

Book Review

Political Theory

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Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism, by Onur Ulas Ince. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 216 pp.

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DOI: 10.1177/00905917211027967

Onur Ulas Ince's excellent book works a subtle but momentous transformation on the burgeoning political theory scholarship on colonialism and empire. It argues that the works of liberal and liberal-adjacent British intellectuals should be read as efforts to negotiate a "simultaneous commitment" to a commercial economy, to the economic and political project of imperial expansion, and to "the primal norms" of liberalism (6). Containing three substantial interpretive chapters—one each on John Locke, Edmund Burke, and E. G. Wakefield—and bookended by methodological and programmatic considerations, *Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism* renovates the study of liberalism's imbrications with colonialism and empire by shifting the focus decisively away from political principles and imaginaries and toward political *economy*. In a bracing and welcome Marxist challenge to the existing literature, Ince argues that "an overly culturalist and discursive orientation undermines the analytical power and critical commitments of scholarship on liberalism and empire," and he proposes to remedy this by attending as much to the "socioeconomic analysis of imperial relations" as to "the fine-grained analysis of liberal ideas in imperial contexts" (13).

Despite this statement, however, one of the signal contributions of Ince's book is to move textual analysis forward dramatically, precisely by paying attention to the economic arguments and references in those texts and by treating "political economy as a species of political theory" (12). This can be as deceptively simple in its operation as it is profound in its effects. For instance, everyone knows Locke's line "in the beginning all the World was *America*." Everyone cites it. Everyone takes it to be significant. And yet how many remember that the line ends with "and more so than that is now; for no such thing as *money* was anywhere known"? As Ince convincingly argues,

the mention of money is the key to understanding Locke's invocation of America, and his economic thought is the key to understanding his approach to colonialism (38–39). Ince's reading neatly integrates the older scholarship that focused on Locke's account of property, to the exclusion of his natural jurisprudence and his involvement in colonialism, with the contextual and colonial turns that displaced what some have termed the "bourgeois-capitalist" Locke. Ince integrates these two portraits by showing that "Locke's idiosyncratic notion of money" must be read in the light of England's Atlantic colonial project (40), because "one navigated the English Atlantic by the compass of commodity and capital much more reliably than one could England itself" (70).

Ince does something similar with Burke, observing that when Burke claims the state is not "a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper or coffee, calico or tobacco," he refers to *colonial* trade, not trade in general (75). Ince reads Burke as attempting to recover and cement the liberal self-image of the British in the face of growing evidence that what seemed in Britain to be commercial exchange was, on the ground in India, imperial predation. Once again, Ince brings together seemingly contradictory pictures of a canonical figure—Burke the traditionalist and Burke the liberal—and shows how these are actually just two "guises" readers have "cut from the cloth of Burke's writings and speeches" (74). There were not two Burkes any more than two Lockes. Rather, both thinkers appear self-contradictory only because we have not read them in the context of the colonial and imperial projects that attended liberalism and capitalism from their inception. Ince's project departs from the premise that capitalism was inaugurated within colonial empire and that the practices that built the empire at the colonial periphery posed a special sort of challenge for the liberal thinkers who celebrated the commercial society of the metropole. The titular dilemma faced by the liberal writers Ince examines is one of how to square their commitment to "the primal norms of contractual freedom and juridical equality" with "the ruthless expropriation and despotic coercion of colonial economies" (5).

Following from this analysis of the justificatory dilemmas faced by metropolitan liberals, Ince treats his subjects as ideologues in a very fruitful way. He takes the problem of ideology to be the problem of how people justify their practices to themselves (43), opening up an approach to ideology that is not reductive or dismissive of ideas but that also does not exaggerate their role and importance. Most centrally to the goals of the book, this justificatory approach also successfully breaks up the question of "Europe and its others" by asking why *certain* practices were considered universal and not others, why *certain* cultural differences were coded as deficiencies and not others, and why these determinations changed over time. The practices of "colonial

entrepreneurs” changed with time and the location of the imperial frontier, and so metropolitan discourses of political economy shifted, too, in order to address the “vexing questions” raised by those practices (4).

But this emphasis on the shifting justificatory demands of colonial capitalism leads me, also, to the unity of liberalism, the other pole of Ince’s title. “Colonial capitalism” is certainly a fruitful concept in Ince’s hands, and it allows him to pinpoint the dilemmas colonial capitalist practices posed for three liberals who sought to justify aspects of Britain’s imperial project. But are the dilemmas of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield also dilemmas of *liberalism*? How are we to understand the passage of these three liberals to liberalism *tout court*?

Ince’s answer to this question is not clear. Early on, he claims that, “had Locke extended the liberal principles of juridical equality and consent to the original appropriation, these norms would have been ideological stumbling blocks to the justification of colonial capitalist enterprise in America” (57). This claim suggests that a truly consistent liberalism—one that honored its “primal norms” (5) instead of making concessions to power—would not face *any* dilemma when confronted with colonial capitalism, but would simply take up a straightforwardly critical stance toward it. A similar resolution might follow from the book’s repeated invocations of Adam Smith, who pops up again and again—from the literal first page of the book right up to the first page of the book’s conclusion—to remind the reader that not every liberal tried to justify colonial capitalism and imperial expansion. Ince suggests here and there that Smith (like Hume) would rather not look too carefully at the practices of modern slavery and colonization (e.g., 6, 110, 158, 202 n154), but, without textual analysis to give them bite, these claims don’t touch on the structure of liberal political economy as a discourse. *Must* liberal political economy recognize and disavow dispossession and bonded labor as constituting elements of commercial society? Or is this merely a *temptation* offered to liberalism by power, a temptation that comes from outside liberalism itself and that liberalism can repudiate?

Ince’s book both provokes and skirts these questions. Striking, for instance, is the way the text alternates between “commercial society” and “capitalism.” Invocations of “capitalism” tend to treat accumulative practices as of a piece, regardless of whether they are lawful or not. “Capitalism” usually names a whole family of social practices that hang together and encourage one another, even in the teeth of certain legal attempts to curb them or to prohibit their more extreme forms. “Commercial society,” on the other hand, usually identifies a sociolegal framework within which the pursuit of material interest can be a consensual and mutually beneficial economic game. The common, critical deployment of the term “capitalism” bundles together, therefore,

social phenomena and practices that most liberals try to keep separate. Most liberals, for instance, do not embrace an unbounded “pursuit of material interest,” “desire for accumulation,” or “love of lucre” (88). With Burke, they think this impulse must be “properly managed” so as to be “rendered calm and dispassionate” (89). The thief and the pirate are as actuated by the love of lucre as is the merchant, but they do not keep within the bounds of the law or treat others as equals. Liberals have no trouble excluding them from commercial society. The student of capitalism may well ask, however, how their illicit practices are encouraged by the same norms that encourage the lawful merchant. There is no contradiction between these two perspectives, but they are distinct perspectives nonetheless.

Attending to the distinction between capitalism and commercial society would impact Ince’s account of Burke, and also, in a slightly different way, his account of Wakefield. Ince proposes two lines of argument regarding Burke. First, he argues that the “imperious Commerce” of the East India Company (EIC) disturbed Burke’s “commercial ideal” (88–101). Second, he claims that Burke had a special respect for Indian society—a respect he did not extend to African or Native American societies—because India, like France and England, had, to Burke’s eyes, the sublime character of a developed and commercial civilization, infused with its own history and relations of authority (105–9). The second line is more persuasive than the first. That Burke would condemn the EIC and the Jacobins in the same terms—terms keyed to “the stages of social progress from savagery to civilization” (109)—explains perfectly why Burke’s “cosmopolitanism of sentiment,” in Uday Mehta’s phrase (102), was such a fickle friend to the colonized and conquered. But I am not convinced that any of the Company’s depredations in India posed any real trouble for Burke’s *commercial ideal*. The “primal norms” of liberalism are the terms in which Burke condemns company policy. It is precisely the lack of “commercial principle” that he attacks their “mercantile dealings” (97). Burke, unlike Locke, does not renege on his principles when he analyzes the colonial frontier, even if he denies that those principles apply to interactions with “Cannibals,” “Savages,” and “Banditti” (104).

But Ince’s second argument also suggests a second answer to my question about liberalism: colonial capitalism does reveal a fundamental dilemma of liberalism, insofar as it makes clear that liberalism *cannot* do without a staid concept of civilization. To put it in today’s idiom, a liberal society is a society within which we have managed to keep our “tribalism” within the bounds of the Olympics and other domesticated group activities so as to get on with the business of exchange. Those who feel their group belonging too intensely, or who express their communal solidarity too vehemently, are

taken to place themselves outside civilization, among the “Savages” and “Banditti” of the world. Are these the inescapable “civilizational categories” (110) of liberalism?

This second answer to the question of whether colonial capitalism poses a fundamental dilemma for liberalism leads directly to Ince’s treatment of E. G. Wakefield. Wakefield is the previously minor character in the book’s trio of protagonists, but Ince makes a powerful case for elevating his status. Wakefield proposed, as a solution to the labor question, that the British Empire impose an artificially high price on colonial land in order to induce colonists to engage in a period of wage labor prior to taking up homesteading on the frontier. Ince argues that, “by interposing government between the colonists and their interests,” Wakefield’s proposals for systematic colonization “assumed an unmistakably paternalistic tone that cut against the liberal sensibility of classical political economy” (150). I am not convinced there is anything here that cuts against liberal sensibilities. Frankly, paternalism has always been part of the liberal story. Being compelled to obey the law is in the interest of each, but legal order is not itself spontaneous. “A heavy dose of juridico-political power” (154) is, therefore, *internal* to the liberal framework and always has been. That is not to deny that Wakefield is open to charges of illiberalism. He certainly denied that *laissez-faire* was sufficient policy. My point is simply that *all* liberals deny that *laissez-faire* is sufficient—for some problem or another—and that, therefore, disagreements *among* liberals about proper policy will always give rise to charges of illiberalism. Liberalism, as a governmental discourse, is about *economizing* coercion and *economizing* government, not refusing coercion and government. Hence, liberalism is more flexible than Ince’s reading of Wakefield implies.

This flexibility makes me suspect that liberals are not as vulnerable to genetic critiques of the modern politicoeconomic order as historians of capitalism would like them to be, and that Wakefield’s plans for systematic colonization are not the “gotcha” moment for which they are sometimes taken. That “the creation of capitalist relations” in the Atlantic hinged on expropriation, enslavement, and massive deployments of illiberal force (21) does not present an insuperable dilemma for the liberal imagination. Liberals have several ways out.

First, temporal sequence is not causation. That plunder both preceded and furnished the commodities for global trade does not entail that trade relations are a consequence of plunder, instead of a replacement of or alternative to it, much less that trade relations could not exist without being set up by plunder. Second, causation is not constitution. Even if liberals grant that global trade was caused or established by colonial and imperial conquests, they can deny that this historical genesis impeaches commercial relations themselves.

Exchanges normatively exclude force, and so liberals can reply that, insofar as the history of conquest has given rise to concentrations of economic power, these should be attenuated by means of more exchange and more trade. Finally, constitution is not exhaustion. Even if liberals were to grant that commerce is constituted by dispossession, they can still fall back on their consequentialist argument that free exchange fosters the division of labor, the improvement of the technology of production, and the rising standard of living that is to the benefit of all—including the dispossessed.

For all these reasons, I think that Ince's focus on colonial capitalism does far more to illuminate the thought of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield—"the ideologues of the new order" (163)—than it does to diagnose an internal limit or contradiction at the heart of liberalism as such. The most significant contribution of Ince's book is its appreciation of the precise ways liberalism has functioned and can function as an ideology of the powerful. Liberalism's multiple commitments, as Ince shows, allow it to be deployed in defense of predation, expropriation, and especially "civilizing" missions, abroad and at home. This warning is more valuable than another critique of liberalism as such.