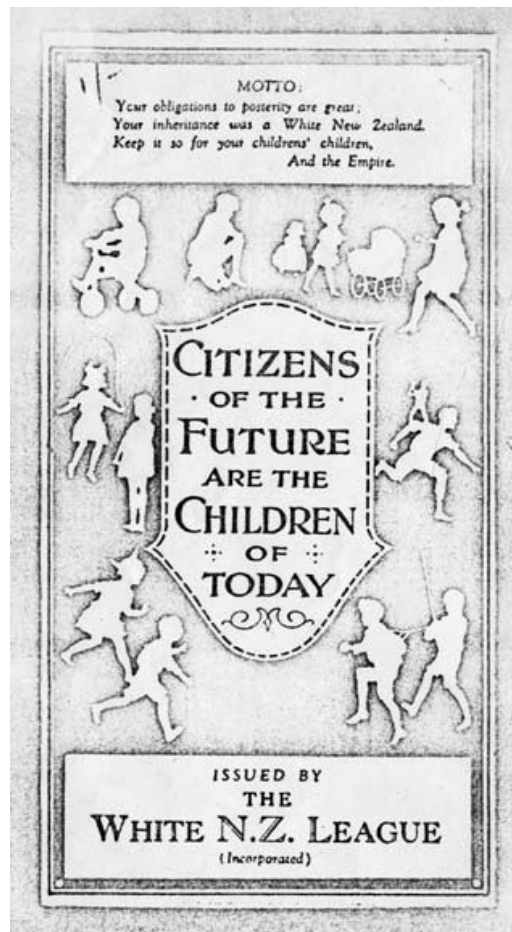


Liberalism in and out of time

As Duncan Bell points out in the Coda to this broad-ranging, richly textured and masterly exploration of the relationship between liberalism, Empire and imperialism in nineteenth century British thought, it is virtually impossible to step outside liberalism in contemporary politics and political thinking. In its protean expression as ideology, normative philosophy and discursive field, liberalism ‘virtually monopolizes political theory and practice in the Angloworld’ (371). And yet the ways in which it has been shaped by history and political practice, at both domestic and global levels, have been very unevenly excavated and revealed. We’re familiar with the relationship between seventeenth and eighteenth century liberalism, from Locke (although Bell tells a surprising account of Locke’s recent ascendancy in the liberal canon,) and early capitalism, and with liberalism’s origins in Protestant thinking (or as Larry Siedentop has recently argued, with Christian thinking pre-Reformation.) But it’s more modern development as the dominant ideology in Anglo politics in the 19th and 20th centuries, during the period in which British colonial expansion left an ineradicable stamp of race and empire on British political and social thought, has not been fully explored until now.

Bell’s *Reordering the World* traces meticulously the relationship between liberal ideas, public discourse, and the legitimizations and experience of British imperialism in the mid to late 19th century. In this period, as he shows here and in his earlier *The Idea of Greater Britain*¹, the development of Britain’s settler colonies shaped liberal arguments for the Empire, liberalism’s assumptions about race, and its prescriptions for world order. This is an impressive and invaluable collection of essays, which range in subject from how we conceptualize political philosophy, to the ideas about time and space that underlie arguments for empire, to the work of academic apologists for, and critics of empire who are now almost forgotten, but who shaped debates in their day. Bell draws on recent scholarship about the imperial and raced heritage of liberalism, but goes far beyond previous accounts. As other contributors to this symposium have pointed out, Bell points out the ambiguities and contradictions deep within liberalism that emerge in its relationship to imperialism, looking further afield from the canon of liberal thinkers like J.S. Mill, whose complicity in the legitimization of empire has been well documented. He examines the work of ‘public moralists’, academics, and others in the public sphere of Victorian Britain, both those who unabashedly defended the empire, and those who expressed skepticism and ambivalence. It’s worth pointing out here that this is a study of public discourse, rather than popular social

views and attitudes, and does not dislodge Bernard Porter's argument that imperialism had a surprisingly small impact on ordinary British society.²



None of the thinkers whose work he recovers here were, as Bell points out, beyond the racial prejudices of the time, and assumptions of white superiority, whether grounded in biology or history. And race, whether expressed in stadial theories of racial hierarchy or assumptions of white superiority, is threaded into the liberalism of this period at all points. It would be fair to say that this is not the only contextualist analysis of British liberalism in this period that might be written (and Bell makes no claim that it is); alternative accounts might focus, say on the changing meaning and role of religion or the family. But empire, with its implications for Britain's place in the world, and its relation to racial difference infiltrated fundamental liberal ideas about freedom, progress and self-determination. It's not so much that liberalism was determined by the by the need to legitimize imperialism, as that its values and prescriptions were shaped by the very existence of the Empire.

This historicization of liberalism in *Reordering the World* goes beyond the main focus of this project on Britain's colonial empire. Bell examines the ideas of thinkers outside the liberal canon, but he also reminds us that canons are themselves historical constructions: our idea that a liberal canon proceeds from Locke, to Mill, then via lesser lights Green, Spencer and Hobhouse into the 20th century dates only to the early 20th century, when Whig constitutionalist thinking such as Locke's was adopted into liberalism. Like a previous contributor to this blog, as a political theorist, I can't avoid the question: what does this historicization mean – both broadly for what we do when 'do' political theory, and particularly, for what liberals argue now? Bell sets out this dilemma for us early in his book, in one of its most interesting essays: 'What is Liberalism?' There's no doubt that Bell and other authors who take his contextualist approach (Mehta, Parekh, Muthu, Pitts) have established a close relationship between liberal ideas, the geopolitical facts of empire, and imperial arguments and justifications. Should we then see empire as necessarily implied by liberalism, or as contingent? Is it possible to rescue any liberatory potential and value in liberalism (or what a previous contributor to this symposium called its critical purchase) from the set of ideas so mired in the legitimization of racial hierarchy, and the 'civilizing mission'? Or does the genealogy of liberalism mean that it is corrupt in its fundamental claims, and irredeemable? Of course, historically grounded accounts of liberalism have pointed out before its concealed constitutive complicities with inequality, its inbuilt untheorized assumptions about race, class and gender: C.B. Macpherson famously argued that Locke's liberalism rested on a proto-capitalist view of the individual as the possessor of private property rights.³ Carole Pateman pointed out that social contract theory assumes a prior, sexual contract that legitimizes patriarchal control over women.⁴ What's the impact of contextualist accounts like these and Bell's, of liberalism's historical imbrication in relations of power?

There are two main approaches to take in answering this. We might argue that the normative claims of liberalism should be judged independently of the ways in which they functioned discursively, when they were written, to support systems and relations of power. Bell describes this as defining liberalism in terms of its stipulative protocols (65). These focus on identifying and analyzing core norms, such as liberty, equality, autonomy, which can be justified independently of any past expression and application (and so might be

distinguished from, say, the market or private property.) This is, Bell says, useful for elaborating normative political philosophies, with ideal types, which can be used in social analysis. But such philosophies are ‘estranged from the vicissitudes of history’ (67) and assume that liberalism exists independently of its own historical formation.

There’s a danger of slipping here between on the one hand, a critique of liberalism for ignoring or concealing its historical foundations, and on the other, a critique of it for maintaining normative ideals that require substantial political change to implement. Bell makes this shift himself at one point, moving from the argument for a contextual analysis of liberalism, to an assumption that we should assess liberalism by its correspondence to lived political realities: ‘Far too often political theorists propound visions of society, and of the world more generally, that appear to most observers to be detached from the vicissitudes of everyday life.’ (154). This is a critique of ideal theory that could be launched against many contemporary liberals, including Rawls and Dworkin. Charles Beitz asks what relevance social ideals have for politics in the real world, at the end of his argument for Rawlsian justice in international relations. Quoting Rawls in *Theory of Justice*, he argues that by setting out the requirements of a just world order, ideal theory allows us to understand and analyze social problems systematically, and provides us with criteria for ‘the formulation and criticism of strategies of political action in the non-ideal world.’⁵ The contemporary normative liberalism that has followed Rawls awaits its own future contextualist historicization, but in the meantime – and even when that happens – there is no reason to think that its prescriptions should not identify injustices and point to emancipatory possibilities.

So much for the critical value of normative liberal philosophy. But the second approach to take here is to look contextually at the ways in which liberal norms and values have been used by colonial subjects and their philosophical defenders to support liberatory political projects. As Duncan Ivison says in his argument for a postcolonial liberalism, it would be surprising if a philosophical and political creed which based itself on individual rights and human dignity were not invoked by those suffering from racial and cultural discrimination and oppression.⁶ Bell concedes that his account focuses almost entirely on those writing in Britain, rather than on discourse about empire produced in the colonies, and it does not take into account the ideas of indigenous people, or the detailed ways in which encounters with indigenous peoples shaped the ideas of the settler colonists about their political arrangements. But the influence went both ways. Anti-colonial movements led by

colonial subjects from the early through to the middle 20th century relied largely upon liberal arguments, and in the context of Bell's remedial emphasis on non-canonical liberal thinkers, it's worth noting that it is the canonical liberal thinkers who have offered more possibilities for reclaiming liberalism by subordinated peoples. The thought of Indian independence leaders including Jawaharlal Nehru is often characterized as democratic socialist, but as C.A. Bayly has shown, it incorporated an expansive understanding of liberal democracy, and the liberal communitarian ideals of T.H. Green, John Dewey and Harold Laski (in his earlier writings.)⁷ Indigenous intellectuals in the settler colonies as well deployed liberal universalist arguments to critique their own subjection. Indigenous inferiority was often conceded by western educated indigenous thinkers, but, as Tim Rowse argues, was regarded as remediable and contingent.⁸ The universalist liberal ideals claimed by indigenous thinkers were often combined with racial identification and collective action that would ultimately ground a more radical politics of self-determination: the Maori in New Zealand, for example, used the rhetoric of liberal empire to argue for their right to participate in fighting in the First World War, but insisted upon their own Maori-led battalion.



In terms of philosophical argument, postcolonial concerns with emancipation, self-determination and equality are shared by liberal egalitarians. As the work of Kymlicka and other multicultural liberals attests, liberalism has adapted to take on board the significance of cultural membership and belonging, and its relationship to personal autonomy (or, we might say, has stripped Mill's acknowledgement of this of its colonial baggage.) Nussbaum's work

on capabilities aims to establish the grounds for human dignity and self-esteem across cultural lines, while avoiding the false universalisms that underpinned the discourse of liberalism in the period examined in *Reordering the World*. Liberalism is in the process of decolonizing itself, as Bell acknowledges at the end of this book, and historical contextualist accounts like this should act as a goad for that process of renewal.

Of course, not all of liberalism is in the process of decolonization. Arguments continue to be made in the 21st century for interventions by western powers on the grounds of liberal imperialism – the bringing of freedom and democracy by Western invading forces to societies allegedly subordinated by traditional religious belief systems, and oppressive forms of rule. Even settler colonialism has its after-life, in the resurgence of the imperial federationist thinking which, in its original form, is detailed in this book and in Bell's *Greater Britain*. Some conservatives in Brexit-era Britain, in search of an international and tutelary role for Britain outside Europe, argue for an organized Anglosphere – a form of political community, whether loose or tightly knit, between Britain and the former white settler colonies: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and sometimes, the US. Defenders of these proposals insist that race is irrelevant to them in their current form, despite the fact that their proposed membership excludes former colonies with non-white majority populations. Bell provides a salutary warning of the underlying racial assumptions that continue to characterize these proposals.⁹

It's difficult, if not impossible to imagine an account of late 19th century British liberalism in the context of empire that is more sensitive to its complexities and nuances, and Bell has anticipated at some point in these essays most of the observations I've made here. *Reordering the World* is a model for further contextual histories of political theory – but also, appropriately, for a recovery of the marginalized voices of indigenous colonial subjects who have reshaped and reinvented the political discourse that was so historically intertwined with their own subordination.

¹ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

² Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁴ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁵ Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 170.

⁶ Duncan Ivison, *Postcolonial Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 31.

⁷ C.A. Bayly, 'The Ends of Liberalism and the Political Thought of Nehru's India,' *Modern Intellectual History* (2015): 12, 3, p. 606.

⁸ Tim Rowse, 'The Indigenous Redemption of Liberal Universalism,' *Modern Intellectual History* (2015): 12, 3, p. 383.

⁹ See for example: Andrew Roberts, 'CANZUK: After Brexit, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain can unite as a pillar of Western civilization,' *Daily Telegraph* 13 September, 2016.