

Political Economy and Empire: Rematerializing a Research Agenda

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The 'colonial turn' witnessed in the last two decades in political theory has occasioned a valuable encounter with the methodological nationalist parameters of the field. What began as the reappraisal of several canonical figures has extended to interrogating the imperial provenance of cardinal concepts that have shaped the discipline in North America. The enterprise has involved detecting, on the one hand, the imperial genealogies of the questions central to political theory and, on the other, how the erasure of these genealogies enshrines the nation-state as political thought's politico-juridical horizon. Exemplary is Charles Mills' (2015) indictment of liberal political philosophy as 'ideology.' The powerful fiction of a social contract between free and equal persons who constitute the (implicitly national) body politic, Mills maintains, obfuscates the colonial histories of liberal polities riddled with racialized exclusions. Scaling up the question from the intra-polity to the inter-polity level, Jennifer Pitts' (2018) latest book trains its sights on the pervasive meta-narrative of 'international society,' which recounts the history of the global order as the progressive universalization of sovereign equality. In her corrective, she reveals international law to be an imperial language wherein sovereign statehood represents not the axiomatic premise of the international system but the effect of the boundaries that excluded non-European polities from its remit.

The two books just cited do not simply illustrate the state of the art in political theory after the colonial turn. In their preoccupation with personhood and recognition, they also encapsulate the field's continued focus on questions of inclusion and exclusion. At least since Uday Mehta's (1999) controversial characterization of liberalism as an intrinsically imperial system of thought, the most influential efforts to unravel empire's relation to political theory have revolved around the politics of representing non-European or colonized others. Scholars have quarried the European history of political thought for constructions of the universal and particular, negotiations of cultural pluralism and difference, and controversies over civilizational hierarchies.

An unfortunate, if unintended, consequence of this bias for the representational has been the neglect of political economy as a constitutive feature of empire and its afterlives. The following reflections identify some of the analytic limitations that follow from this neglect and

contour the potential of situating political theory of empire in the historical unfolding of global capitalism.

Given the centrality of equality, autonomy, and justice to political theory, it is unsurprising that political theorists have mainly construed European colonial empires as structures of domination, exclusion, and injustice. Colonial empires were certainly these. But they also comprised systems of dispossession, exploitation, and surplus transfer. Forged in the imperial crucible were not only racialized hierarchies of full, partial, and non-personhood, and graded capacities for contract, representation, and self-rule. Colonial empires also incubated the property, exchange, and labor regimes that have subordinated the socio-ecological reproductive capacities of the planet to the relentless accumulation of capital.

Bypassing the political economy of empire and viewing Indigenous dispossession, slavery, and imperial despotism primarily through the prism of racism, white supremacy, and cultural arrogance risks falling into a sort of idealism or inverted reductionism. The lexical priority accorded to these ideological formations downplays the fact that slavery, settlerism, and despotism were above all modalities of expropriating land, labor, and social knowledge and reorganizing them in the pursuit of wealth, profit, and revenue. The violent imperial processes that built the global capitalist economy receive frequent condemnation but little sustained reflection in the scholarship on the political theory of empire. The attention instead fixates on the liaisons between imperial rule and European political philosophy generating hierarchical constructions of cultural difference and spurious universalizations of provincial European values.

This tendency stems partly from the disciplinary practices of a subfield that has long been anchored in the exegeses of privileged texts. It also reproduces the theoretical protocols and literary bent of postcolonial studies from which the political theory of empire has borrowed heavily. Two theoretical choices in particular breed a disconnect from political economic analysis. The first is to organize inquiry around the meta-binary of colonizer/colonized. The second is to conceive of this binary as a political and civilizational axis of power to be dissected with the tools of literary and cultural criticism. The outcome, as Neil Lazarus puts it, is a ‘category error’ that fails to grasp colonialism as ‘part and parcel of a larger, enfolding historical dynamic, which is that of capitalism in its global trajectory’ (2011, p. 7). The inattention to political economy is arguably unconscious in postcolonial theory, whereas in political theory it instantiates a conscious aversion to categories of social analysis in the historical study of ideas (Moyn 2014). The victory of linguistic contextualism (the so-called ‘Cambridge School’) has marked intellectual histories informed by sociological frameworks as imprecise or, worse,

reductionist and anachronistic. As a result, the social history of political thought inspired by Crawford B. Macpherson's (1962) Marxist interpretation has found little traction outside a limited academic circle.

The colonial turn at once exhibits the marginalization of social theory and represents an opportunity for recuperating some of its insights – some of which are well illustrated in Nichols' essay in this exchange. While there are good reasons for questioning the adequacy of 'possessive market society' or 'agrarian capitalism' in theorizing the social context of ideas, these do not justify abandoning social contextualization *tout court*. Social theory can prove especially useful for addressing certain limitations of the current political theory of empire. A telling case is the manner in which various forms of imperial violence and coercion are treated in the literature (here, again, Nichols' view is instructive). Many scholars readily invoke the litany of abuses that colonial empires visited upon non-Europeans: land expropriation, bonded labor, predatory commodity markets, and tribute extraction, all subtended by a heavy dose of force. They often subsume these processes under a monolithic category of 'imperial violence,' which then forms the static backdrop for the real question, namely, whether the thinkers under study condoned or criticized it based on their assessment of the capacities of the colonized. In doing so, political thinkers' judgments of *who the colonized are* take priority over, and are assumed to shape their view of, *what the colonizers do*.

A different picture emerges when one situates imperial violence within a theoretical framework that explicates the agendas that animate it, the specific forms of its exercise, and the patterned effects that it produces. A particularly generative approach to imperial violence, one that has informed my own research along with many others', takes as its departure point the Marxian notion of 'the primitive accumulation of capital.' Marx (1976) used the term to explain the historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production through a range of violent colonial transformations that remade the world as they tore it apart. In the eponymous section in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx cited under 'primitive accumulation' the same violent practices and coercive institutions that crop up in the scholarship in political theory and empire, including the plunder of precious minerals in the Americas, the Atlantic slave trade, and commercial imperialism in Asia.

Recasting these episodes as vectors of primitive accumulation changes their analytic register. What were previously undifferentiated descriptions of imperial violence now reappear as building blocks of a theory of capitalist development, revealing the 'colonial' contexts of political ideas to be 'colonial capitalist' contexts (Ince 2018b). The perspective of political economy holds not additive but transformative significance, as it sheds new light on empire's

impact on political thought, including on the politics of universalism and cultural hierarchies. It discloses how European constructions of cultural and racial difference were shaped by the imperative to access colonial land, labor, and resources, by the strategies and discourses devised to achieve these ends, and by the metropolitan perceptions of these ends and methods. The optic of colonial capitalism helps disaggregate imperial violence into, for instance, the violence of slave-plantation capitalism, commercial capitalism, and settler capitalism, as well as their context-specific articulations. Such theoretical parsing of imperial violence in turn enables a more precise view of the criticisms that it incited and the rationalizations it called forth at specific historical junctures.

Patrick Wolfe's (2001) oft-cited discussion of miscegenation laws in the US elucidates the weight of political economic agendas in shaping the construction of social difference. Wolfe explains the diametrically opposed applications of the blood quanta laws to Blacks and Native Americans by recourse to the primitive accumulation of capital that combined enslaved labor and evacuated land. A similar political economic mediation is discernible in the works of several European thinkers who have been of interest to the scholarship on the political theory of empire. Highlighting this mediation enables us to answer a number of unresolved puzzles in the literature: for instance, John Locke's argument that American land was open to unilateral appropriation because Native Americans lacked a monetary economy; or Edmund Burke's sympathy for Britain's oppressed Indian subjects but lack thereof for Africans and Native Americans within the empire; or David Hume's notable silence regarding Atlantic slavery despite his voluble discussions of ancient, feudal and Asiatic bondage; or Adam Smith's failure to extend his rebuke of colonial conquest, plunder, and slavery in the West and the East Indies to agrarian settler colonialism in North America.

The puzzle that each case poses is why *certain* historically specific practices and not others were deemed to be universal, or why *certain* cultural differences were built into civilizational hierarchies while others were considered irrelevant for justifying or criticizing imperial practices. Intra- and inter-textual protocols and culturalist preoccupations hold limited analytic capacity for explaining, and not simply chronicling, the differential assessment of universals and particulars (call it the 'problem of competing universals'). The political economy of empire constitutes a more productive departure point: it illuminates the extraordinary commodification of the seventeenth century Atlantic world where colonial land for capitalist agriculture was the prime asset (Locke); the designation of division of labor and commercial complexity as the index of civilization in eighteenth-century stadial theory (Burke); colonial slavery's paradoxical status as a barbarous yet commercial institution central to modern civility (Hume); and the

institutional dependence of settler capitalism on land markets established by imperial acts of land appropriation (Smith) (Ince 2011, 2012, 2018a).

In each case, the variegated socio-legal forms of colonial capitalism confronted contemporaries with a profound ideological challenge: the modern world of commerce, with its promise of liberty, prosperity, and enlightenment, gestated in colonialism's ferment of chaos, cruelty, and venality. Equally importantly, that we encounter comparable tensions in the works of both imperial functionaries (Locke, Burke) *and* skeptics (Smith, Hume) suggests that this was an institutional-ideological (as opposed to intellectual-discursive) problem that exceeded the ethical predilections and moral sensibilities of individual figures. European imperialism's impact on political concept formation, within and beyond Europe, thus cannot be fully grasped without attending to the capitalist social forms woven into the fabric of imperial relations. These were the province of 'political economy,' which arose from metropolitan attempts to comprehend, institutionalize, and administer the process of wealth and revenue creation across imperial interdependencies. Much more than a language of technical administration, political economy constituted a mode of ethico-political reflection that furnished discourses of civilization and savagery with much of their socio-historical referents and evaluative metrics. The extant literature's focus on civilization, universalism, and difference has by and large evacuated these discourses of their political economic content.

To say this much is not to exhort every scholar in the field to incorporate an analysis of capitalism, much less turn historical sociologists or social historians, but rather to call for expanding the range of social relations and issues comprising the relevant contexts of political ideas. The political economic constitution of empire offers one such contextual register at a particularly opportune moment. The ecumenical and growing fields of 'new history of capitalism' (Beckert and Rockman 2016) and 'racial capitalism' (Dawson 2016; Fraser 2016) are generating a range of pressing questions that invite political theorizing. Their centering of colonialism and slavery in (albeit hemispheric) accounts of capitalist development enlarges the space for exploring the reception, justification, or rejection of colonial-capitalist practices and institutions in legal, political, and social thought. Political theorists would be particularly well situated to contribute to this space. Concomitantly, a closer engagement with political economy, historical sociology, and critical geography promises a renewed social history of political theory, one that is imperial in scope and attentive to the historical specificity of political languages (Kennedy 2012).

There are many methodological entry points to this agenda, including but not limited to reappraising privileged legal, political, and economic tracts; mapping out the 'middle' political

thought of legislators, courts, administrators, and publicists; or excavating vernacular yet comparable ideological formations arising out of imperial social formations. There are no *a priori* reasons against moving between multiple levels of discourse, or for that matter, against constructing syncretic theoretical frameworks (drawing upon, for instance, Polanyian, Braudelian or Foucaultian analysis).

A social turn in the political theory of empire would pay another analytic dividend, which can only be signaled here. If, as many critical scholars and activists have noted, and as Pitts observes above, the imperial constitution of the global order has persisted beyond formal decolonization, then the afterlives of empire arguably remain more salient at the institutional-ideological level. To consider a pivotal theme in the literature, the switch from the language of ‘civilization’ in the nineteenth century, to that of ‘development’ in the twentieth, to the wholesale abandonment of development nomenclature in the twenty-first, cannot be explained by discourse analysis alone. Their full significance *qua* discursive formations rests in their embeddedness in the institutional-ideological problem of governing the peripheries that global capitalism cannot but continuously reproduce within and across borders. This problem has generated oscillating and recombinant modes of institutional reform, indirect rule, military intervention, legal engineering, and financial coercion, both during and after formal colonialism. Elucidating the persistent imperial logics of peripheralization, devalorization, and disposability through their episodic reconfigurations requires a capacious understanding of empire and a different understanding of what it means to theorize it. Political theory would have as much to gain from as to contribute to this revisionist enterprise.