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Research Statement

My research agenda stands at the intersection of political theory, political economy, history of capitalism, and imperial studies. I chiefly investigate how socioeconomic transformations constitutive of global capitalism have shaped and in turn have been shaped by various discourses of political economy since the early-modern period. In addition to the two book projects outlined below, this line of research has generated more than half a dozen peer-reviewed articles in leading political science journals including *The Journal of Politics*, *Political Theory*, and *the History of Political Thought*.

My first book, *Colonial Capitalism under the Dilemmas of Liberalism* (Oxford, 2018), analyzes the relationship between liberalism and empire from the perspective of political economy. It investigates the formative impact of “colonial capitalism” on the historical development of British liberal thought between the late-seventeenth and early-nineteenth centuries. It argues that liberalism as a political language developed through early-modern debates over the contested meanings of property, exchange, and labor, which it examines respectively in the context of colonial land appropriations in the Americas, militarized trading in South Asia, and state-led proletarianization in Australasia. The book contends that the British Empire could be extolled as the “empire of liberty” – that is, the avatar of private property, free trade, and free labor – only on the condition that its colonial expropriation, extraction, and exploitation were “disavowed” and dissociated from the increasingly liberal conception of its capitalist economy. It identifies exemplary strategies of disavowal in the works of John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Edward G. Wakefield, who, as three liberal intellectuals of empire, attempted to navigate the ideological tensions between the liberal self-image of Britain and the violence that shaped its imperial economy. Challenging the prevalent tendency to study liberalism and empire around an abstract politics of universalism and colonial difference, the book discloses the ideological contradictions internal to Britain’s imperial economy and their critical influence on the formation of liberalism. It concludes that the disavowal of the violence constitutive of capitalist relations in the colonies has been crucial for crafting a liberal image for Anglophone imperialism and more generally for global capitalism.

I am currently working on a second book, entitled “Between Commerce and Empire: Capitalism and the Limits of Liberal Anti-Imperialism,” which complements the first. At the heart of both books is the contradictory and constitutive relationship between capitalism, liberalism, and empire. While *Colonial Capitalism* examines this contradiction in liberal defenses of empire, “Between Commerce and Empire” investigates the same contradiction in works of liberal anti-imperial criticism.

The theoretical problematic central to this book can be sketched out as follows. On the one hand, when we survey eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment thought, we find the elaboration of a cosmopolitan ideal of peace, prosperity, and civilization hitched to the nascent order of global commerce. Major Enlightenment figures concurred that modern Europeans were set apart both from their ancient and medieval ancestors and from their non-European contemporaries by a distinct set of political institutions and social manners that emerged from the commercialization of European societies from the sixteenth century onwards. The modern refinement and liberty that commerce generated gave it a distinctly cosmopolitan hue and rendered it on the whole a civilizing force. On the other hand, the same thinkers also had to

admit that it was impossible to account for the history of global commerce independently of the violent and rapacious history of European colonial empires. European political and economic thought in this period harbored the express recognition of the formative role of imperial expansion in forcibly connecting different peoples and economies of America, Asia, Africa, and Europe into a global economic system. Taken together, these two observations occasioned an ideological problem that troubled eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reflections on commerce. While modern European civilization had its conditions of possibility in expanding circles of global commerce, the expansion of global commerce itself was itself historically carried out by manifestly “uncivil” processes of imperial conquest, colonial dispossession, extraction, and enslavement.

Recent scholarship in the history of political thought has been quick to point out this fraught relationship between commerce and empire. Scholars (chiefly Jennifer Pitts, Sankar Muthu, and Emma Rothschild, among others) compiled a veritable inventory of Enlightenment invectives against European imperialism as economically destructive and morally unjust. While such overt denunciations of empire are patently documented, how to interpret them remains a matter of controversy. The thematic leitmotif of the existing interpretations has been “moral ambivalence.” It has been argued that Enlightenment thinkers – such as David Hume, Denis Diderot, Adam Smith, and Jeremy Bentham – acknowledged the cosmopolitan promise of global commerce and by and large welcomed the civility generated by modern commercial society; but they were repulsed by the historical record of imperial violence by which Europeans extended their commerce overseas. Consequently, their verdict on commercial progress was deeply ambivalent, frequently ironic, and ultimately inconclusive.

By contrast, the book argues that the so-called “ambivalence” of liberal critics of imperialism was less a matter of personal sensibility. Such ambivalence, I contend, is better understood as an expression of what I label the “liberal critique of capitalist unevenness” that gives voice to a broader ideological contradiction. Liberal thinkers pitted the cosmopolitan promise of global commerce against the violence of empire, but doing so required a simultaneous act of conceptual purification that expunged the imperial baggage of global commerce, such that it could stand as empire’s normative *antithesis*. Enlightenment critics’ adoption of an essentially liberal conception of capitalism as the standpoint of anti-imperial critique also set limits to their criticism, insofar as it forced them into a sort of ideological boot-strapping: to derive an alternative to the imperial global order from the unintended consequences of that imperial order itself. This represented a momentous feat of ideological innovation, if not a leap of faith.

The book develops this argument through a careful engagement with the works of classical political economists and imperial reformers who openly decried the coercive methods of commercial capitalism such as colonial slavery, settler colonialism, militarized trading, and imperial despotism. The first two chapters focus on the Scottish Enlightenment luminaries, Hume and Smith, and locates their critique of empire in the context of Atlantic colonial capitalism. One chapter examines Hume’s elision of colonial plantation slavery by confining his discussion of slavery to the ancient Greco-Roman practice, feudal bondage, and Asiatic despotism. Another analyzes Smith’s representation of British North American settler colonies in the image of ancient Greek colonies, which occludes the origins of these colonies in territorial conquest and indigenous dispossession. An article version of the first chapter has been published in the *History of Political Thought*, while that of the second chapter has been invited for revision and resubmission at *The Journal of Politics*.

The following chapters on utilitarian imperial reformers are in the research stage. These center on the adoption of the Ricardian theory of capital accumulation – notably by Jeremy Bentham

and James Mill – in opposing imperial expansion as economically sterile and politically corrupt. I disclose the limits of this position as evidenced in the utilitarian admission, at first begrudging and later enthusiastic, of the need for imperial activism in the Asia-Pacific to save British capitalism in the first half of the nineteenth century. Settler colonialism in Australasia, plans to transform British India into a society of consumers, and the Opium Wars to open up Chinese markets constituted crucial moments of colonial capitalism in the East, which posed an ideological challenge to the utilitarian position that envisioned capital accumulation and imperialism as essentially antithetical. I will draft these chapters during the term of the Fung Global Fellowship at the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies.

This book, like the first, advances a major methodological revision to the current scholarship on political theory and empire that remains anchored in linguistic and discursive modes of analysis. Across the various engagements with empire and capitalism that I investigate, we can detect a shared institutional and ideological problem – the problem of colonial capitalism for liberal political economy – that transcends the individual sensibilities and moral commitments of individual thinkers. What the two books accomplish is a triangulation of this problem from both sides of the normative divide. That the same illiberalism of capitalism confronted the liberal defenders *and* the liberal critics of empire strongly suggests that this problem existed independently of the moral predilections and individual sensibilities of the figures under study.

Above all, this line of inquiry issues a call to rematerialize liberalism's relationship to empire by making a theory of colonial capitalism central to our understanding not only of liberal imperialism but also of the so-called Enlightenment against empire. If, as I argue, the contradictions that vexed liberal thinkers were internal to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century global capitalism, then they cannot be derived exclusively from analyses of texts, semantic contexts, and intra-textual interpretation, important as these analyses remain. Delineating the contradictions studied here requires positioning texts as much at the institutional-ideological as linguistic-textual registers, and dissecting the liberalism-capitalism-empire nexus in explicitly socioeconomic terms. What is needed, in other words, is new social history of political theory that is self-consciously global and imperial in scope.

The theoretical insights of this study extend beyond the historical period that frames it and speak to contemporary controversies over the liberal and authoritarian parameters of capitalism. Over the past 15 years, new institutional economists, pioneered by Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, have turned to histories of colonialism and empire to discover the deep determinants of economic performance. As I have argued in a recent paper (under review), new institutionalism's ostensibly pathbreaking opposition between liberal-inclusive and authoritarian-extractive institutions essentially reiterates the Smithian antithesis between commerce and empire. In a similar vein, contemporary economic historians armed with cliometric instruments have adopted an implicit dichotomy between liberal markets and illiberal empires, arguing that levels of transoceanic trade and global market integration would have been much higher in the absence of colonial regulations. In both cases, colonialism and imperialism are admitted as historical facts but denied analytic significance, or in other words, allowed into the *history* of capitalism on the condition that they are excluded from a *theory* of capitalism.

The proposed project, together with my first book, suggests placing liberal and illiberal modes of integration to the global capitalist economy within the same analytic field rather than treating them as mutually exclusive. Instead of understanding liberal-inclusive and authoritarian-extractive institutions as parallel and alternative trajectories of economic organization, this research highlights their structural interdependence in the historical configuration and

expansion of global capitalist relations. Secondly, this project also draws attention to the irreducibly imperial conditions of the globalization of the so-called liberal-inclusive institutions themselves. For instance, when viewed through the lens of settler colonialism, the “successful” cases of Anglophone neo-Europes appear to rest as much on the transplantation of liberal institutions as on displacement of the indigenous populations and the eradication of their alternative social institutions. Within this critical framework, “Between Commerce and Empire” constructs a history of the liberal critique of capitalist unevenness. Its key contribution is to dissect the formative debates in which *the liberal promise of a world economy forged by illiberalism* originally crystallized. As an avowedly presentist history, its looks back to the imperial constitution of global capitalism in order to illuminate the enduring ideological challenges that it continues to pose to its liberal imagination.