

# Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism

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## Abstract

The past decade has seen a spate of new work on empire in political theory and the history of political thought. Much of this work has focused on the place of empire in the thought of many canonical thinkers and in the formation of modern liberalism and related arenas, such as postcolonial settler societies and the discipline of international law. Political theory's turn to empire has been belated in comparison to other fields, such as history, literature, and anthropology, which had been grappling with the histories and legacies of modern European empires since the 1970s. Despite intense attention to the question of American imperialism during the Bush administration, political theory arguably continues to fail to deal adequately with the imperial features of the current global order, including the substantial responsibility on the part of the great powers for conditions such as extreme poverty, ecological crisis, civil conflict, and tyranny around the world.

## INTRODUCTION

The recent sustained attention to questions of empire and imperialism in political theory has at least two distinct sources: the turning, finally, of attention to a field of study that had occupied other scholars for more than two decades; and the sense, shared by a broad global public, that contemporary global structural inequalities, and especially American unilateralism and militarism after 2001, demanded a reinterrogation of the idea of empire. As I discuss in the first section below, a focus of the recent literature in the history of political thought has been the place of empire in the work of political thinkers, many canonical, the imperial dimensions of whose thought had been relatively ignored prior to the past decade. Central to this conversation (section 2) has been the question of the relationship, theoretical and historical, of liberalism and empire, itself one of a broader set of questions about how universalisms have dealt with the moral, political, and legal inequalities inherent to empire. This article returns regularly to questions around liberalism and empire, which recur in the literatures on settler societies (section 3), contemporary neoliberalism and American imperialism (section 4), global justice (section 5), and international law (section 6). Practitioners and historians of international law have begun to investigate thoroughly the imperial contexts and entanglements of their discipline. Public attention to the question of American empire has prompted a burst of scholarship about the nature of imperial politics and politics. Partly in response to this conversation, a newer strand of scholarship has begun to theorize imperial power (section 7), exploring its distinctive “political and ethical stakes” and asking to what extent, for instance, ideas circulating in political theory, such as the republican conception of nondomination, can account for the dynamics of imperial power (P. Markell, unpublished manuscript). Finally (section 8), political theorists have belatedly begun to explore how their subject has been recast by the innovations and preoccupations of postcolonial studies (Persram 2007), even as the field of postcolonial

studies itself undergoes a prolonged moment of self-scrutiny (Scott 1999, 2004; Loomba 2005).

Political theory has come slowly and late to the study of empire, relative to other disciplines. In the 1970s, anthropology began a period of (some have said excessively) self-reflexive study in which anthropologists scrutinized their discipline’s long complicity with and contributions to structures of imperial power (Geertz 1973, Asad 1975, Wolf 1982, Fabian 1983, Cohn 1987). Anthropologists remain among the most trenchant analysts of imperial and postcolonial politics as well as their intersections with global capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 2009). The disciplines of literature and then history were rapidly, if incompletely, transformed by postcolonial studies, whose beginning is generally marked by the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (reissued 2003; also see Said 1993). The histories of Britain and France, for instance, are now widely understood as imperial histories. (For Britain, see Colley 1992; Burton 2003, 2006; Hall 2000, 2002; Hall & Rose 2006; Wilson 2004. For France, see Clancy-Smith 1994, Conklin 1997, Lebovics 2004, Saada 2007). A central recent theme has been the ways in which European state structures and national identities were constituted in part through constructions of empire; historians have had to “rethink what it meant to study a continent called Europe” (Cooper 2005b, p. 401). German, Italian, and Russian historians have more recently also taken up imperial themes (Lieven 2000, Suny & Martin 2001, Burbank et al. 2007, Steinmetz 2007, Fitzpatrick 2008, Mazower 2008), and Latin American historians have perceived a new theoretical centrality for their too-often-peripheral region (Dussel 1995, Schmidt-Nowara & Nieto-Phillips 2005, Adelman 2006, Moraña et al. 2008). The imperial history of the United States, as both a settler society that conquered and absorbed vast continental territory throughout the nineteenth century and the ruler of unincorporated territories such as Cuba and the Philippines in the twentieth, is coming to be more widely studied and recognized

as relevant background to contemporary events (Slotkin 1973, 1985; Takaki 1979; White 1991; Blackhawk 2006; Kramer 2006; Griffin 2007; Go 2008; Rana 2010). Although renewed attention has been paid to non-European empires, such as the Chinese, the Mughal, and the Ottoman, *as* empires (Hevia 2003, Pollock 2006, Subrahmanyam 2006, Stoler et al. 2007, Duara 2009), the political-theoretic discussion has focused on European empires. More broadly, historical research has developed increasingly nuanced analyses of how empires govern, from Rome (Ando 2000) to the present (Maier 2006).

The newly dynamic field of world history has produced particularly sophisticated accounts of the asymmetrical interactions that brought about global modernity (Curtin 1984, 2000; Bayly 1989, 2004; Subrahmanyam 1996, 2005; Benton 2001; Eley 2007). By comparison, political theory for much of the 1980s and 1990s was remarkably untouched by these powerful theoretical and thematic developments, although it clearly has a distinct interest in aspects of postcolonial studies' field of analysis: the theorization of power, state formation, and community and identity, as well as the historical study of such theorizations. (Rare exceptions in political science before the present decade include Doyle 1986, Mitchell 1991, Grovogui 1996.)

So, despite the late and relatively sparse attention that political theorists in a narrow disciplinary sense have paid to imperialism and its history, sustained, critical, and theoretically sophisticated analysis of empire has been widely available in other fields. Brown (2005, p. 66) has argued that "[t]he work of thinking about political matters theoretically" has lately dispersed through a vast array of disciplines, for reasons that range from the receding of nation-state sovereignty (political theory's traditional purview) in the face of globalized capitalism, to a reconceptualization of power's operation and circulation. Thanks in large part to Foucault, this rethinking has invited inquiries into power and politics from scholars of culture,

language, and literature, and other forms of representation such as the visual arts. If all political theory has become cross-disciplinary, this is nowhere more true than in the study of empire. A proper understanding of the phenomenon of empire requires the contributions of social and cultural history and theory; literary criticism; feminist criticism and history; and anthropology. Whether the subject is canonical political thinkers' reflections on conquest, or the theorization of politics in the postcolonial present, much of the most innovative work, with which political scientists should engage far more than they do, takes place outside the confines of the discipline. Brown is right to discourage us from seeking to police political theory's boundaries or lamenting the dispersion of our subject, but we may still regret that political theory as a discipline has contributed less to the vigorous and significant scholarly conversation on empire than it might have been expected to do. This review attempts both to critically assess the work done in the past decade by political theorists specifically and to gesture at the much broader and more diverse range of studies and debates beyond the discipline that constitute political theorizing about empire.

This article does not distinguish systematically between the imperial and the colonial. A working description of an empire is "a political unit that is large and expansionist (or with memories of an expansionist past), reproducing differentiation and inequality among people it incorporates" (Calhoun et al. 2006; also see Muldoon 1999)—or perhaps "annexes" is a better word, since failure to incorporate is characteristic of empires. But since this description of an expansive and differentiated state might also be thought to apply to many large nation-states, we might add, with L. Wedeen (unpublished manuscript), that "[i]n the age of nation-states, imperial states generally exercise [their extensive] dominion over populations that are perceived (by conqueror and conquered) as different from (in the sense of ineligible for incorporation into) the dominant state exercising control." The problem of managing

difference is often seen as the perennial political challenge for empires, although it may be more accurate to say that empires *cultivate* forms of difference (see below, “Theorizing Empire as a Political System”). Maier (2006, p. 19–21) emphasizes the distinctive place of bloodshed in empires (with their “ambition . . . territorial agenda, and . . . problematic frontiers”), the transformation of the core society brought about by conquest, and the role of path dependency in the formation of empires, as even hesitant participants “cling . . . to choices made early on whose reversal seems unthinkable.”

A commonly drawn distinction between imperial and colonial territories marks colonial territories (following the Latin *colonus*, or farmer) as those that involve substantial settlement from the metropole, whereas the term imperial stresses extensive domination over others (see Kohn 2006). But official, popular, and even scholarly usage is unstable, and the terms “colonies” and “postcolonial” are applied equally to spaces of significant settlement and to those without; indeed, the former now tend to be described as “settler colonies” (Elkins & Pedersen 2005). “Colonial empire,” then, often refers to “exploitative economic relations between an imperial core and a subject periphery” (Subrahmanyam 2006, p. 220) or to “the occupation and annexation of regions beyond the global core and the seizure of foreign sovereignty,” as in British India (Steinmetz 2006, p. 143). The term imperialism was, like most political -isms, a coinage of the mid-nineteenth century. Since its earliest usage it has tended to be a term of opprobrium and one that emphasizes not only the extent but the unaccountability of the power exercised (Connelly 2006, p. 19). Finally, for all the controversy it generated, the well-known but idiosyncratic use of “empire” by Hardt & Negri (2000) to describe a new postmodern form of sovereignty utterly different from earlier forms of statehood or imperialism, an all-pervasive but agentless force, has not been widely taken up and has been criticized for too hastily announcing the end of state sovereignty (see, e.g., the critique by Cohen 2004).

## HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

Recent work in the history of political thought has shown that empire has been central to the theoretical and professional preoccupations of many of the key figures in the political theory canon, as well as to modern political languages and ideologies more broadly. This work has formed part of a broader new inquiry into what has begun to be called the history of international thought, after a “fifty years’ rift” between intellectual history and international relations (Armitage 2004a). Modern political thought since the European encounter with the New World has, not surprisingly, received the most attention, but empire has proven an illuminating lens for the study of earlier thinkers as well. Aristotle’s *Politics*, for instance, may be read as a response to the “depredations of [the Macedonian] empire” and as a “problematization of the polis form” rather than its idealization (Dietz 2007, p. 4).

The study of empire as a theme in the history of political thought was pioneered by a few scholars working with a broadly Cambridge-school approach, most prominently Anthony Pagden, James Tully, J.G.A. Pocock, Richard Tuck, and more recently David Armitage. Pagden’s (1982, 1990, 1993) early, seminal studies explored debates over the legitimation of Spanish rule in the New World, debates conducted in language borrowed from Aristotelian psychology (natural slave and child) and Roman legal and political thought (*imperium, dominium, orbis terrarum*). In illustrating how empires generated new states and political forms, and shaped modern political ideologies such as democratic republicanism, Pagden made a powerful case for the centrality of empire to political theory. His most recent books, written for more popular audiences, stress the possibly “insuperable future dilemmas” facing the politics created in the wake of formal empires (Pagden 2001, p. 160) and, controversially, the “perpetual enmity” between Europe and Asia (Pagden 2008). Tully placed questions connected to empire at the heart of both

Locke's thought and modern constitutionalism, as I discuss further below. Pocock (2005, ch. 2 [1973]) insisted, from a professedly "antipodean" perspective, that British history and political thought must be understood in imperial and global terms. More recently, his magisterial volumes exploring Enlightenment thought by way of a study of the contexts of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* have emphasized the global orientation of the enlightened histories that were so prominent a feature of the intellectual landscape (Pocock 1999–2005). Pocock explores the wide range of meanings of "empire" at the time, as well as what he calls the era's "crisis of the seaborne empires" (Pocock 1999, Vol. 4, p. 227) and the anxieties on the part of so many political and social thinkers of the time about the disorders of the global commerce that was supposed to succeed the age of conquests. As Tuck (1999) has argued, early-modern theorists of subjective rights conceived the sovereign individual in terms of the sovereign state and vice versa. They worked out their theories, with "often brutal implications" for indigenous and non-European peoples, partly in response to two key practical problems arising from European commercial and imperial expansion: struggles over freedom and control of trade and navigation in Asia, and states' efforts to legitimate their settlement colonies in the New World (Tuck 1999, p. 108).

The importance of extra-European commerce and conquest to the development of European political thought is heightened, as recent scholarship has emphasized, by the active involvement of key political theorists as legislators or as employees or associates of trading companies. Examples include Grotius, Locke, Hobbes (Malcolm 2002), Burke (Whelan 1996, Burke & Bromwich 2000, Bourke 2007; for a particularly critical reading of Burke as someone who "managed to rescue the imperial mission" by assaulting its crimes, see Dirks 2006, p. 314), Constant (Pitts 2008), Mill (Zastoupil 1994, Moir et al. 1999), and Tocqueville (2001), Richter 1963, Welch 2003, Pitts 2005). Recent work has explored, for instance, Grotius's

sustained theoretical and legal efforts on behalf of the Dutch East India Company (Tuck 1999, Borschberg 2002, Van Ittersum 2006). This research has overturned the portrait of Grotius as the theorist *par excellence* of a modern international legal community of equal and independent sovereign states, illustrating instead his theorization of forms of divided or subordinate sovereignty for states outside Europe (Keene 2002). Locke's theory of property has long been associated with the colonization of America and more specifically with his role in drafting the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), but recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of the extent of his involvement and its implications for his thought on property, sovereignty, and liberty (Tully 1993, Arneil 1996, Mehta 1999, Armitage 2004b, Farr 2008).

It is now widely understood that a full understanding of these thinkers' ideas, as well as the broader traditions to which they contributed, requires attention to imperial and global contexts and concerns. Most fundamentally, such study makes clear that the key concepts and languages of European political thought—ideas of freedom and despotism, self-government, and the autonomous individual—were imagined and articulated in light of, in response to, and sometimes in justification of, imperial and commercial expansion beyond Europe. Ideologies of empire (Armitage 2000), from the republican (Fitzmaurice 2003; also see Hörnqvist 2004) to the utilitarian (Schultz & Varouxakis 2005), are being shown to have permeated political thought that had conventionally been studied either with little attention to its contexts, or in European contexts alone.

"European constitutional states, as state empires, developed within global systems of imperial and colonial law from the beginning" (Tully 2008, vol. 2, p. 200). Just as we must understand modern Western constitutional democracy (and international law) as having emerged in an imperial context, so we must understand its exponents in the tradition of political thought, and those of other inherited political forms and concepts, in the same global and imperial context. Often this is to return thinkers

to a context that they, too, saw as crucially significant, although it has been neglected by subsequent readers. This is especially the case for the thinkers of what is now being called the “global eighteenth century” (Nussbaum 2003, also see Manning & Cogliano 2008, Whelan 2009), including most prominently Smith (e.g., Muthu 2008) and Kant (e.g., Cavallar 2002), but also Hume (Rothschild 2004, 2008), Burke, Diderot, and less canonical figures such as the Abbé Raynal (Muthu 2003, Agnani 2004, Festa 2006). Other thinkers, such as Mill or Tocqueville, may have downplayed the theoretical significance of their imperial context—Mill’s *Autobiography* depicts his nearly lifelong work for the East India Company as a comfortable day job that allowed him time to write and taught him something of public administration (Mill 1981 [1873], pp. 85–87). But both the reach and the limits of their knowledge and interests, and the truncated scope of apparently universal moral and political claims, are apparent only when we grasp the imperial dimensions of their careers and their thought.

## LIBERALISM AND EMPIRE

A prominent theme has been the “mutually constitutive” relationship of liberalism and empire (Armitage 2004a, p. 602). Whether we apply the term liberalism strictly to theories developed after the 1810s, when “liberal” became a political category, or more broadly but conventionally to the languages of subjective rights and self-government stemming back to the early-modern period, the evolution of liberal thought coincided and deeply intersected with the rise of European empires. Liberalism arguably remains marked by features that rendered it often supportive of imperial domination, including a commitment to progress and a teleological view of history, a suspicion of certain kinds of cultural or ethical particularism, and a hospitable stance toward capitalism and the economic exploitation of nature (Parekh 1994, 1995). European imperialisms were themselves decisively shaped by liberal preoccupations, including ideas of tutelage in self-government, exporting the rule

of law, and the normativity of European modernity (for a critique of the last, see Chakrabarty 2000).

In response to an older tradition that assumed that liberalism, with its commitments to equality and self-government, must be anti-imperial (Berlin 1965), it has become increasingly common to argue that on the contrary, the imperialistic “urge is *internal* to” liberalism (Mehta 1999, p. 20), that inherent in the very structure of liberal rationalism and abstraction is “a propensity for colonial domination” (Sartori 2006, p. 623, criticizing this idea). Postcolonial criticism of contemporary liberalism has stressed its abstract rationalism, which, though based on a culturally particular set of values, purports to articulate universal moral truths. Also criticized is liberalism’s narrowly rights-based idiom of justice and the insufficiency of liberal distributive justice, particularly given liberalism’s tendency to stress what Young (2007, pp. 170ff) has called a “liability model” of injustice and to overlook structural injustices, or the ways in which “social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination” even in the absence of harms traceable to responsible individuals. Finally, liberalism’s moral individualism is said to eclipse alternative “possibilities of human solidarity” and “narratives of connection” (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 23; these criticisms are summarized by Ivison 2002, pp. 30–48).

Mehta’s influential *Liberalism and Empire* (1999) identifies as key culprits liberals’ tacit presumptions of particular (European) social structures and anthropological characteristics behind ostensibly universalist moral claims, and the historicism and reformism of nineteenth-century liberals. He contrasts imperial liberalism’s “judgmental” and “evangelical” qualities with Edmund Burke’s keen grasp of the moral and political perils of empire, and his “ability to view the unfamiliar from a perspective that does not a priori presume its provisionality” (Mehta 1999, p. 214). Mehta’s eloquent and theoretically rich discussion has been criticized (including by the present author) for offering an overly ahistorical and undifferentiated account of

liberalism that understates the variety of its incarnations, and overlooks critiques of and ambivalence toward conquest and empire on the part of eighteenth-century proto-liberals such as Diderot, Smith, Kant, and Bentham (Muthu 2003, Pitts 2005). Historians have also called for a corrective to the textual emphasis of such treatments through greater attention to material and social developments that conditioned liberalism's evolution (Cooper 2005b, Sartori 2006). Cooper (2005a, p. 6) criticizes flat accounts of European modernity and Enlightenment that ignore their "convoluted trajectory" and that, as a result, ironically render Europeans the "people without history." Rather than seeing liberalism since the seventeenth century as a theoretical unity, one that has consistently "prided itself on its universality and politically inclusionary character" (Mehta 1999, p. 46), these scholars urge us to see liberalism as an always changing ideology whose commitments at any given time result from contingent conjunctures of discourses (for instance of rights or liberty), interests (such as those of merchants in an emerging commercial society), and institutions (e.g., the Bank of England, the East India Company).

Recent work has further explored liberalism's complicity with and constitution through empire as both have evolved since the early nineteenth century. The relationship between Mill's thought and his nearly lifelong career as a well-placed East India Company official has received particular scrutiny (Zastoupil 1994, Moir et al. 1999), given his status as an iconic liberal and his sustained attention to all facets of the British Empire, from Ireland, India, and Jamaica to the settler colonies (Bell 2010). Although much of this literature has been critical of Mill's crude and unsympathetic account of a "backward" India, his endorsement of "despotism" over "barbarians," and his belief that Europeans had no obligations under the law of nations to societies outside civilized Europe (Mehta 1999, Pitts 2005), others have defended his "tolerant" imperialism (Tunick 2006) or argued that he was a critical-minded supporter of British imperial rule who perceived its tendency

toward systemic injustice (Kohn & O'Neill 2006). Yet as Mantena (2007, 2010) has argued, Mill's thought exemplifies the "internal tensions" of liberal imperialism, which itself might be seen as merely one member of a family of imperial universalisms: projects of progressive reform that, when they encounter opposition or failure, commonly understand the fault to lie in the nature of the colonized societies rather than in the structure of imperial power, and too often give way to culturalist accounts of intransigent, illiberal others. Millian liberalism, however influential, did not, of course, encompass the whole of British liberalism's posture toward empire in the later nineteenth century. Although radical critiques of empire were rare (and remain underexplored), they did exist (Taylor 1991; Claeys 2007, 2010). Imperial liberalism itself evolved and became bound up with various visions of global order (Bell 2007a,b), often on the part of visionary internationalists whose aspirations for global peace and justice sat uneasily with their support for hierarchy and European dominance (Morefield 2005, Sylvest 2009).

The paradoxes of liberal imperialism explored in the historical literature remain instructive for political analysis in the age of American hegemony. The study of the history of American political thought has been less affected by the recent attention to empire (though see Shapiro 2006 and Hendrickson 2009). But Rogin, in groundbreaking essays from the 1970s onward, argued that liberal ideology profoundly shaped America's imperial career, and vice versa. "Liberal contractual relations diffused guilt" in the expulsion and extermination of native Americans, he argued. Rather than directly forcing Indians to abandon their land, the administrations of Andrew Jackson and later presidents insisted that their departures be formally voluntary; the expropriation, famines, and mass death that resulted could then be depicted as the unintended result of a complex set of individual (including Indian) actions and not the policy of the state (Rogin 1987, p. 162–64; also see Rogin 1975). Rogin explored analogies with American

actions in Vietnam, such as the refusal to accept responsibility for civilian deaths, and we might now draw connections to more recent arguments that the United States bears no responsibility for the diffusion of violence in authoritarian or “failed” states around the globe, but that the only solution to that violence is for America to take up the burden of empire (e.g., Ignatieff 2003).

Liberalism is notoriously and inevitably a complex ideology whose exemplars share family resemblances rather than any strict doctrine. Although its languages have contributed prominently to the articulation of imperial projects, and although the most powerful modern empires have, perhaps not coincidentally, been those of liberal states, liberal ideals have just as clearly furnished trenchant critiques of imperialism. As Cooper (2005a, p. 413) has written, one could as easily argue that the urge to anti-imperialism is internal to liberalism as that the urge to imperialism is. Indeed, although it continues to be rare for political theorists to look outside European and American traditions of thought, new work has also emerged on liberalism’s global dissemination, especially on various instances of what Bayly (2007) has called the “global liberal constitutional moment” in the early to mid-nineteenth century. During this period, thinkers from India to North Africa to the newly independent countries of Latin America adopted and adapted liberal language and categories for reformist or avowedly anti-imperial ends (Bayly 2007, Sartori 2008, Kohn 2009, Pitts 2009). Empire undoubtedly served as a vehicle for the imposition or spread of liberal ideas, but it has been argued that the “global availability of [liberalism’s] categories” also stemmed from social transformations around the globe that were related but not reducible to European imperial expansion (Sartori 2006, p. 640; Bayly 2004, 2007). This work on global liberalisms joins a growing body of literature in comparative political theory, which, though not necessarily concerned with questions of empire, has often engaged them in the course of addressing conjunctures between European political ideas

and those of other regions and traditions, especially Muslim (Parel & Keith 1992; Dallmayr 1999, 2002; Euben 2006; Shogimen & Nederman 2009). This literature has explored conceptions and practices of translation as an alternative to the blithe assumption that a parochial European liberalism can successfully articulate universal values.

## POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMAS IN SETTLER SOCIETIES

The possibilities, limits, and pathologies of liberalism also preoccupy the distinct political theory literature that has taken up the expropriation and subjugation of indigenous peoples in settler societies. These historical and ongoing injustices throw into question the legitimacy of such societies, and of the international society that recognizes them, as Keal (2003) has argued (also see Elkins & Pedersen 2005). Analysts of the settler-colonial past of the United States have argued that the country’s “robust ideal of republican freedom emerged through practices of external coercion and control” (Rana 2010): that empire-building and the subjugation of noncitizens inside and outside the state’s borders have been not simply unfortunate failures to live up to the country’s liberal-democratic ideals, but instrumental in the production of the ideals themselves. Political theory on such questions partly issues from and responds to recent legal and political developments in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Australian High Court’s 1992 decision in *Mabo* overturned the doctrine that Australia was *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one) at the time of European settlement, and recognized indigenous title as part of Australian common law (see Fitzmaurice 2007; on the history of the idea of *terra nullius*, see Benton & Straumann 2010), and the 1993 Native Title Act created controversial mechanisms to adjudicate indigenous groups’ land claims. New Zealand law has increasingly recognized the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi and its principle of *tino rangatiratanga*, a complex concept that might be roughly rendered as Maori sovereign authority, as precursors to and



conditions of national sovereignty (see Ivison et al. 2000, Pocock 2005).

Tully's *Strange Multiplicity* (1995) was an innovative work in the political theory of settler societies, with its argument that "the imperial culture embodied in most liberal constitutions" subverts rather than protects freedom and self-rule in culturally diverse postcolonial societies (p. 7). Drawing on the "exemplary" struggles of aboriginal peoples, as well as methodological guidance from Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Quentin Skinner, Tully argues for a practice of "contemporary constitutionalism" that seeks a "mediated peace" and respect for difference rather than a comprehensive liberal justice (p. 211). Where Tully envisions practices of democratic *freedom* beyond liberalism, Povinelli (2005, pp. 147, 159) has questioned the "hierarchy of values produced and institutionalized by the subject of freedom" and the imposition of this schema onto postcolonial societies. She notes that mechanisms such as the Native Title Act impose "legal mandates on the form aboriginal culture must take" (Povinelli 2002, p. 39). Courts, she argues, have increasingly demanded that Aboriginal subjects present themselves as unfree, as compelled by custom or culture, thereby "call[ing] on them to dehumanize themselves as the price of material reparation and public recognition." Povinelli imagines possibilities for justice through "an ongoing, critically oriented search for a better social life," rather than in terms of freedom or liberal agency; like Tully, she suggests that liberalism's idioms have continued to facilitate, rather than challenge, subjugation (Povinelli 2005, pp. 160, 163).

Ivison's *Postcolonial Liberalism* (2002) attempts to salvage and reform liberalism in response to such critiques. Ivison too draws on aboriginal laws, politics, and practices, though from an explicitly nonindigenous perspective. His project is to craft "a conceptual and discursive framework within which the argument between indigenous and nonindigenous people can be carried out on a more satisfactory footing" (Ivison 2002, p. 1). He imagines a "postcolonial liberal order" created out of the

interactions between liberal constitutional structures and languages (rights, public reason, the idea of a *modus vivendi*) and avowedly indigenous political thought, as in the work of scholars and activists such as Alfred (1999) and Pearson (2009), as well as indigenous practices of self-governance and land use. Given the supremacy of liberal discourse in the largely Anglophone settler societies in question, it is perhaps inevitable that struggles for accommodation and coexistence will continue to take place substantially in and on liberal terms—as Tully, Povinelli (who describes her general project as a "critical theory of late liberalism"), and Ivison, from their different positions within or outside liberalism, all suggest. Whether liberalism retains emancipatory possibilities in the current global order, or whether its persistent limitations—perhaps above all its potential blindness to the ways in which liberal languages and practices mask operations of power as well as its obliviousness to the provinciality and partiality of liberal commitments—are questions that should continue to occupy these debates at a theoretical level, while their participants engage as well with questions of contemporary politics and policy.

## EMPIRE, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE LIBERAL STATE SINCE 2001

The mutual constitution of liberalism and empire, a subject of both history of political thought and postcolonial studies, has, along with the broader subject of empire, received exponentially greater attention since 2001, when the frank militarism and unilateralism of the Bush administration provoked a deluge of analyses of the category of empire and of the imperial nature of the American polity and the global order (Harvey 2003, Mann 2003, Khalidi 2004, Maier 2006, Hobsbawm 2008). The United States has been subject to steady criticism as an imperial power since the mid-nineteenth century, especially after the seizure of Cuba and the Philippines in the Spanish-American War. Since decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, critics on the left have regarded the global

order more broadly as persistently imperial. And yet, except during the Vietnam War, these arguments were little taken up by broader scholarly and public debates. To those who have long analyzed global politics through the lens of empire, whether from postcolonial or Marxist or other perspectives, the spate of literature on American empire produced since 2001 often seems to misperceive the phenomenon, to see novelty and exception in the American case where students of empire recognize reiterations of older patterns and tropes, or conversely to seek too simple lessons from past empires (Calhoun et al. 2006, Tully 2008).

While some authors who have asked what lessons past empires may hold for America insist on their agnosticism regarding the desirability of American empire (Porter 2006), others have unabashedly called for America to acknowledge its imperial vocation and to learn from the supposed successes as well as the weaknesses of past models, above all the British Empire, in order to establish a duly liberal or humanitarian empire (Ferguson 2003, 2004; Ignatieff 2003; Lal 2004). Even as President George W. Bush (2004) was protesting that “[w]e have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire,” these authors insisted that America should accept, even embrace, its imperial power, which they portrayed as inevitable (also see James 2006). In Ferguson’s upbeat account, the British Empire entrenched free trade, facilitated capital export to the developing world, pioneered free labor, invested “immense sums” in a global communications network, maintained an unequalled global peace, and saved the world from fascism. The intense criticism his work has prompted is partly a response to the shallowness and partiality of these historical claims. Despite occasional mention of episodes of imperial brutality, Ferguson largely fails to address the British Empire’s systemic injuries: 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 market systems. Accounts of such phenomena need not deny, if

motives matter at all, that imperial motives may sometimes include sincere intentions to bring stability and well-being to the receiving populations. But myths of empire’s benevolent effects, particularly those of the British, have long demanded scrutiny. Recent work has exposed the violence and death unleashed by the British, as in the Indian and African famines and epidemics during what have been called “late Victorian holocausts,” or the British “gulag” in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising (Davis 2001, Elkins 2005). Moreover, Cooper has argued that policies of making colonies “pay the costs of their own repression” and of relying on local elites to do the “dirty work” meant that both the British and French Empires largely eschewed development programs until belated efforts in the 1940s and 1950s to generate legitimacy for their rule. And when the French Empire’s rhetoric of inclusion was taken up by its African subjects in demands for full citizenship and economic equality after the Second World War, the French government chose decolonization instead (Cooper 2006, p. 67; Cooper 2005a, pp. 228–30).

A persistent failing of both imperial civilizing missions and their heirs among “development” projects has been to see locals as objects for administration rather than as political subjects. Reformers’ indifference to local knowledge or contempt for the intellectual or political maturity of the intended beneficiaries of their projects can wreak economic and social havoc. When these failings are combined with other systemic vices of imperial rule—unaccountability to the subjects of power, policies driven partly by economic interests rooted in the metropole—the results of proletarianization, emiseration, chaos, and misrule have been frequently and predictably catastrophic. The same might be said of the American occupation in Iraq. A combination of overwhelming and unaccountable power, opportunism by private corporations, and abysmal planning caused by inattention and indifference have produced a landscape of perhaps irredeemable misery and violence. Unaccountable imperial rule, as its eighteenth-century critics

(such as Burke) well knew, is far more capable of destruction than of productive power.

Defenses of America's imperial presence as a vocation have tended to share a jaunty and even cynical tone combined with gestures at the "tragic" nature of imperial power. Ignatieff's (2003, pp. 8–9) brief for "empire lite," characteristically of this literature, casts the United States as passive and vulnerable, a state "caught in the crossfire of a civil war raging within the Arab world," one that only belatedly "discovered" that its Middle Eastern allies were despotic or incompetent and that sadly is "damned if it does and damned if it doesn't." Ignatieff ignores America's complicity in the creation of disorder and despotism in the Middle East, its history, in Khalidi's (2009) words, of "sowing crisis" (Mamdani 2004, Johnson 2004). Key moments in this history include American and British sponsorship of the coup against Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 (Kinzer 2003); support for authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia throughout the postwar period; and proxy wars, as in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s, in which the United States armed the mujahideen fighting the Soviet-backed government. Ignatieff repeatedly describes the American empire's "enemies" as *the barbarians*, the absence of quotation marks around that loaded phrase leaving the reader in doubt as to whether he is quietly mocking those who think in such terms or uncritically adopting them himself. His larger purpose is to school the United States in the appropriate use of imperial power, even as he expresses the moral anguish that he and Ferguson agree is characteristic of liberalism and so constitutive of liberal empire. As Morefield (2008) has argued in an acute critique, Ignatieff's performance of anguish is cathartic rather than critical.

A particularly powerful volume of essays by scholars of empire questions this eye-catching literature's premise of seeking affirmative lessons *for* empire and instead proposes a critical investigation of the lessons to be learned *from* empires, as well as lessons learned *by* empires, asking what a critical anti-imperialism might mean today (Steinmetz 2006, pp. 139–40).

Features widely assumed to distinguish the idiosyncratic American "empire" from its supposedly more typical predecessors turn out to be persistent, even ubiquitous imperial *topoi*. Among these are the self-reflexive quality of public debates in imperial polities, which have repeatedly dwelled on the questions, "Are we an empire?," "What does it mean for us to be, or to have, an empire?," and "What does it mean to be the citizen of an empire?" When, during the notorious Don Pacifico affair in 1850, Lord Palmerston defended an aggressive British foreign policy with reference to the Roman tag *civis Romanus sum*, he was conjuring a vision of the British subject as one who could invoke the protection of the British state anywhere in the world. He was depicting Britain as an island of "liberty" and "order," but an island with global reach in a world of anarchy and insecurity (Palmerston 1850). Although the actions his speech defended were widely criticized as rash and provocative, his image of the imperial subject proved highly influential and is echoed today in American preoccupations with ensuring the security of the "homeland" through a global military presence.

The imperial self-scrutiny so characteristic of recent U.S. debates has also appeared in a number of Europe's old imperial powers, now reckoning with increased migration by inhabitants of their former colonies. Particularly fierce debates have raged in France, whose postcolonial reckoning comes very belatedly in comparison to Anglophone debates, despite iconic theorizations of empire during the period of decolonization by thinkers such as Fanon, Césaire, Memmi, and Sartre (Forsdick & Murphy 2003, Blanchard et al. 2005, Smouts 2007). This renewed attention comes in the wake of riots and police violence in the *banlieues*, spawned by poverty and social and economic exclusion among Muslims of North African origin, and following protracted controversy around whether the *foulard* or headscarf worn in public spaces such as schools violates the distinct French form of secularism known as *laïcité*. Scrutiny of the Algerian War, prompted in part by the aging of

those who fought (French and the pro-French Algerian soldiers known as *barkis*), has also contributed to this new literature. Scholars writing in both French and English have also produced sophisticated reinterpretations of slavery and abolition in the French colonies (Vergès 1999, Dubois 2004).

## GLOBALIZATION, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND GLOBAL JUSTICE

The dominant political theory literatures on cosmopolitanism and global justice have only glancingly and sporadically engaged with conceptual and historical continuities between formal imperialism and the current global (dis)order. Rawls's *Law of Peoples* (1999), which, like his *Theory of Justice*, has spawned a large and often critical literature, is relatively indifferent to the history of Western domination and expropriation that contributed to the creation of the strata he calls "liberal" peoples (or those that aspire to or approximate liberal principles), "rogue" states, and "burdened" societies. With Rawls, the literature on contemporary cosmopolitanism has tended to ask how liberal states and societies should respond to the pathologies they encounter out there, and how they might intervene to promote democracy, rather than taking the prosperous and relatively stable societies of the global north and the impoverished and too often authoritarian states of the global south as products of the same long history of asymmetrical interaction and mutual constitution (e.g., Archibugi 2008; but see Pogge 2002). One might instead ask how actors throughout the international system participate together in "structural injustice," and how they (we) might responsibly take ownership of such injustice (Young 2007).

Although the argument is not common among political theorists, even within the extensive literature on global justice, there is a powerful case to be made that the structural inequalities of the contemporary world cannot be understood without attention to their

continuities, both historical and conceptual, with the major colonial empires. We should attend to the claim that "what passes for fair trade is neocolonial in structure and therefore exploitative in the extreme" (Harvey 2009, p. 46). One recent effort within the global justice literature seeks to take account of the colonial past by arguing that past colonial ties are a form of "associative relation" akin to common political membership, one that generates obligations of distributive justice well beyond duties of rectification for colonial wrongs (Ypi et al. 2009).

Tully (2008) has offered one of the most fully articulated accounts in political theory of the imperial features of the current global order, which he calls an "informal and interactive" and "postcolonial" imperialism. The dismantling of formal empires, he notes, left in place "nominally sovereign, yet dependent Indigenous governments in a global network of free trade imperialism" dominated by hegemonic great powers and their transnational corporations and governed through biased or lopsided global financial institutions (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, p. 196). He argues that our languages of political description are themselves imperial legacies (p. 130), so that the work of critique requires a thorough revisiting of our theoretical categories and vocabularies. As Tully notes, mainstream political theory has tended to presume that imperialism ended with decolonization and that the world after decolonization conforms to a Westphalian model of a world of legally equal and independent states. Although the pervasive sense that Bush administration policies constituted a new American empire has shaken this complacency, theoretical innovations of the sort Tully proposes remain rare. Tully's approach—which envisages a "new public philosophy for a [to be hoped for] deimperialising age" (p. 7)—draws on and responds to large literatures in cognate fields including anthropology, international law, and more generally what controversially goes under the name of postcolonial studies, which have begun to undertake this theoretical work.

## INTERNATIONAL LAW

Historians of international law have recently grappled with conceptual and historical questions that parallel those preoccupying the scholarship on liberalism or universalism and empire: Are the categories and formally equal rules of the system of international law irredeemably bound up with substantive inequality and European domination, or might they also offer a means by which to combat that domination? In what ways are international law's origins imperial, and to what extent has it been complicit with, or helped to legitimate, imperialism? How have legal practices and imaginations—within Europe and the global north, in colonies and postcolonial states, and transnationally—been bound up with the exercise of imperial power and the construction of imperial sovereignty? As the influential theorist of international law Martti Koskenniemi has argued, there is reason to see international law as both “imperialist [and] anti-imperialist.” Koskenniemi (2002, p. 198) observes that “sovereignty and international governance seem both good and bad, liberating and threatening at the same time: neither provides a recipe against domination” (also see Koskenniemi 2001). Still, despite what he sees as international law's theoretical ambivalence, Koskenniemi goes on to demonstrate its historical complicity in European domination of the rest of the world, especially since the formative period of the 1870s.

A group of scholars known as TWAAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law) has recently taken up the project, launched in the 1950s and 1960s among lawyers of the so-called “new states” after decolonization, of scrutinizing the ways in which the politics, practice, and scholarship of mainstream international law reproduce structures of global inequality and the subordination of third-world peoples (Anghie et al. 2003). Anghie's own important book explores persistent patterns of exploitation in legal relations between Western and non-Western polities, from the fifteenth century through the present, under the rubric of the “dynamic of difference” (Anghie 2004,

p. 6). [Here Anghie echoes Chatterjee's (1986) notion of a “rule of colonial difference”; also see Burbank & Cooper (2010).] Anghie argues that “sovereignty was improvised out of the colonial encounter.” Relations of domination over non-Europeans, that is, were central to the formation of the system of international law, and not peripheral or irrelevant to a fundamentally European phenomenon. This argument constitutes a powerful rebuke to the standard understanding in legal scholarship since the nineteenth century that international law evolved through relations among sovereign European states and was then exported outside Europe as other states entered the family of nations (whether as they became civilized, or as they attained statehood through decolonization). Contrary to the conventional view that decolonization marked the end of formal and legal inequalities (see, e.g., Jackson 1990), Anghie shows how international law has perpetuated the quasi-sovereign status of third-world states, for instance through prejudicial rules governing natural resource extraction and agreements with multinational corporations (also see Miéville 2005).

The implications of such a revision are profound. Debates over humanitarian intervention, for instance, share the assumption that such interventions constitute a rupture in a status quo of nonintervention and sovereign equality and that the challenge is to balance our respect for state sovereignty with a commitment to human rights. If we grasp the extent to which the sovereignty of third-world states is always already deeply compromised through laws, institutions, and practices dominated by the great powers, our understanding of the challenges of intervention may radically change. This is certainly not to say that because various forms of intervention are already the norm, powerful states should be given the green light to intervene militarily whenever they see fit. But the choice between continuing to respect sovereignty and protecting human rights is a false one. The world's powerful states bear considerable responsibility for the conditions producing the violence against which they then

seek to intervene. If we want to protect both political autonomy and human rights, we will subject the profound global inequalities and asymmetries of power to far greater scrutiny than they generally receive in debates over global justice. We will also, as Orford (2003) urges, greatly expand the temporal frame in which we consider intervention, to consider not only the immediate crisis but also the widely shared responsibility for the broader conditions, such as extreme poverty, a surfeit of weapons, and ecological crises, that help to generate civil conflict, tyranny, and genocide.

Recent literature has likewise undermined the “Westphalian myth” that the 1648 treaties established a narrowly European law of nations governing equal and independent sovereign states (Teschke 2003, Beaulac 2004). “The so-called Westphalian system is actually an imperial system of hegemonic and subaltern states constructed in the course of ‘interactions’ between imperial actors and imperialized collaborators and resisters” (Tully 2008, Vol. 2, p. 140). Much international relations theory and political theory more broadly continue to operate with a fairly reductive “Westphalian” image of legally equal and independent nation-states. Scholars typically pose the question of global justice as a conundrum about the tensions between sovereignty and human rights (principles recognized in the United Nations Charter). They tend to ask how liberal democracies should respond to violations “out there,” by others not yet incorporated into the liberal global order, whereas revisionist accounts of the global legal order instead position global poverty and human rights violations as partly products of an imperial system (Rajagopal 2003, Falk et al. 2008). As we have seen, the standard view that regards imperialism as primarily a political relationship often assumes that decolonization ended imperial relations. On the Marxist view, in which imperialism denotes not primarily political but economic relations, formal decolonization simply marked an evolution in the forms of domination, for which Kwame Nkrumah coined the term neocolonialism (Marks 2003, p. 452). Rereadings of

international law through Marxist lenses have offered pointed criticism of recent strategies such as “good governance,” structural adjustment, and conditionality (the imposition of conditions such as austerity or privatization regimes on developing countries for receipt of loans, development aid, or debt relief), by which international institutions controlled by dominant powers constrain third-world and debtor countries to conform to economic and public policies that make them more amenable to the incursion of global capital (Marks 2003).

A vital new literature has examined broader intersections of law and empire. Contributors to this literature have examined Roman legal practices regarding war and conquest, as well as their often ill-understood influence on later empires (on that influence, see Lupher 2003, MacMillan 2006, MacCormack 2007). They have followed the imperial traces in the early American constitutions (Bilder 2004, Hulsebosch 2005), and recognized that colonial conquest depends on the power to shape the legal frameworks governing land ownership (Banner 2005). Roman civil law was shot through with imperial language and categories; and the “languages and institutions of [Roman] Republicanism”—including citizenship itself, even as it was extended to provincials—were to a striking extent “developed in support of monarchical rule and imperial domination” (Ando 2008; also C. Ando, unpublished manuscript).

The circulation and translation of international law beyond modern Europe has also begun to receive sophisticated treatment, as in the literary critic Lydia Liu’s (2004) account of Anglo-Chinese treaty relations and disputes over the nature of sovereignty. Benton’s path-breaking *Law and Colonial Cultures* (2001) argued that the struggles of often peripheral actors in the plural legal spaces formed within and between empires—from British courts exercising jurisdiction in Mughal India to struggles over land title on the Uruguayan frontier—were central to the formation of the colonial state. It is to be followed by a study that further explores the porousness and irregularity of sovereignty in empire and by implication in

European state formation, as a corrective to the traditional picture of sovereignty as above all territorial control (Benton 2010). Benton has insisted that we can understand imperial law only by attending to the actions of participants on the ground and sea as much as to the theoretical writings of the canonical jurists. She and others have begun to paint a far more variegated portrait of the discourses of political and legal theory deployed in the construction and defense of empires than has been available from the more elevated sources.

### THEORIZING EMPIRE AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

The fluidity and multifariousness of empires might furnish an object of study for political theory more than it has done. One fruitful course is taken by historian Charles Maier in *Among Empires* (2006), which uses the question of American empire as an occasion for a broad analysis of imperial power and its characteristic forms, techniques, and dilemmas. Maier stresses the ways in which empires entrench and reproduce inequalities of power and wealth among societies, within the metropole, and within the colony. He also emphasizes the dynamics of social stratification, such as the recruitment of elites in conquered societies or the cooptation of the subordinate classes in the metropole. Although Maier's work rightly takes account of the wide variety of imperial forms—noting, for instance, that distinctions between empire and hegemony are not very robust (pp. 62–64)—empires are too often treated as well-demarcated territorial entities on the model of nation-states with clear boundaries. As Stoler (2006) has argued against the standard portrait, “architects of imperial rule,” far from seeking to clarify borders and establish order, have often “invested in [and] exploited” the proliferation of “zones of ambiguity.” Analysis should perhaps begin, she suggests, “not with a model of empire based on fixed, imperial cartographies” but instead with the recognition that “gradated variations and degrees of sovereignty and disenfranchisement” are

typical, even definitive, of empire: from dependencies, protectorates, trusteeships, and mandates, to the ambiguous status of Guantanamo Bay or American Samoa today (Stoler 2006, pp. 55–56). Legally and politically ill-defined or shifting spaces—places of partial, compromised, or vulnerable sovereignty; people with vague or unstable legal rights—are not a recent innovation, nor a derogation from some neater classical territorial form of empire with inhabitants sharply divided into rulers and ruled. Empires create and cultivate a variety of forms of political belonging, sometimes “coopting local elites into (often derivative and defective) forms of membership and so alienating them in some fashion from the affective structures that might have tied them to their communities” (C. Ando, personal communication; also see Ando 2000).

If empires have often been analyzed in terms set by the nation-state, they have also too often been cast into a teleological history in which the imperial form precedes that of the nation-state and grows increasingly atavistic with the triumph of the nation-state model. Some scholars of historical empires have noted the resilience of imperial forms and suggested that the nation-state model, rather than representing the end of a historical trajectory, may prove remarkably ephemeral.

A further strand of debate has concerned the capacities of imperial power. Some British historians, especially, have stressed the vulnerability and limitedness of British power even during the imperial heyday (Colley 2002). Although such accounts are right to insist that imperial states could not effectively project affirmative power very deeply into colonized societies, they sometimes appear to minimize the European empires' great capacity for destruction and their repeated tendency to wreak havoc in colonized societies—to deindustrialize them, render them less self-sufficient, emiserate rural populations, encourage famine, and truncate life expectancy—whether in deliberate campaigns of terror (Hochschild 1998, Elkins 2005) or through unaccountability and indifference to the welfare of local populations (Davis 2001). Debates have tended to suggest that empires are

powerful versus powerless, rather than showing that they are powerless in certain ways but nonetheless capable of effecting dramatic and generally destructive change. The connections between imperial forms of power and the disruption of sustainable social systems merits further study.

Typical of imperial politics is a fascination with historical models—specifically, a concern to compare contemporary polities with previous empires and to insist on the newness, and, among modern European empires, the unprecedented benevolence and universalism, of the current imperial polity. Recent claims that the United States has inherited the challenges and opportunities of the British Empire might be seen as a modern version of the medieval *translatio imperii*, in which empires laid claim to the inherited authority of the Roman Empire (Pagden 1995). According to Pollack (2006, p. 176), the comparative history of empires (ancient and modern, and around the globe) shows that “it is only by looking at past empires that people have learned how to be imperial at all, since empire is a cultural practice and not some natural state.” Indeed, central to the lives of all empires have been the ways in which they have been constituted through language and their own self-representations: the discourses that have arisen to describe, defend, and criticize them, and the historical narratives that have been invoked to make sense of them. “Colonial empires were always dependent on social imaginaries, blueprints unrealized, borders never drawn, administrative categories of people and territories to which no one was sure who or what should belong” (Stoler 2006, p. 52). Scholars attempting a critical anti-imperialism have asked not only which institutions can be considered imperial but also what the “discursive features” of empire are: the “ceremonial trappings of U.S. power,” or the militarization of the culture, such as the civilian Humvee fad in the United States and the increasing presence of military recruiters and ROTC programs in high schools and universities (Steinmetz 2006, p. 139). Students of empire and imperial histories are well placed to analyze such practices,

beyond explicit talk of empire, that are also constitutive of imperial politics.

## AFTER POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

We have noted the vast influence of Said’s *Orientalism* on literature and history. A distinct strand of postcolonial studies is subaltern studies, which began among South Asian historians in the 1980s (although key participants such as Ranajit Guha had been active since the 1960s). It has been said of these scholars that “no group has done more, by exhortation and practice, to stimulate research on colonial history” (Cooper 2005b, p. 419n14; also see Dirks 2001). Political theory as a discipline has engaged only sporadically and belatedly with postcolonial studies; it is telling, for instance, that a volume on *Political Theory and Postcolonial Studies* was published only recently (Persram 2007). One of the most influential recent contributions of postcolonial thought has been the notion of “alternative modernities,” broached most pointedly by Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), which has been taken up by theorists not usually attentive to questions of empire (see, e.g., Taylor 2004). Chakrabarty argues that European thought “is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations” (2000, p. 16).

The field of postcolonial studies has itself recently undergone a new period of self-criticism and stock-taking. Scholars and critics have increasingly asked whether postcolonial studies as an intellectual movement has begun to “outlive [its] critical or political usefulness” (Loomba et al. 2005, p. 2), or whether, with its increasing theoretical sophistication and methodization, it has lost its critical purchase. A “familiar complaint” charges that “the postcolonial agenda is unduly set by Third World intellectuals who have emigrated to the First World, where they have adjusted to the workings of global capitalism”; a related charge is that the agenda is too much oriented to the needs and preoccupations of “Western theory” (Darby 2007, pp. 252–53). At this juncture, when the need



to interrogate globalization's egregious structural injustices and their ideological supports remains as pressing as ever, postcolonial studies' historical emphasis on the decolonization of discourses—rather than on more direct forms of political critique, or criticism of global capitalism's exploitations—has come to seem inadequate to many. Scott (1999) has identified the present as a transitional moment, “after postcoloniality,” a moment that follows the periods of anticolonial nationalism and then postcolonial criticism. This transition demands a reorientation of the critical agenda: “With the collapse of the Bandung and socialist projects and with the new hegemony of a neoliberal globalization, it is no longer clear what ‘overcoming’ Western power actually means” (Scott 1999, p. 14). The blatant American imperialism of the new millenium has brought back some of the more obtrusive forms of Western power, but Scott's questions about what postcolonial critique of neoliberal hegemony should entail remain pressing. One particularly potent strand of new research challenges the limited neoliberal models of democracy and civil society “on offer by the global leadership,” as well as “the global politics of why societies should democratize” (Darby 2007, p. 256; Marks 2003 makes a similar argument). Wedeen's (2008) exploration of democratic practices and public spheres in authoritarian states, such as the deliberations and political contestations that occur in qat-chew gatherings in Yemen, exemplifies such a challenge to the dominant, and reductive, models of democracy in political science and global policy circles.

Although political theory has been a late and muted voice in the postcolonial conversation, Scott (though, significantly, located in anthropology) offers another compelling model for its possible contribution. His work is informed by diverse influences, including those of Foucault, Quentin Skinner, Reinhart Koselleck, Ian Hacking, and Hayden White. Scott combines a searching attention to what may be the critical demands of the present (e.g., the disaffection around sovereignty in the post-Bandung period) with a deeply informed historical sense

for the myriad political and intellectual contexts of the works he engages, such as C.L.R. James's seminal text of anticolonial history, *The Black Jacobins*. Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) exemplifies the continued vitality and critical potential of a kind of work that political theory seems well-equipped to perform: textual analysis that is theoretically incisive; attention to social, cultural, and intellectual history and the ways in which they inform each other; and engagement with the political dilemmas, critical demands, and profound injustices of the present. Such work is attuned to the continuities both historical and theoretical among different forms of imperial rule, but it avoids teleologies, whether triumphalist or declinist.

In the years after 2001, many scholars of empire noted how unaccustomed they were to the intense public interest, and even the broader scholarly interest, in their subject. Until then, many outside postcolonial studies had come to see empire as an archaic subject, even if others had all along insisted that formal decolonization in much of the world had neither vanquished imperial relations and politics nor rendered empire obsolete as an analytical framework. Some observers have been prepared to consider the danger of American imperialism over with the end of the distinctive form it took under the Bush administration, and they perhaps will have lost interest in the subject. [For example, Mann (2003), pp. 12–14 hopes for “voluntary abandonment of the imperial project by Americans”; see Tully (2008), Vol. 2, p. 134 for a critique of this view.] But the wider scrutiny of questions about empire, the renewed interest by those outside postcolonial studies in what was once considered by some an abstruse conversation that had run its course, and the revived interest in the histories and legacies of the formal empires of the past, will leave their mark. These developments have generated a fertile interdisciplinary exchange that should help to deepen and enliven political theory's hitherto sporadic conversations with precisely those cognate fields with which it shares so much intellectual labor and should be in closer, and ongoing, dialogue.

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