

# A Return of Macpherson in Global Intellectual History?

## Approval and Criticism from the Viewpoint of a Realist Liberal

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### 1. Methodology

In *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism*,<sup>1</sup> Ince undoubtedly deals with two great issues in political theory—liberty and domination—and their problematic (or dialectical) relationship in historical discourses of vital importance, namely discourses of empire. This fact alone sufficiently explains the value of this book for any serious student of political theory and its history. True, the topic of empire has already attracted many scholars, and many interesting works on this subject are available. However, Ince has a remarkable methodological project to bring into this established scholarship: “bringing the economy back in”, as opposed to dematerialising the study of empire.

In this vein, Ince points out the limits of cultural or language-centred approaches to the study of the political thought of empire, and the necessity of overcoming the theoretical boundaries between the political and the social for an intellectual historical inquiry concerning such a complicated issue, and then proposes to utilise updated intellectual tools of Marxist studies. For a student like me who started the study of political theory in the late 1980s, this contention invokes the name of C. B. Macpherson; when I got launched on the study of John Locke, the first thing I had to learn was how to refute Macpherson and Leo Strauss in the way Cambridge School scholars did. Even at that time, however, I was not persuaded fully by this methodological fashion—although I appreciated the importance of their criticism, especially that of anachronism, mainly because the works of Macpherson and Strauss appeared to contain persuasive explanations of why on earth we should turn to a classical text like Locke’s. For me, this discontent relates to a hermeneutical question of how to fuse the horizon of the text with that of our present practical concerns. Therefore, I greatly welcome the return of Macpherson. Needless to say, this work is not a mere return (a point I will revisit when I deal with Ince’s reading of Locke).

Although I have a strong sympathy with the methodological aim of this work, I have a simple question concerning its method, which comes from the central theme of this work, namely the ambiguity of the liberal discourses of empire, the importance of which I strongly recognize. My question (or suggestion) is: “Is it necessary to emphasize other methodological aspect of this book than economy-oriented Marxist one?” The theme of this work is indeed enlightening, since it is historical and contemporary at the same time; one of the remarkable reasons why many people today dare to tackle the issues of empire is our vivid perception of problems coming from the rise

of a new imperialism called globalization. It seems natural that today, readers of historical studies on the discourses of empire expect that these studies will help to elucidate their own predicament. This kind of expectation is true of another fashionable method today, genealogy; and this book, I insist, actually deals with genealogical enterprise because it discloses the historically embedded character of the ideal of the British Empire, whose importance is rediscovered in the context of Brexit. I want to lay stress on the fact that Ince's achievement is genealogical, because by focusing on the normative cores of liberalism, specifically "contractual freedom" and "juridical equality," it succeeds in unveiling the contingency of what we usually assume to be universal norms. Still more important is its elucidation of the reality of domination behind the discourses of liberal morality—this is, after all, a most precious inheritance of Marxist approaches.

Let me ask another methodological question. Why does Ince turn to the studies of thinkers rather than ideas—why intellectual history, not sociology? This is a book concerning "the efforts of metropolitan intellectuals to disavow the illiberal underpinnings of Britain's imperial economy" (p.30). From the perspective of intellectual history, to elucidate the meaning of "disavow" in the thought of significant figures like Locke and Burke is certainly interesting. But in order to uncover the problematic tension between liberty and domination in the empire discourses, it appears to me that the sociological approach to ideology is much more promising. I have in mind such important works as Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.<sup>2</sup> I come to hold this question in part because, in spite of the fact that the three thinkers in this book were chosen due to their role in forming the imaginary of British free empire, this story of formation is, in my judgement, not sufficiently demonstrated. This is particularly true of Locke; he was, after all, pro- or proto-liberal (at least as for liberalism as political ideology), so that if we are to pursue the central theme of this book, it is his influence over later opinions rather than his own thinking that should be analysed.

## II . Interpretation of Locke

A notable feature of Ince's interpretation of Locke's theory of property is its emphasis on the issue of monetarization. Conventional interpretations tend to pay attention to Locke's argument for labour, because this is rightly considered to be the crucial element of his justification for private property, and Locke also believed this to be the case. This emphasis upon the topic of labour would appear more convincing when considering that his main ideological target is Filmer, who insists that the legitimacy of property claims depend ultimately upon the arbitrary will of the sovereign king; Locke then has to show that private property has a natural (that is, non-positivistic) foundation, and the principle of labour is what connects the individual rights of particular men with the universal norm of natural law. However, as Ince shows, Locke also has to add another principle in order to justify the actual states of private property of the people in England and other civilized societies. That is the principle of monetarism. This historical fact of introducing a money system into human society gives rise to two important theoretical themes in

Locke's narrative for property. Firstly, this principle functions as the criterion for discriminating the civility and the non-civility, that is, England and America. Secondly, this principle is conventional but nonetheless non-contractual, because it must cover the morality of mankind including American natives—the principle of monetarism is supposed to stem from the universal norm of natural law in the same way as the principle of labour. Therefore, according to Ince, Locke makes an inevitable appeal to the idea of “universal tacit consent” over the use of money.

I am generally persuaded by this interpretation, but even so have some questions. One is the departure from Macpherson, who also emphasizes the crucial importance of money in Locke's theory of property and criticizes Locke's argument for “a class differential of rationality” as inconsistent with his doctrine of natural rights of equal freedom.<sup>3</sup> We can find a similar distinction in this book, which is the one Macpherson draws between “the Industrious and Rational” and “the Quarrelsome and Contentious.” Indeed, Ince does enlarge the scope of his argument by relating this distinction to colonial issues. What I want to know is whether there is more qualitative difference between these two interpretations.

A second question concerns Ince's description of Locke's universal tacit consent as “a fiction.” It is natural for us to understand the presence of universal tacit consent as a fiction, but when it comes to Locke's own understanding, it seems rather contestable. Locke's treatment of the idea of consent is notoriously obscure, and Locke, I understand, regards social contract as actual rather than hypothetical, insofar as the idea of social contract is employed as the true ground for citizenship. I don't intend to go further into the labyrinth of interpretation of Locke's notion of consent, but I do wish to emphasize the importance of re-examining the concept of fictionality in this theoretical context.

My third question naturally comes from the second; it is concerned with the status of Locke in this work. As its title clearly indicates, an important issue in Ince's book is the articulation of the *dilemmas* which occupy the minds of three thinkers. Ince's descriptions of Burke's idealization of the British Empire and Wakefield's mystification of “settler compact” help to articulate these dilemmas, because this kind of intellectual activity logically presupposes the perception of certain dilemmas within the mind of the intellectuals. However, this seems to me not forthrightly applicable to Locke, who as I said was *proto-liberal* at least from a strictly historical perspective. And this point relates to a conception which seems to need explication, that is, “misrecognition” (e.g. p.30). What is meant by saying, for example, that Locke *misrecognizes* colonial domination and liberal philosophy? Is it possible for a historical Locke to perceive this kind of dilemma?

### III. Normative lessons

Lastly, I would like to ask, what kind of normative lessons are available from the story of this book? This type of question might be thought inappropriate to ask of an academic enquiry, but the very nature of Ince's book demands it.

On finishing the book, one topic to me seemed conspicuous by its absence: justice, and

distributive justice in particular. This is simply because one of the most productive issues for political theory in the age of globalization is that of global (distributive) justice. But Ince's silence on this topic is reasonable, because the idea of justice itself is intrinsically problematic from the perspective of this work. The claim of justice, if you follow the fundamental contention of this work, should be under the scrutiny of socio-economical critique. However, our perception of the actual dilemmas presupposes certain normative standards which enable us to understand the very meanings of deceptive aspects in the ideological discourse. Justice should be an idea of this kind of standard.

This problem, I insist, relates to another key idea in this work, that of "commercial society." This idea has distinctive roles in Ince's interpretation of the targeted three thinkers' invention of the ideology of the British Empire. Indeed, the concept of commercial society has often been recognized to be functional for invoking normative connotations in socio-political discourse throughout the modern age. This work and almost all Marxist critiques try to undermine the functional force of this concept by disclosing the socio-economic realities behind the historical workings of this idea, but after this critical demoralising, what kind of hope can we expect for embracing an alternative normative guide? In the old days, Marxist critiques of modernity went hand in hand with hope, because it was thought that contradictions in modern society would inevitably result in the advent of a new society; all theorists can do is change the pace of this total transformation. However, after theoretical critiques by Popper, Berlin and others, of the inevitability in these types of story, and after deep scepticism over mechanical improvement (or improvement *per se*) of society resulting from what is called the end of history, it is not easy to find normative lessons from ideological critique. This might, perhaps, be an unfair expectation. The task of the theorist may well be to produce purely negative critique after all.

As a liberal, though, I should like to suggest an alternative way of reading this story of dilemmas which might yield a normative insight. In my understanding, these thinkers, Locke, Burke and Wakefield, can be regarded as realist liberals. By realist, I mean a person who recognizes the limits of his or her ideals and is willing to make a compromise to bring about a best possible result in concrete historical conditions. This would appear to apply to Wakefield, a utilitarian theorist with an acute sense of statecraft. His use of the idea of liberal empire or ethical imperialism can be understood as a matter of exercising the commercial reason of state with prudence. Given this interpretation, we can shed another light on the idea of hypocrisy. Ince avoids blatantly calling these liberals hypocrites; this is why he carefully uses the terms of "misrecognition" or "disavowal" when he characterizes their theorising. But this kind of care might come from his belief in ultimate purified norms of some kind, and I, as a sceptic, think such care unnecessary. As David Runciman says, "hypocrisy, though inherently unattractive, is also more or less inevitable in most political settings, and in liberal democratic societies it is practically ubiquitous."<sup>4</sup> If so, to uphold a dilemma is certainly not pleasant, but it is natural and appropriate considering the realities of politics. Well, Ince and others might think I am after all a liberal who

tries to mask vicious activities under the name of inevitability. As a liberal, I am willing to accept such a characterization, but nonetheless will stick to my own sense of the realist, because I cannot but regard politics ultimately as a matter of prudential judgement.

## Notes

1. Ince (2018).
2. Habermas (1989), published originally in German in 1962.
3. Macpherson (1964: 232).
4. Runciman (2008: 1).

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