Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism
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Introduction

Liberalism and Empire in a New Key

In his magnum opus of political economy, Adam Smith described the discovery of America and the circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope as “the two greatest and most important events in the history of mankind.” His estimation of the consequences of these oceanic expeditions, however, was less than sanguine.

By uniting, in some measure, the most distant parts of the world, by enabling them to relieve one another’s wants, to increase one another’s enjoyments, and to encourage one another’s industry, their general tendency would seem to be beneficial. To the natives, however, both of the East and West Indies, all the commercial benefits which can have resulted from those events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned.

In the brief span of a passage, Smith encapsulated a key contradiction of the global political economic order that had been taking shape since the sixteenth century. Smith’s world was a world of transoceanic trade, an emergent international division of labor, and growing prosperity and social refinement in Europe. It was also a world of colonial empires replete with territorial conquest, demographic extirpation, and enslavement in the West, and militarized trading, commercial monopolies, and tribute extraction in the East. For Smith and his fellow Enlightenment thinkers, modern Europe had witnessed the birth of a historically unique form of human society, one that promised a new model of peace, opulence, and liberty. The same Europe also presided over a violent network of colonial economies that forcibly harnessed the West and the East into a world market. This paradox—a liberal, commercial society incubating in a world of illiberal, colonial empires—was at the root of Smith’s ultimately ambivalent assessment of global commerce.

This book is a study of the constitutive and contradictory relationship between capitalism, liberalism, and empire. It argues that British political and economic
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thought, both before and after Smith, was marked by a tension between the illiberal origins of global capitalist relations and the theoretical attempts to envision these capitalist relations in liberal terms. It examines the theoretical efforts of liberal thinkers to explain, navigate, and justify the coercion inherent in colonial economic relations and connects these efforts to the liberal ideology of capitalism as an economic system of market freedom and equality. I maintain that this tension flared most vividly at those moments when the colonial land expropriation, slavery, and resource extraction that were central to the formation of global capitalism appeared too cruel, rapacious, and tyrannical when judged by the liberal political economic principles that were taking shape in Britain. At the heart of my analysis is the curious (and curiously persistent) imagination of the British Empire as a liberal empire of commerce, in spite of the violent record of dispossession, servitude, and depredation that typified its economy, most blatantly in the colonies. I contend that the Britons could extol their empire as the empire of liberty and the harbinger of a peaceful, civilized, and prosperous global order only on the condition that the violence that undergirded colonial economic structures was ideologically contained. I further argue that such ideological containment owed a great deal to the theoretical efforts of liberal intellectuals, specifically John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Edward G. Wakefield, who strove to mediate between the illiberality of British colonial capitalism and the liberal British self-image. The study elucidates this ideological problem around the political-economic debates between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries over the status of property, trade, and labor relations within the empire. By the end of the period examined here, the British political and intellectual opinion could applaud the British Empire as the standard-bearer of private property, free trade, and free labor, thanks to the successive disavowals of the territorial conquest, commercial pillage, and labor bondage that built Britain’s imperial economy across North Atlantic, South Asia, and Australasia.

Liberalism, Capitalism, and Empire

The gulf between the self-professed liberalism of the British Empire and the illiberality of its actual history has been a major leitmotif in the recent “imperial turn” in the field of political theory. In the words of two influential theorists, a guiding premise of studying political thought in the imperial fold is that “European constitutional states, as state empires, developed within global systems of imperial and colonial law from the beginning,” and consequently, “[e]ven when practical and administrative issues were to the fore, the discussion of what we can broadly call colonial government encompassed disputes over universality, sovereignty, freedom, democracy, property, and justice.” Groundbreaking works in this
vein first appeared with the discovery that canonical liberal thinkers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill were personally and professionally invested in the imperial enterprise. Intellectual historians and political theorists expanded on those efforts, adopting imperial history as a critical vantage point for revisionist appraisals of these and other eminent members of the European political theory pantheon. Clustering around the British Empire, such reappraisals evinced a palpable anti-Whiggism in exposing the philosophies of subordination that authorized and justified its systematic violence against non-Europeans. For a growing number of scholars, the juxtaposition of “liberalism and empire” has since come to denote both a specific area of study and its central problematic, that is, a contradictory assemblage that comprised, on the one hand, principles of moral equality, subjective rights, the rule of law, representative government, and ethical pluralism, and on the other, practices of domination, foreign rule, naked coercion, untrammeled power, disenfranchisement, and exclusion.

This book sets out to challenge a notable disposition that stamps this scholarship—namely, the penchant to frame the connection between liberalism and empire primarily as a problem of the politics of representation, culture, or identity. Notwithstanding differences of textual interpretation, historical studies in this field frequently concentrate on liberal thinkers’ perceptions of and normative judgments about the colonized peoples, which these studies then construe as an index of liberalism’s relationship to imperial rule. Although the exact nature of the liberalism-empire nexus remains controversial, the controversy remains noticeably unified in its occupation with questions of universalism and difference, its heavily intratextual approach, and its attention to the linguistic over the material contexts of the liberal ideas under study.

By itself, this methodological preference is not problematic. As with any other interpretive lens, it brings into focus certain features of liberalism’s interface with empire, leaving others outside the depth of field. The problem is that among the dimensions that are left blurry is the socioeconomic and institutional materiality of empire, which in turn limits the capacity of this scholarship to analyze and critique liberal imperialism. As I detail in the next chapter, on the critical front, a culturalist focus on universalism and difference commands little firepower against the presentist vindications of the British Empire as the historic protagonist of economic globalization. On the analytic side, a blanket politics of universalism cannot adequately elucidate how liberal thinkers parsed and ordered the range of cultural differences between Europeans and non-Europeans, and why they emphasized certain differences over others as being more relevant for imperial justification or anti-imperial critique.

This book attempts to address these limits by “rematerializing” the relationship between liberalism and empire. The task involves complementing an account of the semantic context of liberal ideas with an analysis of the socioeconomic
context, that is, paying as much attention to the institutional structures and economic practices that constituted the fabric of empire as to the political languages and vocabularies in which liberal intellectuals articulated their assessment of it. There are no doubt multiple ways of rematerializing the imperial context (e.g., gender, ecology, technology, law, governance), each of which would highlight a different aspect of empire’s formative impact on liberal thought. I propose viewing the materiality of empire specifically through the lens of “colonial capitalism,” a notion inspired by critical social theory and colonial political economy. As an analytic framework, colonial capitalism rests on the fundamental premise that capitalism has historically emerged within the juridico-political framework of the “colonial empire” rather than the “nation-state.” It grasps capitalist relations as having developed in and through colonial networks of commodities, peoples, ideas, and practices, which formed a planetary web of value chains connecting multiple and heterogeneous sites of production across oceanic distances.

A major corollary of the colonial perspective on capitalism is to underscore the constitutive role of extra-economic coercion in effecting capitalist social transformations. Within this picture, colonial land grabs, plantation slavery, and the forced deindustrialization of imperial dependencies configure as crucial moments in the global formation of capitalism. Borrowing a key concept from Marx’s account of the origins of capitalism, I employ the term colonial primitive accumulation to theorize the forcible transformation and uneven integration of colonial land, labor, and resources into global networks of capital. My focus falls on colonial sites, not because primitive accumulation did not also transpire in Europe, but because it played out much more brutally at the imperial frontiers, called for different frameworks of justification, and exercised liberal metropolitan minds with more vexing questions.

The principal contribution of this framework to the study of liberalism is to highlight the economic undertakings of colonial entrepreneurs as a type of colonial anomaly that had to be accounted for by the liberal standards of metropolitan thought. The optic of colonial capitalism redefines empire’s challenge to liberalism by shifting the focus from who the colonized are to what the colonizers do, that is, from the cultural difference of the subject populations to the deeds of imperial agents themselves. In charting a new map of the liberalism-empire nexus, I mainly follow metropolitan reflections on territorial conquest, indigenous dispossession, bonded labor, and armed trading, rather than judgments about the rational capacity or civilizational status of the non-Europeans. For sharpening the contours of this problem, the study capitalizes on the peculiarity of the British imperial ideology. Although the British matched and eventually surpassed their European rivals in the capacity and readiness for imperial warfare, conquest, and brutality, they stubbornly believed themselves to be, in David Armitage’s classic formulation, a “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and
free” people. The clash of this commercial, pacific, and free self-image with the ruthless expropriation and despotic coercion of colonial economies offers a window onto the tension between the liberal conceptions of capitalism and its illiberal conditions of emergence and possibility.

Cognizant of the notoriously protean character of the term “liberalism,” I purposely restrict the investigation of liberalism to its instantiations in metropolitan theories of capitalism rather than taking on the entire range of family resemblances associated with the term. I identify the primal norms of contractual freedom and juridical equality as the ideational core of the liberal conception of capitalism. While freedom and equality as normative values are most commonly associated with liberal political theory, they were also, and perhaps more systematically, elaborated and enshrined in the language of classical political economy. Originating in the seventeenth century, political economy as a field of knowledge evolved in tandem with global capitalism, and its practitioners often proclaimed it to be the appropriate medium for explaining the dynamics of commerce and capital, as well as for charting an enlightened course of domestic and imperial policy.

By concentrating on political economy, this book therefore anchors core tenets of liberalism in a sphere of reflection that adopted capitalist social forms and their global variegation as its principle object of inquiry. I dissect the entangled histories of liberalism, capitalism, and empire around three critical moments of imperial expansion and controversy in which the theoretical parameters of liberalism were articulated. The first of these is the seventeenth-century colonial land appropriation in the Americas that enabled the formation of Atlantic colonial capitalism and ignited momentous European debates over legitimate claims to property in the New World. The second moment centers on the East India Company’s ascendancy in Bengal and British merchant capital’s intrusion into the Indian economy, which triggered a public storm about the nature of Anglo-Indian trade. The third and final moment concerns nineteenth-century schemes of imperial labor allocation that aimed to promote colonial emigration and settler capitalism in Australasia, which threw into question the legal and economic boundaries between free and bonded labor. “Property,” “exchange,” and “labor” thereby constitute a triadic constellation at the core of liberal political economy’s encounter with colonial capitalism. Extralegal appropriation of land in America, militarized trading in India, and elaborate schemes of dependent labor in Australasia each represents a vital moment in the development of global capital networks and a challenge to narrating this development as the triumph of private property, market exchange, and free labor.

Corresponding to the central questions of property, exchange, and labor, I analyze the theoretical attempts of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield to reconcile the essentially liberal image of Britain’s capitalist economy with the illiberal
institutional arrangements and practices on which it stood. My specific focus on these three intellectuals stems from their simultaneous commitment to a modern capitalist economy, to imperial expansion as an instrument of economic prosperity and political power, and to the primal liberal norms of contractual freedom and juridical equality. These multiple and often incongruent theoretical commitments render their writings privileged ground for detecting the frictions between liberalism, capitalism, and empire and their negotiation in the register of political economy. Compounding this rationale is the active involvement of the three thinkers in Britain's imperial politics: Locke as Secretary to the Council of Trade and Plantations and later a member of the Board of Trade; Burke as a member of the Parliamentary Select Committee on India; Wakefield as a pro-colonization publicist, lobbyist, and the intellectual leader of the Colonial Reform Movement. Their shared institutional and intellectual investments in the colonial capitalist enterprise and the empire of liberty furnishes the overarching framework within which a comparison of these otherwise dissimilar thinkers can generate unexpected insights into the liaisons between liberalism and empire.

The following chapters demonstrate that when compared to the twenty-first-century reclamations of British imperialism as the vanguard of economic globalization, Locke, Burke, and Wakefield were ironically less self-assured about the coercive interventions that went into making Britain's imperial economy. Their disquiet about the illiberality of empire was reflected in their strategies of “disavowal.” Crucially, none of them denied the fact of indigenous dispossession, unequal exchange, and labor bondage that pervaded colonial economies. Instead of joining contemporary critics in denouncing the imperial system, however, they resorted to theoretical maneuvers, rhetorical strategies, fictions, and myths that insulated the liberal image of Britain’s commercial economy from the enormities of colonial ventures. These theoretical innovations include Locke’s myth of mankind’s “universal consent” to the use of money, which ultimately blamed Native Americans for their own expropriation; Burke’s fantasy of “imperial commerce” that promised equitable economic dealings between the British and their conquered Indian subjects; and Wakefield’s fictive “settler contract” whereby poor colonial immigrants acceded to work as wage laborers rather than become independent landowners. Such efforts at reconciliation also set these three thinkers apart from other political economists, like Adam Smith and David Hume, for whom the empire, particularly in its territorial and extractive variety, was nigh irredeemable from a liberal economic perspective. When the liberal British self-image traveled overseas, it crashed against the violent shores of colonial capitalism. It fell to the liberal intellectuals of the empire, such as the three examined here, to brace the hull.
I advance the main argument of the book in four chapters. Chapter 1 elaborates the analytic framework of colonial capitalism for reconstructing the relationship between liberalism and empire. I offer a more detailed engagement with the extant literature and outline a social theory of the imperial context as a promising way forward. Drawing on critical political economy, social and economic history, and postcolonial theory, I construct an account of the heterogeneous and globally networked property structures, exchange systems, and labor regimes that comprised Britain’s imperial economy. Against this background, I delineate the dilemmas of liberalism that materialized in the effort to reconcile the liberal British self-image with the violence of the empire. In crafting the hermeneutic key for interpreting the works of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield, I also clarify this study’s stance on methodological questions about contextualization, textual interpretation, and the risks of reductionism and anachronism.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of Locke’s theory of property in the context of Atlantic colonial capitalism. Political theorists and intellectual historians have extensively documented Locke’s professional involvement in English colonialism and explored its implications for his political thought. What has gone unnoticed, however, is the centrality of Locke’s theory of money to the liberal justification of English colonization in America. The prevailing research agenda revolves around Locke’s labor theory of appropriation as the linchpin of his justification of indigenous dispossession. Recasting this problematic in the light of Atlantic colonial capitalism, I trace the shifting terms of Locke’s theory of property from labor to monetization as the grounds for adjudicating rightful property claims in the state of nature. This alternative account brings into conversation the colonial interpretations of Locke with earlier the Locke scholarship on natural law, morality, possessive individualism, and capitalism. I contend that Locke predicated labor and improvement on the use of money and construed the absence of monetization in America as a sign that the continent remained in the natural common and thereby open to nonconsensual appropriation. The ingenuity of Locke’s theoretical construction lay in conjuring up a myth of mankind’s universal tacit consent to the use of money and positioning Native Americans at once inside and outside such consent. The fiction of universal consent enabled Locke to hold Native Americans responsible for the natural common status of America and thereby sutured the rift between his liberal theory of private property and extralegal land appropriations in the New World.

Chapter 3 turns to Edmund Burke’s intervention in eighteenth-century debates on global commerce and empire as refracted through the East India Company’s rule in Bengal. Burke has been a major figure of investigation in the
recent literature on empire by virtue of his fervent effort to impeach Warren Hastings and champion the cause of the Indians against British oppression and misrule. Some scholars have interpreted Burke’s crusade as the expression of his peculiar and untimely cosmopolitanism; others have chalked it up to his conservative defense of empire or his anxieties about the revival of an atavistic spirit of conquest. The chapter expands the terrain of analysis by bringing Burke’s political economic writings to bear on his arguments for maintaining the empire while reforming its illiberal economic policies. I maintain that Burke’s diatribe against the Company rule was that it systematically violated the liberal economic principles that he believed defined the British national character. Holding onto both the empire and its liberal image required Burke to denounce the politicization of commerce in India and distance it from what he conceived to be Britain’s properly commercial—that is, peaceful and equitable—economic system. His condemnation of the Company’s system of tribute extraction can therefore be understood as an attempt to shore up the frayed boundaries between civilized commerce and unabashed pillage, between enlightened self-interest and unbridled rapacity, and between the “imperial commerce” that a reformed empire promised and the “imperious commerce” that had been destroying India.

Chapter 4 examines the writings of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, an unduly neglected and only recently rediscovered figure in the intellectual history of empire. At the center of my analysis is Wakefield’s theory of “systematic colonization” as a solution to the problems of overpopulation in Britain and labor shortage in its colonies. Historians of the British Empire and political economy have noted the remarkable success of Wakefield’s theory in converting the British public and political opinion to a pro-colonization position. I argue in this chapter that systematic colonization was not simply a strategy for imperial labor allocation but also an attempt to protect capitalist civilization from the dangers of “barbarization” both at home in the colonies. In Britain, proletarianization, unemployment, and pauperization stoked labor militancy and threatened social revolution. Relieving the population pressure by pauper relocation was not only economically ineffectual but also bred a repugnant species of frontier barbarism in the colonies by turning British emigrants into poor and rude smallholding farmers. Wakefield proposed to solve both problems at once by imposing preemptive crown rights and artificially inflated prices on colonial lands, which would compel emigrants to work for colonial capitalists. This strategy of state-led, preemptive proletarianization was aimed at rendering laborers structurally dependent on capitalists without formally abridging their civil liberties. Well aware that his plan contravened the laissez-faire orthodoxy of his time and foisted “wage slavery” on colonial settlers, Wakefield took refuge in utilitarian myths of contractual dispossession. He represented the imposition of colonial wage labor by the hand of the imperial state as nothing other than
the enforcement of a fictional "settler compact" whereby colonial emigrants had voluntarily agreed to divide themselves into capitalists and wage laborers for the sake of capitalist civilization.

Ways Forward

My overall purpose is to critically augment the existing scholarship on the political theory of empire by casting a number of key research questions in new theoretical light. Colonial capitalism opens the way to studying liberalism as a historically mediated language of politics that was worked out precisely in and through the political economic debates around the contested meanings of private property, market exchange, and free labor. The proposed interpretation does not abandon the engagement with the politics of universalism that revolves around metropolitan judgments about non-Europeans’ rationality, level of civilization, and capacity for autonomy or progress. Rather, it demonstrates how such normative judgments were mediated by liberal thinkers’ perceptions of the colonial dispossession, exploitation, and extraction that belonged to the history of global capitalism. Without attending to the contradictions of the imperial economy as a source of doubt, anxiety, and endogenous critique for liberal intellectuals, these mediations remain out of sight, leaving one with a blanket politics of universalism that hinges on the exogenous binary between the colonizer and the colonized.

Blanket conceptions of universalism run into difficulties in the attempts to explain why certain historically specific practices and not others were deemed to be universal; or why certain cultural differences were translated into deficits and braided into civilizational hierarchies, while others were considered irrelevant for purposes of colonial rule, dispossession, and exploitation. To name a few such questions that arise in the course of this book: Why did John Locke decisively put monetization before monotheism in America for deciding whether the New World was terra nullius and therefore open to English colonization? On what basis did Edmund Burke differentiate between Britain’s imperial subjects, defending Indians against British oppression, prescribing a despotic discipline for Africans, and envisioning the total extermination of Native Americans? How to explain that the enclosing and improving settler, who embodied the civilizing mission of the British Empire in the seventeenth century, was scorned by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, John Stuart Mill, and other Philosophic Radicals in the nineteenth century as the incarnation of civilizational degeneration?

The contextual variation in these questions is paralleled by the theoretical cross-pollinations displayed by the historical mutations of British liberal thought. Recent scholarship has generated an impressive inventory of the instances in
which liberal thinkers, when confronted with specific problems of colonial rule, enlisted as diverse and even conflicting political discourses as universal human progress, cosmopolitan pluralism, and insurmountable cultural difference. This book conjectures that such cross-pollinations emerged partly from intellectual efforts to suture the rift opened up in the universal claims of liberalism by the manifest unfreedom and inequality that characterized Britain’s colonial economies. Using the framework of colonial capitalism, we can take a step beyond the historicist reconstruction of liberalism’s collusion with other political languages and delineate the historical patterns that such collusions assumed in concrete contexts of imperial political economy. I hazard some reflections in this direction in the conclusion of this study.

The implications of my analysis extend beyond the study of liberalism’s relationship to empire. As I dwell on in some length in the next chapter, connecting liberal ideas to a social analysis of institutions and ideologies of capitalism discloses historical continuities that elude the purview of the linguistic contextualist approach to intellectual history. This book presents both a preliminary excursion, as well as an invitation for further inquiry, into the longer genealogy of the liberal imaginations of capitalism that have persisted down to our present. Conceiving of liberalism as a historically circumscribed and polyphonic political language, which is too convoluted to fit generalizing frameworks of social analysis, risks obscuring its status as the dominant ideology of the Anglo-American-centered capitalist world order in the past century and a half. One is reminded of Charles Maier’s astute observation about the prevailing approach to the intellectual history of empire:

What remains remarkable from the viewpoint of intellectual history was the general unwillingness to admit that markets might have a connection with empire. During the long period of Marxist challenge and Cold War, attributing any underlying socioeconomic causation gave most intellectuals in the West great discomfort, and those who offered such theories were dismissed as fundamentally unsound. Better to affirm the obvious point that imperialism and empire are phenomena too complex to reduce to a uniform underlying causality. Multicausality became and remains the last refuge of historians.

The current insistence on treating liberalism as an idiom that strictly exists in and travels through discrete semantic contexts similarly takes refuge in complexity, contingency, and discontinuity—the battle cries of the cultural turn in its assault on the totalizing frameworks of social analysis, mainstream and critical alike. Questioning this proclivity does not amount to rejecting the plurality and variance of discursive modes in which the liberal ideology of capitalism finds
articulation. Witness, for instance, Niall Ferguson’s glowing historiography applauding the British Empire for fashioning a liberal capitalist international order and Michael Ignatieff’s plea for an “empire lite” to protect the same from its illiberal enemies. Consider, on the other hand, Douglass North and Barry Weingast’s hugely influential institutionalist tribute to the Glorious Revolution for establishing the constitutional commitments necessary for capital accumulation to take off, and James Robinson and Daron Acemoglu’s narrative of the rise of capitalism on the bedrock of liberal, inclusive, and ostensibly anti-imperial institutions. As important as the attention to the specific vocabularies and argumentative protocols of these discourses is the attentiveness to their resonance and the staying power of the fundamental worldview that they project. The former offers an indispensable historical inventory of the liberal and essentially Euro-American conceptions of capitalism, but by itself cannot explain the resilience of this liberal image and its capacity to reinvent itself across different historical contexts. As I discuss in chapter 1, this is where “critical history,” which incorporates a social theory of the socioeconomic context and a notion of ideology, enters (or ought to enter) the picture.

A final conclusion of this book concerns the parameters of political theory as a distinct scholarly mode of reflection. One crucial upshot of extending the framework of political inquiry to problems of imperial rule is to theorize problems of dispossession and exploitation as political questions, which political theorists have for the most part preferred to relegate to the province of political economy or social theory. The historical elaboration of the liberal norms of freedom and equality through controversies on property, exchange, and labor offers a cautionary corrective against the current penchant to sequester the domain of “the political” from the putative field of “the economy” (a sequestration evocatively captured in Hannah Arendt’s resolute distancing of politics from the “social question”). Confining political theory of empire to problems of freedom and domination, consent and legitimacy, inclusion and exclusion, and universalism and pluralism amounts to a sociospatial expansion of the objects of political inquiry that stops short of revising the conceptual framework with which such inquiry is practiced. If the principal benefit of placing the history of political thought in an imperial context is simply to enrich those central problems that are already well entrenched and recognizable to political theorists, then “empire” ultimately remains an exogenous and contingent addendum. In contrast, a crucial trajectory of conceptual innovation promised by political theory’s encounter with empire is to undo the boundaries between the political and the social. This requires that we understand colonial empires not only as structures of political domination and subordination but, equally importantly, as economic systems of dispossession and exploitation. The necessary correlate of Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper’s celebrated call to place the metropole and the
colony in the same analytic field is to integrate political and economic analysis in a more capacious conceptual terrain, and treat political economy as a species of political theory.23

The discovery that cardinal categories of reflection in Western political thought were forged in the crucible of colonial empires has been vastly rewarding for the field of political theory. It would be equally rewarding to leverage the framework of colonial capitalism and imperial economy for expanding the conceptual boundaries of political inquiry.
Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism

Framing an Inquiry

In the colonies the truth stood naked, but the citizens of the mother country preferred it with clothes on.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

The field of political theory is now home to a veritable cottage industry in the study of liberalism and empire. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the contours of this literature, identify the limitations, and propose a new interpretive framework for studying liberal ideas that will complement the current state of the art. Put summarily, I argue that the fine-grained textual analysis of liberal ideas in imperial contexts has not been matched by a clear socioeconomic analysis of imperial relations themselves. As a result, an overly culturalist and discursive orientation undermines the analytical power and critical commitments of scholarship on liberalism and empire. Although I broadly share the critical impulse animating the major works in this field, I believe this impulse must extend to examining the ways in which capitalist relations mediated between liberal ideas and imperial practices in the early modern British Empire.

I elaborate an alternative approach to interpreting liberal ideas in imperial contexts, one that centers on the notions of “colonial capitalism” and the “primitive accumulation of capital.” The principal contribution of this perspective is to disclose the contradictions between, on the one hand, liberal market conceptions of capitalist relations as articulated in British metropolitan political economy and, on the other, the violent methods and coercive processes that gave rise to capitalist forms in the colonies. Through the lens of colonial capitalism, we can delineate the violent capitalist transformations in British colonies as an ideological problem for a self-avowedly liberal and commercial polity, which proudly contrasted itself to the despotic and imperialist spirit that it imputed.
Colonial Capitalism and the Dilemmas of Liberalism

to its Continental rivals. By the same token, we can analyze how British liberal thinkers, canonical or otherwise, struggled to navigate this problem in ways that proved formative of liberalism as a political language in the early modern period.

I begin with a brief assessment of the current trends in the study of liberalism and empire. I contend that what is eschewed in this scholarship is a social theory of the imperial context, as is reflected in the dominant predilection to restrict analysis to the level of cultural representations of the colonized or the linguistic conventions that delimit metropolitan political discourse. In addressing this lacuna, I turn to critical social theory and imperial economic history to develop the notion of colonial capitalism as an interpretive framework that enables a new appraisal of liberalism’s relationship to empire. I go on to distinguish the ideological difficulties generated by the illiberality of colonial capitalism and highlight the role of “disavowal” as a strategy of confronting and mitigating their potentially corrosive effects on the British self-image. I also lay out the methodological premises that I follow in my reappraisal of the history of liberal ideas and address possible objections regarding contextualization and textual interpretation. I conclude with some reflections on the need to compound historical contextualism with a “stereoscopic view of history” for a critical study of liberalism in conjunction with capitalism and imperialism.

Because my primary aim is to construct an interpretive framework and delineate the theoretical problematic to be pursued in the rest of the book, my discussion of colonial capitalism is limited to the extent that it brings to light dilemmas of liberalism that are largely bypassed in the existing literature. I therefore do not delve into long-standing controversies on the capitalist transition and world-system, nor do I dwell in much detail on the recently revived debates on primitive accumulation and the violence of capital. I have devoted sustained attention to these questions elsewhere. Here I draw on the theoretical tenets and conclusions that are germane to the intellectual history of liberalism this book offers.

Liberalism and Empire: Rematerializing a Field

Since the early 1990s, growing numbers of scholars have done an impressive job of reinterpreting liberal ideas by situating them in imperial contexts. Not surprisingly, a focus on the English and, later, the British Empire has pervaded this scholarship owing to Britain’s status, as one commentator recently put it, as “the crucible of liberal political thinking and the most extensive imperial formation in history.” Without going into a comprehensive overview of this literature, I would like to identify two of its broadly shared dispositions that are relevant to my argument. The first of these is a critical attitude toward the British Empire as an instrument of subjugation, exclusion, and domination. This condemnatory
outlook has drawn inspiration from the kindred fields of postcolonial studies and the “new imperial history,” which have sought to upend Whig narratives that depict the Anglo-American hegemonic project as the harbinger of a liberal, democratic world order. Exceptions to this trend, such as Niall Ferguson’s brash defense of the British Empire as the avatar of “Anglobalization” and his endorsement of the United States’ open interventionism have only carried grist to the mill of anti-imperial critique.

Second, and more importantly, there has been a marked penchant to organize these critical studies around ideologies of universalism and cosmopolitanism and conceptions of culture and difference. This predilection has been in marked contrast to the early twentieth-century analyses of European imperialism and colonialism in terms of geopolitical and economic priorities, wherein the problem of capitalism and its crises loomed large. Inflected by the cultural and linguistic turns in the social sciences and the humanities, political theorists and new imperial historians have trained their attention primarily on the identities, perceptions, and cultural representations of the imperial self and the colonial other. Uday Mehta’s acclaimed *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) in particular proved extremely influential in setting the terms of the debate in this culturalist key. Pioneering works have variously explored, for instance, how European thinkers “analyzed and judged unfamiliar societies,” their “philosophical claims about human unity and diversity,” or the “importance of difference” in the formation of imperial “subject-positions.”

Once the problem of imperial domination was posited in terms of the symbolic exclusion of colonial subjects from the ambit of freedom and equality accorded to metropolitan citizens, the question of “liberalism and empire” became a question of whether liberal arguments were mobilized to elaborate and justify such exclusion or to denounce and challenge it. Researchers accordingly turned their attention to liberal thinkers, from John Locke to John Stuart Mill and beyond, and explored the extent to which these thinkers had discovered in colonial difference a reason to question Eurocentric cultural assumptions or instead mapped such difference onto evolutionary civilizational hierarchies that privileged the Europeans. These opposing modes of grappling with colonial difference could translate into, at the one extreme, a precocious cosmopolitanism that censured imperial arrogance and respected non-European polities and, at the other, a renewed confidence in imperial tutelage that perpetually withheld from the colonized the dignity and autonomy promised by liberalism.

The eschewal of social analysis in the new theories and histories of empire stems in part from the justifiable skepticism of reductive teleology associated with Marxism, which, as one critic puts it, has “displaced [colonialism] into the inexorable logics of modernization and world capitalism.” The unfortunate outcome of such skepticism, however, has been to dematerialize the study of empire.
by adopting a heavily culturalist focus and intratextual approach, which, I argue, blunts the critical edge of recent scholarship. In these studies, as Andrew Sartori observes, “the representational order always takes precedence in the analytical sequence” over the concrete relations of force, coercion, and exploitation that formed the materiality of imperial rule. Richard Drayton strikes a similar chord when he writes, “A focus on subjectivity displaced examination of practical and material experience . . . Historians appeared to be more bothered by ‘epistemic violence’ than the real thing.” This oversight becomes particularly pronounced when faced with the sort of Whig imperial apologetics elaborated by Ferguson, which vindicate the British imperial record on institutional-economic grounds, extolling the empire for disseminating private property, free trade, and the rule of law across the globe. If, as Frederick Cooper reminds us, “for friend or foe alike, the ideological framework of globalization is liberalism—arguments for free trade and free movement of capital,” then representing the British Empire as the prime mover of globalization scores a powerful ideological point. On this account, exclusion, subjugation, and even violence and the human costs imperial expansion entails are conceded with disarming frankness and then emploted as unfortunate yet incidental anomalies to the essentially liberal character and mission of the empire. Against such institutional-economic “balance sheet” arguments in support of liberal imperialism, culturalist critiques of empire command little traction.

In addition to diminished critical capacity, bracketing the socioeconomic and institutional dimensions of empire also undermines analytic power. Even when critical scholars emphasize imperial violence and economic exploitation in order to expose Whig narratives, their efforts stop short of a systematic explanation of these two elements, their various configurations, and how these configurations inflected imperial ideology and metropolitan thought in specific ways. It is true, as Jennifer Pitts writes against Ferguson’s apologetics, that the history of the British Empire is a history of “massive resource extraction, establishment of catastrophic systems of bonded labor, deindustrialization, entrenchment of ‘traditional’ structures of authority, and insertion of subsistence farmers into often wildly unstable global markets . . . proletarianization, emiseration, chaos, and misrule.” One can likewise hardly disagree with Duncan Bell’s rebuttal of John Darwin’s crypto-Whiggism on the grounds that “extra-judicial killing, sexual cruelty, indentured labour, coercive displacement, the annihilation or radical disruption of existing traditions, institutions, and ways of life, even mass murder and genocide” were all integral to what made the British Empire. However, short of a theoretical account of how these different forms and moments physical coercion, economic exploitation, and social destruction are structurally interconnected, this ignominious record congeals into an undifferentiated mass of “imperial violence” that liberal thinkers then rationalize or criticize. The result
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is an abstract politics of universalism that has little to say about how colonial differences are parsed, why they are differentially evaluated synchronously and over time, and which ones are conscripted into imperial ideologies of rule, dispossession, and domination. In other words, although the current scholarship does a commendable job of interpreting liberal texts in imperial contexts, much remains to be done to relate these interpretations to a social theory of imperial contexts.

The eschewal of capitalism and, more generally, social history has been even more pronounced in the field of intellectual history, where the bane of reductionism is joined by the bugbear of anachronism.18 “Linguistic contextualism” is the broad moniker of the methodological effort to banish these fallacies from the practice of intellectual history, originating in J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner’s thunderous rejoinders to C. B. Macpherson’s portrayal of a number of early modern thinkers as “bourgeois” political philosophers and thereby defenders of capitalism.19 As the dominant disciplinary stricture currently governing what counts as bona fide intellectual history, linguistic contextualism turns on the premise that the proper contexts of the history of ideas consist in conventions of language and political discourses, as opposed to economic structures and social practices.20 On the one hand, linguistic contextualism disputes the validity of textual interpretations that rest on longue durée assumptions about social structure and economic change.21 The allusion to the “rise of capitalism” represents perhaps the most suspicious of the incursions of “the social” into the perimeter of intellectual history. As Istvan Hont astutely observes, when scholars of eighteenth-century intellectual history cannot avoid speaking of the economic relations of the period, they “use terms like ‘commercial society’ to get away from Marxist language and categories of sociology. Terms like ‘capitalism,’ ‘bourgeois society,’ and ‘inorganic society’ now seem to be both loaded and disturbingly sloppy as categories.”22 At the same time, linguistic contextualism functions as a “strategy of containment” against the plumbing of the past for consistent and linear intellectual traditions.23 On this account, invoking “liberalism” in the seventeenth century amounts to thrusting certain notions back in time and upon thinkers who would be at a loss recognize themselves as “liberal.”24 The prescribed path for avoiding these cardinal sins of intellectual history is to embed historical texts in strictly bounded linguistic contexts, wherein one can, as accurately as possible, reconstruct what the author intended his utterance to mean in the light of his immediate interlocutors and the semantic universe available to him.25

There is no reason to dispute that careful attention to historical context and to the specific vocabularies, idioms, and terms of debate is indispensable to a study of liberalism and empire. However, linguistic contextualism proves inadequate for an investigation that aspires not only to reconstruct past arguments
but also to build explanations of why certain paradigms of thought and modes of argumentation proved more tractable and durable than others. The critical task of delineating historical continuities in imperial ideologies necessitates a retrospective gaze that detects their transmutation over time and translates past vocabularies into present ones, not only on the basis of their shared semantic content, but also with attention to the political and legal institutions in which they instantiate and the socioeconomic power relations they underwrite. This critical retrospective gaze appears unsound when judged by linguistic contextualism’s author-centered and forward-looking approach to the history of political ideas and its default suspicion of intellectual history motivated by critical agendas rooted in the present. I elaborate my position on this score in more detail at the end of this chapter, once I have outlined the interpretive framework that informs my inquiry into liberalism and empire.

The particular reappraisal of liberal thought I propose in this study places capitalism and, specifically, coercive capitalist transformation in the colonies, at the heart of the relationship between liberalism and empire. The conceptual pivot of my analysis, colonial capitalism, addresses the manifold processes of territorial expropriation, social displacement, resource extraction, and bonded labor that typified British imperial expansion and played an essential role in the formation of capital circuits connecting the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Colonial capitalism can offer a theoretical account of the imperial context that is largely absent in the extant analyses of liberalism and empire by bringing into focus the political economic dynamics that propelled, shaped, and delimited the course of imperial expansion. Although colonial capitalism is by no means the definitive standpoint for an imperial account of liberalism, it has the merit of highlighting two key characteristics of the imperial context. First, Britain’s imperial economy emerges as a totality of heterogeneous yet interdependent socioeconomic forms consisting of, for instance, Caribbean plantations, English manufactories, Asian and African trading posts, and North American smallholding farms. Second, the violent methods by which these forms were established, such as indigenous dispossession, enclosure of common lands, chattel slavery, and militarized trading, present us with an imperial formation in which the entwinement of political force and economic transformation was not incidental but followed the logic of capitalist expansion.

The analytic of colonial capitalism enables us to disaggregate “imperial violence” by identifying the political and economic priorities behind it, strategies and vectors of its exercise, and, most importantly, how these priorities and strategies shaped the specific terms in which liberal arguments about empire were articulated. In the context of the early modern British Empire, such arguments revolved around totalizing visions of an imperial-commercial order in which the twin objectives of capital accumulation and state-building entered conscious
reflection. Political economy increasingly furnished the main medium in which the English and, later, the British political and intellectual classes expressed their views on the governance of the empire, direction of its force, and significance of its consequences. Political economy is therefore the principal site this study excavates to unearth liberal responses to coercive capitalist transformations in the colonies and to reconstruct the attempts to reconcile colonial capitalism with the pacific and commercial self-image of Britain.

I contend that the notion of the “primitive accumulation of capital” that Marx elaborated in Capital presents a particularly fruitful way of theorizing the coercion and heterogeneity characteristic of capitalist networks in the early modern period. Marx coined the term “primitive accumulation” with sardonic reference to Adam Smith’s origin story of capital as the result of hard work and frugality. Marx maintained that capitalist relations had instead sprung up from the violent separation of direct producers from their means of production and subsistence, most importantly, from the expropriation of agricultural producers. Marx designated the English enclosures and the Highland Clearances as the “classic” case of primitive accumulation, which created a mass of dispossessed proletarians, who, in a repressive regime of vagrancy laws, criminal codes, and workhouses, would later be disciplined into the first waged working class in history.

Perhaps more importantly, Marx extended the notion of primitive accumulation beyond England and Scotland to cover a range of violent economic ventures of global scope and imperial nature. He wrote, in a frequently quoted passage:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blacks, are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.

If the atrocities listed in this passage sound familiar, it is because we have encountered roughly the same record in Pitts’s and Bell’s renditions of the British Empire’s history of violence. The major difference, however, is that when viewed from a Marxian perspective, these violent acts appear to be more than just moral wrongs, the “systemic injuries” (Pitts) or the “original sin” (Bell) of the empire. The moral valence and liberal assessment of imperial violence is compounded and mediated by its formative role in the global inceptions of capitalism, generating the sort of tensions we saw Smith grappling with in the opening of this book. This is not to suggest replacing empire with capitalism as the relevant context of liberal thought but to conceptualize it more precisely as “colonial empire,”
understood as the politico-legal framework in which capitalist relations historically developed and liberal thought found its conditions of possibility.\(^{31}\)

Social historians of imperial and transoceanic connections have long underscored the historical symbiosis between imperialism and capitalist expansion. Robin Blackburn, in his magisterial history of the New World slavery, describes the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic as the stage of “pioneering capitalist industrialization.” Commercial wars, territorial conquests, slave trade, and the union of extra-economic coercion and export-oriented production in slave plantations placed these activities “entirely within that sphere of primitive accumulation about which Marx wrote . . . force as an economic power.”\(^{32}\)

Turning from the West to the East Indies, we find an aggressive form of what Jairus Banaji calls “company capitalism.” This species of mercantile capitalism, prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, combined militarized trading by chartered companies in the Indian Ocean with their forcible intrusion into the organization of agriculture and manufacturing in South Asia, especially after the British military and political ascendancy on the subcontinent.\(^{33}\)

Cautioning against overemphasizing commercial imperialism, the recent revival in the area of settler colonial studies has alerted us to the cascades of displacement and depopulation that passed over North America and Australasia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, supplying the “ghost acres” that proved essential to capitalist expansion.\(^{34}\)

Finally, Sven Beckert’s recent reconstruction of the Industrial Revolution weaves together these strands of imperial violence, planetary economic reorganization, and institutional innovation into an account of a “war capitalism” that rampaged between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Although Beckert rarely invokes Marx, his story of war capitalism is almost entirely coextensive with Marx’s story of primitive accumulation,\(^{35}\) above all in its focus on the “transformative powers of a union of capital and state power” as the propulsive force behind “imperial expansion, expropriation, and slavery [that] became central to forging a new global economic order and eventually the rise of capitalism.”\(^{36}\)

There are two reasons for adopting the concept of primitive accumulation in the study of colonial capitalism and liberalism. The first is the pivotal role it assigns to extra-economic coercion in the creation and maintenance of the institutional background conditions of capitalism.\(^{37}\) As a number of theorists have recently pointed out, capitalism is much more than simply an economic system of production, circulation, and consumption. It consists of an entire “institutionalized social order,” a historically determinate mode of imagining, organizing, and practicing human beings’ relationship to one another and to the nonhuman world, which encompasses social, ecological, and political dimensions at both the macro-level of institutional-ideological complexes and the micro-level of subjectivities.\(^{38}\) That being said, the perceived autonomy of the “economic” relations
institutionalized via self-regulating markets is critical for the liberal imagination of capitalism. As I will dwell on in more detail, liberal theories of capitalism normatively exclude nonmarket coercion from economic dealings between legally free and equal property-owning individuals, even as it consigns such coercion to the enforcement of property rights and contracts. To this extent, capitalism can be extolled as the economic system of freedom par excellence, an identification that finds vernacular expression in the phrase “free market economy” in today’s parlance, and whose genealogy can be traced at least back to Smith’s idea of the “system of perfect liberty.”\textsuperscript{39} By contrast, Marx, in his discussion of primitive accumulation, stressed that the \textit{creation} of capitalist relations hinged on the employment of “the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society.”\textsuperscript{40} Rosa Luxemburg expanded on this by observing extra-economic force to be a “permanent weapon” of capital at every moment of its history, on the grounds that it “is an illusion to hope that capitalism will ever be content with the means of production which it can acquire by commodity exchange.”\textsuperscript{41}

The main vector of coercive capitalist transformation, according to the Marx-Luxemburg line, is “expropriation,” which sets the conditions of capitalist “exploitation” by instituting capitalist private property, a dispossessed labor force, and a market in productive inputs and wage goods. Expropriation in this sense is not a simple transfer of resources or “stockpiling.” It denotes a structural transformation, or the “capitalization of social reproduction,” which makes laborers’ access to conditions of labor and means of subsistence contingent on producing a surplus that can be privately appropriated and accumulated as capital.\textsuperscript{42} Nancy Fraser captures this point well when she writes that the move “from the front-story of exploitation to the back-story of expropriation constitutes a major epistemic shift” by directing our attention beyond the market (sphere of circulation) and the workplace (sphere of production) to the “political conditions of possibility of capitalism” (sphere of institution).\textsuperscript{43} Chief among these political conditions is the role of public authority in suppressing the “resistance to the expropriations through which capitalist property relations were originated and sustained.”\textsuperscript{44} This emphasis on the constitutive violence of primitive accumulation is not intended to displace or occlude other illiberal forms of power and force that are internal to the general law of capitalist accumulation, the most important of which is what Marx famously called the “despotism of the workplace.” Instead, one can fruitfully construe the despotism of the workplace as resting on the institutionalized structural inequality and unfreedom created by primitive accumulation. If the accumulation of capital, as Marx argued, depends on the subjection of social reproduction to the law of value—that is, the generalization of commodity form and the domination of abstract labor in the satisfaction of social needs—then the law of value itself presupposes, in Werner Bonefeld’s words, “the law of private property that primitive accumulation established.”\textsuperscript{45}
It is important to note that abstract labor and the law of value that it sub-tends are always already organized through historically specific and varying forms instead of manifesting themselves in a singular and uniform social configuration. Historically, the entwinement of political power and capital accumulation ocasioned different property institutions, exchange systems, and labor regimes in the imperial metropole and in the colonies. In the former, institutionalized political power assumed the form of an interventionist “fiscal-military state” that secured capitalist private property, safeguarded returns to investment, enforced contracts, and protected domestic industries from foreign competition. Elsewhere, it functioned as a “colonial state” that upheld titles to expropriated land and enslaved labor, lent military and financial support to chartered companies, reined in unruly subjects overseas, and, of course, waged imperial wars against European and non-European rivals. If one follows the thread that runs through the Atlantic slave-plantation complex, the deindustrialization and agrarianization of India, and the opening up of the Chinese markets, one eventually arrives at the imperial state, whose sovereign power circulated, grew, and ramified in an imperial constitution that connected the metropole and its colonial officials to chartered companies, trading factories, settler societies, and plantocracies.

Secondly, the Marxian notion of primitive accumulation enables us to conceive of violent socioeconomic transformations in the colonies as capitalist transformations, rather than developments that are anomalous or incidental to the history of global capitalism. The dismissal of the relevance of colonialism to a theory of capitalism has come in many disciplinary shapes and colors, yet in one way or another, they all flow into the metanarrative of endogenous capitalist development in Europe and the rise of the West. Those who call this Eurocentric standpoint into question have linked colonialism to global capitalism in its capacity to “confiscate and conscript” land and labor into circuits of capital, thereby overcoming resource constraints that might have stifled capitalist expansion. Perhaps more importantly than this crude material aspect, colonial economic spaces also functioned as spaces for imagining and implementing new ways of organizing social production for profit, at times by means so brutal that they would have been difficult to imagine and let alone attempt in Europe—genocidal expropriation of native populations and chattel slavery being the most obvious examples. In the words of two Atlantic historians, “[C]olonization itself was an experiment in economics on a transoceanic scale . . . it did act as a crucible in which economic, social, and political experimentation with new ideas and approaches, both imported from the old world and spawned in the new, were allowed to flourish, often unfettered.”

This last point is also the reason this study devotes more attention to colonial capitalist transformations than to metropolitan ones. Primitive accumulation
and capitalist innovation flourished “unfettered” in the colonies because they were located “beyond the line” of jus publicum Europeaum, that is, beyond the laws, customs, and conventions that limited the use of force and fraud in economic competition, social struggle, and political conflict in Europe:

The “inside” encompassed the laws, institutions, and customs of the mother country . . . The “outside,” by contrast, was characterized by imperial domination, the expropriation of vast territories, decimation of indigenous peoples, theft of their resources, enslavement, and the domination of vast tracts of land by private capitalists . . . In these imperial dependencies, the rules of the inside did not apply . . . violence defied the law, and bold physical coercion by private actors remade markets.

It is tempting to perceive in this description an international order bifurcated between the norm-bound spaces of Europe and exceptional spaces of the colonies. Yet, as Antony Anghie has compellingly shown, far from existing in a legal void untouched by European international public law, colonial spaces were constituted as unbound by norms through a hierarchical differentiation within the one and same sphere of international law. Molding colonial territories into the peripheries of the capitalist world economy turned in great measure on defining them as “exceptional zones of armed expropriation” and designating their inhabitants as “expropriable subjects . . . shorn of political protection, ripe and ready for confiscation.” Furthermore, as Nikhil Singh correctly observes, the colonies were domains not only for enacting plunder, that is, primitive accumulation (or accumulation by dispossession), but also for developing cutting-edge procedures, logics of calculation, circulation, abstraction, and infrastructure—the slaver’s management of human cargo, the camp, the prison, the forward military base—innovations that can proceed insofar as they are unfettered by legally protected human beings advancing new prejudices, built upon the old.

Liberated from political, legal, or customary limits to expropriation, enslavement, and plunder, colonial entrepreneurs, such as planters, slave traders, merchants, and chartered company agents, found a much freer hand in in reshaping local systems of production and exchange wherever they managed to secure political or military predominance. Consequently, although various forms of coerced dispossession and bondage dotted the European landscape in the early modern period, the union of political power and capital birthed much more violent and much “primitive” methods of accumulation beyond the “civilized” pale
of Europe. Brutal forms of economic extraction and exploitation in the colonies represented the “systemic edges” of capitalist expansion in the early modern period, where the scale and nature of the deep social transformations central to the birth of the global capitalist order fell into sharper relief.\textsuperscript{59}

### New Dilemmas of Liberalism

The primitive accumulation of capital was therefore “primitive” in two respects. In the first, structural sense, it marked the “originary” (\textit{ursprünglich}) and coercive transformations that gave rise to capitalist relations and drove their subsequent expansion by subsuming noncapitalist relations. In the second, normative sense, it signified the uncivilized, barbaric, and brutish means by which the conditions of capital accumulation were instituted and maintained. At the dawn of global capitalism, in Beckert’s words, “not secure private property rights but a wave of expropriation of labor and land characterized this moment, testifying to capitalism’s illiberal origins.”\textsuperscript{60} Yet in what sense and by what standard were these origins “illiberal”? By the standard, I argue, of a liberal conception of capitalism that imagined it as an economic system based on the sanctity of exclusive private property, voluntary market exchange between juridical equals, and the freedom to dispose of one’s labor without subjection to the arbitrary will of another. Marx himself conceded this much when he took classical political economy at its word and described the realm of the market, the sphere of capitalist circulation, as the realm of “Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham.”\textsuperscript{61} As the silent compulsion of economic relations qua threat of destitution replaced the overt coercion of primitive accumulation, capital’s despotism retreated to the “hidden abode of production,” leaving the sphere of circulation as the domain of freedom and equality, where the owners of the means of production and the owners of labor power entered into voluntary and self-interested agreements.

If we boil down these institutional arrangements and their structuring principles to their normative core, we arrive at \textit{contractual freedom} and \textit{juridical equality} as two primal norms of liberalism. This is certainly a rarefied, abstract formulation, but it is useful for clearly delimiting the scope of inquiry into such a notoriously polysemic concept as “liberalism.” First, restricting focus on contractual freedom and juridical equality helps us avoid entanglement in the whole range of family resemblances (such representative government, natural rights, consent of the governed) that have been associated with the term. The argument advanced here specifically concerns the centrality of juridical equality and contractual freedom to the liberal metropolitan imaginings of capitalism, rather than claiming to have discovered, in Bell’s words, the “ineliminable core” of liberalism tout court.\textsuperscript{62} We can thus dial in, for example, on Locke’s defense of
private property in the context of English occupation in the Atlantic or Edmund Burke’s advocacy of free trade in the face of British depredations in India, without getting mired in the dispute over whether we can speak of “liberalism” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.63

Secondly, and relatedly, a focus on these two primal norms situates our analysis in the idiom of political economy, which, as a political language and self-styled science of society, was born of the intellectual attempts to comprehend the emergent global capitalist order.64 The latter included, as we have seen, the commercialization and newfound prosperity of European societies but also the imperial expansion and war capitalism that made it possible. Political economy therefore constitutes a particularly propitious discursive terrain in which to trace the formulation and evolution of contractual freedom and juridical equality in connection with “the violent nature of capitalist expansion, ... the convulsive developments that tore up the globe even as they started integrating it.”65 In this field we find theses about security of property, the rule of law, division of labor, mobility of capital, and market expansion to be closely entangled with debates over claims to conquered territories, the colonial drain of wealth, the (dis)advantages of slave labor, and despotic rule over subjugated populations.

It is my contention that from the latter third of the seventeenth century onward, contractual freedom and juridical equality, through their varied yet persistent reiterations across different contexts and controversies, calcified into the backbone of a liberal understanding of capitalism in the early modern period. As the following chapters demonstrate, these norms displayed striking historical continuity in their conceptual intension, relative geographic indifference in their claims, and a remarkable compatibility with otherwise quite dissimilar political languages, including natural jurisprudence, ancient constitutionalism, conjectural history, and utilitarianism. As modular premises, they circulated less as strictly specified codes of conduct than as “a set of characteristic dispositions” that were “articulated in universal terms and entertained universal ambitions,” yet always already negotiated against various circumstances.66 Although it is not possible to exhaust their normative essence in any one of their historical expressions, these primal norms are recognizable as animating principles behind a range of discourses that can be grouped under a liberal understanding of capitalist relations.

In the early modern period, the term that constituted the semantic pivot of liberal political economy was “commerce,” a term that was simultaneously descriptive-particularistic and normative-universal. “Commerce” at once referred to the historically determinate capitalist socioeconomic relations obtaining in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and christened these relations with a cosmopolitan morality and civilizational superiority under the sign of “commercial society.”67 Moral philosophy and political economy converged
around this term, as disputes over the reason of state and the common good of the people, disagreements over how to govern colonies and imperial dependencies, and philosophical conjectures over the natural course of societal development increasingly partook of a new lexicon of social theory centered on commerce.  

English, and later British, political economists were both precocious and influential in articulating a liberal dialect within this new idiom. David Armitage remarks that in late seventeenth-century England, political economy functioned not just as a technical language of administration but also as a “political and constitutional argument” for imagining a novel polity that comprised the composite monarchy of the Three Kingdoms and its colonial possessions in the Atlantic. The expansion of English trade in the mid-seventeenth century, argues Steve Pincus, was critical to “creating for the first time a truly self-conscious commercial society” and with it “a new ideology applicable to a commercial society [which is] better understood as liberalism.” Although the British were not alone in increasingly relying on political economy for framing problems of imperial governance, they were peculiar in insinuating a liberal variant of political economy into the imagination of the British Empire as an “empire of trade.” In the British political and public opinion, this empire of trade and liberty united its metropolitan and colonial constituents by an ethos of material and moral improvement, bonds of mutual benefit, and the civilizing power of commerce. This liberal self-image was further galvanized by systematically contrasting its essentially maritime, free, and commercial character with the land-based despotism and territorial aspirations of Spain and France. “The virtues of an expanding commerce,” P. J. Marshall observes, “were widely extolled in Britain and in the colonies. . . . The freedom generated by commerce was assumed to be the distinguishing feature of Britain’s relations with her colonies by comparison with the oppressive empires of other European powers.” Even Smith in his acerbic critique of the mercantile system conceded that the British Empire, for all its faults and follies, was “less illiberal and oppressive” than its continental rivals.

Most importantly, this commercial self-conception meant that liberal thinkers in Britain would apply the same normative standards to judging the economics of the empire. It is at this point that the liberal thrust of political economy in fashioning the British self-image came up against the accelerating processes of colonial conquest, military extortion, and enslavement on which Britain’s imperial economy rose. As Chris Bayly summarizes, the imperialist drive to “retain and enhance control over land and labour” in the colonies “clashed with judicial and administrative philosophy of contemporary Britain which was imbued with ideas of freedom of contract, freedom of trade and free title to land.” The idea of a maritime and commercial people implied a belief in the fairness of the voluntary exchange of commodities and experiences between parties whose moral
right to pursue their interests was respected, in other words, a vision of “free exchange as the model of human interrelations.” At the same time, it was no secret that the making of Britain’s overseas commercial ties, and consequently the seed-bed of the modern economy and material prosperity, followed a course of imperial violence to pursue economic objectives. Consequently, while metropolitan condemnations of the abuses of empire “did not prevent imperial governments and settlers from being brutal and exploitative, it did ensure that scandals would be a periodic feature of imperial governance . . . over slavery, massacres, colonial wars, forced labor and poverty.” Containing these scandals in Britain was critical to straddling the simultaneous embrace of its commercial self-image and the imperial foundation of its power and prosperity.

An uncompromising way out of this conundrum would be either to radically overhaul Britain’s imperial structure along liberal principles or to abandon any pretense of upholding these principles as a matter of British character. The first option, most famously proposed by Smith’s advocacy of decolonization or imperial federation, would spell the end of the British Empire as the Britons knew it. Liberal critique of empire failed to resonate with the majority of the British political and economic elite (merchants, planters, manufacturers, statesmen), who dismissed it as little more than abstract philosophical speculation. In a context of interstate rivalry, with the Dutch in the seventeenth century and the French in the eighteenth, contemporaries held that empire, especially for an island country like Britain, secured the wealth and prosperity that was vital for domestic peace and national survival. “Nearly everyone at this time perceived that economic progress, national security, and the integration of the kingdom might well come from sustained levels of investment in global commerce, naval power, and, whenever necessary, the acquisition of bases and territories overseas.”

Mercantilism or the “old colonial system,” which hinged on the deployment of the organized power of the state for economic expansion and consolidation, was not considered an aberrant political intervention in what would otherwise be global free trade. Far from being an obstacle to economic globalization, the colonial empire provided the political framework in which transoceanic linkages of commerce could emerge as a historical reality and an object of contemplation in the first place.

The second option, of resolving this contradiction by jettisoning liberal commitments, likewise failed to find adherents among the advocates of empire, who remained wedded to what Karuna Mantena has labeled “ethical imperialism,” an ideology that rationalized imperial expansion as the instrument of “liberal, utilitarian, and evangelical reforms to transform, civilize, and emancipate the native.” The British imperial ideology obstinately remained “peculiar,” in Partha Chatterjee’s words, in its “reconciliation of a critique of Continental empires as land-based absolutist tyrannies with its own possession of overseas territories.”
Despite widespread awareness of colonial slavery in the West Indies, economic extortion in the East Indies, and territorial aggrandizement in both, the regard for the British Empire as the “empire of liberty” carried the day, though certainly not without recurrent ambiguities and anxieties.

We are thus confronted by the puzzling obduracy of the liberal conception of Britain’s imperial economy in the face of the endemic violence of colonial capitalism. I argue that such obduracy can explained by the discursive strategies of disavowal that circulated in the discursive space of the “imperial commons” and shaped the British political opinion on empire. Borrowing from Sybille Fischer, “disavowal,” in contradistinction to “denial,” involved the recognition of the disturbing realities of colonial coercion, expropriation, and exploitation. Instead of suppressing the disturbance by passing over it in silence, disavowal was a rather verbose strategy, a sort of incitement to discourse, that worked volubly and productively through “stories, screens, fantasies, that hide from view what is to be seen.” These strategies were particularly pronounced and deftly executed in the works of intellectuals of empire such as Locke, Burke, and Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who were at once earnestly committed to the liberal values enshrined in metropolitan political economy and to Britain’s colonial capitalist economy that undergirded her national prosperity and power. Such intellectuals provided the British political elite with the theoretical resources for furnishing an undeniably imperial political economic order with an ultimately liberal character. I say “ultimately” because in simultaneously defending British colonial capitalism and its liberal image, they neither ignored colonial violence nor cynically admitted it as the trademark of empire. Instead, they wove together a series of discursive strategies, rhetorical maneuvers, and literary fictions to demonstrate that the British imperial economy and the British polity remained at heart wedded to liberal values without denying the violence that checkered its career in the colonies.

The argument from disavowal differs from the existing explanations of the resilience of liberal imperialism. For some, such resilience can be traced to an upsurge of imperial confidence in British public opinion at the turn of the nineteenth century. The difficulty with this argument is that the impact of public opinion on the course of imperial policy was, at best, questionable between the 1780s and 1830s, which saw a combination of proconsular imperialism abroad and political conservatism at home. The alternative account locates the key to the puzzle in the pervasive cynicism of the British political elite and treats imperial ideology as a perennial “exercise in lofty denial.” While I concur that the elite consciousness is where we should look for ideological tensions—not least because it harbors more unambiguous expressions of such tensions as compared to popular consciousness—the explanation from cynicism remains facile. Despite its tempting simplicity, collapsing the tension between liberalism and
empire to the logic of duplicity is hard to sustain, if only because, as Bernard Porter notes, the British political classes may have been ideologically gullible, but they were not hypocrites. Imputations of a conscious instrumentality to liberalism as an imperial ideology forget that such ideologies were the “opiates of the elite” and that their various iterations “primarily targeted their fellow Europeans. It was, above all, their own countrymen and political leaders that colonists had to convince of the legitimacy of their actions, not indigenous peoples.”

Liberal imperialism, as Bell argues, shared with other ideologies of justification a common “imperial imaginary” structured by the metaconcept of “civilization,” in which the world was “envisioned as a space of inequality and radical difference” and “peoples and societies are arrayed in a hierarchical manner.”

Crucially, the thinkers who openly criticized imperial institutions and practices that were regnant in their time, thinkers who have been hailed as the representatives of anti-imperial Enlightenment, also broadly subscribed to the civilizational hierarchies of the imperial imaginary, though certainly with different normative inflections and conclusions. The liberal strand in British imperial ideology proved to be rather resourceful and adaptive, to the point of co-opting fragments of anti-imperial critique to use in renewed justifications of expansion and control. Consequently, the claim that “the conflict between the domestic and the foreign regime proved too contradictory to bridge” is at best greatly overstated.

In breaking with culturalist interpretations and “rematerializing” liberalism’s relationship to empire, we are not simply inverting the lexical order between ideation and materiality but, rather, restoring materiality back to the circuit of imperial ideology and practice. Expressed another way, we are not reducing liberalism to an ideological handmaiden of capitalism but positing a reciprocal and contradictory relationship between the two. Liberalism is better understood as a mode of theoretical reflection and a value system that found its social conditions of possibility in the historically situated capitalist institutional forms but could not normatively accommodate the violent processes that engendered them. Processes of enclosure, commodification, and dispossession originating in the seventeenth century gave birth to “private property,” “market exchange,” and “free labor” as concrete social relations on which theoretical reflection could fasten and around which liberal tenets such as “the private,” “consent,” “contract,” and “self-ownership” could germinate and crystallize. At the same time, however, these very conditions of possibility saddled liberalism with contradictions inasmuch as these conditions came into existence through the forcible obliteration of the “strange multiplicity” of alternative modes of life, in Europe but more dramatically in the colonies. The enthronement of private property as the natural and universally beneficial mode of appropriating and exploiting the earth’s resources depended on the forcible marginalization of competing property systems, which was accomplished on a colossal scale by the land appropriations in
the New World. The ascendancy of free trade involved the coerced assimilation or the subordination of nonmarket forms of distribution to the logic of selfinterested market exchange, which, for instance, made agricultural exports possible during famines in India and Ireland. Finally, the triumph of free labor over serfdom and slavery was at the same time the triumph of an agenda of forcing individuals to “freely” contract their labor power on the market by cutting their access to alternative means of social reproduction, a logic that vividly played out, first in England and later in its settler colonies in North America and Australasia.

The upshot of this reasoning is condensed by Bonefeld, who writes, “The violence of capital’s original beginning is the formative content of the civilized forms of equality, liberty, freedom, and utility.” At the same time as primitive accumulation established the social conditions of capitalist exploitation on a global scale, it also engendered the institutional forms that would become the hallmarks of liberal political economy in Europe. However, the element of violence in the capitalist appropriation and conscription of land, labor, and resources overseas could always become too intense, offensive, and thus unacceptable to liberal sensibilities in the British metropole. For the colonial capitalist ventures to be carried out by private agents, endorsed by public authorities, and condoned by public opinion, these ventures needed to be recognized—or more accurately, misrecognized—as being on the whole “British,” that is, commercial, pacific, and free. If we situate liberal thought in a framework of “ideology,” then the critical role of British imperial ideology in this period was to uphold the necessary misrecognition of colonial capitalism as an essentially liberal market phenomenon.

The relationship between liberalism and capitalism can therefore be grasped as one of contradictory co-constitution, wherein capitalist transformations created the institutional conditions of the possibility and tractability of the primal norms of liberalism, while liberal misrecognition of capitalism endowed the inequalities and power effects generated by such transformations with normative validity and legitimacy. “Slavery, colonial rule, and white domination all depended on long-distance connections and on ocean-crossing ideological constructs: on the sense of normality and entitlement of colonial planters, settlers, and officials, and on publics in Europe accepting such arrangements as legitimate parts of an imperial polity, a global economy, and Western civilization.” The conviction that the British Empire was a global engine of liberty, property, civility, and law not only supplied post hoc justification of colonial violence; it also lent ideological force to renewed authorizations of further waves of coercive expropriation, secure in the faith that the empire project remained liberal at heart.

The staying power of this article of faith in the liberality of empire, and therefore the reproduction of this necessary misrecognition, owed in no small part to the efforts of metropolitan intellectuals to disavow the illiberal underpinnings of
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Britain’s imperial economy. Locke, Burke, and Wakefield were three such intellectuals whose works present privileged grounds for observing liberal strategies of disavowal. First, these three figures evinced a bona fide dedication to a secular conception of progress and civilization that was shaped by Britain’s capitalist economy. A central theme in their writings was the material benefits to be reaped by humanity from increased economic productivity, finding expression in such tropes as the “common stock of mankind” (Locke), “universal opulence” (Burke), and “accumulation of capital” (Wakefield). Second, they saw in the British imperial project an avatar of commercial civilization with a world-historical purpose as much an instrument for ensuring Britain’s survival as a great power. Furthermore, all three men were actively involved in Britain’s imperial politics: Locke, in his capacity as a colonial administrator on the Board of Trade; Burke, as a parliamentary member of the Select Committee on India; and Wakefield, as a colonial reformer who had a coterie of followers in Parliament. Third, they were all “liberal” political economists in that they made contractual freedom and juridical equality the keystone of their appraisal of capitalist relations, be it in Locke’s global theory of private property, Burke’s ideal of imperial commerce, or Wakefield’s plans for colonial free labor. Finally, all three belonged to what contemporaries called the “middling sorts” who offered their talents to the British political elite whose patronage they sought. Being excluded from the direct exercise of political power, their principal means for exerting influence on imperial policy was the theoretical cogency and appeal of their writings on the political economy and morality of the empire, which they variously addressed to Parliament, the government, and the Colonial Office. By virtue of this peculiar status, the works of such intellectuals displayed an unusual attention to the contemporary universe of political discourse, keen engagement with the major debates, and a pronounced and even self-avowed concern with theoretical consistency.

Such shared institutional, intellectual, and professional investments constitute the overarching framework in which a comparison of these otherwise dissimilar thinkers can generate unexpected insights into the liaisons between liberalism and empire. At once animated and constrained by these commitments, Locke, Burke, and Wakefield made remarkable attempts to navigate the aporias attendant on professing liberal political economic principles at home while endorsing illiberal economic practices in colonial peripheries. Their conception of British capitalism as an essentially commercial and pacific system rested on representing the expropriation, extortion, and exploitation of the empire as something incidental to British capitalism instead of its historical modus operandi. Their emphatic endorsement of empire also set them apart from other liberal political economists, such as David Hume or Smith, who similarly diagnosed the conflicting commitments of liberalism and imperialism but sided with liberal commitments against empire. The intellectual efforts Locke, Burke,
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and Wakefield registered those moments in which the cardinal premises of liberalism were forced into an open confrontation and negotiation with their historical conditions of possibility.

Having outlined the theoretical problem, historical scope, and the interpretive approach of the study, we can now return to the question of method broached earlier. From a rigorous linguistic contextualist perspective, the interpretive apparatus of colonial capitalism appears suspect because neither “liberalism” as a self-conscious doctrine nor “capitalism” as a descriptive concept existed in British political discourse in the period under study. As I have suggested, this is a matter of the register of analysis. The fact that seventeenth-century thinkers did not invoke liberalism and capitalism *eo nomine* does not mean that the practices and principles that we now recognize and analyze under these rubrics did not exist at the time. Secondly, and equally importantly, designating the relevant context at the level of institutional practices and ideological principles rather than linguistic conventions and discursive protocols does not render the analysis less contextual. The framework of colonial capitalism does not dislodge texts from their historical conditions of articulation, but it does carve out of historical relations and temporalities a different type of context in which liberal arguments can be subjected to questions—in this case, social contradictions, theoretical conundrums, and ideological tensions—that are different from those available to linguistic contextualism.

As a number of commentators have recently observed, the contextualist suspicion of the social and the longue durée in the study of political ideas is conditioned by a rather narrow understanding of what “context” is. Perhaps most importantly, there exists no ultimate a priori standard by which to adjudicate between the validity of discursive/linguistic and practical/socioeconomic contexts, and as social theorists have not ceased to remind us, the division itself is highly dubious and unsustainable except by disciplinary strictures. The important question is not so much whether the proposed textual interpretation adopts the “correct type” of context as whether it contains a coherent theory of the relationship between ideation and practice and an account of why the contexts it demarcates are relevant for investigating the questions it sets for itself. For instance, the argument that the commodification of agriculture in Bengal is as relevant to the history of liberalism as the British debates on commercial society would be anathema to linguistic-contextualist sensibilities, as would be a study of liberal imperialism that proceeds by comparing the widely disparate contexts of early twentieth-century Britain and early twenty-first-century United States. Yet recent books by Andrew Sartori and Jeanne Morefield accomplish precisely these feats, demonstrating the rich interpretive possibilities activated by expanding one’s scope to other “logics of history” beyond the linguistic and to other temporalities beyond the provincial.
The interpretation of liberalism undertaken in these pages is animated by a kindred impulse to “embed the conceptual structure of liberal thought in the sociohistorical contexts of its articulation.” While I pay due attention to historical detail and the specificity of the political languages in which liberal ideas on property, exchange, and labor were articulated, my interpretation directs liberal arguments beyond the self-enclosed domain of textual circulation. Liberal ideas and the dilemmas they embody assume their significance (that is, both meaning and import) in this study with reference to concrete colonial capitalist forms and the challenge of their manifest illiberality.

I follow two premises in mooring the works of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield in their respective contexts of territorial dispossession, unequal exchange, and unfree labor. The first is the capacity of these authors “to articulate a (relatively) coherent formulation of specific modes of social reflection and ethico-political argument that had either emerged or would soon emerge to prominence.” The significance of the writings of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield resides not in their immediate illocutionary force, but in their status as elaborate condensation points of social forces, political and economic priorities, and imperial agendas. Viewed under the light of colonial capitalism, their writings shine as surfaces on which we find inscribed the social and ideological contradictions that were internal to Britain’s imperial economy. These contradictions were of interest to their contemporaries and their future readers, and to the extent that they provide a window on the contradictory co-constitution of capitalism and liberalism that persists in our present, they should be of interest to us.

The persistence of the past in the present, in other words, is arguably more pronounced in practical and ideological contexts than in strictly linguistic ones, but it is also this persistence that renders historically distant utterances on the common ground of liberalism, capitalism, and imperialism commensurable. In this sense, a theory of colonial capitalism, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in a moment of exceptional lucidity, can be adopted “as not so much . . . a teleology of history as . . . a perspectival point from which to read the archives.” Such a reading is enabled by a retrospective gaze that pierces through multiple historical contexts, which, in turn, necessitates parting ways with the strict linguistic contextualism that “helps in identifying particular idioms of speech within historical political discourse, but it is less productive when naming key concepts that transcend linguistic fashion.” To argue this much is not to suggest that contextual contingencies that shaped the circulation and reception of the ideas studied here are irrelevant; only that an exclusive focus on the temporality of contingencies occludes from view the significance of ideas in the temporality of capitalism.

Secondly, I consider each author to be writing in the very thick of the problems of imperial political economy and governance rather than in clearly isolable periods (for instance, the “first” empire or the “second” empire or Pax
Britannica) each having its settled issues and agendas of government. Their contexts were marked by flux, when extant modes of political and economic thought had revealed their limits in comprehending the novel world-historical phenomena emerging within the networks of Britain’s imperial formation. As Ellen Meiksins Wood succinctly puts it, “[L]ong-term developments in social relations, property-forms and state-formation do episodically erupt into specific political-ideological controversies.” At its most immediate, the debates examined in the following chapters concerned whether the English were rightfully occupying vacant lands rather than usurping them from Native Americans by force, whether Britain’s trade with its Eastern empire could be restored to its true commercial foundation or was irredeemably corrupt, and whether it was possible to compel British emigrants to work for capitalist farmers in the colonies without abridging their civil liberties. At stake in these debates, however, were the broader ideological questions about the nature of Britain’s imperial economy; the means by which it ought to be promoted and regulated; and the implications of these imperial strategies, institutions, and practices for imagining the British polity and national character. One can find these comprehensive ideological stakes reflected in the writings of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield, who not only directed their arguments to their contemporaries but also advanced their claims in expressly universal terms with an indication to speak beyond their immediate context and communicate enduring verities to imagined future audiences. If we further widen the analytic aperture from the history of the British Empire to its intersection with the history of global capitalism, we can identify the significance of their reflections for the liberal imagination of capitalism understood as a problem of political theory. From this vantage point, we can see their ruminations on the naturalness of private property, the justice of the market, and the utility of free labor cutting across the history of global capitalism, classical political economy, and problems of imperial governance.

This is why in studying the history of liberalism in the context of empire, one ought not to rest content with questions of culture and language, of universalism and difference, as important as these questions are. If we are to gain analytic purchase on the cardinal liberal institutions of private property, free exchange, and free labor, as well as the primal norms of contractual freedom and juridical equality they incorporate, in Geoff Kennedy’s emphatic call, “we do need a conceptualization of capitalist development as the relevant social context.”

Conclusion: Stereoscopic View of History

In his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin wrote, “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own
The historical articulation of the past for Benjamin emphatically did not mean to reconstruct it as accurately as possible. Instead, his historical pedagogy aimed at training the faculty of seeing “dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade.” The expression is rather aphoristic and allegorical, but it gestures at a potentially productive, critical orientation to history that often gets brushed aside as methodologically unsound. The three-dimensionality implied in the stereoscopic view is of the same order as Benjamin’s more famous call to “blast open the continuum of history” and release fragments of the past to restore their relevance to our present. A relevant fragment could be something that is fragile and threatens to vanish from the historical record altogether—abandoned attempts or quashed possibilities of different ways of organizing human communities, such as indigenous systems of social reproduction, nonstate forms of political organization, or moral economies of commoning, which, though defeated by the alliance of the modern state and capital, reminds one that the present could have been, and can perhaps still be, otherwise. By contrast, a relevant fragment could also be something that is robust and persists in the present but eludes our recognition by its ubiquity—a dominant social principle or historical logic, which, precisely because it is not recognized as historical, pervades the present as timeless common sense, such as the assumption that all property is essentially individual private property, the state is a necessary evil, and human beings are hardwired utility maximizers.

By linguistic-contextualist reasoning, if the early modern political period is circumscribed by political idioms in which liberalism and capitalism are conceptually absent, then there is little to be attained by delving into this period for sharpening our understanding of either liberalism or capitalism in general. The past remains a foreign country. By contrast, a critical history, in Martti Koskenniemi’s words, “should not dispose of materials from other chronological moments,” and at times, the spark of critical insight arises precisely from the juxtaposition of fragments from disparate historical contexts. Consider, for instance, the following two passages that are separated by more than three centuries:

God gave the World to Men in Common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest Conveniencies of Life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational, (and Labour was to be his Title to it); not to the Fancy or Covetousness of the Quarrelsome and Contentious.

Development knowledge is part of the “global commons”: it belongs to everyone, and everyone should benefit from it. But a global
partnership is required to cultivate and disseminate it. The Bank Group’s relationships with governments and institutions all over the world and our unique reservoir of development experience across sectors and countries, position us to play a leading role in this new global knowledge partnership.114

The first of these is by John Locke, in the Second Treatise of Government; the second is by the World Bank president John Wolfensohn, in his 1996 inaugural address. One could either dismiss the resonance between the two as mere imagistic analogy and reassert their incommensurability or, alternatively, investigate the shared logics of history and specific temporalities that render them resonant despite their different historical circumstances, immediate concerns, and political vocabularies.

One such explanation (admittedly at a level of abstraction that may make historians uncomfortable) is the persistence in Western political thought of the “notion that states, and indeed humanity itself, could only preserve themselves through the exploitation of the earth’s resources to which all people had a common right, but to which particular people gained superior and particular rights through their acts of exploitation or occupation.”115 The book from which this quote is taken, Andrew Fitzmaurice’s survey of the Western “doctrine of occupation” over five centuries, suggests that longue durée studies in intellectual history do not have to end up in positing unbroken, evolutionary continuities from pristine ideational origins, or what Michel Foucault called “pedigree” in contrast to “genealogy.”116 Rather, I contend that obtaining a stereoscopic view of history involves parsing different historical logics and temporalities to identify what persists in the present. This in turn necessitates an alertness to historical fragments that can provide us with clues about continuities and discontinuities and about disappearance and resurgence, instead of a methodological probity that safely ensconces each fragment in its historically proper place.

Stereoscopic view of history is therefore, to borrow from David Armitage, “transtemporal” but not “transhistorical.”117 Returning to the problem of theorizing the imperial context, however, the historical configuration in which we find Locke’s late seventeenth-century proto-liberalism and Wolfensohn’s late twentieth-century neoliberalism does not immediately present itself to us. Discerning it requires the mediation of a specific theoretical vantage point, one attuned to the continuities between the institutional-ideological structures and social imaginaries of European colonialism, the Mandate System, and the postwar development regime, through which the nineteenth-century binary of civilized and barbarian mutated into that of developed and underdeveloped.118 Similarly, dissecting the amoebic resilience of the “rise of the West” metanarrative, which has reinvented itself over the last century and a half through a host
of different idioms (evolutionary biology, sociology, political science, history, and, most recently, institutional economics), necessarily points beyond the specific languages in which it has instantiated and toward a theory that incorporates their nondiscursive connections.\footnote{To use a celestial metaphor favored by Benjamin, gazing at the writings of Locke, Burke, and Wakefield through the looking glass of colonial capitalism aligns them in a historical “constellation” that discloses the constitutive dilemmas of liberalism in its fraught relationship with capitalism and empire.}
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Introduction


10. This orientation has a long lineage that extends at least back to the dependency theory, if not to earlier studies on capitalism and slavery. I am indebted to Jairus Banaji’s sophisticated reconstruction of this theoretical perspective, above all, in his *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) and, more recently, in “Merchant
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20. Ferguson, Empire; Michael Ignatieff, Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan (Toronto: Penguin, 2003).

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3. For two excellent surveys of the literature on liberalism and empire and of the broader field of political theory of imperialism to which it belongs, see Jennifer Pitts, “Theories of Empire and Imperialism,” Annual Review of Political Science 13 (2010): 211–35; and Bell, “Dream Machine.”

5. Ferguson, Colossus; and Ferguson, Empire. See also Ignatieff, Empire Lite.


10. Uday Mehta’s work on liberalism and empire offers the most unequivocal condemnation of liberalism’s complicity with imperialism, sharing in the postcolonial critique of the Enlightenment as a whole. Jennifer Pitts and Sankar Muthu have done much to challenge this cathartic condemnation by reconstructing the anti-imperial streak in European Enlightenment thought, which, they argue, flared up for a resplendent if brief moment in the late eighteenth century. See Mehta, Liberalism and Empire; Uday Mehta, “Liberal Strategies of Exclusion,” Politics and Society 18 (1990): 427–54. Sankar Muthu, Enlightenment against Empire (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pitts, Turn to Empire.


12. Sartori, “British Empire,” 637. Sartori’s essay provides what is in my opinion the most astute critique of the culturalism that is prevalent in the study of liberalism and empire. For an alternative materialist approach, see Andrew Sartori, Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). For a critical treatment of the kindred culturalist disposition in postcolonial studies, see Frederick Cooper, “Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History,” in Loomba et al., Postcolonial Studies and Beyond, 401–22; and Ilan Kapoor, The Postcolonial Politics of Development (London: Routledge, 2008).


15. The liberality of empire is further evidenced by the Anglo-American capacity to lament the violence that inevitably attends all empires. The bad conscience about the violent past of the empire reconfirms that the British imperialists were liberal at heart. For an exceptionally insightful critique of these discursive strategies, see Jeanne Morefield, “Empire, Tragedy, and the Liberal State in the Writings of Niall Ferguson and Michael Ignatieff,” Theory and Event 11, no. 3 (2008), doi. 10.1353/tea.0.0014; and Jeanne Morefield, Empires without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).


24. Such transhistorical interpretive moves fall prey to one or more of Skinner’s famous mythologies of doctrine, coherence, and prolepsis. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding.” For a recent reiteration, see Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” 682–715.


28. I develop this argument in detail in “Primitive Accumulation” and in “Bringing the Economy.”

29. Karl Marx, Capital, 1:873–76. Since Marx’s elaboration, the usefulness of the term for a theory of capitalism has been hotly contested. Those who understand the term to mean a preliminary stockpiling of material resources, for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, call for abandoning the concept altogether, whereas others who emphasize the social-relational aspect of primitive accumulation, David Harvey and Saskia Sassen notable among them, have reworked the concept


31. The notion of colonial capitalism here at bottom builds on than Sanjay Subrahmanyan’s definition of “colonial empire” as “a particular kind of empire that is fundamentally characterized by the exploitative relations between an imperial core and a subject periphery.” Yet it is also conceptually more capacious inasmuch as it extends beyond mere surplus transfer and encompasses coercive socioeconomic transformations in the colonies. The social-transformative as opposed to merely economic-extractive intension of colonial capitalism also distinguishes my analysis from Lisa Lowe’s recent investigation of liberalism and empire, which collapses the material link between the two to the “colonial profits” that helped to build the European bourgeoisies and their liberal categories of development. In a sense, this accounting perspective simply inverts earlier claims that imperialism and colonialism were “unprofitable” and therefore “peripheral” to the development of capitalism in Europe. Sanjay Subrahmanyan, “Imperial and Colonial Encounters: Some Comparative Reflections,” in *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin Moore (New York: New Press, 2006), 220; Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Lance E. Davis and Robert A. Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire*: *The Political Economy of British Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Patrick O’Brien, “European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery,” *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 35 (1982): 1–18. For a considered treatment of the institutional frame of analysis in the history of capitalist globalization, including the national, the imperial, and the global, see Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, esp. 91–112.


37. Such extra-economic coercion is, in Chakrabarty’s formulation, “both originary/foundational (that is, historic) as well as pandemic and quotidian,” which is also to suggest that primitive accumulation is not a concluded historical stage but has an inherent and continuous character as a capitalist strategy of reproduction, expansion, and crisis management. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 44. For a more detailed elaboration, see Ince, “Primitive Accumulation”; De Angelis, “Separating the Doing,” 57–87.


40. Marx, Capital, 1:915.

41. Luxemburg, Accumulation of Capital, 351.

42. Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” 60, 64. For the capacious understanding of primitive accumulation as a social as opposed to simply an economic category, see Nichols, “Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation”; and Kalyan Sanyal, Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007). Partha Chatterjee similarly defines primitive accumulation as “nothing else but the destruction of the precapitalist community, which, in various forms, had regulated the social unit of laborers with their means of production.” Chatterjee, Nation and Its Fragments, 235.

43. For instance, Jason Read conjectures that for Marx, the “violent lawmaking power of primitive accumulation is merely privatized and brought indoors into the factory.” Read, Micro-Politics of Capital, 28–29.

44. Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode,” 60, 64.


46. The presumption of linearity underlies the troubled modernization theories that conceive of capitalist “transition” as the replication of the Euro-American economic experience.


48. Cooper, Colonialism in Question, 102.


50. Very useful in this regard is Chakrabarty’s distinction between the “being” and “becoming” of capital, between its “universal logic” and the historically specific forms it assumes. The key
theoretical insight behind this distinction is Marx’s discussion of the “real subsumption” and the “formal subsumption” of labor under capital’s direction. Marx, *Capital*, 1:1019–38. For a rigorous analysis of the ways in which these two modalities are interrelated, see Jairus Banaji, “Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History,” in *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto, 2007).


57. Fraser, “Expropriation and Exploitation,” 172; Singh, “On Race,” 41. Also see Michael Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order,” *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 143–61. To give one example, in England the majority of the laboring population was subject to the Statute of Artificers, which bound apprentices to their masters but also provided them with recourse to common law and courts. By contrast, Barbados had a slave code (the first slave code in English history) to govern its black labor force, which was framed by and granted absolute prerogative to the white masters. Douglass Hay and Paul Craven, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).


59. Saskia Sassen elaborates the methodological merits of focusing on “systemic edges” in analyzing the dispossessive and exclusionary logics of capitalism. The systemic edge represents “the site where general conditions take extreme forms,” which in turn “makes visible larger trends that are less extreme and hence more difficult to capture.” Sassen, *Expulsions*, 211.


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71. Sophus Reinert’s studies into the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century translations of political economic tracts provide a highly original mapping of the dissemination of this new political language among European political classes and lay publics. See Reinert, Translating Empire; and “Empire of Emulation,” in Reinert and Røge, Political Economy of Empire.


73. Smith, Wealth of Nations, 2:34.


75. Andrew Sartori, Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 51.


77. Frederick Cooper, “Modernizing Colonialism and the Limits of Empire,” in Calhoun, Cooper, and Moore, Lessons of Empire, 66.


92. See, generally, Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty*.

93. Maier, *Among Empires*, 61, 64.


103. Sartori, Liberalism in Empire; Morefield, Empires without Imperialism. The concepts “logic of history” and “premise of provincialism” are borrowed respectively from Sewell, Logics of History, 10–11; and Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism,” 40–44.


105. Sartori, Bengal in Global Concept History, 6.

106. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 63.


112. Sequestering the past from the present on the grounds of historical correctness can thereby militate, ironically, against one of the positive conclusions Skinner drew from the linguistic-contextualist approach— namely, that it can “show the extent to which those features of our own arrangements which may be disposed to accept as tradition or even ‘timeless’ truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure.” Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding,” 53.


115. Fitzmaurice, Sovereignty, 19.


117. Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea?”


119. The new institutionalist defense of “liberal” institutions for their inclusiveness and efficiency lacks Ferguson’s brash imperialist bombast, but it is no less apolitical for that reason. In fact, Ferguson himself later expanded the scope of his pro-imperial stance to the Western civilization as a whole. Whatever their methodological choices and mode of presentation, both accounts similarly admit the place of illiberal, coercive methods in the history of global capitalism, only to cordon them off from the essentially liberal character and Western provenance of capitalism by casting them either as unfeasible economic strategies or as peripheral political expedients. See Acemoglu and Robinson, Why Nations Fail; Niall Ferguson, Civilization: The West and the Rest (London: Allen Lane, 2011); Niall Ferguson, The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

120. On the notion of “constellation” as a conceptual apparatus of historical analysis, see Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London: Verso, 1998), 34–35.

Chapter 2

1. Trailblazing colonial interpretations of Locke include James Tully, An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Arneil, John Locke and America; and Mehta, Liberalism and Empire. For skeptical accounts, see