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Critical Exchange

Empire and its afterlives

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> Et vous, cruels Européens, ne vous irritez pas de ma harangue. Ni le Hottentot, ni l'habitant des contrées qui vous restent à devaster ne l'entendront. Si mon discours vous offense, c'est que vous n'êtes pas plus humains que vos prédécesseurs; c'est que vous voyez dans la haine que je leur ai vouée celle que j'ai pour vous.
> Denis Diderot, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, Tome Premier, p. 259

At the time of its 2005 publication, Jennifer Pitts' *A Turn to Empire* was among a handful of works in political theory probing imperialism's constitutive influence over modern political thought. Following Uday Singh Mehta's path-breaking *Liberalism and Empire* (1999), theorists such as Pitts, James Tully, Sankar Muthu and Karuna Mantena developed far-reaching expositions of seminal thinkers' historical, biographical and conceptual entanglements in projects of empire, pulling imperialism and colonialism from the discipline's margins to its center and setting into motion a broader confrontation with its Eurocentric past. In the 1990s and

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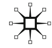
earlier, historians of political thought such as Tully, Barbara Arneil, David Armitage and Bhikhu Parekh had excavated early modern theorists' relations to imperialism (Locke in particular), alongside efforts by Anthony Pagden, Richard Tuck and J.G.A. Pocock to draw empire more prominently into the study of the history of political thought. But broadly speaking, as Pitts (2010) observes, political theory was astonishingly late in registering empire's imprint over its methods and field of vision when a great many related disciplines – anthropology, literary studies, history, postcolonial theory – got there decades earlier.

With the 2018 publication of *Boundaries of the International*, Pitts returns to a now thriving, wide-ranging and cross-pollinated field of study. The intervening years have, gladly, witnessed the scholarship's development in several respects. First, it now canvasses a broader geographical and temporal scope, expanding beyond decolonial (Mignolo, 2011; Lugones, 2008; Quijano, 2007) and postcolonial (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 1999) literatures centered, respectively, on Latin America and India, to capture empire's political impacts in the Caribbean, Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa, and on Indigenous peoples in North America and Australasia. It has also traveled to the other side of the colonial divide, as political theorists have engaged the capacious projections of political independence and global interdependence advanced by colonial subjects, from Indian nationalists' advocacy of a Pan-Asian 'alliance of England's oppressed' (Krishnavarma, 1907) to the 'world-making' globalisms championed by mid-century Black Atlantic thinkers (Getachew, 2019), and from transnational cosmopolitanisms from below (Valdez, 2019) to the variegated social forms that, Timothy Vasko argues below, have always lurked beneath the banner of the international. Such interventions have, still further, yielded methodological innovations, from Juliet Hooker's juxtaposition of figures bound by hemispheric proximity (2017) to Jane Gordon's 'creolizing' political thought (2014). The turn to empire has thus stretched the discipline's boundaries to encompass neighboring fields' critical efforts and to expand its own, drawing on – and drawing in – decolonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial scholarship, global intellectual history, comparative political thought, critical race theory, Indigenous political thought and much more. It has also sparked self-examinations concerning conceptual inheritance – how contemporary interlocutors might position themselves in relation to corpuses mired in historical injustice. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has forced a disciplinary reckoning, rendering it impossible to ignore the outward-looking face of modern political thought. Against a discipline that long indulged the obscurantist fantasy of emanating from Europeans talking among and about themselves, the turn to empire shows that the modern political imaginary was global from the outset, forged in relation to the necessities of empire.

It's a measure of the distance traveled that theorists of empire have, also, become self-reflexive of – and self-critical toward – their own endeavor. Taking the publication of *Boundaries of the International* as a point of departure, this critical



exchange considers the afterlives of empire and colonialism in political theory. It asks how we might today take up the challenge of thinking politically in a world marked by colonial and imperialist depredations, past and present. The idea is to venture a few responses to the question of what political theorists attentive to the impacts of empire might think about in moving the discipline forward – to take stock of where the scholarship is and where it might go.

And it has come some way, in a few ways. To begin with, as it has evolved, its categories and concerns have become more finely parsed, particularly as regards the separation of empire and settler colonialism. Where Mehta reflected two decades ago that in the empire, liberalism had found the 'concrete place of its dreams' (1999, p. 37), Duncan Bell has suggested that this incarnation may, in fact, have been in the settler colonies (2016). Their clearer demarcation has had the felicitous consequence of raising questions and uncovering injustices surrounding settler colonialism that don't appear on empire's analytical register. The concept of dispossession, for instance, whose centrality to the expansion of the American republic is illuminated by Aziz Rana (2010) and Adam Dahl (2018), has been subjected to a nuanced and far-reaching theoretical critique by Robert Nichols (2020). Indeed, the recent efflorescence of Indigenous political thought (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Estes, 2019), and of political thought on Indigeneity and settler colonialism (Bhandar, 2018; Dhillon, 2017; Temin, 2018), centers a conceptual nomenclature – on land, space, dispossession, and occupation – reflecting the specificities of historical and ongoing colonial domination in North America and Oceania. It also bridges often disparate modes of political-theoretical inquiry: Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014) weds a careful historical survey of the Canadian state's ever-mutating genocidal policies toward Indigenous populations with Marx's and Fanon's critical insights, just as Burke Hendrix (2019) draws persistent injustice toward Indigenous peoples to bear on normative theory, whose appeals to ideal-type principles – as Charles Mills has long argued (2005) – mask the systemic asymmetries of power shaping contemporary societies.

The turn to empire also entails certain methodological transformations, notably, as is limned above, a rapprochement between political theory and cognate disciplines (Byrd, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Morefield, forthcoming 2021) and the development of a much more catholic scholarship bristling against the disciplinary boundaries jealously guarded by their predecessors. Where once territorial debates raged around the demarcations of political theory and political philosophy, normative and historical scholarship, or how we ought to read and interpret canonical texts, political theorists of empire have had little truck with orthodoxies ill-fitted to the complexities. They have exercised a willful and principled disregard for the gatekeeping tendencies delimiting the field's borders, taking the concepts, methods and concerns of surrounding disciplines as useful – necessary, even – tools for theorizing a constitutionally imperial world. This should come as little surprise to those attuned to its insights. As Pitts here and in *Boundaries* persuasively argues,

and as Vasko elaborates, the discipline's 'traditional' conceits and divisions – between theory and IR, domestic and international, and surrounding what Ulas Ince characterizes below as theory's methodological nationalism – have masked political science's imperialist scaffolding. They've subtended the fiction of a pacific global order depicting inequality, marginalization and violence as externalities, rather than, as Nichols observes, constitutive features of the lived experience of subjects of Euro-American empire.

To be sure, political theory – at least since the 1960s – has enjoyed a close relationship to history, more willing to cede ground to a sister discipline similarly concerned with the ideas and contexts of seminal political thinkers. This is particularly true of the scholarship on empire that, as all of the contributors here recognize, traces its roots back to Cambridge School intellectual historians' expositions of the imperialist embroilments of 'great thinkers'. For all of the work it's done to transform how we read those thinkers, however, intellectual history – like all fields – carries certain limitations that critical social theory and social history, Nichols and Ince argue, draw to light. Intellectual history exhumes what Nichols describes as the first-person standpoint of Euro-American elites (focusing on colonial intent); social theory, by contrast, turns our attention to the material and economic conditions rendering their claims tractable and, perhaps more profoundly, enables a perspectival pivot to the standpoint of the colonized (focusing on colonial effect). Social history thus alters the lens through which we conceptualize imperialism and colonialism, answering questions to which intellectual history provides no satisfactory response and shifting the measures by which we evaluate empire – and history – altogether.

Such disciplinary renovations have cut across the ideological spectrum, pushing political theorists of various stripes to confront the traces of empire lingering in its dominant traditions. Departing from postcolonial critiques of developmentalism and historicism (Chakrabarty, 2000; Nandy, 1994), the turn to empire has occasioned retrospection on the reverberations of empire in liberalism (Ivison, 2002; Mantena, 2010; Muthu, 2003; Marwah, 2019), Marxism (Anderson, 2010; Harootunian, 2017; Paquette, 2012), and critical theory (McCarthy, 2009; Allen, 2016; Ingram, 2018), as scholars have sought not only to disinter the colonial foundations of their architectonics, but also to chart a way forward from them. Against the procrustean tendencies toward which doctrines naturally tilt, theorists of empire have drawn out their interruptions, i.e. those points of friction between the universalisms rationalizing imperialist domination and the stubborn recalcitrance of those subject to it. These critical efforts are far from limited to history, as universalist and developmentalist pretensions remain alive and well in the neocolonial institutions and global order that, James Tully (2008) and Jeanne Morefield (2014) note – along with Pitts below – continue to populate the liberal internationalist imagination.

Finally, the turn to empire invites reflection on what counts as political theory at all, as regards the objects and substance of our study – what we read and what we do. The Archimedean perch from which much theory, normative and historical, issues is neither neutral nor encompassing: it's the viewpoint of one mode of theory among what we ought to recognize as a great many others. Theory need not involve grappling with great thinkers, great texts or great ideas – finding the parts of a Locke, Marx, or Paine that we might like, or not like, or want to recover for whatever purposes. It might also involve reconstructing notions of autonomy, resistance and self-determination advanced in what Ince captures as the 'middle' political thought of legislators, administrators and agitators. It can be, as comparative political theorists have shown, entering the theoretical worlds of non-western thinkers eclipsed by narrowly construed academic canon-building. It can be what Alex Livingston (2020) has coined in the pages of this journal as 'thinking with the streets', where theorists engage 'vernacular theories articulated by movement actors themselves' to 'recover lost concepts and languages, expand our political imaginaries in novel ways… [and] leverag[e] the estranging effects of movement discourses and archives to reconsider from the outside, so to speak, our own disciplinary concepts' (2020). It can be reading 'ephemera' (Bayly, 2007, p. 167), the pamphlets, broadsheets and polemics that were the lifeblood of colonial India's nationalist movements, tracing out bodies of political thought marked by what Ranajit Guha evocatively describes as the 'impact of living contradictions' (1988, p. 41). It can be working with anti-colonial radicals' and provocateurs' political theory, falling well short of the analytical rigor and systematicity to which our Kants and Hegels aspired, precisely because it's driven by the imperatives of non-domination rather than philosophical neatness: because, in a word, it is political.

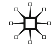
To conclude, one thing emerges clearly from the contributions to this exchange: taking empire seriously doesn't just add a subject to the roster of political theory's concerns, but rather transforms it altogether. Taking empire seriously is to question the structures of our discipline, uproot the conditions configuring its theoretical presumptions, widen our methodological lenses, and scrutinize what, whom and how we read – and why. It's to shift our vantage point so as to expose the historically false and normatively pernicious visions of domestic and global order underpinning it. It's to recognize that that global order is not the imperfectly realized cosmopolitan federation that Kant dreamed up some 250 years ago, and that still haunts contemporary citizenship regimes (Tully, 2014). It remains, rather, what it always was, which Diderot, writing contemporaneously with Kant, perhaps better captured. Against Kant's eupeptic gloss, Diderot acidly observed of Europeans in the Cape of Good Hope that they 'descended upon this country to despoil it', admonishing colonists for coming to the Hottentot's 'hut only to chase him from it, to substitute him, if you could, for the animals laboring under the cultivator's whip, to brutalize him, for no reason other than to satisfy your cupidity'

(1782, vol. 1, p. 258). Europe's world-spanning dominance was secured 'by rivers of blood that stave off tyranny for a few instants, only to let it fall back with still greater furor and ferocity upon a nation sooner or later oppressed' (1782, vol. 8, pp. 215-216), the endpoint of empires shaped by the simple propulsions of wealthier states to exploit those weaker than themselves. Nearly two centuries later, Fanon came to much the same conclusion. 'European opulence', he famously wrote, 'is literally a scandal for it was built on the backs of slaves, it fed on the blood of slaves, and owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world. Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians and Asians. This we are determined never to forget' (2005, p. 53). This is the world as it's come to be, shaped by a half-millennium of empire. It's the world that we inhabit and that theory must, today, take as its point of departure.

Inder S. Marwah

Liberal Democracy and the Tenacity of Empire

The most important feature of the modern world order, arguably, has been its imperial structure of racialized, capitalist hierarchy. The contours of this hierarchy of wealth, political power and legal standing have changed significantly since its inauguration in the fifteenth century, but its continuity as a basic fact and its implications for the world since so-called decolonization should remain at the center of our description and analysis. The pervasive nature of these imperial dynamics means that the tasks for postcolonial political theory are vast. The very categories that have structured the discipline of political science since the end of the Second World War contribute to the challenge. Political theory was conceived in the postwar period largely as the study of the state and of politics within states, alongside a discipline of International Relations that took itself to be the study of the relations among states, with an implicit understanding that the states in question were post-imperial and disavowing its own prewar past as a discipline preoccupied with the management of colonial and racial hierarchy. Postcolonial theory, in contrast, refers not to a time after the end of empire, a condition that we are nowhere near achieving, but rather after the inauguration of the modern imperial world order (Seth, 2013, p. 1). Twentieth-century anticolonial thought offered precisely such an 'expansive account of empire that situated alien rule within international structures of unequal integration and racial hierarchy' (Getachew, 2019, p. 2). as well as resourceful political responses to that condition, now just beginning to be tapped by disciplinary political theory. As I'll suggest below, W.E.B. Du Bois's writings on the global order, beginning during the First World War, remain one potent source of empirical analysis of and theoretical insight into this phenomenon. Indeed, the continuing resonance of his account of the imperial



global order underscores how much persists, despite changes as seemingly significant as formal decolonization and the onset and then the end of the Cold War.

The tenacity of this imperial formation is due in part to the flexibility, and the attractions, of some of its key legitimating discourses, including liberalism and international law. In *Boundaries of the International*, I studied the relation between imperial structure and discursive scaffolding by exploring the mutual constitution of international law and the imperial global order. I stressed the politics of international law's conceptual frames: the ways in which an image of the world as an international community of free and independent states was used to justify European imperial domination, and sometimes to criticize it, but especially to occlude it. The state system itself, that is, as an ideology and as a set of legal institutions and political practices, entrenched imperial hierarchies while simultaneously obscuring them with the appearance of formal equality, as it continues to do. As a conceptual frame, or 'language of disclosure', the notion of an international community of states has thus obscured or distorted much of global politics since it was invented, and as it was entrenched over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tully, 2008, vol. 2, p. 127). It follows that any discussion of the politics of territorial states, or of the world as a system of such states, must take place alongside a recognition of more fundamental imperial structures.

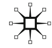
Given the extent of the task of taking stock of the persistence of global hierarchy, I hesitate to write prescriptively about what political theorists concerned with empire should be considering. Since we were invited to take *Boundaries* as a point of departure, though, I can begin by noting some of the ways I had hoped it would be engaged and taken up, as well as some of the questions and dynamics that the book does not address and lines of approach that I hope to follow in future work. I am only too aware of the limitations of the approach I took in *Boundaries*, particularly that it privileges discursive contexts over material dynamics and that its objects are mainly European thinkers, as Vasko, Ince and Nichols observe below.

Among the book's key preoccupations are the epistemic pitfalls and political limitations of the dominant conceptual framework that we have for talking about global politics, as a community of independent territorial states. *Boundaries* addresses the historical development of this framework and its occlusions but says less about their implications for contemporary normative theory. To place imperial structures at the heart of our critical descriptions of the global order may be to challenge quite fundamentally both the ideal of an international community of free and equal nations and the cosmopolitan ideal that has constituted its main rival within normative international theory. The notion of such a community of states that respect one another's autonomy, while offering assistance when needed, is in many ways a compelling normative vision. But it has always also been, as is commonly the case in international law, an aspiration couched as a description, a conflation that has generated two different but related problems. First, to the extent

that the aspiration has been used as a working description, it has masked the imperial nature of European states (as in Rawls, 1999). Second, to the extent that the aspiration has been shaped by empirical assumptions – for instance, as to what forms of prosperity or solidarity are possible in the modern nation-state – it has presupposed conditions that came about through imperialism and in many instances remain dependent on global hierarchies. This is one reason among many to relinquish 'liberal-democratic' states of the global north as normative models.

Du Bois's critique of what he called 'democratic despotism' illuminates these two intertwined but distinct problems. As I only began to suggest in *Boundaries,* Du Bois's First World War essays offer a profound contrast with the views of the European international lawyers and political theorists of whom my study is a critique. Du Bois saw the modern world order not as an expanding community of states but as a global economic and political system shaped above all by the dynamics of imperial domination. His early efforts to make sense of the industrial imperialism of his present involved a *longue durée* global history linking conquest, commerce, and race, and showing that the key political developments on which modern Europeans prided themselves – advancing freedom and equality under democracy, the increasing prosperity of their populations – were parasitic on imperial exploitation.

His critique bore on the interaction of ideas and material forces: white supremacy and European ideas of civilization together with the operations of global capital. The ideology and the legal and institutional structure of the international system facilitated the exploitation inevitable under capitalism by placing it in imperial and racialized spaces outside the bounds of 'international' concern. And because European democratization itself relied on imperial exploitation, empire had morphed into a distinct and novel phenomenon: 'democratic despotism'. The sharing of imperial spoils eased social conflict within Europe, simultaneously reconciling the ruling 'captains of industry' to increased power-sharing at home as long as they had continued impunity in the colonies, and mitigating the poverty and political agitation of the European masses through colonial profits and consumer goods (Du Bois, 1915, p. 709). Despite the fact that the white working classes themselves suffered under imperial capitalism, white socialists and their labor supporters failed to acknowledge or to combat the dynamics of global domination because they were also its beneficiaries: 'in this crime white labor is *particeps criminis* with white capital' (Du Bois, 1921, p. 7). They had been seduced into demanding a greater share of imperial profits, rather than recognizing that ultimately their own liberation depended on their working to end the even more extreme exploitation of non-whites around the world. On Du Bois's account, the modern nation – and therefore the international system – was not, as other critics such as J.A. Hobson were arguing, perverted by imperialism, but in fact created by it. The Euro-American nation-state system emerged as an idealization perched atop structures of global empire.

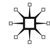


A wealth of recent scholarship on empire, settler colonialism, and their contemporary instantiations, develops these Du Boisian insights, drawing the connections between racial and imperial domination 'within' societies and between them, tracing the connections between democracy or popular sovereignty and imperial subjugation, elucidating the dynamics of racial capitalism, and attending to the resources in anticolonial thought and action, especially in political solidarities across the global south. As Aziz Rana argued in *Two Faces of American Freedom*, freedom and equality among whites in the North American colonies, and then the United States, depended materially and symbolically on the exploitation and expropriation of subject communities: 'settler empire was the servant of a unique and robust view of self-rule, seen by many as crucial to the fulfillment of emancipatory ambitions' (2010, p. 3). Settlers' ongoing insistence on interpreting Indigenous claims for land and political autonomy in their own terms, moreover – as claims for property rights and cultural freedoms – renders them impervious to the radical challenge such claims pose to the settler-colonial model of development, capital accumulation by means of dispossession, and the political practices that depend on them (Coulthard, 2014). These pathologies are closely bound to the broader dynamics of democratic despotism identified by Du Bois – to democratization in non-settler imperial states – in ways that bear on both democratic theory and the study of settler-colonial societies. The economic and political life of European metropolitan citizens was similarly premised on imperial domination and expropriation: the industrial productivity enabled by the opening of agricultural land in the western hemisphere to European economies; the fueling of the European working class by sugar calories made cheap by the use of slave labor; the sense of political inclusion of the working class generated by a shared colonial project. Class conflict in Europe was mitigated, democratic communities forged, and welfare states inaugurated on the back of imperial expropriation, white supremacy, and, as Inés Valdez has shown, racialized imperial labor control. Valdez's account of the immigration policies of contemporary nation-states as 'imperial remnants rather than legitimate attributes of sovereignty' (2019, p. 22) sheds light on contemporary right-wing populism and exposes the limits of left positions on migration that seek to protect only domestic labor while leaving capital's global exploitation of labor unchallenged. Thanks to the global hegemony of the United States, the constellation of distinct but connected forms of imperial domination that has characterized American history – slavery, settler colonialism, and conquest of both adjacent and more distant territory – has ramified around the world. As the sociologist Matthew Desmond (2019) has argued, America's 'low-road capitalism' – characterized by depressed wages, extreme inequality, racism, union-busting, the punitive disciplining of workers, lax regulation of labor standards, and 'normalized insecurity' – can be traced to slavery. If that low-road capitalism is not typical of wealthy countries, on Desmond's account, its centrality to the world's largest economy intensifies the imprint of empire on the

contemporary world economy, while the exploitation by global capital of labor in more vulnerable states amounts to the exportation of low-road practices outside the political boundaries, but not the economies, of other wealthy states.

Just as Du Bois had demonstrated the continuities between empires and European nation-states as their chief modern agents, he also showed that postcolonial states suffered new iterations of imperial domination obscured by international law. Anticipating the idea of neo-colonialism developed by Kwame Nkrumah and others in the 1950s, Du Bois argued in 1925 that Liberia, one of the few formally independent African states at the time, was wrongly 'looked upon as a self-steered craft, master of her own fate instead of being, as she has always been, a canoe tossed on raging economic currents which eddied out of the slave trade of the eighteenth-century into the swirl of the World War in the twentieth century' (Du Bois, 1925, p. 327). As it was for Liberia in Du Bois's time, debt remains a major mechanism of neo-colonial control, now enforced by a rigid 'statist' norm of repayment that states in the global north did not abide by before the 1930s, when they were the major borrowers and defaults were common. This norm, widely considered to be both apolitical and indispensable to the functioning of international finance, is neither. It imposes extraordinary costs on the populations of postcolonial states, while encouraging speculators and investors to make indiscriminate loans, confident that, however illegitimate, predatory or transitory a given regime or loan package, the population is on the hook for repayment (Lienau, 2014; Roos, 2019). In this way, international law and norms, and a flawed, tendentious understanding of their history, discipline postcolonial states to adhere to unprecedentedly onerous repayment terms and further entrench their subjugated international standing.

In *Boundaries* I followed Martti Koskenniemi in treating law as a set of discursive and institutional resources mobilized by 'people with projects', asking what sort of political work these resources did for those who deployed them (Kennedy, 2000; Koskenniemi, 2002; Marks and Lang, 2013). The focus of the book's analysis and critique is liberal ideology as it appeared in the discourses of the law of nations and international law. I recognized the importance of profit motives and commercial agents to this history, but capitalism was not a central category of analysis. Still, given that modern empires and capitalism developed jointly, and must be understood in relation to one other, it would have been useful to address more explicitly the relationship between liberalism and capitalism, as does recent Marxian work in the history of international law that has sought to capture the 'systemic logics at work' in international legal hierarchies (Marks, 2008, p. 302) and the literatures on racial capitalism and colonialism that Ince flags below. Where my emphasis in *Boundaries* tended to be on the persistent violation of international law's avowed norms of freedom and equality, and the obfuscations of that violation that the articulation of the norms has performed, this scholarship tracks more explicitly liberal international law's work in service to imperatives of



capitalism: the domination performed by the norms themselves rather than by their violation. International law, as these accounts show, created the conditions necessary for capitalism by 'reconstructing the world in the image of a particular kind of "free" and "equal" or "sovereign" legal subject', one with individual rights, especially freedom of religion and conscience, and rights of property and freedom to trade (Parfitt, 2019, p. 57).

The democratic nation-state as it emerged in Europe, then, was both a creature and an agent of imperial capitalism, though in its self-conception it was the antithesis of empire *and* its successor in a historical progression toward a more just and equal world. Just as the capitalist corporation is sometimes described as an 'externality machine' – a structure designed to internalize profits while offloading costs onto others – the western democratic nation has never been self-sustaining, but rather took the form that it did only by imposing devastating costs elsewhere. I have alluded to the attractions of some liberal and democratic norms and of the ideal of an international community of nations treating one another with mutual respect as independent and as equals; the same can be said of the concern for the dignity and moral equality of every individual that underlies cosmopolitan projects in political theory. Du Bois himself saw 'but one adequate method of salvation – the giving of democratic weapons of self-defense to the defenseless' (at other times he might have said the taking of such weapons by the defenseless) (Du Bois, 1915, p. 712). If these values are to serve as the basis for critique or constructive political projects we must continue to reckon as he did with their imperial entanglements past and present.

Jennifer Pitts

Theory's Empire

The critique and rejection of imperial rule was, and has remained, a persistent element of that form of government from its inception. For a long time, however, that element had been obscured by the major theories of global political life. The tendency had been, instead, to favor the core concerns of a certain class of metropolitan administrators and theorists who, whether overtly or surreptitiously, promoted their own governments' rights to dominate over much of the rest of the world. Then, around three decades ago, something unusual began to happen: the relatively narrow professional guild of political theorists, largely occupying academic institutions in the global north, started to push back against 'the West's' claims to rightfully dominate 'the rest' more systematically and directly than had previously been the case. These critical efforts have since become quite mainstream. The stakes of this 'turn to empire' in political theory seem to lie in reforming the profession as an institutional and intellectual project. In demonstrating how political theory has traditionally justified the political aspirations of

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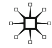
imperial governors, it is hoped that students and scholars of the field might begin to think of their work beyond and against these entanglements.

In what follows, I want to suggest that the extent to which this project might be successful turns on how political theorists have conceived of the relationship between 'the political' and 'the international' to date, and how to conceive of that relationship otherwise. Taking the international seriously in political theory requires conceiving of the field as imperialist, not just in the content of its canon, but more fundamentally in the way it is constituted as a field. The imperialism of the field consists, in the first instance, in alternately excluding and subsuming forms of thought and action that emerge from beyond the recognizable boundaries of the political, a category founded in reference to Euro-American canons and institutions of government, as Ince and Pitts here recognize. These boundaries have been codified in the separation of theories of 'the political' from theories of 'the international', such that the international comes to be understood as external to the properly political.

Accounts of the field's historical and ongoing imperial entanglements helpfully unpack how this particular relationship has worked to justify Euro-American imperialism. Pitts' recent *Boundaries of the International* is a very fine example of such scholarship. However, such accounts also tend to somewhat problematically reduce 'the international' to those entanglements, external to and readily addressed by political theory's critical resources. This runs the risk of replicating and reifying the political/international division upon which so much of the field's imperialism has been premised. This need not be the case. Instead, it is possible to view the international as the condition of possibility for political theorizing itself. And if the challenge for political theorists of empire is to address questions about the purpose, legitimacy and potential future(s) of the field, this view of the international may prove a fruitful starting point to take up the analytical work necessary to meeting that challenge.

What does it mean to say that political theory is an 'imperialist' enterprise? The political theorist identifies, defines and produces understandings of statements, ideas, texts, acts, and authors that meet the criteria of being 'political.' By extension, they must either reject any such idea, author, episode, etc. that they determine to be non-political, or establish criteria for its inclusion within the political. These are routine discriminations, necessary for the maintenance of any discipline. But they are what make political theory, in fact, an imperialist enterprise – and, as we well know, most modern disciplines are (Wallerstein, 1984). It is not simply the problem of a particular canon's particular historical entanglements with particular imperial formations. It is something closer to the problem that 'empire' poses in the meaning of its etymological root, *imperium*, 'absolute or supreme power or dominion… complete control or influence; supreme command' (OED). To say that political theory is something of an imperialist enterprise is to say that it



lays claim to a dominion over the means to conceptualize the ways that humans attempt to live together . There are a couple of variations on the way this plays out.

In the first – let's call it the supremacist variation – the boundaries of the field and its core concepts are tightly circumscribed and secured, arrogating the political to a singular geo-historical tradition. It is in this register that we can understand Hannah Arendt (1977 [1961]), for example, when she states that 'the very word ['political'], which in all European languages still derives from the historically unique organization of the Greek city-state, echo[es] the experiences of the community which first discovered the essence and the realm of the political… Whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action. What remains outside it, such as the great feats of barbarian empires, may be impressive and noteworthy, but it is not political, strictly speaking' (p. 154). One can say this is imperial to the extent that the supremacy of the political is preserved through a series of operations in which its boundaries are secured: the political is elevated to the status of the highest and most complete realization of human attempts to live together, and ultimately alternative formations are considered lesser, secondary curiosities, if they are considered at all.

Another variation runs in the opposite direction. We'll call this the expansionist variant. Here, the political, and/or its conceptual relatives or subsidiaries – democracy, sovereignty, the *res publica*, freedom, equality, justice, and the like – are taken to be the organizing principles of, or principles for, organizing human communal life everywhere. As Cedric J. Robinson (2016 [1980]) put it, 'the political precept as a descriptive capsule for enclosing segments of human experience and organization has … [monopolized] the concerns, interests, and phenomena of arenas formerly dominated or characterized by alternative or truly alien instruments of reconciliation or resolution' (p. 23). Here political theorists may spar over conceptual and historical transformations in the contents of these organizing principles, or over their relative value for understanding politics. They may even push to admit new entries into the pantheon of sanctified ideas, texts, authors or qualifying metrics of the political. But they do not question the ability for the political, its canon, and its subsidiaries to adequately account for the idea, text, author, event or form of order in question. While this allows for a certain disciplinary capaciousness, one potential consequence may be that, as Adom Getachew (2016) has recently argued, this mode of political theory flattens the specificity of other human attempts to live together when they fall outside of the available grammars of the political. The result is the conceptual colonization and expropriation of essential specificities for the purpose of (re)affirming the 'true' universality of the political.

As Pitts argues in *Boundaries of the International* (2018), these supremacist isolations and expansionist subsumptions were initially formulated and played out by Euro-American political and legal theorists from the eighteenth-century onward, generating much of the conceptual architecture that we have come to associate with

the imperialism of the modern international. When eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political and legal thinkers sought to address the question of Europe's place in the world, they almost invariably began from the assumption that the supreme realization of human efforts to live together was manifested in or between nation-states on the European continent in the form of properly 'political' societies. This belief yielded two seemingly contradictory, but nevertheless complementary visions of and for 'the international' that justified structures of European imperialism. On the one hand, because the high achievement of properly political society was peculiar to European people and nation-states, none of the relevant imperatives associated with the establishment of just and legitimate political society (contract, consent, representation, protection of individual and communal rights, just conduct in war, and so forth) pertained beyond the metropole. On the other hand, because considerations essential to the establishment of properly political society did not pertain beyond the metropole, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers also often insisted that extra-political measures be taken to expand and project the properly political onto those spaces and populations where proper political society had yet to take root – the 'transition to modernity' that Nichols points to below. The seeming contradiction between these two positions was largely superficial. Far from negating each other, they in fact worked in tandem to produce an understanding of the international as an external space wherein those persons and governments claiming the high civilization and authority of 'political' society were not required to be accountable to peoples who supposedly had not developed that form of community and authority. Thus the intellectual mouthpieces of Euro-American imperialism, as Pitts puts it, obscured 'the fact that some of Europe's most important powers were global empires – rather than simply territorially bounded communities of citizens engaged in a shared, and implicitly republican, political project' – through treatises that sought to define a supposedly universal 'law of nations'. This 'largely disregarded the violence of European commercial and imperial expansion [and effaced] the features of hierarchy and imperial extension that characterized the world system [from the eighteenth-century] through the present' (pp. 72–73).

The consequence of this legacy is that political theory has traditionally rendered the international as an external space, separate and distinct from the properly political, thus enabling political thinkers simultaneously to secure the political from the messy realities of the world beyond Europe and to remake the world in that image. Pitts' account of this dynamic is a very helpful diagnosis of the relationship between political theory and international law in Euro-American imperialism. But it is also an illustrative example of how such critiques can formally replicate the dynamic of the political/international division that they set out to destabilize. While Pitts is quite correct that our contemporary grammars of international law, community, order, security, and so on have frequently justified North Atlantic domination over the rest of the world, focusing on this particular understanding of

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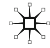


the international may also be a little reductive. For example, as Pitts notes above, *Boundaries* provides very little insight into alternatives to European imperialist discourses of the international from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, we are (re)introduced to European political theorists – familiar and unfamiliar – that were more or less self-aware and critical of their countrymen's and governments' behaviors overseas. To be sure, *Boundaries* hints at one possible alternative early on, in its discussion of how the Ottoman empire participated in forms of diplomacy, exchange, treaty-making, and warfare with European states, thus yielding a condition of internationality stubbornly irreducible (though certainly not invulnerable) to the early-modern European states-system and its legal, political, and theological underpinnings. Still, the Ottoman example remains mostly a foil against which to draw into relief the imperialism of European international thinking, and Europeans' criticisms of that discourse.

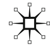
These sorts of omissions are characteristic of the tendency in many of today's political theories of empire to focus mostly, if not exclusively, on how Euro-American imperialism has monopolized visions and practices of international and inter-communal interchange. This, of course, is an essential point of departure for any effort to critique the legacy of that imperial monopoly. However, focusing exclusively on European imperialist provincialism also risks crowding out what is, presumably, the implicit upshot of such a critique: that is, to explore ideas, institutions, and practices of internationalism beyond the Euro-American canon. There are several examples from the same period that one could summon in an effort to cultivate a new pool of resources that can provide accounts of alternative principles, protocols, and foundations for understanding human attempts to live together. One could, for instance, place Emer de Vattel's account of the problematic but complex distinctions between Christian and non-Christian nations, and of the prerogatives or responsibilities for each party that followed therefrom, alongside the contemporaneous attempt to address these questions by a thinker from the Islamic world, like the Sufi scholar Sidi al-Mukhtar ibn Ahmad al-Kunti (see Grovogui, 2017). When considering how critics of empire and the slave trade addressed the British Parliament, Burke's contemporary Olaudah Equiano might provide a more complete picture of the growing critical chorus around these issues in the late-eighteenth-century. And, if one wishes to consider how ideas about the perlocutionary self-evidence of law came to characterize trends in nineteenth-century legal theory such as European positivism, it may be worth also considering Māori expressions of political authority and autonomy over their lands and peoples in the first article of the 1835 *He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirene* (Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand).

Now, an al-Kunti, an Equiano, or the Māori might not appear in much of political theory's literature concerning empire because non-European criticisms of empire were, historically, either unknown to or considered irrelevant by Euro-American thinkers. It is certainly true that the imperialism of Euro-American political and

international thought was only possible through rituals of direct and indirect discriminations that rendered non-European criticisms irrelevant or unacceptable to accounts of what political and international life were or could be. However, because the imperialism of Euro-American political and international thought materialized in large part through the direct or indirect practices of invalidating non-European criticisms, leaving those accounts unconsidered may also carry the unintended consequence of unwittingly replicating the original discriminations that fortified Euro-American claims to the primacy of the political and the imperialist vision of the international. One way to possibly mitigate the risk of replicating those discriminations, therefore, is not to begin from the assumption that the international proper is a pre-existing structure of imperialism. Instead, we might treat the international as a way of responding to questions of identity, judgment, and action that emerge when two or more roughly discrete communities come into contact, and potentially, into conflict. In other words, as R.B.J. Walker (2016) has suggested, one might understand the claim to the international as the condition of possibility for providing an account of who and what any discrete and bounded polity, and attendant account of political life, might be.

The fact that Euro-American empire has remained the overwhelming form that those relationships have taken is not to be dismissed, but refusing to allow the international to be reduced to that relationship would be an essential step in sustaining a critique of that form of imperialism. This might involve decentering received accounts and canons of the political originating from North Atlantic promoters of Euro-American imperialism, or at least understanding those accounts in more dynamic relationship with counterpoints to the fundamental premises of those accounts and canons during the times they were being articulated. This is not to suggest that theorizing the political is incompatible with the conception of the international that I am proposing, and that the former should be abandoned in favor of the latter. A modest reversal in the traditional way we identify and criticize political problems, particularly where these abut claims to the international, may be in order, however. So far, political theorists of empire have begun with the problem of empire as the condition of internationalism to highlight certain conceptions of what is and what is not political. The result has been to say that, to combat imperialist internationalism, any particular criticism of empire has to be seen as the true preserve of the political, and/or that the field must readjust the boundaries of the political so that it can adequately encompass and account for those criticisms. But alternatively, viewing the international as an unsettled question, as the condition of possibility for claims about what is or is not political, may ultimately help chip a little bit more at the petrified boundaries that have for so long mapped the cognitive terrain of theory's empire.

Timothy Bowers Vasko



Political Economy, Capitalism, and Empire: Rematerializing a Research Agenda

The 'colonial turn' witnessed in the last two decades in political theory has occasioned a valuable encounter with the methodological nationalist parameters of the field. What began as the reappraisal of several canonical figures has extended to interrogating the imperial provenance of cardinal concepts that have shaped the discipline in North America. The enterprise has involved detecting, on the one hand, the imperial genealogies of the questions central to political theory, and, on the other hand, how the erasure of these genealogies enshrines the nation-state as political thought's politico-juridical horizon. Exemplary is Mills' (2015) indictment of liberal political philosophy as 'ideology'. The powerful fiction of a social contract between free and equal persons who constitute the (implicitly national) body politic, Mills maintains, obfuscates the colonial histories of liberal polities riddled with racialized exclusions. Scaling up the question from the intra-polity to the inter-polity level, Pitts' (2018) latest book trains its sights on the pervasive meta-narrative of 'international society', which recounts the history of the global order as the progressive universalization of sovereign equality. In her corrective, she reveals international law to be an imperial language wherein sovereign statehood represents not the axiomatic premise of the international system but the effect of the boundaries that excluded non-European polities from its remit.

The two books just cited do not simply illustrate the state of the art in political theory after the colonial turn. In their preoccupation with personhood and recognition, they also encapsulate the field's continued focus on questions of inclusion and exclusion. At least since Uday Mehta's (1999) controversial characterization of liberalism as an intrinsically imperial system of thought, the most influential efforts to unravel empire's relation to political theory have revolved around the politics of representing non-European or colonized others. Scholars have quarried the European history of political thought for constructions of the universal and particular, negotiations of cultural pluralism and difference, and controversies over civilizational hierarchies.

An unfortunate, if unintended, consequence of this bias for the representational has been the neglect of political economy as a constitutive feature of empire and its afterlives. The following reflections identify some of the analytic limitations that follow from this neglect and contour the potential of situating the political theory of empire in the historical unfolding of global capitalism.

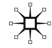
Given the centrality of equality, autonomy, and justice to political theory, it is unsurprising that political theorists have mainly construed European colonial empires as structures of domination, exclusion and injustice. Colonial empires were certainly these. But they also comprised systems of dispossession, exploitation and surplus transfer. Forged in the imperial crucible were not only racialized

hierarchies of full, partial and non-personhood, and graduated capacities for contract, representation and self-rule. Colonial empires also incubated the property, exchange and labor regimes that have subordinated the socio-ecological reproductive capacities of the planet to the relentless accumulation of capital.

Bypassing the political economy of empire, and thus viewing Indigenous dispossession, slavery, and imperial despotism primarily through the prism of racism, white supremacy, and cultural arrogance, risks falling into a sort of idealism or inverted reductionism. The lexical priority accorded to these ideological formations downplays the fact that slavery, settlerism and despotism were above all modalities of expropriating land, labor and social knowledge, and reorganizing them in the pursuit of wealth, profit and revenue. The violent imperial processes that built the global capitalist economy receive frequent condemnation but little sustained reflection in the scholarship on the political theory of empire. The attention instead fixates on the liaisons between imperial rule and European political philosophy, generating hierarchical constructions of cultural difference and spurious universalizations of provincial European values.

This tendency stems partly from the disciplinary practices of a subfield that has long been anchored in the exegeses of privileged texts. It also reproduces the theoretical protocols and literary bent of postcolonial studies from which the political theory of empire has borrowed heavily. Two theoretical choices in particular breed a disconnect from political economic analysis. The first is to organize inquiry around the meta-binary of colonizer/colonized. The second is to conceive of this binary as a political and civilizational axis of power to be dissected with the tools of literary and cultural criticism. The outcome, as Neil Lazarus puts it, is a 'category error' that fails to grasp colonialism as 'part and parcel of a larger, enfolding historical dynamic, which is that of capitalism in its global trajectory' (2011, p. 7). The inattention to political economy is arguably unconscious in postcolonial theory, whereas in political theory it instantiates a conscious aversion to categories of social analysis in the historical study of ideas (Moyn, 2014). The victory of linguistic contextualism (the so-called 'Cambridge School') has marked intellectual histories informed by sociological frameworks as imprecise or, worse, reductionist and anachronistic. As a result, the social history of political thought inspired by C.B. Macpherson's (1962) Marxist interpretation has found little traction outside a limited academic circle.

The colonial turn at once exhibits the marginalization of social theory and represents an opportunity for recuperating some of its insights – some of which are well illustrated in Nichols' essay in this exchange. While there are good reasons for questioning the adequacy of 'possessive market society' or 'agrarian capitalism' in theorizing the social context of ideas, these do not justify abandoning social contextualization *tout court*. Social theory can prove especially useful for addressing certain limitations of the current political theory of empire. A telling case is the manner in which various forms of imperial violence and coercion are



treated in the literature (here, again, Nichols' view is instructive). Many scholars readily invoke the litany of abuses that colonial empires visited upon non-Europeans: land expropriation, bonded labor, predatory commodity markets, and tribute extraction, all subtended by a heavy dose of force. They often subsume these processes under a monolithic category of 'imperial violence', which then forms the static backdrop for the real question, namely, whether the thinkers under study condoned or criticized it based on their assessment of the capacities of the colonized. In doing so, political thinkers' judgments of *who the colonized are* take priority over, and are assumed to shape their view of, *what the colonizers do*.

A different picture emerges when one situates imperial violence within a theoretical framework that explicates the agendas that animate it, the specific forms of its exercise, and the patterned effects that it produces. A particularly generative approach to imperial violence, one that has informed my own research along with many others', takes as its departure point the Marxian notion of 'the primitive accumulation of capital'. Marx (1976) used the term to explain the historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production through a range of violent colonial transformations that remade the world as they tore it apart. In the eponymous section in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx cited under 'primitive accumulation' the same violent practices and coercive institutions that crop up in the scholarship in political theory and empire, including the plunder of precious minerals in the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, and commercial imperialism in Asia.

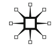
Recasting these episodes as vectors of primitive accumulation changes their analytic register. What were previously undifferentiated descriptions of imperial violence now reappear as building blocks of a theory of capitalist development, revealing the 'colonial' contexts of political ideas to be 'colonial capitalist' contexts (Ince, 2018b). The perspective of political economy holds not additive but transformative significance, as it sheds new light on empire's impact on political thought, including on the politics of universalism and cultural hierarchies. It discloses how European constructions of cultural and racial difference were shaped by the imperative to access colonial land, labor and resources; by the strategies and discourses devised to achieve these ends; and by the metropolitan perceptions of these ends and methods. The optic of colonial capitalism helps disaggregate imperial violence into, for instance, the violence of slave-plantation capitalism, commercial capitalism, and settler capitalism, as well as their context-specific articulations. Such theoretical parsing of imperial violence in turn enables a more precise view of the criticisms that it incited and the rationalizations it called forth at specific historical junctures.

Patrick Wolfe's (2001) oft-cited discussion of miscegenation laws in the USA elucidates the weight of political economic agendas in shaping the construction of social difference. Wolfe explains the diametrically opposed applications of the blood quanta laws to Blacks and Native Americans by recourse to the primitive accumulation of capital that combined enslaved labor and evacuated land. A similar

political economic mediation is discernible in the works of several European thinkers who have been of interest to the scholarship on the political theory of empire. Highlighting this mediation enables us to answer a number of unresolved puzzles in the literature: for instance, John Locke's argument that American land was open to unilateral appropriation because Native Americans lacked a monetary economy; or Edmund Burke's sympathy for Britain's oppressed Indian subjects but lack thereof for Africans and Native Americans within the empire; or David Hume's notable silence regarding Atlantic slavery, despite his voluble discussions of ancient, feudal and Asiatic bondage; or Adam Smith's failure to extend his rebuke of colonial conquest, plunder and slavery in the West and the East Indies to agrarian settler colonialism in North America.

The puzzle that each case poses is why *certain* historically specific practices and not others were deemed to be universal, or why *certain* cultural differences were built into civilizational hierarchies while others were considered irrelevant for justifying or criticizing imperial practices. Intra- and inter-textual protocols and culturalist preoccupations hold limited analytic capacity for explaining, and not simply chronicling, the differential assessment of universals and particulars (call it the 'problem of competing universals'). The political economy of empire constitutes a more productive departure point: it illuminates the extraordinary commodification of the seventeenth-century Atlantic world where colonial land for capitalist agriculture was the prime asset (Locke); the designation of division of labor and commercial complexity as the index of civilization in eighteenth-century stadial theory (Burke); colonial slavery's paradoxical status as a barbarous yet commercial institution central to modern civility (Hume); and the institutional dependence of settler capitalism on land-markets established by imperial acts of land appropriation (Smith) (Ince, 2011, 2012, 2018a).

In each case, the variegated socio-legal forms of colonial capitalism confronted contemporaries with a profound ideological challenge: the modern world of commerce, with its promise of liberty, prosperity and enlightenment, gestated within colonialism's ferment of chaos, cruelty and venality. Equally importantly, that we encounter comparable tensions in the works of *both* imperial functionaries (Locke, Burke) *and* skeptics (Smith, Hume) suggests that this was an institutional-ideological (as opposed to intellectual-discursive) problem that exceeded the ethical predilections and moral sensibilities of individual figures. European imperialism's impact on political concept formation, within and beyond Europe, thus cannot be fully grasped without attending to the capitalist social forms woven into the fabric of imperial relations. These were the province of 'political economy', which arose from metropolitan attempts to comprehend, institutionalize and administer the process of wealth and revenue creation across imperial interdependencies. Much more than a language of technical administration, political economy constituted a mode of ethico-political reflection that furnished discourses of civilization and savagery with much of their socio-historical referents



and evaluative metrics. The extant literature's focus on civilization, universalism and difference has, by and large, evacuated these discourses of their political economic content.

To say this much is not to exhort every scholar in the field to incorporate an analysis of capitalism, much less turn historical sociologists or social historians, but rather to call for expanding the range of social relations and issues comprising the relevant contexts of political ideas. The political economic constitution of empire offers one such contextual register at a particularly opportune moment. The ecumenical and growing fields of the 'new history of capitalism' (Beckert and Rockman, 2016) and 'racial capitalism' (Dawson, 2016; Fraser, 2016) are generating a range of pressing questions that invite political theorizing. Their centering of colonialism and slavery in (albeit hemispheric) accounts of capitalist development enlarges the space for exploring the reception, justification or rejection of colonial-capitalist practices and institutions in legal, political and social thought. Political theorists would be particularly well situated to contribute to this space. Concomitantly, a closer engagement with political economy, historical sociology and critical geography promises a renewed social history of political theory, one that is imperial in scope and attentive to the historical specificity of political languages (Kennedy, 2012).

There are many methodological entry points to this agenda, including but not limited to reappraising privileged legal, political and economic tracts; mapping out the 'middle' political thought of legislators, courts, administrators and publicists; or excavating vernacular yet comparable ideological formations arising out of imperial social formations. There are no *a priori* reasons against moving between multiple levels of discourse, or for that matter, against constructing syncretic theoretical frameworks (drawing upon, for instance, Polanyian, Braudelian or Foucaultian analysis).

A social turn in the political theory of empire would pay another analytic dividend, which can only be signaled here. If, as many critical scholars and activists have noted, and as Pitts observes above, the imperial constitution of the global order has persisted beyond formal decolonization, then the afterlives of empire arguably remain more salient at the institutional-ideological level. To consider a pivotal theme in the literature, the switch from the language of 'civilization' in the nineteenth century to that of 'development' in the twentieth, to the wholesale abandonment of development nomenclature in the twenty-first, cannot be explained by discourse analysis alone. Their full significance *qua* discursive formations rests in their embeddedness in the institutional-ideological problem of governing the peripheries that global capitalism cannot but continuously reproduce within and across borders. This problem has generated oscillating and recombinant modes of institutional reform, indirect rule, military intervention, legal engineering and financial coercion, both during and after formal colonialism. Elucidating the persistent imperial logics of peripheralization, devalorization and disposability

through their episodic reconfigurations requires a capacious understanding of empire and a different understanding of what it means to theorize it. Political theory would have as much to gain from as to contribute to this revisionist enterprise.

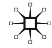
Onur Ulas Ince

Context, Violence, and Methodological Drift in the Study of Empire

The publication of Pitts' impressive and erudite *Boundaries of the International* presents an occasion to revisit the past several decades of scholarship in political theory and the history of political thought concerning empire and imperialism. Indeed, a summary comparison of this work with Pitts' earlier study, *A Turn to Empire* – itself a watershed publication – provides a point of departure for tracing some of the longer and larger arc of the field. For while the later work is in many ways a continuation of the project begun in the earlier, there is a notable divergence with regard to basic questions of method.

A Turn to Empire fits legibly within the larger 'historical contextualist' approach to political theory which has dominated the study of empire since the mid to late 1990s and is most heavily indebted to the Cambridge school. Thus, when Pitts and others working in this vein set out to extrapolate from this approach to the study of empire and imperialism, the notion of 'context' with which they were working was primarily restricted to the discursive context of elite, canonical thinkers' immediate interlocutors. Hence,*A Turn to Empire* focused on reconstructing the (often parenthetic) references to non-European peoples in the writings of recognizable figures in the canon of western political thought, such as Smith, Burke, Bentham, Mill, and Tocqueville.

Boundaries departs from this method in important ways. In it, the notion of 'context' has expanded considerably to include socio-economic and institutional backgrounds. These not only inform the content of the texts and concepts in question, they provide the mechanism of articulation for their uptake in actual practices of imperial governance. Methodologically, this not only means reading a much wider swath of thinkers – particularly those more directly involved in empire building – but also supplementing textual exegesis and 'close reading' with archival work into institutions and practices of imperial governance. *Boundaries* contains glimpses of this deeper institutional history, particularly as regards practices of legal decision-making. A second change concerns the growing attention paid to the perspective of the *governed* rather than merely the *governors* in the imperial world. This trajectory is more muted and tentative relative to the first, but is discernible nevertheless. In *A Turn to Empire,* Pitts noted that the canonical thinkers under examination 'communicated very little with their countries' colonial subjects and had no firsthand knowledge of non-European societies' (Pitts, 2005, p. 242). In *Boundaries,* however, we find an increased



appreciation for the intellectual and political agency of non-elite, colonized and/or subaltern actors, moving away from what might be called a dissemination theory of imperial ideas towards an interactive or 'contrapuntal' one (see Morefield, 2019, and Tully, 2008). The latter emphasizes that key concepts and categories of empire do not emerge in the metropole only to trickle down to the periphery, but rather spring out of the dynamic interactions and contestations between governors and governed. Accordingly, *Boundaries* offers an extended attack on a longstanding dissemination narrative that 'depicts modern international law as developed exclusively within Europe and then exported to the rest of the world, rather than as partly forged in the course of European imperial expansion and through European interactions with extra-European states and societies' (Pitts, 2018, p. 14).

This contribution pursues the notion that these changes within Pitts' contribution to the study of empire and imperialism are symptomatic of a more general 'methodological drift' in the field as a whole. I refer to this as a 'drift' because it has largely taken place without any overt re-theorizing of methods. In what follows, I consider one possible impetus behind this movement in the form of a fraught and frictional relationship between Cambridge school intellectual history and critical social theory. I then unpack some of the potential implications of methodological drift with respect to one domain of substantive inquiry with which I am most familiar: the study of settler colonialism in the late modern and contemporary Anglophone world.

The interpretive framework that casts the largest shadow over the study of empire and imperialism in political theory and the history of political thought is the so-called Cambridge school. Initially developed by Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock (*inter alia*), the Cambridge school developed into a highly influential research agenda in the fields of intellectual history and the history of political thought. Building off J.L. Austin's speech-act theory and the approach to 'language games' developed by the later Wittgenstein, Cambridge school thinkers have sought to reinterpret classical texts in the history of political thought as complex illocutionary interventions. This required relating text to context, for to understand a speech act is to understand what it does within a particular context of action: its function, not its meaning.

This approach already contained some elements of what we might consider to be a critical social theory. To read a text such as Hobbes' *Leviathan* in this way is already to de-reify it in a certain respect. Namely, it entails grasping the author not as someone engaged in a transhistorical conversation with other luminaries ruminating over eternal questions, but as a political actor, i.e. someone trying to accomplish a practical objective within a real debate in their own time. Read in this light, the line between 'canonical' and lesser-known works begins to break down. If a text gains its force and meaning in its relation to context, then reconstructing this context moves us beyond the interpretation of self-standing 'great works'.

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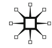
Despite these important insights, Cambridge school approaches have nevertheless reached a certain impasse in the attempt to connect intellectual and social history effectively. Although great emphasis is placed upon context from within this approach, the ‘context’ in question remains a highly intellectualized one, often essentially reducing down to the immediate elite interlocutors of the author in question, as Pitts recognizes above. Moreover, it means reconstructing the intended audience from his or her own standpoint. The result is an approach to intellectual history that remains relatively silent on macro level socio-economic developments – as Ulas Ince also points out in his contribution to this exchange – and thus a rather startling separation of intellectual and social history.

One implication of this has been that those working in the Cambridge school style often struggle to explain the mechanism by which one intellectual tradition is crowded out by another: they lack an account of the differential material tractability of intellectual discourses. This problem is generated, in part, by a common conflation between two different problems regarding the relation between intellectual discourses and material context. One reason that intellectual history has been largely separated from social history in the study of political thought resides with the concern that overemphasis on socio-economic forces robs thinkers of their intellectual autonomy and agency by turning social and material circumstances into direct causal mechanisms that generate concepts and ideas. However, one can adopt a more materialist orientation without this *reductio ad absurdum*. One way to reframe the matter is to consider it as pertaining to the effect, rather than cause, of conceptual innovations in the history of ideas. From this perspective, we do not focus exclusively on the question of causation (what caused this agent to say X?) but rather consider also impact (why did this agent’s argument for X largely succeed?). When we examine the impact of intellectual discourses – why some prevail over others – it is reasonable to conclude that this is not merely a function of intelligibility (it conforms to recognizable standards of meaning and rationality) but also of tractability (it appears feasible, converges with, or finds appropriate support within social institutions and practices that enables it to make good on its claims).

This points us to a second limitation of the Cambridge school approach. One of its aims is to provide an account of a text from the author’s own standpoint, to avoid imposing our own prejudices upon historically distant texts. The approach begins from a methodological commitment to reconstruction from a first-person perspective, generating two obstacles for social theory. First, it can make it more difficult to account for the underlying motivation of the study. A Cambridge school approach teaches us to read from within the worlds of historical actors themselves. But why do this? The most obvious reply is that it gives us a more accurate, fairer or truer account of what ‘really happened’. It is thus representational, i.e., attempting to correspond to reality as it was experienced by those who lived it. Historical accuracy is a worthy goal. But this forecloses an analysis of several



important questions in politics. Questions of impact, effect and tractability can never be reconstructed only from the first-person present, for the author herself cannot know what the uptake of her arguments will be. Instead, they must be reconstructed from a third person, retrospective perspective. Moreover, we may very well wish to examine the past explicitly from the standpoint of the present, that is, as a means of understanding how the present order came about in the way that it did. This presentist orientation is implied already by some historical contextualist approaches to political theory, most obviously in the work of James Tully, for instance, whose work aspires precisely to bridge Cambridge school and critical-genealogical approaches (Tully, 2008, vol. 1, chs 1–2). In the bulk of the cases, however, it is denied or obfuscated, in which case the interpretative method threatens to draw a falsely stark division between past and present (see Turner, 2016).

To understand the implications of this, consider a set of debates sparked by the 1999 publication of *Liberalism and Empire* by Uday Singh Mehta. Mehta set out to examine a certain tendency of liberal thinkers to convert abstract theories of universal rights into exclusionary practices, domination and the authorization of violence when actualized on the imperial periphery. Subsequent analysis has frequently challenged Mehta's framework, either by defending the specific liberal thinkers Mehta took to task, or by providing counter-cases that purport to undermine or nuance the general picture he provided (Mantena, 2010; McCarthy, 2009; Muthu, 2003; Pitts, 2005). In sum, whereas Mehta saw a relatively monolithic tradition of liberalism and empire, critics have found internal contradiction, heterodoxy and diversity. In my evaluation, claims about the internal diversity of broad descriptors such as 'liberalism' or even 'British Imperialism' can be simultaneously true and yet limited. They are true in the sense that they are more accurate descriptions of these intellectual traditions as viewed from an internal, first-person perspective. It is descriptively true that Mill's views on European imperialism were importantly different from, say, those of Locke or Kant, and that this undermines the notion that there is a singular, unified nexus between liberalism and empire extending from the seventeenth-century to the nineteenth or twentieth.

However, while true, there are at least two reasons also to consider this a limited and partial claim.

First, it may be question-begging as to the standard for evaluating the relative coherence of an intellectual tradition. There is no absolute standard for determining the uniformity or cohesion of an intellectual tradition. Instead, its coherence must be evaluated relative to some relevant criteria, which will importantly hinge on the perspective from which it is evaluated and the purposes for doing so. More particularly, it is a function of the degree to which one's critical perspective is immanent or external to the tradition itself. Note that this does not mean the critic herself must be wholly 'internal' or 'external' to the tradition, in terms of social or

cultural location, only that the critical posture they adopt relative to it. If the criterion is fully immanent to the tradition itself, the evaluation risks becoming self-vindicatory, even tautological. Put more concretely and in the parameters that matter here, a preoccupation with the internal heterogeneity of imperial traditions may presuppose (rather than demonstrate) that the perspective of quarreling imperial elites is *the* standpoint from which coherence should be evaluated, a position that is rarely made explicit and, more to the point, must be argued for in terms other than those of the imperial elites themselves (lest it become tautological).

Second, there is no *prima facie* reason to privilege the perspective of those most centrally positioned in the institutional field responsible for reproducing the intellectual tradition in question. Rather, as decades of work in critical race, feminist and postcolonial analysis has taught us, there are good political and epistemic reasons to privilege the standpoint of those most peripheral to a dominant intellectual tradition and the institutions that function to reproduce it. Indeed, these others may teach us valuable lessons about its impact which its designers and defenders cannot or will not see. In sum, by reconstructing the intellectual history of empire from the internal, first-person perspective of European elites, largely without reference to the social context or material tractability of their arguments, the historicist work of the Cambridge variant has largely failed to grapple with the implications of the perspectival shift generated by postcolonial and decolonial analysis.

To give this set of claims more substance, and to unpack some of their possible implications, consider two problems that have emerged in the specific field with which my own research is concerned, the study of Anglo settler colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When viewed from the interior, first-person perspective of intellectual history, British and American imperialism of the nineteenth century appears as a complex, heterogeneous collection of diverse practices and idioms with little underlying coherent rationale. However, when we view it from the standpoint of Indigenous peoples targeted by these policies, we see a remarkable level of convergence. This is partially because of the standpoint of the analysis, certainly. But it is also because these different vantages points are attending to different aspects of the process as a whole. They operationalize different evaluative criteria: while European intellectual history tends to focus on *intent,* anti-colonial and Indigenous critique tends to focus on *effect.* That prevailing work in the history of political thought commonly obscures this distinction is itself symptomatic of a privileging of the forward-looking, first-person perspective of imperial elites, since the overall structural effect of a set of (seemingly) diverse policies is something that can only be grasped by retrospective reflection. It is necessarily anachronistic to evaluate theorists on those terms, and yet it is nevertheless indispensable to historically informed critical social theory.

This becomes all the more acute when we consider the specific matter of violence. The expansive and explosive colonization process described by James Belich as a 'settler revolution' (2009) was uniformly devastating for those Indigenous societies that stood in the way of the Anglo settler wave. Although Indigenous peoples responded to contact with Anglo settlers in multitudinous ways – including military conflict, negotiation, cooperation, assimilation and self-segregation – in all cases, they eventually found themselves outnumbered and outgunned, and finally bearing witness to the total transformation, if not outright destruction, of their worlds. In many cases, the violence wrought by settlers was intentional. Colonizers physically attacked Indigenous peoples, assaulted, murdered and hunted them for sport. In other cases, although settlers did not necessarily intend violence, destruction nevertheless followed in their wake. The undermining of social, cultural, religious and economic systems caused untold devastation to Indigenous worlds, but in many cases settlers did not understand themselves to be undertaking acts of violence at all. Rather, their policies were frequently designed with the express intent of assisting Indigenous peoples in the (presumed) necessary transition to modernity. Notwithstanding whatever settler elites may have thought, this colonial intent is not the only relevant criterion when evaluating the overall effect of these policies.

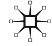
Indigenous communities have survived and even thrived in the midst of this long assault. They have innovated, adapted, fought, fled and negotiated their way through the various iterations of a colonial system that, from their perspective, retains a relatively uniform underlying objective: to prevent them from being Indigenous, i.e. living according to their own ways on their own lands. In other cases, however, colonial violence was more successful. Whole societies have been eliminated. Colonization entailed – and entails – genocide. Grappling with this form of eliminatory violence poses a unique problem for traditional approaches to the history of political thought. It has, however, already been extensively theorized in the field of social history. In his careful historical reconstruction of the colonization process in the Great Basin region of the United States, extending from the late sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the Indigenous (Shoshone) historian Ned Blackhawk provides indispensable conceptual and methodological resources for political theorists in this regard. As Blackhawk argues, the analysis of colonization requires the consideration of violence as something more than another object of study, as, for instance, the grim calculation of lives lost. More than that, violence must become for us 'an interpretative concept as well as a method for understanding' (Blackhawk, 2006, p. 5). Colonial violence remade the world and thus inescapably alters the lens through which we reflect backward upon history itself. It 'characterizes these Native worlds', just as it 'has also destabilized the categories of analysis used to describe them' (Blackhawk, 2006, p. 8). In a similar vein, historian Karl Jacoby pauses in his own darkly gripping account of the 1871 Camp Grant Massacre to consider the conceptual and methodological challenges

posed by colonial violence, at once 'the most familiar and the most overlooked subject in American history' (Jacoby, 2008, p. 2). He writes:

> Reckoning with this violence involves facing some of the more difficult aspects not only of the American past but of the historical enterprise itself. Unlike almost any other object of historical study, violence simultaneously destroys and creates history. The physical annihilation of another human produces a profound absence that distorts the historical record for all time. One of the most immediate manifestations of violence is thus a terrifying silence that no testimony of the past can fathom in its entirety (Jacoby, 2008, p. 3).

Prevailing work in the history of political thought on empire and imperialism has yet to grapple with this 'terrifying silence'. More pointedly, it may lack the resources to do so. Prevailing methods in political theory – preoccupied as they have been with the intellectual context of canonical texts – implicitly skew towards a privileging of dominant elites. This is not merely a problem of ethical or political solidarity with the oppressed: it is a problem that arises internal to the methodological commitments of the field because it undermines our capacity to account for research motivation and evaluative criteria in a non-tautological manner. Rather than a mere object of study in some direct sense, violence must be conceptualized as a background force that orders the historical record itself, including by imposing vast and terrifying silences that introduce systemic biases into any effort at contextual reconstruction. To reduce the intellectual history of imperialism to the internal, forward-oriented, first-person perspective of major contributors to 'western political thought' is to preclude in advance the possibility of integrating this analysis with one that considers violence as a constitutive force within history. The willingness and capacity on the part of European and Euro-American settlers to use intense forms of eliminatory violence against Indigenous peoples is at least part of what gave one set of intellectual traditions a certain material tractability over and against another and helps us explain relative convergence. Intellectual history shorn of social theory risks unreflectively amplifying this effect by naturalizing the conditions under which theoretical traditions are reproduced over time. This is just one set of reasons why the study of empire and imperialism in the history of political thought must contend with the ongoing problem of how to marry historical reconstruction with critical social theory.

Robert Nichols



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Inder S. Marwah is Assistant Professor of Political Science at McMaster University. His research lies in the history of political thought, modern political theory, global intellectual history, postcolonial theory and comparative political thought. He has particular interests in the intersections of race, empire and political theory, and in the conceptual tools framing the relationship of western and non-western worlds.

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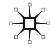

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