

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

EMPIRE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN VICTORIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT. *This essay surveys recent scholarly work on the political theory of empire and international relations in Britain during the long nineteenth century. It traces the dominant themes and arguments to be found, points to some interpretative and methodological weaknesses, and highlights a number of topics that remain to be explored in detail. I focus on the following: the relationship between liberalism and empire and, in particular, the role played by the idea of civilization in circumscribing liberal claims to universality; the nature and evolution of international law, and the key role that jurisprudential thought played in shaping conceptions of civilization and setting the bounds of legitimacy for imperialism; the vexed relationship between the history of imperial thought and cultural/political history; and the important, though frequently marginalized, role of the colonial empire in the Victorian imperial imagination. Finally, I suggest that areas that remain to be explored in depth include non-liberal visions of international affairs; the role of theology in shaping conceptions of global order; and the balance between the United States, Europe, and the various (and very different) elements of the empire.*

In recent years, historians of political thought have paid increasing attention to the way in which past generations conceived of the complex patterns of global politics. This reorientation is long overdue, as much of the best historical work produced since the 1960s has tended to focus on domestic aspects of political theory. Questions of international trade, foreign conquest, imperial administration, the justness of war and occupation, and conceptions of other cultures figured tangentially, if at all. The same applies for the most basic question of all, namely the ways in which the domains of the ‘international’ and ‘empire’ were demarcated and legitimated over time. The nascent coverage of international and imperial thought remains uneven, however, with some topics, regions, and historical periods receiving far less attention than others. The Victorians have been especially poorly served. Just as the era was frequently neglected by historians of political thought, who tended to gravitate towards the early modern world and then to the eighteenth century, so the intellectual history of empire and international relations habitually bypassed the mid- and late nineteenth century. This problem was compounded by the fact that many of the most sophisticated analyses of nineteenth-century political thought consigned international and imperial issues to the margins. It is rather ironic that most attention has been lavished on a period in which Britain played a relatively minor role in global politics, whilst far less concern has been shown with the patterns of thought animating intellectual life when it was

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the most powerful polity in history.¹ Fortunately, there are signs that this lacuna is being addressed.

The lack of attention paid to the empire – by both the political elite and the public – was itself a theme (and a lament) woven through Victorian imperial thought. J. R. Seeley protested that historians habitually ‘relegated’ imperial affairs to ‘supplementary chapters’ and lambasted the mid-century ‘system of indifference’ that had threatened the unity of the empire.² This echoed John Stuart Mill’s earlier complaint about the ‘indifference to foreign affairs’ displayed by the British public, and J. A. Froude’s claim that ‘indifference’ about the existence and fate of the empire was endemic.³ This was certainly an exaggeration, as the scale of the Victorian peace movement illustrates, but the trope of ‘indifference’ reflected both an authentic concern with the parochialism of much British intellectual exchange and a case of special pleading by those heavily involved in colonial affairs.⁴ Disinterested analyses of the empire and foreign policy were rare, and imperial and international thought was enmeshed in political advocacy and contestation.

Two reasons stand out for the relative dearth of work on Victorian visions of global order. The first concerns the role played today by the canon of ‘great thinkers’ in the selection of appropriate subjects for research. Aside from Karl Marx (whose impact at the time was relatively slight) and John Stuart Mill, no Victorian thinker plays a major part in the story that political theorists tell themselves about their past, and many of the prominent figures of the time, including Thomas Macaulay, Herbert Spencer, T. H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson, Henry Maine, Henry Sidgwick, Seeley, and James Fitzjames Stephen, often barely rate a mention. In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the imperial and international thought of the era political theorists need to widen the aperture of their gaze, moving beyond the self-limiting confines of the canon to explore the multifaceted and fissiparous contours of Victorian intellectual life.

¹ It is useful to note the way in which terms were employed at the time, for many of our current usages are anachronistic. The term ‘international’ was coined by Jeremy Bentham in 1789, and was used throughout the Victorian era, as was ‘foreign affairs’. The term ‘colony’ appeared first in English in Wycliffe’s translation of the Bible (1382), but entered common usage in the sixteenth century; ‘colonialism’ was employed first in 1853 to signify issues pertaining to a colony, and only in 1886 to refer to a system or principle. ‘Empire’ has a long and complex semantic history, reaching back to Rome, but the term ‘British empire’ became popular in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. ‘Imperialism’ was used for much of the Victorian period to characterize the purportedly despotic municipal politics of France; it was only in the late 1860s, and especially the 1870s, that it entered mainstream use to refer to policies of foreign conquest, and, even then, there was much confusion over its meaning. See Jeremy Bentham, *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London, 1970 [1789]), p. 296. On ‘colony’, see Chris Gosden, *Archaeology and colonialism: cultural contact from 5000BC to the present* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 1; on ‘empire’ see David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 170–1; on ‘imperialism’, see Richard Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt, *Imperialism: the story and significance of a political word, 1840–1960* (Cambridge, 1964), chs. 5–7.

² J. R. Seeley, *The expansion of England: two courses of lectures* (London, 1883), pp. 121–2; Seeley, ‘Introduction’ to *Her Majesty’s colonies* (London, 1886), p. xv.

³ John Stuart Mill, ‘A few words on non-intervention’, in John M. Robson, ed., *The collected works of John Stuart Mill* (33 vols., Toronto, 1963–91), XXI, p. 117; and J. A. Froude, ‘England and her colonies’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 1 (1870), pp. 1–16, at pp. 4–5.

⁴ On the peace movement, see Martin Ceadel, *The origins of war prevention: the British peace movement and international relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford, 1996); idem, *Semi-detached idealists: the British peace movement and international relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford, 2000); and Paul Laity, *The British peace movement, 1870–1914* (Oxford, 2001).

The second reason concerns the sheer mass of material produced, and the problems of identifying the scope of ‘political thought’, during the nineteenth century.⁵ Political thought was expressed not only in the traditional form of treatises, pamphlets, and articles; it was also encoded in cityscapes, encrypted in poetry, novels, and art, and conveyed in government publications and the scientific, bureaucratic, and judicial writings that pervade public cultures in modern capitalist societies. It was embedded in the emerging social sciences, in the writing of history and political economy, in newspapers, and in constructions of race, class, and gender. Imperial and international thought was likewise diffused across mediums and articulated in a variety of registers, including the creation of colonial ‘knowledge’ – anthropological, cartographic, and technological. No single appraisal can do justice to this cornucopia of material. Consequently, unqualified generalizations about ‘the political thought’ of the era, based inevitably on a fraction of the relevant array, are often misleading.

One of the main issues addressed in recent work concerns the division of the world into ‘civilized’ and ‘non-civilized’ (‘barbarian’ or ‘savage’) spheres. Levels of civilization could be assessed in relation to theology, technological superiority, ascribed racial characteristics, economic success, political institutions, individual moral and intellectual capacity, or (as was typically the case) some combination of these. Writing in the 1780s, Edmund Burke criticized ‘geographical morality’: the way in which the British were prone to apply – ‘by climate, degrees of longitude and latitude’ – different moral precepts in their conceptions of other cultures, and especially India. Their moral imagination was constricted, their sympathies limited. It was this bounded morality, Burke maintained, that underlay the frequent abuse of power that followed in the wake of empire.⁶ The notion of varied ‘spheres’ of imagination, each generating radically different sociological accounts and subject to diverse ethical claims, likewise governed much of the international and imperial thought of the nineteenth century – and, in a rather more muted form, could be said to do so today.

The Victorians were, however, far from unanimous in their conceptions of global order; there was no single imperial imaginary. The binaries were complemented, supplanted, and occasionally undermined by other attempts to classify and order the world. This often resulted from the difficulties faced incorporating liminal societies, those that fell awkwardly between the categories of civilized and barbarian. China, Japan, Russia, the Ottoman empire, the newly independent republics of Latin America, even the countries of southern Europe – all presented difficulties and generated debate. So too did Ireland. Focusing on the division between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarian’ offers important insights into the Victorian political imagination, but it needs to be complicated and enriched by accounts that recognize the intricacies and ambiguities of the intellectual and political life of the time.

In the following section, I examine recent work on ‘liberal’ political theory. Section II considers the evolution of international law. Section III argues that historians of political thought need to engage more seriously with cultural and political history, and notes some of the theoretical problems in recent debates over British national identity. Section IV highlights areas in which much work remains to be done and Section V argues that the

⁵ See the introduction to Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys, eds., *The Cambridge history of nineteenth century political thought* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

⁶ Edmund Burke, ‘Opening of impeachment’ (16 Feb. 1788), in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke* (9 vols., Oxford, 1991), vi, p. 346.

colonial empire played a greater role in Victorian political thought than is often recognized.

I

It is frequently argued that, sometime between 1810 and 1840, there occurred a perceptible shift in the manner in which the wider world – and in particular the nature of non-western societies – was envisaged.⁷ The qualified pluralism of much eighteenth-century thinking was superseded by a more judgemental, more arrogant, conception of global hierarchy. The clearest articulation of this movement is found in Jennifer Pitts's valuable account of French and British imperial thought, *A turn to empire* (2005). Pitts traces the shift between the (relatively) sympathetic pluralism of Burke, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Benjamin Constant through to the epitome of 'imperial liberalism', John Stuart Mill. Although it is potentially misleading to label Smith and Burke (and perhaps even Bentham) as 'liberals' – a term dating from a later and very different political universe⁸ – she traces this transition effectively, offering subtle interpretations of the various thinkers. James Mill plays a key transitional role in this story, as his synthesis of Scottish conjectural history and Benthamite utilitarianism – exhibited most prominently in *The history of British India* (1817) – helped transform the terms of imperial debate, and exerted a powerful influence over his son.⁹ Pitts suggests that this new stance was the result of two changes. First, theories of progress became more triumphalist and less capable of accommodating cultural difference, and this led, accordingly, to harsher normative judgements being passed on those classified as backward. Combined with a residual universalism, this provided the framework within which to evoke the civilizing mission. Secondly, imperial liberalism was driven partly by concerns about the establishment of viable liberal governments in the wake of democratic reform. This happened, Pitts argues, in two main ways, one represented by Tocqueville and the other by Mill. Tocqueville's defence of French colonialism in Algeria was premised less on *la mission civilatrice* than on the demands of national glory and the revivifying effects of colonialism on French society. Power politics and republican virtue provided the foundations for conquest. For Mill, on the other hand, portrayals of the incapacity for political responsibility of colonial subjects helped to draw the boundaries around the British political nation, allowing respectable members of the working classes (and women) to be compared favourably with, for example, Indians. The division thus performed a key role in his propagation of social reform.

Pitts's analysis, stressing some of the variations and transformations in liberal thinking, is a useful counter to the monochromatic image of liberalism painted in Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and empire* (1999). Mehta's analysis brims with intelligent comments on the philosophical anthropology of universalism, and the problems and possibilities of

⁷ See especially Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005); and Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against empire* (Princeton, 2003). On the distinction between civilized and barbarian, see also Edward Keene, *Beyond the anarchical society: Grotius, colonialism, and order in world politics* (Cambridge, 2002); Gerry Simpson, *Great powers and outlaw states: unequal sovereigns in the international legal order* (Cambridge, 2004); and Gerrit Gong, *The standard of 'civilization' in international society* (Oxford, 1984).

⁸ Raymond Geuss, 'Liberalism and its discontents', *Political Theory*, 30 (2002), pp. 320–39.

⁹ See also Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned imaginings: James Mill's 'The history of British India' and orientalism* (Oxford, 1992).

encountering difference. As an historical study of the relationship between liberalism and empire, however, it is flawed, mainly due to the scope of its claims. Despite various half-hearted qualifiers, Mehta tends to conceive of 'liberalism' as a homogeneous body of thought stretching from the seventeenth century into the present and speaking with one dominant voice.¹⁰ The only figures from this ostensible tradition examined in any detail are Locke and the Mills. Aside from the problematic assertion that Locke was a liberal, the exact relationship between his thought and nineteenth-century liberalism(s) is far from clear, and even if it were, this is an overly narrow foundation in which to anchor arguments about the relationship between liberalism and empire.

'I do not claim', Mehta writes, 'that liberalism must be imperialistic, only that the urge is internal to it.'¹¹ This 'urge' to empire – elsewhere labelled an 'impulse' – is grounded on the consequences of the universalism 'integral' to liberalism.¹² Mehta's account of the structure of John Stuart Mill's universalism is illuminating, but there is no serious discussion of whether Mill can be seen as representative of nineteenth-century liberal views, or any serious engagement with the many non-Millian liberal alternatives. The general claim about liberal 'urges' is, moreover, deeply ambiguous. If by 'urge', Mehta means that liberal thought, and not just the thought of a handful of liberals, contains within it the theoretical resources that open the way to justifying empire, then so be it. Nobody would disagree. (Virtually all political traditions contain such resources). But if he means that it makes empire inevitable, or, alternatively, that a special act of will or theoretical circumspection is required to stop liberals becoming imperialists – as the main thrust of the book seems to suggest – then this position is hard to defend, both in relation to the nineteenth century and today. Liberalism also contains plenty of other 'impulses', some of which, including a concern with the dangers of militarism and (more commonly now) with the moral equality of all, can equally lead to anti-imperialism, and have done so repeatedly. The nineteenth century was no exception to this theoretical and political variation. The liberal tradition was, and continues to be, divided on a plethora of political issues, including the status of empire. And once this is established, the problems of generalizing about the tradition from the standpoint of identifiable 'impulses' should become apparent. Such generalizations efface, indeed frequently erase, the complexity of history in much the same way as a crude variety of liberal universalism. Any adequate account of the relationship between liberalism (as a complex and divided political tradition) and empire (as a multi-faceted and mutating moral and political order) must also account for the way in which similar ontological, epistemological, and anthropological commitments can point in very different political directions, and in which those starting from dissimilar positions might end up agreeing.¹³ It must also account for the variety of non 'liberal' reasons that liberals have drawn on to defend the empire, a point largely ignored by Mehta, although stressed by Pitts. As we will see below, most liberals supported the empire, though often for different reasons, and with varying degrees of enthusiasm; a significant number did not.

¹⁰ Mehta writes, to give a typical example, that 'In the empire, one might say, liberalism had found the concrete place of its dreams' (Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought* (Chicago, 1999), p. 37).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 47, and 80.

¹³ See, for example, Duncan Bell and Casper Sylvest, 'International society in Victorian political thought: T. H. Green, Herbert Spencer, and Henry Sidgwick', *Modern Intellectual History* (forthcoming).

John Stuart Mill's views on empire, and the manner in which his career at the East India Company shaped other elements of his thought, have been the subject of much debate.¹⁴ Revealing as these analyses often are about Mill, a theme common to many is an equation of Mill's own liberal vision with liberalism more generally. This strategy is premised, implicitly if not openly, on the belief that Mill is fully representative (even exhaustive) of liberal thought at the time. This unwarranted elision can lead to inaccurate accounts of wider patterns of thought. Even Pitts, though she is more careful than Mehta, sometimes falls into this trap. In particular, she exaggerates the completeness of the rupture that she identifies. First, various prominent late eighteenth-century intellectuals were keen advocates of empire, for example William Robertson, one of the great triumvirate (with Gibbon and Hume) of late eighteenth-century historical writing.¹⁵ And secondly, nineteenth-century imperial thought was not as univocal as she imagines. By the mid-nineteenth century, Pitts writes, 'we find no prominent political thinkers in Europe questioning the justice of European empires'.¹⁶ Sankar Muthu concurs: 'By the mid-nineteenth century anti-imperialist political thinking was virtually absent from Western European intellectual debates, surfacing only rarely by way of philosophically obscure and politically marginal figures.'¹⁷ Such claims are misleading. Two counter-examples suffice. Richard Cobden, one of the leading British politicians of the century and an important influence on the development of European liberalism, was scathing about empires.¹⁸ Herbert Spencer, lauded throughout much of the nineteenth century as one of the greatest philosophers alive, was also a vitriolic critic of empire.¹⁹ Cobden and Spencer, despite their manifold differences, represent an important, though not dominant, strand in nineteenth-century liberal international thought – critical of British arrogance and aggression, worried about aristocratic privilege and the threat to domestic liberty, challenging the variety of claims made in the name of conquest. Furthermore, if we include liberals who worried less about the right to rule over other people and focused instead on poor imperial governance and potential damage to the British polity – remembering that Smith and Burke were far from unqualified in their condemnation of empire – then most Victorian radical-liberals can be seen as critics. The standard mid-Victorian liberal line was sceptical of what came to be known during the 1870s as 'imperialism', a mode of aggressive and militaristic adventurism associated traditionally with Caesarist tendencies in France, but also increasingly with

¹⁴ Aside from Pitts and Mehta, see Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford, 1994); M. I. Moir, Douglas Peers, and Lynn Zastoupil, eds., *J. S. Mill's encounter with India* (Toronto, 1999); Michael Levin, *J. S. Mill on civilization and barbarism* (London, 2004); Beate Jahn, 'Barbarian thoughts: imperialism in the philosophy of John Stuart Mill', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 599–618; and Eileen P. Sullivan, 'Liberalism and imperialism: J. S. Mill's defence of the British empire', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (1983), pp. 599–617.

¹⁵ See Stewart Brown, ed., *William Robertson and the expansion of empire* (Cambridge, 1997); and G. A. Grundy, 'An enlightened Spanish lesson: William Robertson, war and the international order' (Ph.D. dissertation, Edinburgh, 2004).

¹⁶ Pitts, *A turn to empire*, 'Introduction'.

¹⁷ Muthu, *Enlightenment against empire*, p. 5.

¹⁸ John Morley, *The life of Richard Cobden* (London, 1910 [1881]), pp. 333–4; and J. A. Hobson, *Cobden: the international man*, ed. Neville Masterman (London, 1968 [1919]), chs. 8 and 13.

¹⁹ Rom Harre, 'Positivist thought in the nineteenth century', and Ross Harrison, 'Utilitarians and idealists', both in Tom Baldwin, ed., *The Cambridge history of philosophy, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 24, 256; and Herbert Spencer, *Social statics*, in *Herbert Spencer: collected writings*, ed. Michael Taylor (12 vols., London, 1996 [1851]), III, ch. 27; and idem, *The proper sphere of government* [1843], in *The man versus the state, with six essays on government, society, and freedom* (Indianapolis, 1982), pp. 217–26.

Disraeli's Eastern policy.²⁰ Liberals often defended particular visions of the empire, but professed to hate imperialism.

Just as there was no imperial logic to liberalism, so the relationship between utilitarianism and empire is rather more ambiguous than is sometimes recognized. For many years Eric Stokes's *The English utilitarians and India* (1959) stood as the most authoritative account of this connection.²¹ Stokes painted a picture – much of which remains convincing – of the central role of Benthamite utilitarianism in justifying and administering the empire; what we might term an 'India House utilitarianism'. But the picture he drew was distorted by placing that most idiosyncratic utilitarian, James Fitzjames Stephen, on the centre of the canvas.²² While many utilitarians supported the empire – including James and John Stuart Mill, Fitzjames Stephen, and Henry Sidgwick – there was no necessary connection between the philosophy and the political project. Bentham himself was a critic of empire, as was Spencer.

Nevertheless, utilitarian principles did motivate much of the reforming ardour in India. The (mis)appropriation of Bentham's thinking by zealous imperialists highlights one of the most complicated, and least studied, issues in the history of political thought, namely the translation of the ideas of an individual thinker into practical political usage. Bentham seemed especially prone to misreading, a process highlighted also in the debates over Greek independence.²³ The reception of ideas is as significant as the intended message, and often shows how naïve it is to interpret the 'ideological work' done by particular texts without researching how those texts were actually employed.²⁴

Civilizations could be theorized in either constructivist or essentialist terms; as the products of time, chance, luck, and skill, or alternatively as the result of ingrained biological difference. The major division between conceptions of civilization was consequently between dynamism and immobility. The dynamic account, drawing initially on the historical sociology of the Scottish enlightenment and later on universalistic theories of progress, held that although the world was divided between societies at differential levels of development (moral and material) this situation was neither inevitable nor natural. All could be brought under the shield of civilization. This position was held in common by all the theorists examined by Pitts, and the movement that she traces was within a particular universalistic civilizational framework; what changed was the modulation of universalism. Proponents of static accounts, which denied the implicit moral universality of the various dynamic perspectives, stressed instead the immutable biological characteristics of race, arguing that progress amongst at least some groups (with Aboriginal Australians and Africans regularly coded as paradigmatic) was virtually impossible. Much recent work on

²⁰ Miles Taylor, 'Imperium et libertas? Rethinking the radical critique of imperialism during the nineteenth century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 19 (1991), pp. 1–23; and Peter Cain, 'Radicalism, Gladstone, and the liberal critique of Disraelian "imperialism"', in Duncan Bell, ed., 'Victorian visions of global order: empire and international relations in nineteenth-century British political thought' (unpublished collection of essays).

²¹ Eric Stokes, *The English utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

²² Frederick Rosen, 'Eric Stokes, British utilitarianism, and India', in Moir, Peers, and Zastoupil, eds., *J. S. Mill's encounter with India*, pp. 18–33. See also Georgios Varouxakis and Bart Schultz, eds., *Utilitarianism and empire* (Lanham, 2005).

²³ Frederick Rosen, *Bentham, Byron, and Greece: constitutionalism, nationalism, and early liberal political thought* (Oxford, 1992).

²⁴ Peter Mandler, 'The problem of cultural history', *Social and Cultural History*, 1 (2004), pp. 94–118; and Jonathan Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (London, 2001), pp. 1–11.

the role of race in the Victorian imagination has argued that, during the middle decades of the century, the emphasis shifted from culture to biology, from ‘polite’ to ‘scientific’ racism. This claim has, however, been subjected to some powerful criticisms, most notably by Peter Mandler, who argues that biological views of race and organic conceptions of the nation never infused British intellectual life to the degree that they did in France and Germany, and that this was partly because of the need to defend a multi-racial empire and a multi-national state.²⁵ In other words, while nobody doubts that racism was prevalent in the operation of empire, and that bigotry and ignorance permeated thinking about the world, it is less clear that the underlying theoretical assumptions about civilization, race, and society underwent a radical transformation, at least during this period. My own view is that they did not, although a distinct shift in tone can be detected, an increasingly toxic combination of hostility and defensiveness, the product of anxiety spawned by perceived imperial weakness. It was only much later in the century, and even then not to a pervasive degree, that biologically essentialist understandings of racial and cultural difference gained significant ground.

Imperial liberalism rested ultimately on an amalgam of arrogance, ignorance, misplaced idealism, and the geographical morality identified by Burke. Cheryl Welch argues that Tocqueville avoided facing the conflicting commitments of his political thought – between respecting established indigenous rights and promoting French national honour via colonialism – through moral and rhetorical evasions.²⁶ Such dissonance, such silencing of possible internal theoretical conflict, also saturated much Victorian liberal thought. The argumentative strategy of ‘comparison as vindication’, for example, was adumbrated regularly in liberal justifications of Indian occupation. Most liberals recognized that the British had acted reprehensibly at times, but instead of using such insights as the basis for a general critique of empire, frequently resorted to comparing British behaviour to other imperial powers. Seeley wrote of the ‘unjustifiable means’ by which the English pioneers acquired power, adding the equally common qualifier that their behaviour was ‘not as bad as many others’, while stressing that such ‘crimes’ as had been committed, ‘have been almost universal in colonisation’. For Charles Dilke, the British were justified in staying because if they left India would fall prey to ‘Russia or to herself’.²⁷ In simultaneously admitting and then relativizing the crimes of the British, the uncomfortable tensions at the heart of liberal imperialism were exposed. Another widespread approach to squaring the circle was to invoke the notion of duty, that foundation stone of Victorian morality. While acknowledging past injustice, the British nevertheless had a duty to the indigenous population: an obligation to stay. Speaking in 1900 about British obligations to India, the idealist philosopher J. H. Muirhead argued that, ‘To repudiate its responsibilities, to retire from tasks it has undertaken, however thoughtlessly at the time, is the poorest sort of corporate repentance. In the case of an empire like ours this would be a crime outweighing all we have committed in creating

²⁵ Peter Mandler, ‘“Race” and “nation” in mid-Victorian thought’, in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young, eds., *History, religion, and culture: British intellectual history, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 224–45; see also Stuart Jones, ‘The national in Victorian political thought’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming, 2006).

²⁶ Cheryl Welch, ‘Colonial violence and the rhetoric of evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria’, *Political Theory*, 31 (2003), pp. 235–64.

²⁷ J. R. Seeley, ‘Our insular ignorance’, *The Nineteenth Century*, 18 (1885), pp. 135–6; Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain* (2 vols., London, 1868), II, p. 383.

it.²⁸ During the last thirty years of the century, enthusiasm for the civilizing mission waned. Although it did not disappear, its fervour (witnessed especially in the 1830s and 1840s) was diluted by the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 and the Eyre controversy during the 1860s.²⁹ But duty, it was argued, compelled the British to remain in India, to accomplish the mission, and to uphold the honour of queen and country. In doing so, many imperial liberals argued, Britain itself would be ennobled, the character of its people tested and re-affirmed, and India would be kept stable and propelled gradually into the future. Combined with the retroactive argument that past injustices could, in some sense, be ameliorated by present and future successes, this type of strategy helped imperial liberals to deflect potential inconsistencies in their positions.

II

Lawyers played an important role in the world of the Victorian public moralists. The formative role of jurisprudence in shaping international and imperial thought was likewise pronounced. First, law both reflected and prescribed the division of the world into separate spheres, thus codifying a hierarchical world order. Secondly, parts of the empire, and India in particular, acted as laboratories of legislation, as experimental spaces in which to enact reform. Thirdly, conceptions of law, and in particular of jurisprudential universality, were modified, if not entirely transformed, by the colonial encounter. And, finally, international law, as its proponents and practitioners debated the rights of occupation and conquest, was inflected by the strategic concerns of the imperial powers.³⁰

Martti Koskenniemi's magisterial *The gentle civilizer of nations* (2001) charts the nineteenth-century emergence and evolution of a liberal internationalist legal 'sensitivity', a combination of ideas and practices, all underpinned by political faith and shaped by practical constraints. This ideology was distinctive 'not only for its reformist political bent', but also because of its 'conviction that international reform could be derived from deep insights about society, history, human nature or developmental laws of an international and institutional modernity'.³¹ Koskenniemi convincingly argues that a radical break occurred in legal argument between the early nineteenth century and the period between 1869 and 1885. The emergent view of law was not anchored in the highly abstract understandings of natural law that had attracted earlier generations, stressing instead the socially embedded and ever-evolving character of legal systems. Methodologically, it focused more on cultural and historical analysis than on *a priori* reasoning. Although there were national variations, most of this generation of international lawyers claimed that the law was 'rooted in the actual histories of peoples and nations'. Its essence, however, was universal: 'national laws were but aspects or stages of the universal development of human society'. The 'founding conception' of late nineteenth-century international law, he writes, 'was not sovereignty but a collective (European) *conscience* – understood always as ambivalently either consciousness or conscience, that is, in alternatively rationalistic or ethical ways ... Even in the absence of a common sovereign, Europe was a political society and international law an

²⁸ J. H. Muirhead, 'What imperialism means' (1900), in David Boucher, ed., *The British idealists* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 246.

²⁹ Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of empire* (forthcoming, Princeton, 2006).

³⁰ Karma Nabulsi, *Traditions of war: occupation, resistance, and the law* (Oxford, 1999).

³¹ Martti Koskenniemi, *The gentle civilizer of nations: the rise and fall of international law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 3.

inextricable part of its organization.³² This vision animated the lawyers who established the *Institut de droit international* in 1873 and lasted until the Second World War, from which it never fully recovered.

The lawyers were almost overwhelmingly liberal and reformist. Interested in expanding the scope of legally binding norms, entrenching international arbitration as a dispute settlement mechanism, and pursuing stability, co-operation, and progress, they regarded themselves as a vanguard – a clerisy – that could influence the international affairs of the present and the future. They were no straightforward defenders of the status quo, nor of the state; their credo was not the slavish worship of Austinian sovereignty, but a ‘*critique of sovereignty*’.³³ They tended to combine ‘moderate’ nationalism with internationalism – as such, they mirrored the dominant liberal sensibility of the period, striking an uneasy balance between particularism and universalism.³⁴ Their accounts of the scope of law also tended to be structured by the geographical morality characteristic of the age. International law was, as such, bound up intimately with the justification of empire, a topic that Koskenniemi illuminates brilliantly. The boundaries of the civilized world – and thus the meaning of civilization itself – were under constant discussion. Much of this debate focused on relations with China and Japan which, to some, appeared capable of engaging with western societies on a basis of legal (if not quite moral) equality and which, to others, fell foul of the civilizational stipulation.³⁵ But the law could also be used to challenge the behaviour of imperial powers. F. W. Newman, brother of the eponymous Cardinal, argued that the Indian states should be treated as independent entities subject to international law and that consequently the annexationist policies of Dalhousie were illegal.³⁶

The gentle civilizer of nations provides a superb account of the evolution of international law during this period. Yet despite his frequent references to the mid-nineteenth century as ‘Victorian’, Koskenniemi focuses primarily on developments in France and Germany and his analysis of British legal thought is patchy. Casper Sylvest has partly filled this gap. Focusing on the foundations of international law and the liberal ideology with which it was infused, he effectively revises the standard account that describes in teleological fashion the gradual, but inexorable, defeat of natural law by positivism.³⁷ Sylvest shows how the implied linear progression, whilst perhaps adequate as an abstract generalization about long-term trends, occludes as much as it illuminates. Naturalism was never fully supplanted, and indeed positivism and naturalistic understandings of morality co-existed – sometimes comfortably, sometimes in tension – within British international law well into the twentieth century. He divides British legal thinking into three periods: between 1835 and 1855, when international law began to emerge as a self-contained subfield, albeit one that anchored jurisprudence in theology; between 1855 and 1870, when

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 51. Italics in original.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 4. Italics in original.

³⁴ Duncan Bell, ‘Unity and difference: J. R. Seeley and the political theology of international relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), pp. 559–79; H. S. Jones, ‘The idea of the national in Victorian political thought’, and Georgios Varouxakis, ‘“Patriotism”, “cosmopolitanism” and “humanity” in Victorian political thought’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming, 2006).

³⁵ Jennifer Pitts, ‘The boundaries of Victorian international law’, in Bell, ed., ‘Victorian visions’.

³⁶ F. W. Newman, ‘Indian annexations: British treatment of native princes’, *Westminster Review*, 23 (1863), pp. 115–57; and Pitts, ‘Boundaries of Victorian international law’.

³⁷ Casper Sylvest, ‘International law in nineteenth-century Britain’, *British Yearbook of International Law* (Oxford, 2005); and *idem*, ‘The foundations of Victorian international law’, in Bell, ed., ‘Victorian visions’.

its practitioners became increasingly confident and institutionalized, and when secular arguments began to displace theology; and after 1870, when the role of evolutionary theories (yoked to the idea of civilization) provided authoritative new foundations for legal reasoning. Throughout the century, British lawyers (more so than their continental counterparts) battled the ‘spectre of Austin’, the argument by the Benthamite theorist – later re-iterated by John Stuart Mill – that ‘laws properly so called’ rested on a command theory of sovereignty, requiring a determinate source, and that international law was merely a tissue of custom and convention, a moral rule not a law.³⁸ The ultimate resolution to this problem, argues Sylvest, was to be found in the idea of legal evolution, which ‘obtained a standing in international legal argument that was not far removed from that formerly occupied by “natural law”’.³⁹

The law, however, was not simply an expression of the desire to pacify the relations between civilized states or to justify the expansion and rationalize the administration of empire; it was one of the key justifications for occupation. It was the beneficent gift of the civilized. As Sandra den Otter writes, by the middle of the century ‘legal reform had become one of the legitimating myths of British imperial policy’.⁴⁰ Many imperial reformers set about trying to rationalize the Indian legal system, their efforts peaking in the 1830s and 1840s and in the 1860s and 1870s, usually with damaging consequences. The universal claims of the reformers were, however, continuously challenged and undermined by the practical difficulties of implementing change. ‘While some colonial administrators and legal reformers might look to India as a laboratory in which all sorts of legal experiments could be tried, the political reality was very different’.⁴¹ Maine once reflected that, in the light of experience, the scholar of India ‘revises’ his ‘political maxims’ and ‘admits that they may be qualified under the influence of circumstance and time’.⁴² Such experience heightened his appreciation of the cultural specificity of jurisprudential systems, fed his criticisms of utilitarian universality, and underpinned the development of his ‘comparative method’, a mode of thinking that required, he argued, knowledge of two key areas, Roman law and Indian society.⁴³ Given how influential the comparative method was in the late Victorian era, the indirect impact of India on the shape of British intellectual life was considerable. In terms of the intellectual apparatus of empire, moreover, such thinking provided the foundations for increasingly popular ideas of ‘indirect rule’ and ‘trusteeship’, notions that were to dominate much British imperial thought and practice in the early twentieth century, and which are resurfacing again today.⁴⁴

³⁸ John Austin, *The province of jurisprudence determined*, ed. W. E. Rumble (Cambridge, 1995 [1832]), pp. 123, 171; John Stuart Mill, ‘Austin on jurisprudence’ (1863), in Robinson, ed., *Collected works*, XXI, pp. 165–207. ³⁹ Sylvest, ‘The foundations of Victorian international law’.

⁴⁰ Sandra Den Otter, ‘Rewriting the utilitarian market: colonial law and custom in mid-nineteenth-century British India’, *The European Legacy*, 6 (2001), pp. 177–89 at p. 179.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴² Henry Maine, *Village-communities of the East and West* (London, 1881), p. 206; and James Fitzjames Stephens, *Liberty, equality, fraternity* (Indianapolis, 1993 [1874]), p. xxix.

⁴³ Maine, *Village-communities*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Karuna Mantena, ‘“Law and tradition”: Henry Maine and the theoretical origins of indirect rule’, in Andrew Lewis and Michael Lobban, eds., *Law and history* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 159–88; and William Bain, *Between anarchy and society: trusteeship and the obligations of power* (Oxford, 2003).

III

Historians of political thought rarely address the degree to which the ideas of the thinkers they study either reflected more widely held views in society, or indeed influenced attitudes in general. Theories can, of course, be studied for their own intellectual value, either historical or theoretical or both, but there is a frequent tendency – especially, it seems, when talking about empire – to move quickly from claims about individual thinkers to claims about the wider culture, or simply to assume that the imperialism of various political theorists mirrored (or shaped) the imperialism prevalent elsewhere. ‘It is hard to imagine any feature of British political, social, and economic, and cultural life, except perhaps the purely municipal, not being somehow affected by this grand predicament.’⁴⁵ What does it mean to be ‘affected’ by empire? In attempting to grapple with such questions, the history of political thought meets political and cultural history, and it is important for intellectual historians to recognize that there exists considerable disagreement over the extent to which the empire influenced British culture.

The empire evidently affected individuals to the degree that it structured the national economy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was widely understood that international commerce set the economic conditions of national life.⁴⁶ Britain was enmeshed in a global imperial system; in this sense, Victorian society was undoubtedly imperial. Yet most people would have been unaware of the extent to which their fate depended on this complex amalgam of factors. Indeed one of the main differences between past and present manifestations of globalization is the degree to which society is penetrated by an understanding (however vague) of the ways in which individual lives are shaped by global dynamics. The history of globalization is as much about the history of shifting patterns of social cognition as it is of the organization of the world economic system.

It is not clear, however, that socio-economic conditions translate directly into claims about individual and collective identity. Was British culture imperial? This is a question that has come to dominate much of the historiography of the British empire, generating a plethora of competing answers. Yet the conceptual multi-valency and general vagueness of the term ‘identity’ (and indeed ‘culture’) distorts much of the debate.⁴⁷ At one end of the spectrum lie post-colonial writers such as Antoinette Burton, Catherine Hall, and the late Edward Said.⁴⁸ British culture, they argue, was saturated with, and structured by, imperial themes and representations, and national identity was consequently imperial. Although starting from a (very) different theoretical standpoint, John Mackenzie and the ‘Manchester school’ argue that imperialism was a ‘core’ Victorian ideology.⁴⁹ At the other end of the spectrum lie assorted political historians, most forcefully Bernard Porter, who in *The absent-minded imperialists* (2004) launched a full broadside at such arguments. Most

⁴⁵ Mehta, *Liberalism and empire*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of trade: international competition and the nation-state in historical context* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

⁴⁷ On problems and ambiguities, see Philip Gleason, ‘Identifying identity: a semantic history’, *Journal of American History*, 69 (1983), pp. 910–31; and Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, ‘Beyond identity’, *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), pp. 1–47.

⁴⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London, 1993); Catherine Hall, *Civilising subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge, 2002); Antoinette Burton, ‘Introduction’, to idem, ed., *After the imperial turn: thinking with and through the nation* (Durham, NC, 2004).

⁴⁹ John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and empire: the shaping of British public opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984); see also Krishan Kumar, *The making of English national identity* (Cambridge, 2003).

British people, most of the time, he argues, were either ignorant about or uninterested in the empire; it did not have a major impact on British society.⁵⁰ It was largely the preserve of sections of the governing elite, and especially the aristocracy, the military, and big business who often thought it necessary to keep the ‘masses’ in ignorance.⁵¹ The dispute between proponents of the two contrasting positions is often acrimonious, charged with the white heat of contemporary politics.

I have neither the space nor the expertise to offer a comprehensive response to the questions raised in this clash. Three points are worth noting, however. First, historians of political thought should not simply assume that Victorian society was infused with an imperial spirit. Secondly, accounts of the dynamics of ‘othering’, so central to the debate, need to be treated with caution. Whilst self/other relations are constituted by ontological difference – for the self cannot be conceived without differentiation from what it is not – it does not follow, either in theory or practice, that the behavioural or attitudinal manifestations of this relationship will lead automatically to derogatory ‘othering’. It may well do, and it frequently has done, but this is not necessarily so, and the degree to which it does depends on a series of other contingent historical factors that require careful elucidation and causal exposition.⁵² Finally, the gap between the two apparently antithetical positions is often exaggerated. The divide is frequently (thought certainly not always) rooted in competing understandings of ‘identity’. Arguments about the lack of an imperial national identity set the bar very high, demanding that in order to classify an identity as imperial there has to exist pervasive and explicit (hence empirically demonstrable) support for the empire. Arguments about the imperialism of British culture tend to be based on far less stringent criteria, and thus on a different account of identity construction. Here a collective identity is regarded as imperial if the material and discursive contexts in which people are embedded are permeated with imperial themes and imagery. In such a society, individuals cannot easily escape being imperial – they are inflected, inscribed, interpellated, constituted, by the imperial encounter. Both accounts, though sometimes illuminating, are problematic. The former eschews the role of the empire in shaping non-measurable, sometimes subconscious, perceptions and understandings of self and world. The latter is based on a set of generalizations that are often unwarranted, and, as Porter highlights, often mines a shallow evidentiary seam.

Identity constitution is rarely straightforward, and in particular the relationship between individual and collective identities is especially opaque. Too often, historians of imperial thought generalize from the individual to the collective (and sometimes vice versa) without adequate argument. Yet the links between self and society are far from transparent. I live in a (British) culture in which football is ever-present; it pervades the representational structure of society to a far greater extent than the empire did in the nineteenth century (even if only because of the increased power of the media). This may or may not say something important about British national identity – the answer to this is dependent, once again, on the understanding of identity being employed. But what does it say about my individual identity, and what can we learn from this about the relationship between part and whole? Although I like playing football in the park and sometimes watch football matches on

⁵⁰ Bernard Porter, *The absent-minded imperialists: empire, society, and culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 9. See also Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working class*.

⁵² Bahar Rumelili, ‘Constructing identity and relating to difference: understanding the EU’s mode of differentiation’, *Review of International Studies*, 30 (2004), pp. 27–47; and Arash Abizadeh, ‘Does collective identity presuppose an other?’, *American Political Science Review*, 99 (2005), pp. 45–60.

television, I have no serious interest in, or commitment to, the sport. If it were suddenly to disappear, my life, my sense of self, and the way in which people interpret me as (in Charles Taylor's formulation) a hermeneutic actor, would not change.⁵³ On a weak account, my identity is partly constituted by football, both because of my occasional interest and participation in certain practices, and (more importantly) because of the system of representations in which I am embedded. A future historian, leafing through my (hypothetical) diary might well infer from the entries that football was a significant aspect of my identity.⁵⁴ In contrast, on a less permissive account of identity, football plays no constitutive role, and can be considered epiphenomenal. The same ambiguity plagues much of the debate over imperial identities. As Richard Drayton observes there 'is an endemic problem in the study of how imperialism shaped metropolitan culture: it is easy, for example, to identify racist imagery in soap advertising but much more difficult to know what people thought as they washed their hands with the unwrapped bar'.⁵⁵ Historians are prone to leap from one to the other. This is a danger that intellectual historians of the empire should try and avoid.

IV

Much of the recent scholarship on Victorian Britain has focused on liberalism and the bifurcation of the world into civilized and non-civilized spheres. There were, however, numerous other ways in which the world was imagined, and it is on these alternative conceptions – sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting – that much more work needs to be done. The division between 'great powers' and the rest, for example, was a fundamental structuring device. As Gerry Simpson argues, this division has been a constant over the last three centuries, although the actual states classified as 'great' have alternated, as has the way in which hierarchy is institutionalized – in the nineteenth century it was through the operation of the Vienna Congress, today it resides in the veto power of the UN Security Council. Great powers have taken it upon themselves to police the international order, assuming the 'key prerogative' that they are entitled to intervene in other states to uphold certain values (whether peace, stability, humanity, or progress).⁵⁶

A key component of any comprehensive account of Victorian attitudes towards the world should place political economy – both in its technical and popular senses – centre stage, and in particular it must explain the prevalence of and challenges to the variety of free trading ideologies that dominated British conceptions of economic and social order.⁵⁷ Peter Cain's *Hobson and imperialism* (2002) provides a compelling interpretation of the

⁵³ Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the sciences of man', in idem, *Philosophy and the human sciences: philosophical papers* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1985), 1, pp. 15–57.

⁵⁴ This would be even more pronounced if they picked a period in which, say, the World Cup was being shown on television.

⁵⁵ Richard Drayton, 'Putting the British into the empire', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 187–94, at p. 191.

⁵⁶ Simpson, *Great powers and outlaw states*, p. 5. See also Georgios Varouxakis, "'Great" versus "small" nations in Victorian political thought', in Bell, ed., 'Victorian visions'.

⁵⁷ Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988); Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997); E. H. H. Green, *The crisis of conservatism: the politics, economics, and ideology of the Conservative party, 1880–1914* (London, 1995); and idem, *Ideologies of conservatism* (Oxford, 2002), chs. 1 and 2.

imperial vision of the empire's most famous anatomist.⁵⁸ Hobson began his career as a 'free trade imperialist', and was only gradually converted into a trenchant critic – though he remained a supporter of settler colonization. He was radicalized in the mid-1890s, appalled by the behaviour of Cecil Rhodes, and influenced by Ruskin, the Fabians, and his involvement with the Rainbow Circle. Cain provides an insightful analysis of Hobson's economic theorizing, the inconsistencies in his writings (particularly in relation to the benefits of free trade), and also in the continuity between his new liberalism and long extant radical criticisms of imperialism. Arguing that he drew heavily on Spencer's distinction between 'militant' and 'industrial' societies, Cain writes that Hobson's 'innovations were ... an attempt to bring up to date Spencer's analysis of militarism as a causal factor in imperialism by incorporating the role of finance more firmly into the sources of unearned income upon which militancy was supposedly based'. Hobson provided perhaps the most powerful exposition of the constellation of economic and moral ideas associated with the anti-imperial strand of liberalism, though he was not as radical as either Spencer or Cobden, believing that Europeans had a (limited) part to play in bringing civilization to Africa.⁵⁹

Three other gaps in coverage are noteworthy: non-liberal political thought; theological visions of the globe; and the impact of Europe. Liberalism continues to sweep the field, to the detriment of a more nuanced understanding of the tapestry of political thought.⁶⁰ The lack of a comprehensive contextualist account of Marx's vision of empire and international relations is especially striking. A further gap lies in assessing the impact of theology on conceptions of global order. As Boyd Hilton has demonstrated, theology, and especially evangelicalism, was elemental in shaping social and economic thought in the first half of the century. Catherine Hall, meanwhile, has illustrated the power of the missionary Baptist sensibility in shaping certain aspects of municipal political culture, and in campaigning for slave emancipation (in order to turn ex-slaves into good Christians) in the West Indies.⁶¹ As yet, though, we lack a broad analysis of the impact of theology on Victorian conceptions of world politics. Focusing on the empire has also occluded the role that Europe (or certain European countries) played in shaping Victorian political thought. It is certainly arguable that for many people, developments on the continent – and across the Atlantic – were of more interest than those in the empire.⁶² Moreover, the role of British thinking, especially over free trade and global commerce, in shaping European liberalism(s) was pronounced. Analyses of Europe can be usefully supplemented by exploring the role of European ideas in the non-western world, and of the complex patterns of circulation, translation, and assimilation. As Chris Bayly argues, very little scholarship exists on what he labels 'trans-cultural hermeneutics' – the systematic contextualist analysis of the dissemination, adoption, and adaptation of western political thought in non-western societies, the way

⁵⁸ Peter Cain, *Hobson and imperialism: radicalism, new liberalism, and finance, 1887–1938* (Oxford, 2002).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 162.

⁶⁰ Exceptions include Michael Bentley, *Lord Salisbury's world: conservative environments in late-Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2001), ch. 8; Green, *The crisis of conservatism*; and Mark Bevir, 'In opposition to the Raj: Annie Besant and the dialectics of empire', *History of Political Thought*, 19 (1998), pp. 61–77.

⁶¹ Hall, *Civilising subjects*; and Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004).

⁶² Murney Gerlach, *British liberalism and the United States: political and social thought in the late Victorian age* (Basingstoke, 2001); Georgios Varouxakis, *Victorian political theory on France and the French* (London, 2002); and J. P. Parry, *The politics of patriotism: English liberalism, national identity, and Europe, 1830–1886* (forthcoming, Cambridge, 2006).

such ideas ‘bond’ with and re-shape local intellectual traditions, and the reciprocal impact of non-western thinking on the development of western intellectual traditions.⁶³ This presents a major challenge, and a great opportunity, for future scholarship.

V

Two related problems in much of the recent work on the empire have served to paint a distorted picture of Victorian political thought. The first is the failure to distinguish adequately between the different elements of the empire, or to generalize from one element (usually India) to the imperial experience as a whole. To talk of ‘the empire’ is often deceptive; for many contemporaries there existed multiple empires – in India, in Africa, in the West Indies, and the settler colonies – which were viewed through different moral and sociological lenses. The second is a failure to appreciate the importance of the colonial empire – the states we know now as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and, more ambiguously, South Africa – in the Victorian political imagination.⁶⁴ J. A. Froude, author of the best-selling *Oceana* (1886), was not alone in his belief that the ‘colonies are infinitely more important to us than even India – it is because the entire future of the English Empire depends on our availing ourselves of the opportunities which those dependencies offer to us’.⁶⁵ This is not to suggest that the colonies played a more important part than India across the political and intellectual spectrum, but rather that their importance at various points in time, and for certain prominent groups of thinkers, has not been fully appreciated. By the late nineteenth century much of the enthusiasm for civilizing the world was transmuted into a concern with the future of the settler colonies, their inhabitants regarded as British not alien, their institutions, laws, and *mores* all comfortingly familiar. The colonies became spaces for moral regeneration and political desire; sites for the projection of imperial zeal.

During the first half of the century, the colonial empire expanded considerably in size and economic power. This provoked a corresponding increase in interest in colonial affairs by those concerned about the lack of attention paid to the burgeoning territories. The most prominent voices – or at least those who shouted loudest – belonged to the ‘colonial reform movement’ of the 1830s and 1840s, a movement that was influenced heavily by philosophic radicalism but which spanned the political spectrum. Challenging the view that the colonies were economically wasteful, populated largely by criminals and rogue adventurers, and useful only for ‘shovelling out paupers’ and providing jobs for minor aristocrats, they contended that colonization was an important national responsibility, beneficial both in terms of maintaining geopolitical power and as an essential component of the British socio-economic system.⁶⁶ Drawing in particular on the theoretical writings of

⁶³ C. A. Bayly, ‘European political thought and the wider world during the nineteenth century’, in Stedman Jones and Claeys, eds., *The Cambridge history of nineteenth century political thought*.

⁶⁴ The importance is recognized by political and economic historians: G. R. Searle, *A new England? Peace and war, 1886–1918* (Oxford, 2004); P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British imperialism, 1688–2000* (2nd edn, London, 2002); and Andrew Thompson, *Imperial Britain: the empire in British politics, c. 1880–1932* (London, 2000). See also E. H. H. Green, ‘The political economy of empire, 1880–1914’, in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire* (5 vols., Oxford, 1999), III, pp. 346–68.

⁶⁵ J. A. Froude, ‘England’s war’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 3 (1871), pp. 135–50 at p. 144.

⁶⁶ For sceptical remarks about their influence and originality, see A. G. L. Shaw, ‘British attitudes to the colonies, ca. 1820–1850’, *Journal of British Studies*, 9 (1969), pp. 71–95.

Edward Gibbon Wakefield, and especially his ideas about the sale and allocation of land, the colonies were reconceived as spaces for the investment of capital and the development of productive economies populated by resourceful, respectable colonists.⁶⁷ (Wakefield acted as the main foil for Marx's discussion of colonization in *Das Kapital* and he also influenced Mill's discussion of colonialism in the *Principles of political economy*).⁶⁸

By the 1860s most of the settlement colonies were ruled under the auspices of 'responsible government', and it was commonly held that sooner or later, for better or worse, they would become independent. The argument that the colonial empire was heading inexorably to dissolution provoked a flurry of rejoinders, and the last three decades of the century saw numerous attempts to underline the importance of the colonies. This vision was expressed most forcefully in the notion of 'Greater Britain' – a term popularized by Charles Dilke – and the enumeration of vague ideas about the necessity of 'imperial federation'.⁶⁹ Imperial federalists, including Seeley, Froude, W. E. Forster, James Bryce, Joseph Chamberlain, and even Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse, envisaged some form of alliance between the 'white' colonies and the 'mother country', ranging from closer informal relations through loose confederal arrangements all the way to an integrated global polity.⁷⁰ The result would be a global Greater Britain, ruling an empire (primarily in India and Africa) and acting, in the most ambitious visions, as a single state. This extravagant idea was underpinned by a perception – catalysed by developments in communications technology – that the world was simultaneously shrinking and accelerating. In this turbulent global environment physical scale was essential to preserving power.⁷¹ This argument was a precursor of the geopolitical writings of Halford Mackinder and his followers. Even many of the critics of formal federation, such as Dilke, Goldwin Smith, and E. A. Freeman, supported the idea of a Greater British political community; they dissented, however, from erecting the political machinery (whether a new imperial parliamentary chamber, a written constitution, or a *zollverein*) that many federalists deemed necessary.

The re-discovery of the importance of the colonies was due to a combination of two interwoven factors: fear about increasing international competition, both economic and geopolitical, and anxiety about the potentially deleterious consequences of democratic reform. Miles Taylor has argued that the existence of the colonial empire was of great importance in underwriting British political stability during the first half of the

⁶⁷ E. G. Wakefield, 'Outline of a system of colonization' (1829), in M. F. Lloyd Prichard, ed., *The collected works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield* (Glasgow, 1968), pp. 178–87; and John Stuart Mill, *Principles of political economy*, ed. Jonathan Riley (Oxford, 1994 [1848]). See also Bernard Semmel, *The rise of free trade imperialism: classical political economy, the empire of free trade and imperialism, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1970), chs. 4 and 5; and Donald Winch, *Classical political economy and colonies* (Cambridge, 1965), chs. 5 to 10.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital, a critical analysis of capitalist production*, 1 (Moscow, 1954 [1887]), ch. 33. See also H. O. Pappe, 'Wakefield and Marx', *Economic History Review*, 4 (1951), pp. 88–97.

⁶⁹ Duncan Bell, *Building greater Britain: empire, ideology, and the future of world order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, forthcoming); Michael Burgess, *The British tradition of federalism* (Leicester, 1995); J. E. Kendle, *Federal Britain* (London, 1997), ch. 3; and Ged Martin, 'Empire federalism and imperial parliamentary union, 1820–1870', *Historical Journal*, 16 (1973), pp. 65–92.

⁷⁰ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a study*, ed. Philip Siegelman (Ann Arbor, 1997 [1902]), p. 332; and L. T. Hobhouse, *Democracy and reaction*, ed. Peter Clarke (Brighton, 1972 [1904]), pp. 153–4. Both later changed their views on this issue.

⁷¹ Duncan Bell, 'Dissolving distance: technology, space, and empire in British political thought, 1860–1900', *Journal of Modern History*, 77 (2005), pp. 523–63.

century.⁷² This lesson was not forgotten. Not only did Britain need to compete against the economically dynamic post-civil war United States, the emergent German state, and the Russian empire, it also had to absorb the possible rise of 'socialism' in the wake of franchise extension. Given the prevailing environmental conception of character formation, a programme of systematic emigration to the colonies would both strengthen them and diffuse potential disaster in the imperial metropole, creating in the process a new breed of rugged imperial patriots. While Pitts is correct to stress the way in which a comparative framework helped to draw the boundaries of the British political nation, the colonies also offered a much more direct and sweeping response to democratic anxiety. It is only with an understanding of the importance of the colonies, and with a picture of the multiple conceptions of global order prevalent during the era, that a comprehensive account of Victorian imperial and international thought will emerge.

In conclusion, recent scholarship has deepened awareness of the way in which Victorian thinkers constructed boundaries, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion, legitimating and perpetuating global hierarchy. This complements the mass of excellent scholarship on the period by social, political, economic, and imperial historians.⁷³ But it is only the beginning. To adapt a metaphor from a discipline connected intimately with imperialism, we are in the early stages of an archaeological dig. The site has been cleared, the initial excavation begun, and the contours of the target are increasingly clear. Much, though, lies buried beneath the sands.

⁷² Miles Taylor, 'The 1848 revolutions and the British empire', *Past and Present*, 166 (2000), pp. 146–80.

⁷³ Philip Harling, 'Equipoise regained? Recent trends in British political history', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), pp. 890–918. On the compatibility between 'high' political history and post-linguistic turn approaches, see Susan Pedersen, 'What is political history now?', in David Cannadine, ed., *What is history now?* (London, 2002), pp. 36–57.