

Liberal Anti-Imperialism

Some notes on the tradition of classical liberal opposition to colonialism, imperialism, and empire

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I don't have a background in imperialism etc., except that I have a background in classical liberal thought and movements. I put these notes together because I have lately participated in a discussion of imperialism. I am very much inclined to think that military endeavors abroad and nation building are wrongheaded, though I am ready to admit that something at least akin to imperialism at least arguably "worked" in a few cases like West Germany, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea.

I'm beginning to see that something very unfortunate is going on. The best and the brightest, the good and the great—academics and other smart people—are writing about how tutelary institutions run by smart folk like them can do so much good for unstable and chaotic societies, and they are giving short shrift to the harm that comes from these endeavors.

In particular, I get the feeling that best and brightest elide the strong case against imperialism; the elision is accomplished by acknowledging *only anti-imperialism from the left*. The leftist tradition is fatally flawed because—it is leftist. In particular, it sees imperialism as an outgrowth of capitalism. The leftists generally say the way to end the evils of imperialism is to end or dilute capitalism. This line against imperialism is easily defeated.

As an illustration of what I mean, read this excerpt from an email message by my good friend [Stephen Davies](#), a classical liberal historian at Manchester Metropolitan University:

There's a column in the (London) *Independent* today [I think that would be 7 Je 04] by Yasmin Alibhai Brown relating how she took part in a debate with Ferguson and a couple of other empire fans. Sadly, she reckons her side lost. The problem is that social democratic and socialist critics do not have persuasive arguments - their strongest arguments are actually liberal ones, which they don't develop fully. Above all they are crippled by their assumption that imperialism is somehow an outgrowth of capitalism, a basically flawed argument that makes them easy meat for folks like Ferguson.

The best and brightest should acknowledge and engage the classical liberal criticism of imperialism. It is bad scholarship to elide the classical liberal tradition while making a favorable case for imperialism.

A second impetus to writing up these notes is to share them with classical liberals in Sweden. I find that they tend to be a bit soft on foreign policy. In my judgment, they are generally much too supportive of US military action. My guess is that this flows from several things: (1) some kind of (misguided) shame over Sweden not pitching in against the Nazis; (2) not being adequately sensible to the pernicious consequences of war and imperialism on domestic political discourse and policy; (3) not being adequately sensible to the tax burden and blowback hazards of US foreign policy (which fall on Americans, not Swedes); AND MOST OF ALL (4) reacting somewhat knee-jerk against the usual leftwing intellectual and political opponents who oppose “American” culture and viscerally oppose US foreign policy.

My background in these matters is nonexistent, but I draw on friends (Davies, especially, but also Jeff Hummel and a few others) whose knowledge is deeper. This set of notes is written up just for my own benefit, and will seem amateurish to people with a serious knowledge of liberal anti-imperialism.

To people without much background in liberal anti-imperialism, these notes might provide some touchstones.

Comments welcome.

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Adam Smith favored relinquishing the colonies (America, West Indies). He also opposed the monopoly trading privileges given to the East India Company.

Here is great passage where Smith asserts the desirable notwithstanding the politically likely. This important passage carries the spirit of later champions of radical thinking like Hutt, Hayek, and Philbrook (not to mention William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglas), who emphasized that what will be politically possible tomorrow depends on the moral courage today to explore and articulate the desirable:

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, [B.IV, Ch.7, Of Colonies](#) (p. 581-82 of the Mod. Lib edition, p. 616-17 of the Glasgow/LF edition):

To propose that Great Britain should voluntarily give up all authority over her colonies, and leave them to elect their own magistrates, to enact their own laws, and to make peace and war as they might think proper, would be to propose such a measure as never was, and never will be adopted, by any nation in the world. No nation ever voluntarily gave up the dominion of any province, how troublesome

soever it might be to govern it, and how small soever the revenue which it afforded might be in proportion to the expence which it occasioned. Such sacrifices, though they might frequently be agreeable to the interest, are always mortifying to the pride of every nation, and what is perhaps of still greater consequence, they are always contrary to the private interest of the governing part of it, who would thereby be deprived of the disposal of many places of trust and profit, of many opportunities of acquiring wealth and distinction, which the possession of the most turbulent, and, to the great body of the people, the most unprofitable province seldom fails to afford. The most visionary enthusiast would scarce be capable of proposing such a measure with any serious hopes at least of its ever being adopted. If it was adopted, however, Great Britain would not only be immediately freed from the whole annual expence of the peace establishment of the colonies, but might settle with them such a treaty of commerce as would effectually secure to her a free trade, more advantageous to the great body of the people, though less so to the merchants, than the monopoly which she at present enjoys. By thus parting good friends, the natural affection of the colonies to the mother country which, perhaps, our late dissensions have well nigh extinguished, would quickly revive.

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From George Washington's Farwell Address, 1796:

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?

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Edmund Silberner, *The Problem of War in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought* (Princeton UP, 1946). Shows that liberals generally opposed militarism, that protectionists were more favorable to militarism, and that most socialists opposed militarism but thought it was caused by property relations. Not much specifically on colonies and empire, but pp. 43-45 on Bentham and James Mill shows they favored Smith's view of relinquishing the American colonies, and p. 86 that Say had similar views. My understanding from elsewhere is that James Mill favored the British acting paternalistically in India. Of course, he and his son John were life-long employees of the East India Company.

For remarks on 19th British liberalism and anti-imperialism, see Steve Davies message appended below.

Herbert Spencer, "Imperialism and Slavery," "Re-Barbarization," in *Facts and Comments* (1902). Spencer's treatment of imperialism is part of his general theory of voluntarism/industrialism v. political/exploitive society, and he sees imperialism as a

reversion to barbarism/political society. (The voluntary industrialism v. coercive political society distinction comes from Dunoyer and Comte, who are noted in Silberman pp. 83-85.) Spencer highlights the affinity between imperialism and racism and slavery, which appears prophetically in Sumner, who anticipated that US imperialism would intensify what we know as Jim Crow.

Grover Cleveland, in deed and written word, was a champion of anti-imperialism. There is a good short introduction to Grover Cleveland's anti-imperialist foreign policy in Robert Kelley, *The Transatlantic Persuasion* (Knopf 1969, reprinted Transaction, 1990, 2nd ed) pp 342-345. An important classical liberal survey is Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr. *The Civilian and the Military: A History of the American Antimilitarist Tradition* (Oxford UP, 1956).

A classic essay against US imperialism is William Graham Sumner, "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," [1898], in *War and Other Essays* (Yale UP, 1911). Sumner says US imperialism is really good for no one save a few plutocrats. The argument is multifaceted and must reading. The main theme is that imperialism makes ever more tenuous the hold on American libertarian principles, as it excites unhealthy political values and passions and it diverts precious attention from the basic contest between govt and liberty (pp. 313, 323-25).

One example of the attenuation of American libertarian principles is Sumner's analysis on how imperialism erodes the principle of equal liberty for people within the American domain. He anticipates how US imperialism will intensify what we know as Jim Crow:

For thirty years the negro has been in fashion. He has had political value and has been petted. Now we have made friends with the Southerners. They and we are hugging each other. We are all united. The negro's day is over. He is out of fashion. We cannot treat him one way and the Malays, Tagals, and Kanakas another way. A Southern senator two or three days ago thanked an expansionist senator from Connecticut for enunciating doctrines which proved that, for the last thirty years, the Southerners have been right all the time, and his inference is incontrovertible. (pp. 328-29)

Indeed, the intensification of Jim Crow coincides perfectly with US imperialism in Latin America and the Philippines. I understand that many scholars (such as Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 2nd rev. ed., p. 73) have argued that the mechanism Sumner identifies here is historically causal. Sumner is like Spencer in linking imperialism to rebarbarization and slavery.

Also in the Sumner volume is an essay entitled "War" [1903], the final pages of which (pp. 36-40) analyze T. Roosevelt's militarism and augmentation of the Monroe Doctrine:

The Monroe Doctrine is an exercise of authority by the United States over a controversy between two foreign states, if one of them is in America, combined with a refusal of the United States to accept any responsibility in connection with

the controversy. That is a position which is sure to bring us into collision with other States, especially because it will touch their vanity, or what they call their honor—or it will touch our vanity, or what we call our honor, if we should ever find ourselves called upon to “back down” from it.

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J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism*, first published 1902. Hobson was an under-consumptionist and “new liberal” fabian, not a classical liberal. His criticism of the British Empire was very influential. The book is partly a response to the Boer War, and the War propelled the book forward. The book is influential especially on Lenin, who regurgitated the ideas with a Marxian twist.

Lenin and leftist anti-imperialism generally depart from Marx. Marx favored imperialism because it pushes forward the historical process towards socialism. I recently read carefully Isaiah Berlin’s *Karl Marx*, and it seemed that for every single war that came along during his days Marx threw his voice in favor of military aggression.

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Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* (1951). The imperialism essay doesn’t so much offer an assessment as an explanation. Schumpeter likes to describe ugly inevitability, because, while basically classical liberal, he was a fatalist. His thoughts on imperialism are a lot like Spencer and Sumner. Imperialism derives from the atavistic instincts; it is a holdover from the pre-civilized past and is at odds with capitalism and progress. Schumpeter’s broad purpose is to discredit the Hobson/Lenin view that imperialism is an expression of capitalism. Schumpeter says it an atavistic reaction to capitalism.

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A famous book is Parker Thomas Moon, *Imperialism and World Politics* (Macmillan, 1926). I asked Davies about this book, and he replied:

Moon taught at Columbia, died relatively young and was active in Catholic social movements. The book is classical liberal and anti-imperialist. It analyzes imperialism as a political and social phenomenon, the reasons for its growth since c1870 and the part it played in international relations at the time the work was published. Moon relates imperialism to the revival of economic nationalism and to neo-mercantilism, developments that made it essential for countries to have access to raw materials via political rule of the territories that produced them. Moon suggested that once one great power adopts imperialism and neo-mercantilism all the rest are driven to follow suit. The book also explores how certain groups benefitted both directly and indirectly from imperial adventures, ultimately via the way it enabled them to extract resources from their fellow citizens (this is the argument made by a succession of CLs and others, such as

Cobden, Bright, and Hobson). The book is notable also for its strict methodological individualism.

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Niall Ferguson has an exchange with Robert Lucas and others over the record of British imperialism at <http://www.bu.edu/historic/hs/april03.html>. Lucas takes a classical liberal line and says it is silly to lump US, Australia, Canada, etc. in with other Brit colonies in measuring success. Ferguson doesn't disagree, but gets into saying how we don't really have the basis to make the historical comparisons we would really like to make.

At the end of his reply, Ferguson quips that it is inappropriate to blame British imperialism for the statism of the LSE and for the general course of academic opinion. First of all, Lucas' point about the unhealthy influence of statist British academic culture depends on the connectedness of the Indian leaders and British academia, not on imperialism being the cause of academia's statism.

But the causal connection is also worthy of comment. A key point of Sumner and really all the classical liberals is that imperialism is a contributory factor in attenuating the public's attention and good sense, in weakening their guard, in diverting public accountability from the constant need to keep statist ideas in check. As Sumner put it:

It will be established as a rule that, whenever political ascendancy is threatened, it can be established again by a little war, filling the minds of the people with glory and diverting their attention from their own interests. (p. 313)

That is the true essence of the libertarian vein of American politics (which I admit isn't the only vein): mustering and maintaining a strong presumption in favor of liberty and against government activism. This vein is reflected in things like "Eternal vigilance," "That government is best," the Declaration, the Bill of Rights, Paine's works, and Cato's Letters. War and imperialism are one of the reasons the libertarian vein diminished so dramatically in the twentieth century, involving a huge makeover of American political culture and sensibilities (Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan*, Oxford UP 1987). Shakespeare's Henry IV counsels his son to "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels."

Also, and this is a minor point, Steve Davies tells me that British imperialists like Alfred Milner were in fact instrumental in aiding and abetting the Webbs in setting up the LSE.

All in all, I find Ferguson's reply to Lucas rather weak.

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Here are block passages from my email correspondence with Steve Davies, Professor of History at Manchester Metropolitan University,—who better than a history professor from the city of Cobden, Bright, and Gladstone!

DAVIES: There's a couple of points worth adding. One is the very close connection between imperialism, both as practice and ideology, and the move to a social democratic state. The historian Bernard Semmel wrote an excellent book on this called *Imperialism*

and Social Reform. He points out that the three main political groups in favour of such measures as state old age pensions and a growth of the collectivist state, namely, the Fabians, the 'Liberal Imperialists' such as Asquith, and the 'Tarrif Reform' wing of the Tory Party such as Joseph Chamberlain, Amery, and Garvin, were all supporters of Imperialism - just like Progressives in the US. Anyone doubting this should read the writings of people like the Webbs or H. G. Wells or any decent collection of Progressive writings. The connection with racism and eugenics is also striking. In Britain the India Office was the first great department of state on the modern model and the template for later creations (such as the education department). The idea of a tutelary and uplifting government in which wise managers and administrators created the conditions for social progress and acted on behalf of a people too backward to act for themselves, while articulated to justify imperial rule, was easily adapted to justify a paternalist state at home.

I asked Steve to list the top 8 British liberal anti-imperialists, and he replied:

DAVIES: Hi Dan, Why top 8, I thought top 10 was more usual? Anyway my list would be Richard Cobden, John Bright, Henry Richard, Herbert Spencer, H. R. Fox Bourne, Edward Morel, Josephine Butler, W. J. Fox. You could add Gladstone to the list, quite a few other people as well.

Next I asked Steve:

> Two further questions:

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> 1) How would you describe JS Mill on the question of imperialism?

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> 2) Who is more representative of pre-1880 Brit liberalism on this issue, the folks you listed, or JS Mill?

DAVIES:

Dan,

Mill is, as ever, ambivalent. He's not a cheerleader for imperialism and he doesn't buy the arguments of folk like Gibbon Wakefield who thought we needed colonies to take 'surplus population' and in general he thinks it's a bad thing, but he does think imperialism can be justified sometimes on a case by case basis. For him it can be justified on the grounds that the imperial power can have a tutelary role and help to bring the subaltern people on to liberty. This means imperialism should be temporary (in theory). This comes to a large degree from his father and Bentham - utilitarians were a major force behind the aggressive 'westernisation' campaigns in India in the 1840s that led to the Mutiny of 1856-7. It sounds more humane than a straightforward Tory imperialism of the kind that e.g. Salisbury espoused but in fact it's worse as it implies a kind of parent-child relation between the imperial power and the subjects so that colonised peoples such as Indians are seen as inferior or less developed (which is not the way they were seen by 18th century empire builders). From the pov of say an Indian (or the Irish who were also

often thought of in this way) it's bad enough that you're being ruled over by a bunch of Brits without the bastards patronising you as well and telling you it's all for your own good.

The question of what is most typical before 1880 is difficult because Victorian Liberalism is an amalgam of several distinct groups that had different views on this. Overall I would say that anti-imperialism is predominant but this is confused by the argument that intervention and empire could sometimes promote liberty. Among the particular groups, intellectuals of Mill's kind tended to slightly favour empire, particularly if they were utilitarian in sympathy. Non-Conformists (such as Bright and Fox) were generally hostile, as were working class Liberals. The business class were divided. Whigs, such as Palmerston and Hartington were generally pro-imperialism. Gladstone was hostile, as were the body of "Gladstonian MPs". So overall generally anti.

In 1886 the groups that favoured empire tended to also be hostile to Irish Home Rule and so left the Liberals to join the Tories to form the Unionist party. That made the Tories, who had previously been broadly in favour of imperialism but not in a particularly strong or ideological sense, into a much more clearly imperialist party. The bulk of the people who stayed with the Liberal party such as Morely were anti-imperialist but in the 1890s you get the growth of the so-called "Liberal Imperialists" such as Roseberry, Grey and Asquith. There's a strong connection between support for imperialism and support for the "new" "social" liberalism (despite the fact that the intellectual advocates of new liberalism such as Hobson and Hobhouse are mostly opposed to imperialism). Traditional liberal anti-imperialism gets a big boost with the Boer War and the reaction to Kitchener's scorched earth policies ("methods of barbarism" as Henry Campbell-Bannerman called them - another great person btw) and this is one aspect of a general revival of classical liberal feeling that culminates in the landslide victory of 1906. Sadly, when CB died Asquith succeeded him as PM and the Liberal Imperialists got control of the Cabinet.

That's my take on it anyway. Liberal anti-imperialism and the work of organisations like the Aborigines Protection Society tends to get overlooked in the historiography, like other aspects of 19th century liberalism.

Eugenio Biaggini is good about it though. Grover Cleveland is a staunch anti-imperialist and has close links with that wing of British Liberalism. Steve

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