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Imperium et Libertas

The abiding intellectual problem surrounding British imperialism in the nineteenth century was how to reconcile it with the liberalism that was supposed to be a far more dominant discourse in Britain at that time. It was Britons’ sense of “freedom” that made middle- and working-class people in particular proud of being British, however delusional that sense may have been; and consequently loyal (in the main) to their ruling classes, just as it is in the United States today. There is less evidence of any particular pride in “empire” among them, at least until the final years of the nineteenth century, except in one particular form: the spreading of distinctive British liberties in the wider world, through “free” settlement (ignoring the *indigènes*, for the moment), to places such as the United States, British North America, and Australasia. Even here, however, the treatment of the *indigènes* did pose a problem, which became enormously magnified when Britain’s non-“Anglo-Saxon” and therefore more directly ruled colonies hove into view; in particular, of course, India. How could Britain’s vaunted liberalism be reconciled with her autocratic domination of all these millions? It is probably true, as Theodore Koditschek hints at one point in this book, that most people didn’t bother themselves much over this glaring contradiction. (Few of us think things through.) Public intellectuals, however, did. It is their attempts to solve this puzzle—or, in the end, to give up on solving it—that form the subject of this excellent new book.

This is a topic that has been pored over before, but usually by political scientists, who, whatever their other insights, have been blinkered firstly by their too ready acceptance of some historians’ and cultural theorists’ insistence that in fact it was imperialism that was the more dominant discourse, to which “liberalism” was merely subordinated—a means to justify imperial rule; and secondly by their neglect of the subject’s historical dimension, which is what Koditschek provides for us here. That is important in two ways. One is obvious: both Britain and her empire changed radically during the course of the nineteenth century, which also therefore altered the contexts in which these ideas were discussed. Political theory does not always take enough notice of this. The other is that the idea of history was itself crucial to these debates; in particular, what Koditschek calls “the progress narrative”—another dominating discourse of the time—which was the key factor enabling a kind of accommodation between those two opposite poles, even—at its most ingenious—a synthesis; which worked both ways (p. 4). Yes, it could be used to justify imperialism to liberals. But it was also bound to have an effect on the kind of imperialism that was preached, at least, albeit not always practiced; liberalizing it in various ways, to the extent of eventually reconciling even many imperialists to its demise: because liberalism’s inescapable bottom line, after all, was freedom from domination by others, even if a temporary domination might be required to enable colonial peoples to “progress” to the stage where they could be trusted to exercise that freedom. How else to explain the widespread acceptance in Britain at the time of
decolonization—far beyond the period this book covers, but still affected by these old nineteenth-century ideas—of the myth that this represented the culmination of imperialism, rather than, or as well as, its demise?

Of course the “progress narrative” was problematical. In its original form, it posited that all peoples everywhere were capable of progressing to modern states of rational liberty, conceived broadly in European, or British, or—even more specifically—Scottish terms. Koditschek notes how many of his chosen writers came from Scotland, as of course did so many British thinkers in all fields in the earlier nineteenth century: a product both of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, and, in this particular area, of the Scots’ greater involvement in Britain’s imperial enterprises than the more parochial English. They also had recent experience on their own soil of intercourse with peoples who needed to be “enlightened”: traditional Scottish cultures that were still being incorporated into the Enlightenment project; which gave some guidance as to how this could be done—and what was to be done with the remnants of the old cultures that were displaced: in other words, with defunct “histories”—on a broader scale. This is where Koditschek begins: firstly in Ireland, Britain’s first colony, where the intercultural problem seemed at its most acute, and was theorized in very different ways by the two writers he focuses on—the female novelists Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan); and then in Scotland, where another novelist, Walter Scott—significantly, the “historical” novelist par excellence—offered what seemed to be a satisfactory solution to it. (In a nutshell: the tribal Scots become “enlightened,” but are allowed to retain their old culture “in imagination,” p. 39.) That seemed relatively easy for Scotland, and still (in the early nineteenth century) not yet out of the question for the Irish.

India however presented a much greater challenge: “half a world apart” as it is described here, “not only in geography and climate, but in culture, religion and ethnicity too” (pp. 57-58). But the dominance of the liberal discourse in Britain (as opposed to among India’s British rulers, who generally came with other values, or acquired them while they were there) meant that the fundamentally authoritarian raj had to be justified in liberal terms too. Koditschek illustrates the two main ways in which this was attempted: firstly by trying to co-opt Indian institutions to the British liberal project on the basis of equality and respect, largely under the influence of sympathetic “orientalist” scholars such as Sir William Jones and H. T. Colebrooke—light-years away from Edward Said’s dismissive caricature of the Western “orientalist,” by the way; but secondly by demeaning Indian civilizations entire in order to justify their replacement by what seemed to T. B. Macaulay (another Scot) and especially James Mill—the real villain of the piece, in Koditschek’s book—superior “Enlightenment” ways. That was a “liberal” view, too, and not, for example, strictly speaking a “racist” one: if they had been racists Mill and Macaulay would not have believed the Indians capable of enlightenment (p. 83); but Koditschek also agrees that by dismissing Indian cultures so arrogantly Mill “opened the door to the racism of the late Victorian Raj” (p. 11). It was this that presaged the end of liberal imperialism in India in the later nineteenth century. Before it came to that, however, “a rising generation of middle-class [Indian] intellectuals was creating its own variant of the liberal imperial romance” (p. 15): men like Surendranath Banerjea and Dadabhai Naoroji, whose ambition was to draw India back into the historical narrative on equal terms. These were the true successors of William Jones et al. Sadly that was scuppered by imperial racism on the one side, and colonial rejectionism on the other; producing eventually an independent India defined less by its imperial history, than by its rejection of it.

Other chapters deal with nineteenth-century liberal imperialism and its difficulties on a broader level, through the writings of, for example, Zachery Macaulay (T. B.’s father), the legalist Henry Maine, and the historians J. A. Froude, W. E. H. Lecky, E. A. Freeman, and R. C. Dutt. An epilogue includes easily the best analysis of W. E. Gladstone’s thinking about empire that I have read; before moving on briefly to the eclipse of the liberal “progress narrative,” in Koditschek’s view, by the new triumphalist Anglo-Saxonism of J. R. Seeley in history, and Joseph Chamberlain in policy. Ending effectively with Ireland–Gladstone’s preoccupation, of course—brings a nice symmetry to the book. But neither this, nor Seeley’s alternative history, brought an end to the discussion of how to reconcile Imperium et Libertas—to quote the title of a book published by Bernard Holland in 1901—which carried on, in interesting new forms, well into the twentieth century. If he has nothing else in mind, Theodore Koditschek might consider following it there.

In some ways Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination is an old-fashioned work of intellectual history, centered on the ideas of just a few writers, whose influence on others, and on broader contemporary, is never properly discussed; neither is it has to be said, the influence of broader events on them. Nonetheless, qua intellectual history, it is outstanding: diligently researched, dispassionately considered, with-
out any of the preconceptions that often bedevil this field, well written, and—for those of us who are as interested in the history of ideas as Koditschek is—fascinating and frequently suggestive. His main “progress narrative” theme is hugely illuminating; going a long way to explain how the proudly “free” Victorian British could live with their empire, without too great a sense of incongruity. A fine and important work.

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