

Theory and History of ‘Liberal’ Colonialism: Appraisal and Inquiries

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I. Evaluation of the Book

Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism examines the formation of the British liberal imagination from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth-century.¹ If the British has been successful in conceiving and promoting themselves as the guardians of liberalism despite the exhaustive colonial practice, according to this book, the language was supplied by John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Edward Gibbon Wakefield. In what follows, I first highlight three points which I consider to be of particular value of *Colonial Capitalism*. Subsequently, three inquiries for further specification ensue.

First, this study examines, very consciously, a theoretical contribution by and for the metropolitans. The fine result of the attentive angle is the idea of “disavowal” and the “self” image (not just an image) of the liberal empire. None of the three thinkers forced subjugation to the colonial populace. Nor were they a mere mouthpiece of imperialism. As Ince mentioned, their explanations were “genuine in their intentions.”² Whereas the complete gravity upon the metropolitan thinkers could be seen one-sided for some, this study’s careful and deliberate effort to investigate “self” image is a fresh contribution that urges the rethinking of the ideas of other metropolitan thinkers. More meticulous research on theorists of other empires with regard to their social status, their intended audience, and their scope of theory, in the manner that is demonstrated in *Colonial Capitalism*, would generate more refined vision of self-image in contradistinction to image, and their “genuine” intentions.

The contextualist approach to the metropolitan ideas would mitigate the prevalent postcolonial assumption that pro-empire theories by metropolitans is altogether reproachable. So-called “liberals” have particularly been exposed to the postcolonial accusation of the past for the last fifty years. Ironically, however, as *Colonial Capitalism* anatomizes, the “liberal” thinking was born out of the colonial reality. Those metropolitan theories indeed disguised the cruel practice of colonialism and capitalism as a result and the blind positive reappraisal should not take place. Nevertheless, the separation of liberalism and colonialism is another ditch. *Colonial Capitalism* carefully delineates the “self-image” and “genuine intention” not to fall into either ditch, and guides us to the academic discourse on colonialism of a wider horizon beyond the postcolonial criticism.

Second, *Colonial Capitalism* demonstrates a felicitous alliance with Marx. The theoretical

framework elicited from *Das Kapital* adequately justifies bringing up Locke, Burke, and Wakefield. Some might regard attaching a Marxian concept to the earlier thinkers anachronistic, but the application of the concept of primitive accumulation to Locke and Burke in fact aligned with Marx's discussion in *Das Kapital*. Whereas Marx at one point issued a conceptually strict definition of primitive accumulation which would fit the reality of nineteenth century alone, Marx brought up historical cases of colonial America and India that betrayed his own conceptualization.³ Following Marx's general scheme, *Colonial Capitalism* assigns a metropolitan thinker to each district. Meanwhile, Wakefield is the contemporary of Marx and the person whom Marx quoted favorably in *Das Kapital*. Therefore, although the trio of *Colonial Capitalism* at first sight might be alien, but there is a well-grounded link concerning Marx's writing.

Finally, *Colonial Capitalism* bridges the political theory and the history of economic thought. At first sight, *Colonial Capitalism's* analysis of liberalism (p.24) might seem closer to the method of political theory. However, it is evident that the actual excavation of history provides richer layer of ideas, and the reference to Marx's economic theory is conspicuous, as mentioned above. Thanks to what Ince calls "cross-pollinations" (p.9), the two classic thinkers of the political Whiggism, Locke and Burke, were adequately linked to Wakefield, a rather economic thinker. In this way, both political and economic aspects of liberalism are examined. It is also notable that *Colonial Capitalism* adamantly covers the "big thinkers" and creates the refreshing lineage of thought.

II. Questions to the Author

Thus, with theory and history of empire, capitalism, liberalism combined, this book is designed to gain a wide readership. Precisely because of its breadth and depth, even a historian of British political and religious ideas c. 1580-1640, myself, is prompted to inquire three points to learn more. First, in what sense Wakefield's concept of "free labor" could be uniquely associated with the cores of liberalism, i.e. contractual freedom and juridical equality? I suspect that in the age of Wakefield's, the idea of freedom was not something to be exclusively linked to Locke or liberal tradition, but rather a value which every reasonable thinker would have wanted to exploit. This inquiry is also to clarify the contribution of Wakefield to the liberal self-image. Unlike Locke or Burke, both of whom have been classic Whig spokesmen, Wakefield seems to, at least hitherto for us, be a stranger of the lineage of thought.

Even back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many royalists who condemned the puritans and the parliamentarians, did not express outright condemnation of private property, civil right, liberty or freedom. It was just a matter of degree and/or a matter of compromise with other values such as royal supremacy, tranquil social order, or longstanding tradition/custom. Few wanted to have their freedom and equality infringed without good reason.⁴

As for Wakefield, his idea was in one aspect comparable with that of conformists when Ince summarizes Wakefield's thought as follows: "only imperial sovereignty could provide the juridico-political preconditions of the right to life, liberty, and property through which capitalist civilization

could be established in the colonies” (p.147). Here Wakefield seems to have pronounced that hierarchy and the coercive power to maintain the order were indispensable to keeping basic rights in judicial and political spheres. Similarly, royalists and conformists argued that their proposal of stable hierarchical order was the very ground of liberties and property of subjects. Therefore, the imposition of hierarchy might have played part in Wakefield’s thought as extensively as it had been in the mind of the early modern conformists. Moreover, being a proponent of abolition, social reform, and settler colonialism did not necessarily label one a liberal in the nineteenth century.⁵ Thus, I would like to have some unique ties between Wakefield and liberalism elucidated, besides the facts that Wakefield was an abolitionist, social reformer, and an advocate of the language of “free.”

Second, I wonder how Professor Ince would locate his concept of empire in the ongoing debate on the periodization of the British Empire. On the one hand, David Armitage refers to the age of Henry VIII to trace the ideological origins of the empire.⁶ On the other hand, however, Tony Claydon and Brendan Simms assert that it was not until the victory in the War of Spanish Succession that the Englishmen seriously began to frame themselves primarily in relation to colonies rather than to Continental Europe.⁷ According to Claydon and Simms, the acquisition and justification of colonies were conducted not in order to fulfill the mission of the British Empire but to secure a place in the European stage of the balance of power, especially in the seventeenth century. Therefore, they would have qualms about discussing Locke’s writing as a proper manifestation of imperial thought.

With these different interpretations in mind, I would like to learn the conception of the British empire in the author’s mind. Furthermore, I wonder how far the conceptual framework of *Colonial Capitalism* could be extended to earlier times. If we pick up a more concrete example, can we include one who made a remark on the colonization of Ireland in 1536? Recognizing that Ireland is not included in Marx’s remark, can we apply the idea of primitive accumulation to earlier colonization?

The final question concerns Wakefield’s analysis of settler laborers. It is interesting to observe Wakefield’s attempt to deliberately distance himself from Adam Smith. In particular, unlike Smith, Wakefield did not attribute slavery to the human love of tyrannizing and domination, obliterating the accomplishment of Scottish moral philosophy. Alternatively, he stressed the role of system and institution. Thus in one sense, at least with regard to colonial proprietors, it seems that Wakefield put more importance on external circumstances than internal motivation. Then, how would Wakefield explain the motivation of prospective emigrants to be appropriately settled? I suppose that the success of the systematic colonization was crucially predicated upon human moral that led to civility, self-control, and most importantly, the desire to cultivate their own land in the first place and to remain properly free. Did Wakefield assume that the system of decent land and labor could attract and discipline impoverished former “vagrants” and nurture them even without strong moral inclination? Did Wakefield leave the task of civilizing and self-control almost entirely

to the hands of female emigrants? (p.149)

Notes

1. Ince (2018).
2. Ince (2018: 4).
3. Ince (2014: 122).
4. Burgess (1992: 130-8); Sommerville (1999: 39); Langbaine (1641: 20-30); Kiyosue, *Jean Bodin and France in the Age of Crisis* (1990: 169-76); Inuzuka (2015: 147-72).
5. Piterberg and Veracini (2015: 457-78). I appreciate Ince for kindly sending me a list of essential further readings prior to the symposium, including this one.
6. Armitage (2000: ch. 2).
7. Claydon (2007); Simms (2007: ch. 1); Simms (2016: chs. 1-3).

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受稿2019年11月5日／掲載決定2019年11月18日