

Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2016, ISBN 10 0691138788, ISBN 13 9780691138787, (hbk) 441 pp

Duncan Bell's *Reordering the World* presents a bold case for reconfiguring the study of liberal ideas in imperial context. The book mainly intervenes in the field of "liberalism and empire," a prolific cottage industry that has recently grown within circles of Anglophone political and postcolonial theory. Bell sets out to correct two major flaws that he identifies in this scholarship. First, he targets the overly neat imperialist and anti-imperial lineages of liberalism, as well as the equally tidy historical periodisations of British imperial ideology. Second, he criticizes the narrow conceptual construction of "empire" as "alien rule" and the attendant fixation on British India as the flashpoint of liberalism's encounter with empire. His correction is correspondingly twofold. On the one hand, he challenges the attempts to define "liberalism" by identifying its ineliminable ideational core, and offers a linguistic-contextualist account of it as a self-conscious political language with origins in the mid-nineteenth century. Second, he centers his investigation of liberalism on Britain's "second settler empire" (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) and the privileged status that late Victorian and Edwardian statesmen and intellectuals assigned to it.

Upon this theoretical base, the book contends that liberal visions of a global order of peace, progress, and prosperity germinated in debates over unifying Britain's white settler colonies into a new transoceanic polity. The idea of a "Greater Britain," Bell argues, functioned as a shared screen on which statesmen, historians, philosophers, and writers projected liberal desires, anxieties, and fantasies about the future of the world. Although forward-looking in their aspirations, these visions stemmed from fears of Britain's impending decline under the twin pressures of international competition (chiefly from the United States, Russia, and Germany) and a restive democratic movement at home, which, if politically successful, would likely opt for a course of imperial retrenchment. Liberal imperialists believed that a bout of imperial renewal through invigorating and more closely integrating settler colonies could simultaneously boost Britain's material and human resources and alleviate the "social question" in the metropole.

Changing conceptions of time and space were crucial in the re-imagination of the British polity beyond the British Isles. Industrial technologies of transportation and communication annihilated the vast oceanic spaces that John Stuart Mill thought vitiated the possibility of a political unity with the colonies. Late-nineteenth century intellectuals reckoned that it was, for the first time in history, feasible to forge a "planetary public" and extend the imagined community of the British nation across the globe (168). The nascent transoceanic British polity also heralded liberation from history. After having scoured the Greco-Roman past for precedents for almost three centuries and inspecting their own nation's present for augurs of decline, British political elites could now find hope in the idea that Greater Britain represented an unexampled form of "*post-imperial* political association," exempt from the vagaries of cyclical time that ruled the life of empires (141).

But "post-imperial" did not mean "cosmopolitan." Bell systematically highlights the deeply hierarchical and increasingly racialized "imperial imaginary" that shaped the various imaginations

of Greater Britain as well as of the global order it inhabited (96). “Liberal internationalism” of this period classified the world’s peoples along a civilizational continuum and admitted only the “civilized” nations into the inner sanctum of “international society” (259-60). The same racial logic structured the “settler *mythscape*” of Greater Britain, wherein the liberal promise of liberty, equality, and representative government was founded on the violent elimination of indigenous populations and the ideological erasure of their territorial claims as peoples (42). The myth of the “vanishing native” had as its obverse a supremacist belief in the uniqueness of the “Anglo-Saxon character,” which for many liberals constituted the cohesive principle that would hold the settler empire together. The most radical formulation of this tenet, expressed in “race patriotism” and “isopolity,” proposed to decouple citizenship from the state and reattach it to race (187).

This is not to suggest that all liberals saw eye-to-eye on matters of empire. Beyond the shared political priorities and ideological tenets just outlined, disagreement abounded over the exact nature of intra-imperial bonds and the institutional forms that ought to encase them. Contending models included, among others, a decentralized association based on Greek precedent, an “imperial federation” with alternative schemes of parliamentary representation, and a “multinational commonwealth” (177). For some, like A. V. Dicey and John Seeley, an institutionalized federative structure pointed the way forward, whereas for others, like Charles Dilke and Goldwin Smith, a “virtual confederation” based on shared identity offered a more expansive and secure foundation because it could incorporate the United States into a prospective Anglo-world as an ally and not a competitor (187). Notwithstanding their differences, Bell concludes, it was “in the [settler] colonies, not in India, that many liberals found the concrete place of their dreams” (366).

In mapping the “polyphonic variation” of liberal arguments on empire, Bell draws on a wealth of texts from “elite metropolitan culture” (works of philosophy and history, speeches, editorials, pamphlets) that coalesced into an ideational “imperial commons” (2, 240). Unlike most existing scholarship, he directs his gaze beyond canonical figures to chart out (in Emma Rothschild’s words) “medium” political thought produced by public moralists (T. H. Green, Henry Sidgwick), historians (John Seeley, Edward Freeman), politicians (Archibald Rosebery, James Bryce), journalists (W. T. Stead, Edwin Arnold), and novelists (Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells), among others. Were it not for Bell’s eloquent and lucid prose and conceptual precision, such formidable historical erudition would risk disorienting the reader.

The book is organized into three sections which operate at distinct yet interlinked levels of generality. The chapters under “Frames” outline the scope and the method of inquiry into the conjunction of “liberalism” and “empire.” Chapter 2, in particular, furnishes an informative and incisive review of the recent literature and drives home the book’s central argument on settler colonialism. The second section, “Themes,” explores changing conceptions of time and history, space and territoriality, race and citizenship, and political association and constitution around the axis of Greater Britain. Chapter 8 provides an insightful account of the idea of an “Anglo-world” as the nucleus of a liberal world order *in potential*—an idea, Bell recurrently notes, that has persisted into our present by shedding its overt racialism though not its hierarchical view of the world order. The final section, “Thinkers,” consists of targeted readings of individual liberal thinkers and provides a finer-grained picture of the main thematic concerns surveyed in the

previous chapters. In addition to an impressive reconstruction of John Seeley's *The Expansion of England*, this section also treats the reader to an instructive essay on James Froude's distinctly republican imperialism and an illuminating reading of the "New Liberal" John Hobson's endorsement of "genuine colonialism."

Reordering the World should be of interest to scholars of international relations, political theory, intellectual history, and (obviously) the British Empire. While Bell's conceptual and temporal framing of liberalism might not convince all audiences, his analytic focus on settler colonialism will change the imperial key with which to decode the history of liberalism. Perhaps more importantly, Bell makes it amply clear that the stakes of his analysis overflow from the historical period he examines into our present moment. The most critical of these (at least to this reader) is not just the *imperial context* but the *imperial intentions* out of which the idea of an Anglo-world emerged. Twentieth- and twenty-first century theories of liberal internationalism, in both scholarly and lay variants, have latched onto the ideal of a world order that revolves, if not around an Anglo-American center of gravity, then certainly around the putative Anglo-American norms of liberalism and democracy (and I would add, norms and institutions of capitalism). The hues of cosmopolitanism and theories of "democratic peace" in which liberal internationalism parades today shroud the attendant dreams of reordering the world, by the force of arms if necessary. The book does an excellent job in disclosing the imperial genealogy and lineaments of these dreams. We would ignore its message at our own risk.

Notes on Contributor

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