
Review

Empires without imperialism: Anglo-American decline and the politics of deflection

Jeanne Morefield

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It's a good time to be writing about empire. In the last decade or two, political theorists have increasingly turned their attention to imperialism for both political reasons (the post-9/11 Bush administration's penchant towards muscular unilateralism, global overreach and unselfconscious hubris) and scholarly ones – namely, the growing recognition, long noted by postcolonial theorists, of the modern world's fundamentally imperial constitution. The resulting literature is as varied in its focus as in its tone, from the careful contextualism of historians of empire such as Duncan Bell, Christopher Bayly, Andrew Sartori and David Armitage, to trenchant critiques of liberal imperialism by Jennifer Pitts, Uday Mehta, Karuna Mantena and Thomas McCarthy, to James Tully and Antony Anghie's indictments of neo-colonialism, to the first-person insights of Fanon, Memmi, Gandhi and Césaire. Jeanne Morefield's *Empires without Imperialism: The Late Modern Politics of Deflection* makes a singularly inspired contribution to the field, richly complex in its historical scholarship, sharply polemical (without being uncharitable), and most importantly, highly original in its subject, approach and tenor. *Empires* falls outside these better-known modes of scholarship and yet borrows from them all: Morefield deftly marshals the analytical acuity of critics of liberal imperialism, the contextualism of intellectual historians, the urgency of anti-neo-colonialists and the psychoanalytic bent of postcolonial thinkers in crafting a book as philosophically sophisticated as it is politically relevant.

Empires tracks the variations on a very particular argumentative strategy developed by an equally particular cast of public intellectuals over the dying days of the British and American empires, tracing the efforts of two clusters of pro-imperial liberals (surrounding the first World War and today) 'to narrate the history of "who we are" in response to their empire's perceived decline in a manner that consistently forgets the imperial state's forays into illiberality in the past and present ... [by employing] prolonged and creative forms of deflection that consistently ask the



reader to avert her eyes, away from colonial violence and economic exploitation, and back toward the liberal nature of the imperial society' (p. 3). What's fascinating is the sheer breadth of rhetorical tools on which they draw to steer us away from those illiberalities and towards the 'enduringly liberal character' (p. 63) of British and American empires fraying under the weight of their own contradictions. Morefield groups them under 'three categories of strategic deflection' (p. 26).

Chapters 1 and 2 address Alfred Zimmern and Donald Kagan's 'Strategies of Antiquity' tying British and American empires (respectively) to Periclean Athens through highly selective readings of Thucydides, to two ends. First, they situate their own empires in a long lineage of proto-liberal 'commonwealths' (a term of artifice if there ever was one) bound by shared commitments to liberty, equality and democracy that simply awoke, in Kagan's rendition, to discover themselves reluctant hegemon (p. 86). Second, the displacement to Athens serves to 'evacuate the present' (p. 67) of the niggling reminders – Abu Ghraib, the Amritsar massacre, and so on – of British and American illiberalisms. As Morefield observes, fifth-century Athens' remove also provides Zimmern and Kagan with a particularly wide canvass on which to paint their interests, both backward (Zimmern's projecting a 'liberal utopia' (p. 59) onto the classical world) and forward (Kagan's exhorting weak-willed Americans to learn from Athenians' timorousness in the face of their imperial responsibilities), while studiously avoiding any considered reflection on the injustices of their own age.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the 'Metanarrative Strategies' framing what Morefield, borrowing from John Hobson, nicely captures as the Round Table (an early twentieth-century pro-imperial organization) and Niall Ferguson's 'Teutonic relay-race', 'the handing-off of the baton of liberty from the ancient Germans to the Anglo-Saxons, from the British to the Americans' (pp. 116–117). This kind of Hegelian developmentalism underpinned the Round Tablers' re-branding of the British empire as a commonwealth, the fullest realization of the liberal spirit carried through history from 'one "member of team Teuton" to the next' (p. 116). It also naturalized it as an organic, unified, multicultural federation, sharply differentiated it from the racialized authoritarianism of the German empire, and conveniently papered over its own gross inequalities. Ferguson's iteration, pervaded by ever-widening historical ellipses as he has shifted from credible scholar to talking head, similarly tracks the 'grand narrative of Western ascent' (p. 148) but shifts from Hegel to Hayek, portending the catastrophes that await us should radical Islamists, leftists, recalcitrant tariff-hungry governments and our own self-doubt be allowed to impede the progress of free markets and 'Anglobalization'. Sure, liberals should feel bad about their empires' occasional dalliances with strong-armed repression and racialized violence; those pangs of regret, Ferguson assures us, confirm the sincerity of our good intentions – liberal guilt, of course, being evidence of liberal virtue.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore Jan Smuts and Michael Ignatieff's 'Strategies of Character'. In a particularly riveting chapter, Morefield draws out the unlikely

conjunction of Hegelian organicism and Darwinian evolutionism in Smuts' holism, which led him to regard the League of Nations as the evolution of the British empire, a higher, more complex synthesis of peoples 'actuating' liberalism's moral principles ('freedom, equality and equity', p. 184). The League would be both more internally diverse and more unified (by common character and commerce, rather than military force) than the empire; and yet, this was to be an 'ordered diversity in which lower and higher elements' – which is to say, races – 'were kept in equilibrium' (p. 190). That Smuts was a white South African intent on maintaining segregation comes as no surprise. If Smuts casts liberal character in evolutionary terms, Ignatieff leans towards the tragic. Morefield shows that the Berlinian empathy marking Ignatieff's early work, his inclination to step into the shoes of distant others, has become supplanted in the post-9/11 era by a profound anxiety regarding the intractable warlords, terrorists and nationalists threatening to undo us. In a world of such crooked timber, liberals have no choice but to shoulder the 'lesser evil' (p. 210) of liberal interventionism with all of its attendant hazards (waterboarding, black sites and the like); ours is the tragedy of dirty hands. But where the best of tragedies invite self-examination, Ignatieff's is a foregone conclusion; his blithe acceptance of our tragic burden does little to incite reflection on Western responsibilities for failed states and global instability, and still less on the perils of waging war against an abstraction such as 'terror'.

Beyond these contributions to the intellectual history of empire, *Empires'* subject matter stands out in a few distinctive ways. First, while early and late modern thinkers' entanglements with imperialism are well chronicled, Morefield treats a period – the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – that is, in political theory, relatively underserved. And yet it's a fascinating age, caught between the nineteenth-century's brash, Eurocentric overconfidence and the postcolonial age we have come to inhabit. This transitiveness yields many of its most interesting deflections: Zimmern's plunge into the classical world simply eludes the irresolvable contradictions of his own age; the Round Table's desperation to differentiate their empire from the German reveals the paroxysms of an era of collapsing race-thinking; Smuts's League of Nations elides equity and equality to obfuscate his liberalism's illiberalisms. Each captures not only the dying gasps of the empires in question, but the dying gasps of an *age* of liberal imperialism (or so we hope, Ignatieff, Kagan and Ferguson notwithstanding). Second, Morefield exposes a set of thinkers who, for all of their relative obscurity, have profoundly influenced contemporary global history. The Round Table's *The Commonwealth of Nations* parlayed the empire's terms into the language of 'internationalism' and shaped the League of Nations' Mandate System and the UN's Trusteeship Council, which Smuts pushed forward in later years. Ferguson's influence is widespread as a renowned public figure and advisor to some of the world's largest financial firms. Beyond his failed bid for Canada's Prime Ministership, Ignatieff has served on the Independent International Commission on Kosovo and the UN's International Commission on Intervention and State



Sovereignty. For all of the contemporary influence that we like to attribute to canonical figures like Kant, it pales in comparison with these thinkers' impacts on the modern world.

Morefield's approach is equally original, drawing together careful historiographical research, a sharp analytical and critical eye, and psychoanalytic reflection to illuminate the political and philosophical stakes of her protagonists' deflections. While the mixture of methods paints a well-rounded history of the present overall, the psychoanalytic dimension is somewhat uneven, lapsing at points into psychologism. At its best – as with Smuts, the Round Table and Zimmern – Morefield's turn to psychoanalysis is buttressed by, or brought into conversation with, the thinker's ideas. In Chapter 5, for instance, she very effectively shows the congruence of Smuts' holism, racism and contributions to the League's Mandate System and UN's Trusteeship System; we see here the overlaps and imbrications of Smuts' philosophical, personal and political commitments, each of which illuminates the others. Her treatment of Ferguson's impetus as an historian (p. 140) and turn to the psychoanalytic literature on disavowal to explain his illiberalism (p. 160), conversely, do less to develop our comprehension of his thought than unravel his personal motivations – a more speculative, less convincing, and to my mind, less interesting endeavour. Similarly, attributing Kagan's focus on the Athenian, rather than British, empire to its greater obscurity (all the better, Morefield surmises, on which to project his favoured counterfactuals) imputes a lot to a choice plausibly subject to a wide range of motivations. At its strongest, *Empires* reveals the tensions these thinkers grapple with and how they go about it, rather than conjecturing about why they do.

The book's greatest contribution, however, lies in capturing the peculiar tenor of political theory generated by these 'bad Hegelians' (p. 19), their curious cast of mind. What's of enduring interest is their different kind of theory, theory that isn't quite theory but that rather sits at the juncture of public, academic and political audiences. Theirs is a body of thought that I can only describe as *queasy*, struggling to resolve paradoxes and contradictions that simply wouldn't trouble more straightforward theorists or philosophers who don't twist on the horns of publicity, academy and power. What makes the bad Hegelians so interesting is that they wear three hats – public figure, scholar, advisor to the powers that be – and their ideas reflect the tensions and anxieties resulting from trying to reconcile their often incompatible demands. Whatever the contradictions in Mill's liberal imperialism were, they simply didn't trouble him in the way that Zimmern, the Round Tablers and Ignatieff are troubled by the empire's profound inconsistencies (Ferguson is the outlier here, his exceptional hubris shielding him from any such queasiness, ambivalence or self-reflection). The tensions that the Round Tablers sought to resolve weren't just theoretical, but rather grappled with *conceptual* contradictions that threatened to undo a system of *power* if improperly presented to the *public*. Their concerns were, then, not merely philosophical, but also political and public; the challenge lay in weaving together a liberal imperialism that could speak to these disparate concerns



and audiences. For the bad Hegelians, things are at stake in ways that they weren't for Mill, who could casually dismiss his post at the East India Company as a day job with little bearing on his real philosophical work. Mill did not, of course, face the later backlash against imperialism. But more than that, he didn't face such disparate audiences or have to put himself through the multi-hatted Hegelians' contortions as theorists, apologists and proponents of empire.

While there is much to be gained from *Empires*, Morefield's accomplishment is to expose this queasiness, the malaise of this late-imperial mode of political thought, seeking to balance too many demands and reconcile too many contradictions for too many audiences with too profound a set of consequences. In so doing, she does what the best of critical scholarship ought to: she alerts us to the intellectual strategies that, still today, carry the mantle of domination under the guise of liberalism.

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