



The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History

ISSN: 0308-6534 (Print) 1743-9329 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fich20>

Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism, by Onur Ulas Ince

Matthew Birchall

To cite this article: Matthew Birchall (2019) Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism, by Onur Ulas Ince, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 47:1, 193-195, DOI: [10.1080/03086534.2019.1580861](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1580861)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1580861>



Published online: 04 Mar 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




Article views: 15



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

lacked it was not, they believed, a task that could proceed from principles dictated by noblemen gathered around a map across a mahogany table in Whitehall.’ (18) The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was just the beginning of the steady deterioration of relations between the colonies and the British government over the next ten years. The so-called Coercive Acts of 1774, in response to events in Massachusetts, included the Quebec Act that extended the Quebec colony across the Great Lakes into the northern Ohio Valley. From the point of view of the colonists, from New York to the Carolinas, this amounted to a reinstatement of the old French claims to the Ohio Valley that had prompted the Seven Year’s War. Edelson states, ‘Britain embraced what it had once feared,’ not to mention the colonists. (155) Of course these measures, the Coercive Acts, including the Quebec Act, led directly to the First Continental Congress and an even more serious decline in relations. As for the elaborate project to systematically survey and map the North American colonies, Edelson notes, ‘Maps made American subordination within the Atlantic empire visible.’ (289) The War for Independence relegated most of these maps to obscure files in numerous archives and manuscript libraries in Britain and the United States.

Edelson has done an incredible job of searching out hundreds of maps in public and private archives in both Britain and the United States. Although he states that it is not his intention to write a history of how the maps were made, he goes a long way to doing that as well. One of his achievements is the gathering of all of these maps and using them in his narrative about British colonial policy. However, instead of having a dozen maps reproduced in black-and-white on an octavo page, he has had some 256 map images produced in colour on an internet programme that can be downloaded from [Mapscholar.org/empire](https://www.mapscholar.org/empire). The maps are all coded in the text of the volume, so the reader can consult the images on the computer screen while reading the book. The maps are also superimposed on satellite images of the areas depicted, so that the precise location of each map can be seen against a larger context. Altogether this is a valuable and innovative study of British and colonial relations in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War and an introduction to the eighteenth century efforts to generate an accurate cartographic understanding of Britain’s Atlantic empire.

Francis M. Carroll
St. John’s College, University of Manitoba
 Francis.Carroll@umanitoba.ca

© 2019 Francis M. Carroll
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1580862>



Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism

Onur Ulas Ince

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018

232 pp., ISBN: 9780190637293 (Hardback, £53)

The so-called turn to empire by political theorists and intellectual historians over the last thirty years has significantly enriched our understanding of what David Armitage has nominated the ‘mutually constitutive’ relationship between liberalism and empire. A major preoccupation of the literature, and undoubtedly its lasting achievement, has

been to recover the extent to which key concepts in Western political and legal thought were shaped by Europeans' relationship with the non-European world, from the fifteenth century onwards. Thus we have Andrew Fitzmaurice's history of the idea of occupation over the *longue durée*, Richard Tuck's pioneering study of international order from Grotius to Kant, and Lisa Ford and Lauren Benton's more recent analysis of the origins of international law, to name but a few prominent examples.

Yet, if empire has empathically been written back into Western political thought, it is also the case that scholars have been reluctant to stake claims on the global history of capitalism. Most studies in the genre have instead tended, quite naturally, to focus on how canonical political and legal texts were generated within imperial contexts: the relationship between liberalism and capitalism has received relatively short shrift. Seen in this light, Onur Ulas Ince's *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* makes an important contribution to the literature, one that complements the work of previous generations yet also prompts greater engagement with the history of capitalism.

A trio of thinkers underpin Ince's analysis of what he calls 'colonial capitalism,' the global system of capitalist relations that emerged in the context of the early-modern British Empire. Traversing the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Ocean worlds, a move that paves the way for a dynamic examination of plantation slavery, company colonisation, and settler colonialism, Ince charts a course through Britain's sprawling maritime empire by way of close readings of John Locke, Edmund Burke and Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the last a key figure in the colonisation of South Australia and New Zealand in the 1830s. Ince's concern throughout is to show how all three grappled with the paradox presented by colonial capitalism: How could the British Empire be reclaimed as liberal when it was defined as much by slavery and Aboriginal dispossession as it was by free-trade and private property rights?

Central to Ince's analysis of colonial capitalism is the concept of 'disavowal,' the rhetorical strategy of confronting and neutralising the threats posed to the British self-image by the existence of a deeply illiberal empire, an empire markedly at odds with ideas of freedom and liberty so essential to glorified renditions of the British past. Whereas Locke's theory of property in colonial contexts is typically examined in terms of what may be called his appropriation argument, Ince insists that it is to his theory of monetisation that we must look, perhaps the most strikingly revisionist aspect of the book. Locke, Ince elegantly shows, 'construed the absence of monetisation in America as a sign that the continent remained in the natural common and thereby open to nonconsensual appropriation' (p. 7). The claiming of Native American land was thus justified by Locke on the grounds that they had failed to transform common land into private property, an argument that allowed Locke to preserve his liberal theory of private property in the face of indigenous dispossession.


Likewise, Edmund Burke's well-known attack on Warren Hastings and the English East India Company is recast as an attempt to defend an enlightened imperial commerce from the depravities of an avaricious corporation, while Edward Gibbon Wakefield's theory of systematic colonisation is interpreted as a scheme to justify colonial wage slavery on the fictitious grounds that British emigrants had voluntarily agreed to a binary divide between labourers and capitalists.

All of this is well argued and lucidly presented, but it remains unclear whether Ince's own analysis actually fulfils its stated aim of 'rematerializing' the relationship between liberalism and empire. Taking issue with what he calls culturalist readings of the liberal canon, which privilege European thinkers' perceptions of colonised peoples, Ince instead concerns himself with the 'institutional structures and economic practices that constituted the fabric of empire' (p. 4). Yet Ince seems to be here constrained by his choice of source material and

at times his focus on printed primary texts makes it difficult for him to move beyond the ‘heavily intratextual approach’ that he so insightfully critiques. One solution may have been the integration of archival research. A scrutiny of the New Zealand Company records, for instance, would have unearthed much about Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s role in the colonisation of those islands, with his frequent appearances at the Company’s office in the City of London. The world of boardrooms and taverns, banks and country retreats, was as much a part of the story of colonial capitalism in the antipodes as works of political economy like Wakefield’s *Letter from Sydney* (1829).

Some of Ince’s broader methodological arguments may also prove contentious. Those who adopt a linguistic contextualist approach, the author claims, do too little to engage with the stakes of contemporary political life, a position advanced by an increasing number of historians of international law, among them Martii Koskenniemi. Yet contextualist histories are far from devoid of normative evaluation. On the contrary, fine-grained empirical research that analyses empire in the context of global capitalism can powerfully speak to contemporary concerns, not least because it delicately traces how the past shades into the present.

But these are mere points for further reflection, and Ince is to be commended for suggestively opening up new vistas for scholars of liberalism and empire to explore. In a lively, original analysis of British imperialism, one that ranges across continents as well as centuries, Ince provocatively makes the case for taking the history of capitalism seriously. It deserves to be read by anyone invested in the liberalism and empire debate.

Matthew Birchall
University of Cambridge
 mb2019@cam.ac.uk

© 2019 Matthew Birchall
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2019.1580861>



Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire

Jennifer Pitts

Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, Harvard University Press, 2018,
293 pp., ISBN 9780674980815 (Hardback, £32.95)

Law has become the problem of the moment for historians of international political thought. Jennifer Pitts’ writings over the last decade have contributed importantly to this development, and they culminate now in her monograph *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire*. The book picks its way through a densely packed historiographical field in exemplary fashion, its copious endnotes tracing its close engagement with intellectual historians and legal scholars. Pitts is a persuasive and imaginative reader of political texts, especially at their frayed edges, where the book concentrates. Nobody interested in the history of international law will be able to ignore her arguments. While the book’s grander interpretative ambitions are not fully realised, it presents a satisfying series of meditations on major thinkers and issues.

Boundaries of the International is a study in discourses of international law between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. It explores ideas about the legal relations between Western European imperial states and extra-European societies, and