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Review: Liberalism and Empire

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Liberalism and Empire

Thomas R. Metcalf

C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire.*

Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920.*

These two volumes, among only a scattered handful of others in the Ideas in Context series, examine the responses of varied thinkers to the moral and political issues posed by the existence of empire and the growth of modern imperialism. Bayly's, indeed, is the very first among the one hundred published volumes in the series to move beyond European reflections on empire and give pride of place instead to intellectuals from the colonized world. Together liberal ideals and imperial practice incontestably exist at the heart of the modern world. Why, then, have the writings of Indian and other non-Western intellectuals, not to mention European theorists and critics of empire, received such cursory treatment in such an influential set of volumes? It is not possible to answer that question here, but fortunately the rapid rise of scholarly interest in imperialism over the last few years has spurred much new and exciting work on the ideology of empire. This outpouring of studies has even generated a subfield called "the new imperial history" devoted to exploring the links joining colony and metropole.

The works under consideration here are at once complementary—the one focused on Indian political thought, the other on British—and comprehensive. Both volumes range very widely across time, and engage with an

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array of thinkers. Both authors also fulfill the mandate of the larger series by placing ideas firmly in the context in which they took shape, and ask how they participated in the intellectual discourse of their times. Bayly, in his first sentence, describes his task as examining "the ideas, projects and sensibilities of those Indian intellectuals . . . who broadly subscribed to the international liberal consensus of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[1] Claeys, for his part, proposes to assess ". . . explanations of the origin of the British empire; justifications for its continuation; and criticisms of its consequences."[2]

Sir Christopher Bayly—the first historian of the British Empire, it might be noted, to be knighted since Sir John Seeley over one hundred years ago—has had a distinguished career as Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at Cambridge. Though he was never affiliated with any of the major historiographical schools of the last decades—the so-called Cambridge school of the 1970s, the Subaltern Studies Collective of the 1980s, or the postcolonial cultural "turn" of the 1990s—Bayly's wide-ranging publications across Indian and Imperial history have stimulated scholarship throughout the discipline and beyond, most notably among those many postgraduate students he has trained. So it is appropriate that Bayly should now add his own definitive account to the on-going scholarly discussion of the political theory of empire.

Indian liberals have been maligned ever since they came into existence as a visible group of English-educated young men in the 1840s and '50s. During the high colonial era of the late nineteenth century they were disparaged by the British as mere talkers, as self-interested job seekers, and as a minuscule coterie who sought to speak for a non-existent Indian "nation," but in fact represented no one but themselves. Nationalist writers and political leaders, from the 1890s onward, dismissed their liberal predecessors (and contemporaries) as ineffectual mendicants and bourgeois hangers-on of the Raj. By the Gandhian era, with two or three notable exceptions, among them Dadabhai Naoroji and G. K. Gokhale, India's Victorian liberals had disappeared altogether from the canon of the nation's heroes. Finally, in the postcolonial era, scholars such as Homi Bhabha derided them as inauthentic "mimic men" who tried to be, but could never truly be, English.[3] Indian liberalism, unlike its British counterpart, was thus, as Bayly

[1] C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), vii.

[2] Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

[3] See Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Tensions of Empire*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 152–60.

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correctly argues, "embattled from the beginning by powerful ideologies that largely rejected it."[4] A rehabilitation of the thought and practice of these men is therefore especially welcome.

India's fledgling liberals, not unlike their English counterparts, who contrasted Anglo-Saxon liberties with the Norman "yoke," looked for sustenance to the civic institutions of their country's past, and above all to a presumptive "ancient constitution" that had declined over the centuries. Bayly's otherwise enigmatic title *Recovering Liberties* evokes this historicist myth-making.[5] Still, in practice, almost inevitably, India's liberals appropriated the shaping ideals of European liberalism in the making of their own. But this Indian version of liberalism was no mere copy of a European original. At the heart of Bayly's study, and what gives it its freshness and originality, is his careful assessment of the various ways elements from India's past and its present were incorporated into its liberalism, and transformed over time by successive thinkers. The colonial context in which Indian liberalism arose, in particular, contributed to it a number of distinctive characteristics. Most notably, Bayly describes what he calls a "liberalism of fear," arising from an awareness among Indian thinkers of "the pervasiveness of despotism" and "the scale of the obstacles in [the] way of even the smallest progressive change." In addition, Bayly insists, Indian liberalism was always more "communitarian," or concerned with society rather than simply the individual, and more hospitable than its English free trade counterpart to state intervention in the economy.[6]

The substance of *Recovering Liberties* consists of a series of studies of individuals whom Bayly considers influenced by liberal thought. Not all the individuals discussed are well known even to India specialists; and many, not least Gandhi and such revolutionaries as B. G. Tilak and M. N. Roy, would disavow any connection with liberalism. Not surprisingly, Bayly begins his account with Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), often awarded the accolade of "founder of modern India." Roy was neither a believer in democracy nor an opponent of British rule over India. Nevertheless, he introduced into Indian political debate several fundamental liberal principles. Committed to constitutional legalism as a way to contain the untrammeled power of the East India Company's officials, Roy fought vigorously

[4] Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, 5.

[5] See esp. 38–41, 50–53. The British too in the late eighteenth century invoked the notion there had existed an "ancient constitution" in India that had subsequently declined. See Robert Travers, *Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6] Ibid., 6, 11, 14.

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to secure trial by jury and a free press. Never a Benthamite utilitarian, he sought to encourage "virtuous civic activity" rather than simply pressing demands for individual rights, and he envisioned in India a society of "republican citizens" assured of a liberty they had once possessed.[7] Bayly's two chapters on Rammohun Roy, in this reviewer's opinion, provide the richest and most sophisticated analysis of early Indian liberalism currently in print.

Space does not permit us to follow Bayly in his detailed accounts, as liberalism took root in mid-nineteenth-century India, of the varied views of Roy's successors. In the first stage, from 1840 to 1860, Indian liberals increasingly sought sustenance from continental as well as English sources; among them, according to Bayly, were Comte's evolutionary humanism, Mazzini's republican radicalism and List's national political economy. Above all, especially in western India, by mid-century British rule itself, not simply Company despotism, was being challenged. This involved what Bayly calls a "benign sociology" of accumulating facts and statistics that could be used to contest British justifications for their rule.[8] This "statistical" liberalism, in the hands of a former official like Romesh Chunder Dutt, demonstrated that poverty and famine were not inevitable or natural products of a failed Indian society. In addition, by 1880, Bayly concludes, Indian liberalism had become "deeply institutionalized."[9] Though Indian representation in government was extremely limited, societies, clubs, newspapers, and English language debate flourished.

By the late nineteenth century, Indian liberalism was, in Bayly's view, rapidly changing shape. The "universalist" or "classical" liberalism derived from the likes of Mill, Darwin, and Spencer in large part gave way, Bayly argues, to a liberalism informed by a desire to find a footing for Indian political life more in keeping with what were conceived to be traditional Indian values. "Spiritualised" liberals, such as the members of the Arya Samaj, supplemented scientific knowledge with "the concept of an immanent spirit moving through history." Others advocated "justice for communities" in place of the traditional liberal focus on a representation of individuals.[10] Theosophy, in particular, grew in popularity at the turn of the century, for it appeared to meld successfully the powerful currents of "social evolutionism, liberal communitarianism and a globalised form of Vedantic Hinduism."[11] This infusion into liberalism of a historicism based

[7] Ibid., 50, 53.
[8] Ibid., 105.
[9] Ibid., 159.
[10] Ibid., 227, 247.
[11] Ibid., 254.

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on community opened up an ideological gap never to be closed between India's Hindus and its Muslims as each sought a way forward.

Buffeted by hardening racial ideologies, and the disillusionment associated with the First World War, together with the rise of Gandhi, liberalism in India by 1919 had effectively disappeared as a compelling political order. Still, there remained, Bayly insists, a "loose jumble" of "flotsam and jetsam."[12] As Bayly searches through this "flotsam" for a usable inheritance, he finds strands of liberal thought everywhere. Some may feel the net is cast too widely. It is surely problematic to cast the Hindu communalist V. D. Savarkar as a liberal for expanding "the liberal notion of individual rights to embrace the whole Hindu—though only the Hindu—population."[13] B. R. Ambedkar was in some ways a committed secular liberal, and author of India's constitution, but his "counter-historicist" view of Dalit oppression, and his determination to make the state a force for "radical and positive social recognition" were never part of classical liberal ideology, as Bayly himself acknowledges.[14] Interestingly, the ever-enigmatic Gandhi is dismissed in a brief two pages, while Nehru, often alleged to be a quintessential liberal, makes no appearance at all. In the end, however much one might dispute Bayly's evaluation of individuals, one can, with justice, surely acknowledge with him that the persistence of liberal values through the nationalist era gave the new Indian Republic a solid foundation on which to build an enduring democratic society.

The nature of the ties linking liberalism and empire has evoked substantial controversy in recent years. Since the days of the Manchester School of John Bright and Richard Cobden one hundred and fifty years ago, the presumption has always been that, by its very nature, liberalism was hostile to empire. A doctrine founded upon a cosmopolitan rationalism, dedicated to free trade, liberalism disdained empire. Insofar as English liberals did support rule over others, they were moved by a universalist vision of global transformation. As Macaulay memorably wrote of India, British rule would be succeeded by an "imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws." In recent years scholars have begun to question not just the reluctance of liberals to put this transformative moral vision into practice—Bayly's Indian liberals were only too aware of the persistence of colonial autocracy—but whether imperialism was not an inherent and abiding element of liberalism from the beginning. The universal capacities liberalism celebrates, Uday Mehta has written, concealed

[12] Ibid., 277.
[13] Ibid., 313.
[14] Ibid., 299, 305.

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a set of "specific cultural and psychological conditions" so stringent and demanding as to be effectively impossible of realization. The fundamental characteristics imputed to non-European peoples—their child-like natures, their irrational behavior—barred them from ever participating in liberalism's civil society.[15] Other scholars have pointed to the transformation of liberalism itself in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Men such as Henry Maine, for instance, insisted upon the existence of "traditional societies" embedded in village communities and tribal structures. These enduring bonds of custom and kinship created societies defined by their "difference" from the modern West, and so appropriately subjected to a paternalist imperial order directed to sustaining them. Karuna Mantena, in her discussion of the crisis of liberal imperialism, sees it as changing sequentially over the course of the nineteenth century from a philosophy of "moral idealism," to one of "culturalist explanation," and finally to one of "retroactive alibis."[16]

Gregory Claeys raises some questions about the ambivalent anti-imperialism of Cobden and Bright—he points out, for instance, that neither advocated immediate withdrawal from India; but he chooses to skirt the debate about the fundamental nature of liberalism raised by critics such as Mehta and Mantena. In so doing, Claeys suggests that if by the later nineteenth century "sceptics" of empire were no longer to be found among liberals, then they might be found instead among those who avowedly contested the tenets of "classical" liberalism. Claeys subjects two such groups to exhaustive scrutiny: Positivists and Socialists. *Imperial Sceptics* takes up each in turn, with the aim of assessing in what ways, and to what extent, thinkers associated with these philosophies confronted late Victorian and Edwardian imperialism.

The philosophy propagated by the French thinker Auguste Comte, Claeys argues, evoked widespread support among many late Victorian intellectuals. Comte is well known as the founder of the new science of sociology and a new faith known as the "Religion of Humanity." This religion took as its mission the "subordination of egoism to altruism," and with it "the establishment of an international polity based on morality."[17]

[15] Uday S. Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," *Tensions of Empire*, 59–86.
[16] Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 20 and chap. II, "Inventing Traditional Society," 56–88. See also Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[17] Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, 50, 56.

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Comte's followers, known as Positivists, committed to the unity of humanity and a sympathetic understanding of all faiths, became, in Claeys's view, the most principled opponents of imperialism in late Victorian Britain. Indeed, Positivists "flaunted their anti-imperialist views openly," often "showing a rare degree of moral courage in defiance of public opinion."[18]

The initial Positivist manifesto came with the 1866 publication of a collection of essays entitled *International Policy*. This volume, taking as its cue the conception of "one common organism, Humanity," propounded, Claeys asserts, the first coherent critique of imperialism. Distancing itself from the old free trade radicalism, the volume anticipated much that was to come later with the revival of British socialism.[19] Criticism also came from within the imperial establishment itself with the writings of the dissident Indian civil servants H. J. S. Cotton and James Geddes. In publications from the 1880s onward, Cotton railed against Britain's extraction of wealth from India and the country's consequent impoverishment, as well as what he saw as "the evils which the possession of India entails on England."[20] The 1882 crisis in Egypt, which led to the British takeover of that country, emboldened Positivist critics to focus on the figure of the unscrupulous financier. The sole rationale for the invasion of Egypt, Frederic Harrison insisted, was "the money interest of certain bondholders and shareholders."[21] This of course anticipated the similar criticisms leveled against British policy in South Africa at the time of the Boer War. For some sixty years, Claeys writes, the writings of men like Harrison consistently upheld the view that every "fresh extension of the Empire . . . but extends the area of vulnerability and weakness."[22]

Its emphasis on morality and moderation enhanced Positivism's appeal to disillusioned liberals, who in any case sought only a slow dissolution of the empire, and a gradual substitution of native for English officials in colonies like India. Much in Positivist philosophy appealed also to English-educated Indians. As Bayly points out, and as indicated above, by the later nineteenth century Indian liberals were seeking a philosophy that had a moral and spiritual purpose and was based on the community not the individual. Positivism ideally suited such needs. As Comte himself wrote, and Cotton emphasized, "It is a Positivised Hinduism that you adopt: the religion of Humanity on the one hand with the system and life of Hinduism on

[18] Ibid., 112.
[19] Ibid., 63.
[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] Ibid., 82.
[22] Ibid., 88.

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the other."[23] Positivism's moderation too, of course, helped secure liberal adherents.

Positivism could not, however, compete with the jingoistic nationalism that drove British politics during the 1890s and into the Edwardian era. Nor could Positivism, with its abstract "Religion of Humanity," effectively contest the class-based mass appeal of socialism. To be sure, Positivism had much in common with socialism. With socialism, it laid emphasis on the community, and supported a substantial sphere of state economic activity. British socialism on its side had a strong moralizing component unlike its more Marxist-inflected continental counterparts. Yet, almost to his own surprise, Claeys finds socialists as a group to be much less committed than Positivists to an anti-imperial program. Indeed, he sets out to call into question the popular "mythology" of a "resolute socialist antagonism to empire."[24]

It is impossible, as Claeys acknowledges, to impose any single view of empire, or of socialism itself, on all those who are commonly regarded as socialists. So in an extended one hundred-page-long chapter, Claeys methodically assesses in turn the views of a number of individuals and groups, ranging from H. M. Hyndman and William Morris to the Fabians and Ramsey Macdonald. The Fabians, whose imperial sympathies are well-known, he terms "socialist imperialists." Their distinctiveness as socialists arose, Claeys points out, not from their objectives but from their chosen means—the methodical efficiency of "an enlightened government control [that] would effect higher moral ends."[25] In a word, confronted with the immense popularity of empire in Britain, socialists determined not to oppose empire as such, but only "*capitalist* imperialist exploitation." Empire need not be abandoned altogether; rather it could be usefully transformed into "a potential socialist commonwealth, capable of extending the benefits of socialist civilization to the less developed regions of the world."[26]

In his final chapter Claeys sets out to provide a "new context" in which to assess J. A. Hobson's famed *Imperialism: A Study,* published in 1901. Demolishing the claims of those who see Hobson's *Study* as an original contribution to the understanding of imperialism, Claeys places him firmly in the lineage of his Positivist and Socialist "antecedents." Hobson's description of imperialism was, Claeys insists, "if more sophisticated,

[23] Ibid., 72–73.
[24] Ibid., 126.
[25] Ibid., 186, 195.
[26] Ibid., 226–27, author's italics.

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methodical, and carefully crafted, none the less the stock-in-trade of both Positivist and much socialist argument, built up over the previous half-century."[27] Nor was Hobson all that hostile to empire. No "Little Englander," he was rather a "socialist imperialist," fully prepared to see the world's resources developed by "more efficient" nations whether or not indigenous peoples consented. What we have in Hobson, Claeys concludes, is "a paternalist account of global interference rooted in a civilisational ideal."[28] Apart from the Positivists, the "imperial sceptics" turn out not to be so skeptical after all. For British liberals and socialists alike, empire in one form or another possessed an abiding appeal. These two excellent books by first-rate scholars make clear how, only from India, and then only after the effective collapse of liberalism, could there come into being a concerted challenge to imperialism.

Liberalism and imperialism, for good reason, remain inexhaustible subjects of study, and fully deserve a place, at long last, in the Ideas in Context series.

University of California, Berkeley.

[27] Ibid., 246.
[28] Ibid., 260, 263.

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