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## Review

# Colonial capitalism and the dilemmas of liberalism

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Less than a year after the publication of C. B. Macpherson's *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* in 1962, social historian Christopher Hill praised it as one of those rare works that 'changes the historical thinking of a whole generation' (Hill, 1963, p. 86). In a way, Hill's statement turned out to be right, just not for the reasons he had in mind. Among political theorists, *Possessive Individualism* made its mark on historical thinking less as a model to emulate than one to avoid. In the hands of a rising generation of Cambridge historians, Macpherson's claim that seventeenth-century texts encased the intellectual sources of capitalist development became a benchmark for anachronism in the history of political thought. It was thus in part by rejecting the rise of capitalism as a governing framework for understanding early modern ideas that scholars such as John Dunn, Quentin Skinner, and J. G. A. Pocock forged an influential approach to historical inquiry in the study of political ideas – one that pressed interpreters to situate a text in the intellectual circumstances out of which it emerged, heeding the range of linguistic conventions and concepts available to its author. That linguistic contextualism significantly enhanced the interpretive possibilities of political theory and set it on a fruitful interdisciplinary path was nowhere more evident than in the literature on empire and imperialism, which rose to prominence in the mid-1990s and has spiraled into the present.

Onur Ulas Ince's fascinating *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* adds the latest chapter to this story. By bringing the history of capitalism back to the fore of political theory, Ince has presented us with a powerful and urgent contribution to the field that bears as much on the study of liberalism and empire as on ongoing interpretive debates over historical context. *Colonial Capitalism* traces a narrative of empire in which the realities of dispossession, commercial plunder, and bondage in the colonies were willfully recognized yet artfully disavowed through myths about private property, commerce, and free labor concocted by three thinkers who were at once architects and gatekeepers of Britain's liberal self-image: John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Edward Gibbons



Wakefield. Ince looks to social theory and critical political economy to intervene in what he sees as two widespread patterns in the literature on liberalism and empire: a tendency to privilege the linguistic conventions of metropolitan discourses, and a propensity to focus on cultural representations of colonized subjects. For Ince, these trends have overshadowed the socioeconomic practices, institutions, and transformations that, as his book convincingly shows, were central both to the development of a recognizably liberal idiom about empire and to the realities of exploitation and dispossession engendered by European imperialism across the colonies. In an attempt to restore this lost materiality of liberal ideologies and imperial practices, Ince relies on the analytic and historical concept of ‘colonial capitalism,’ which, departing from the premise that capitalism emerged historically ‘within the juridico-political framework of the “colonial empire”’ (p. 4), allows him to tie a textual analysis of liberal arguments about British imperialism to the historical emergence of an imperial-commercial order steered by capital accumulation and state-building (pp. 18–19). In doing so, Ince dispels the linguistic-contextualist aversion to recognizing the history of capitalism as a basic institution of early modern political thought, showing that although ‘capitalism’ remained absent from European vocabularies until the nineteenth century, the principles, discourses, and practices associated with its development were – as Macpherson had suggested – *topoi* of conscious reflection well before the industrial revolution.

Through a detailed narrative of capitalist development in the British colonies, *Colonial Capitalism* illuminates two salient yet neglected aspects of liberalism’s embroilment in empire. First, the book’s compelling study of capitalist relations and political economy lays bare the underrecognized interdependency between, on the one hand, the socioeconomic institutions and practices of British imperialism, and, on the other hand, the liberal language, principles, and norms metropolitan thinkers used in their assessments and justifications of empire. Second, Ince’s use of ‘colonial capitalism’ as a historical and theoretical category foregrounds the violence that sustained Britain’s imperial economy through expropriation, militarized trading, and regimes of forced work. Importantly, Ince shows that the core values of liberalism – contractual freedom and juridical equality – served not only as the basis for a coherent tradition of Western political thought, but also as animating principles behind the development of classical political economy as a ‘self-styled science of society’ (p. 25). Liberalism’s dilemma, then, captures the struggle of metropolitan intellectuals to normatively validate and legitimize the inequality, exploitation, and coercion inherent in the very capitalist practices, institutions, and social relations that sustained liberalism as a viable mode of theoretical reflection (p. 29). Locke, Burke, and Wakefield resolved this contradiction by disavowing the illiberal thrust of colonial primitive accumulation through a series of conjectures that aligned territorial dispossession, unequal exchange, and unfree labor in the colonies with liberal accounts of private property, commerce, and free wage-labor as natural, just, and consensual institutions of



capitalism – as economic expressions of juridical equality and contractual freedom the world over.

Part of what makes Ince's approach so compelling is that *Colonial Capitalism* sets out to complement, not replace, linguistic contextualism. Ince provides a model of how political theorists might integrate a diachronic analysis of historical social relations into textual interpretation without abandoning the intellectual contexts and linguistic conventions of ideas. This is an important step toward Ince's ambitious aspiration to bring materiality back to the circuit of ideology and practice (p. 29). While his rigorous engagement with social theory and political economy does considerable work to move the field in this direction, the crux of Ince's interpretive pursuit remains largely confined to a discursive terrain that at times obscures the relationship between the liberal ideas and the capitalist processes that he seeks to illuminate. Overall, the book sets the socioeconomic context of British imperialism in overly broad terms in each chapter, such that its historical narrative seems to bear on its fine-grained textual readings in ways that often come across as tentative. By circumscribing his account of liberalism to the discursive realm of 'metropolitan imaginings of capitalism' (pp. 24–25), Ince raises a crucial question that his book never answers: how exactly were the liberal conjectures, myths, and ideals in question constitutive of colonial capitalism as a historical process?

*Colonial Capitalism* does not take us far enough in this respect because the answer cannot be deduced from a textual exegesis of arguments and ideas by prominent European thinkers. It inheres instead in the historical records that relate how political and economic actors turned to the conceptual grammar of liberal political economy in order to rationalize particular socioeconomic orders and institutional forms at the heart of colonial capitalism. Shifting the focus of scholarly approaches to empire and liberalism from 'who the colonized *are* to what the colonizers *do*' (p. 4), as Ince proposes, demands a historical account of liberal political economy not only as a set of rhetorical maneuvers and fictions used to discursively disavow colonial capitalism, but as an integral aspect of the practices and institutions that perpetuated it. One way of mooring ideas in a concrete material realm might be to probe social relations in the colonies through the history of economic life, which William Sewell defines as 'the history of human participation in the production, exchange, and consumption of goods' (Sewell, 2010, p. 146). In the case of colonial capitalism, this might include looking at proslavery jurisprudence in the early modern Atlantic as an array of technical discourses that mediated the historical assimilation of liberal ideas into capitalist institutions in the colonies; or thinking of sugar plantations as concrete sites across which the historical encounter between ideologies of empire and the realities of colonial capitalism played out, where tensions between freedom and slavery were enlivened yet never resolved. In both cases, political theory's focus on discourse, language, and ideas becomes a resource for – rather than a barrier to – exploring the convergence of liberal ideologies and capitalist formations.



There is plenty of evidence that slavery was, at various junctures in the history of the modern Atlantic economy, justified and prolonged by dint of economic discourses bound up with liberalism's disavowal of colonial capitalism. The annals of proslavery jurisprudence, for instance, contain detailed accounts of how jurists and judges across the antebellum American South called on utilitarian calculations, economic reasoning, and ideological vindications of the free market, private property rights, and corporate contracts in order to authorize slavery at a time when the abolitionist movement seized the minds of policy experts, liberal thinkers, and the broader public alike (Brophy, 2016). As a technology of the market, the legal system not only reflected the values of liberal political economy but reified, instrumentalized, and enforced these values as facts of economic life in order to rescue slavery from an ideological dead end. Insofar as this example registers the sway of liberal norms on economic life, it is also a *material* testament of the durability and tractability of liberalism as 'a paradigm of thought' (pp. 17–18). We may likewise look to workplaces as material terrains in which to locate the purchase of ideas and discourses as frameworks for organizing human participation in the economy. At a sugar plantation in French Saint Domingue, for instance, the idiom of sentiments associated with Enlightenment political thought and the antislavery movement was seamlessly adapted into the jargon of slave drivers and plantation managers as a means to 'resolve the contradictions of plantation life' while leaving the basic situation of colonial slavery intact (Cheney, 2017, p. 92).

In a book that accomplishes so much, what it leaves undone is equally agenda-setting. If historians of political thought should take up Ince's lead in attending to socioeconomic context, to the history of capitalism, and to 'what colonizers *do*,' then this must entail not only a change in the questions we ask but in the sources we use to answer them. In short, the many complex issues raised by the history of capitalism and their salient connections to the historical, critical, and normative concerns of political theory cannot be accounted for solely by engaging the canon. Approaching the co-constitutive relationship between the histories of socioeconomic relations and political ideas 'from below' may offer historians of political thought a productive inroad to investigating and expressing the contours of this relationship more tangibly and definitively. This is one of the most promising directions Ince's work charts for future research in political theory. Following this path may confirm something that *Colonial Capitalism* already suggests, namely, that the dilemmas of liberalism were more than the object of abstract conjectures by eminent intellectuals; they were facts of economic life.



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