

# A Political Economy of Liberal Imperialism:

John Locke, Edmund Burke and E.G. Wakefield

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## I. Synopsis of the Book

For about the last two decades, the history of political thought has experienced an ‘imperial turn.’ The scholarship on this trend, including Uday Singh Mehta (1999), David Armitage (2000), Sankar Muthu (2003), Jennifer Pitts (2005), Duncan Kelly (2009), Karuna Mantena (2010), Jeanne Morefield (2014), Andrew Sartori (2014), Anthony Pagden (2015) and Duncan Bell (2016), to name only a few, has investigated distinct aspects of the complex interplay between modern Western political thought and the evolution of European colonial empires. One of the protagonists of the trend, Jennifer Pitts argues that “the key concepts and languages of European political thought—ideas of freedom and despotism, self-government, and the autonomous individual—were imagined and articulated in light of, in response to, and sometimes in justification of, imperial and commercial expansion beyond Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

Ince’s book fits broadly in this strand of historical study. He examines the ways in which the development of colonial economic relations impacted on the ideology of liberalism in modern Britain, with a particular focus on the works of John Locke, Edmund Burke and E.G. Wakefield. Ince contends that these three intellectuals sought to reconcile a posited liberal self-image of Britain’s imperial economy and the actual illiberal practices on which this economy was based, by incidentalizing, “disavowing” or providing a “misrecognizing” account of the latter.<sup>2</sup> In attempting to overcome the tension in such a manner, they portrayed the British Empire as the transoceanic ‘empire of liberty,’ as the progenitor of a peaceful, civilized and prosperous world order.

Among many advantages of this book, the most critical and conspicuous is its attempt to ‘bring the economy back in’ the intellectual history of empire and imperialism. Ince foregrounds the complex ways in which the British thinkers at issue (Locke, Burke and Wakefield) disavowed actual coercive capitalist transformations in assorted colonies in North America, the Indian subcontinent and the Pacific antipodes—the phenomenon that he sometimes represents with recourse to the Marxist concept of the primitive accumulation of capital. In analysing the three thinkers’ attempts to reconcile such violence of colonial capitalism with a pacific and commercial self-image of Britain’s empire, Ince shows that the liberal ideas of political economy centred around private property, market exchange and free labour were inherently entangled with the growth of the British Empire as well as the imperial economy.

Collaterally, Ince defines liberalism in terms of politico-legal principles as a structuring element

of capitalist economy in the colonies. Thus he specifies it as consisting in two pivotal norms, namely, contractual freedom and juridical equality, then applying it to the thought of all the three intellectuals under analysis. This focus on imperial political economy can serve as an antidote to the tendency in this body of scholarship to flag the cultural, moral and symbolic complicity of liberal ideologies. As Ince himself notes, intellectual historians of liberalism and empire including Mehta, Muthu and Catharine Hall are apt to highlight how liberal thinkers relied on their own views of colonial culture, moral and representational aptitude as well as ethno-biology to postulate differences (or hierarchies) between the imperial self and the indigenous other.<sup>3</sup> As opposed to this, Ince's book examines liberals' *political-economic* justifications of British imperialism and discrimination against the colonized.<sup>4</sup>

I briefly introduce (from my viewpoint) Ince's analysis of the three thinkers. He first focuses on Locke's theory of property from a so far largely disregarded perspective: the centrality of Locke's account of money and monetization to his liberal justification of English appropriation in America. Ince examines the change of terminology in Locke's speculation on property away from labor and agricultural improvement, and towards monetization as the basis on which to judge rightful property claims. Based on this focus, Ince argues that Locke viewed the absence of monetization in America as the indication that its *terra firma* existed as a natural land open to English seizure. Ince also claims that Locke's fiction of the 'universal tacit consent' served to bridge the rift between his liberal account of private property and the illiberality of colonial land appropriation across the Atlantic that he intended to defend.<sup>5</sup>

The book next addresses Burke's strategy to reconcile actual British imperial illiberality and the self-image of Britain as a promoter of pacific, liberal imperial commerce. Here Ince centres on Burke's condemnation of the East India Company rule in Bengal, arguing that his fulmination against the Company was meant to disavow its illiberal rapacity in India and so to insulate the essentially liberal characterization of British imperial capitalism—Burke's fantasy promising equitable economic dealings between Britons and Indian subjects—from such colonial violence. Consequently, Ince argues, Burke in effect gave a hand to the increasingly opaque distinction in the real world between civilized imperial commerce and plunder, or between enlightened self-interest and unabashed extraction.<sup>6</sup>

The last figure that Ince's book targets is E.G. Wakefield, a less well-known, yet critically important theorist in the context of British settler colonialism. It was his account of 'systematic colonization' that had a pivotal impact on the Victorian liberal J.S. Mill's work on this topic.<sup>7</sup> In analysing Wakefield's political-economic proposals for emigration and colonial settlement in the South Pacific (specifically, Australia and New Zealand), Ince offers two-fold arguments. First, he contends that Wakefield applied deep-seated developmental categories to his theory of systematic colonization. As a result, Wakefield presented it not simply as a remedy for effective allocation of labor across the empire, but also as a zealous attempt to safeguard the civilized image of the British from the risks of 'barbarism' —that is, both social revolution at home and self-contained

agrarian smallholders in the settler colonies. Second, Ince claims that Wakefield acknowledged the illiberal effect of his scheme: transoceanic settlers would suffer such conditions as what Marx termed ‘wage-slavery.’ To reconcile this reality with the self-image of the British Empire as a civilized liberal community, he invented a utilitarian myth of ‘settler contract.’ Based on this myth, Wakefield could postulate contractual dispossession, alleging that the settlers had originally agreed to partition themselves into capitalists and wage laborers on behalf of economic development.<sup>8</sup>

The book finally concludes by emphasizing the benefits of capturing colonial empires not only as structures of freedom and domination, consent and legitimacy, or universalism and pluralism, but also as economic systems of dispossession and exploitation. Ince argues that analysing (in his words) the “heterogenous development of global capitalism in imperial networks” would serve to foreground the important fact: a number of key political categories in Western intellectual history were fashioned in the colonial empires loaded with economic concerns.<sup>9</sup> This insight will work as a corrective to the existing scholarship on the theme that, like Hanna Arendt’s detaching of the political from the social, tends to dissociate inquiries into political theory from the economic. Dissecting the constitutive and contradictory relationship of modern liberalism, capitalism and empire in the aforementioned ways, the book can be a contribution to global intellectual history in view of political economy.

## II. My Clarificatory Questions

I would like to leave a more substantive critique of Ince’s book to the three review articles that follow. Here, I raise two broad questions for the purpose of clarifying basic approaches adopted by the author. The first concerns his usage of the term *liberalism*. In this book, Ince employs liberalism chiefly to represent a pair of politico-legal tenets: contractual freedom and juridical equality. He uses it uniformly, diachronically and (in a sense) non-contextually, making it applicable to the political ideas of Locke, Burke, Wakefield simultaneously. On Ince’s account, all of them were liberal in this meaning, despite the fact that they themselves did not adopt this term or might have used it in a different sense (especially in the case of Wakefield). This approach to liberalism is not well suited to an array of recent scholarship on the history of liberalism, including Duncan Bell’s “What Is Liberalism?” (2014) and Helena Rosenblatt’s *The Lost History of Liberalism* (2018).<sup>10</sup> It rather highlights the importance of a polyphonic view of liberalism, and seeks to show exactly what specific meaning thinkers, who actually used this term, infused into it. From this perspective, Ince’s usage of liberalism risks being criticised as ahistorical and anachronistic. Thus, I expect him to clarify his position in using this expression. How does he defend himself from such potential criticism?

Second, one of the main threads of this book is the ‘tension’ between Britain’s liberal self-image and actual illiberal practices in the extra-metropolitan empire. According to Ince, in order to protect the image of Britain (and the British Empire) as a civilized, orderly and liberal community,

Locke, Burke and Wakefield adopted the strategy of disavowal—not denial, but a strategy involving “the recognition of the disturbing realities of colonial coercion, expropriation and exploitation.” It was to work “volubly and productively through stories, screens, fantasies, that hide from view what is to be seen.”<sup>11</sup> By applying this strategy, the three thinkers attempted to make the British elite misrecognize or turn their eyes away from actual colonial violence (Locke’s fiction of the ‘universal tacit consent’ to using money, Burke’s fantasy of ‘imperial commerce’ and Wakefield’s myth of ‘settler contract’ are all categorized into such disavowal). I observe that the concept reverberates with Jeanne Morefield’s account of the ‘politics of deflection’ as a rhetorical tactic endorsed by early twentieth-century liberal internationalists.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the critical exposure of liberals’ self-complacency is a penetrating current among the intellectual history scholarship on liberalism beyond the border. Having said that, I expect Ince to elaborate on his own prospect for the following issue: in what ways can such critical self-reflection of liberalism contribute to a theoretical reconstruction of this political strand (unless he is satisfied with just displaying critical edges)?

## Notes

1. Pitts (2010: 215).
2. For his usage of “disavowal” and “misrecognition,” see Ince (2018: 28, 30).
3. Hall (2002).
4. To a degree, the book is also a modernization of C.B. Macpherson’s famous work, although Ince clearly transcends it in many key respects. Macpherson (1962).
5. Ince (2018: ch. 2, “In the Beginning, All the World Was America: John Locke’s Global Theory of Property” ).
6. Ince (2018: ch. 3, “Not a Partnership in Pepper, Coffee, Calico, or Tobacco: Edmund Burke and the Vicissitudes of Imperial Commerce” ).
7. Smits (2008); Bell (2016: ch. 9, “John Stuart Mill on Colonies” ).
8. Ince (2018: ch. 4, “Letters from Sydney: Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the Problem of Colonial Labor” ).
9. Ince (2018: 160).
10. Bell (2016: ch. 3, “What Is Liberalism?” ); Rosenblatt (2018).
11. Ince (2018: 28). Ince defines this term based on Fischer (2004).
12. Morefield (2014).

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