Karuna Mantena. Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism.

Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism by Karuna Mantena

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even the Socialist International endorsed settler colonialism.

In contrast, scattered socialist anti-imperialists drew more from positivism than normally recognized. Claeys sees an unmistakably positivist legacy in socialists’ critique of exploitation and the argument that empire-building benefited financial interests at the expense of Britain’s majority. Karl Marx originated the critique of imperialism, and many socialists remained critical, including Karl Kautsky and Henry Hyndman, who championed Indian self-rule. The Social Democratic Federation claimed to be the first advocates for Irish Home Rule, but this too was a positivist agenda.

The book culminates by scrutinizing Hobson’s developing analysis, both before and after his production of Imperialism. It concludes that Hobson hardly proved hostile to imperialism but instead was inconsistent and also influenced by positivism. Like positivist Emerich de Vattel (John Locke is not mentioned), Hobson paternally justified seizing land if indigenes did not develop it. He shared with positivists cultural relativism and the view that imperialism drained resources from the domestic economy while impairing moral degeneration and undermining democracy. Given this context, Claeys challenges Wolfgang J. Mommsen, A. J. P. Taylor, and others who credited Hobson with the first analysis systematically linking imperialism and capitalism.

The book reflects privileged white men’s continuing feelings of entitlement to pronounce on the fate of others without consulting them. In this “history of ideas” it apparently matters little whether the ideas were held by a cabinet minister such as Herbert Samuel with power to enact his ideas into practice, an influential journalist such as Blatchford, or an obscure member of the chattering classes, so long as he left an archive of writings. Nor does the reader learn the degree to which any of these disparate and competing ideas were put into practice by those with power to do so. The most rudimentary enquiry into what was actually happening in European colonies at the time would offer a bracing juxtaposition to what in most cases amounted to wishful thinking. No women appear apart from Besant, briefly, much less major anti-imperialist activists such as Indian National Congress leader Dadhabai Naoroji, also an Irish Home Ruler and proponent of the “drain” theory, who is mentioned only in passing. “Hindoo” positivists apparently corresponded with positivist Richard Congreve, but their views appear nowhere in this volume. The book in short would lead one to believe that the destiny of the colonized world remained in the hands of a particularly vocal, entitled, and prolific segment of the European intelligentsia. History, however, has demonstrated otherwise. In debunking socialist associations with anti-imperialism and in sorting through a vast literature on this question, the book performs a useful service.


In this book political theory meets history and anthropology. Karuna Mantena brings the work of recent political theorists of empire, such as Uday Singh Mehta, Sankar Muthu, Jennifer Pitts, and Mahmood Mamdani, into conversation with older works of imperial history, most notably the scholarship of Thomas R. Metcalf, Francis G. Hutchins, and David Low. Through a generative and rigorous reading of the political thought of Henry Sumner Maine, a theorist and civil servant of the British Empire, Mantena argues that British liberal political thought shifted in a more culturalist direction in the late nineteenth century and provided the foundations for a social theory that formed the basis of modern anthropology and, subsequently, policies of indirect rule in Africa and Southeast Asia. Against the long-dominant presumption in British historiography that a universalizing, well-intentioned British liberalism went wrong when it arrived in the empire, Mantena argues that the theory of liberalism and empire at work in late nineteenth-century British rule in India went through a series of epistemological shifts that changed the nature of liberalism from within.

At the heart of the book is a deceptively simple question: how did liberalism go from the putative universalism of Thomas Babington Macaulay to the notions of cultural difference embedded in theories of indirect rule by people such as Frederick Lugard? Mantena argues with great rigor that the coherence of liberalism as a project was continually critiqued, eventually reshaping itself into new forms of imperialism. Many historians of empire have argued that administrative practices in the colonies were a pragmatic response to high-minded theory. The best-known version of this argument is the longstanding conception of the “man on the spot” and what he did when confronted with challenges such as caste, ritual, and customary legal practices that were antithetical to universal (read: British) liberal norms. Instead, Mantena argues that theories about liberalism were constituted by contradictions generated from within liberalism and concomitant debates about imperial governance. As she argues, “[Maine’s] complex relationship to liberalism—both as defender and prominent critic—also locates him at the center of its discursive reconstitution and political realignment” (p. 181).

The argument is carefully constructed, beginning with a quick survey of British political thought generated by Warren Hastings and Edmund Burke in the late eighteenth century, through the mid-century Victorian liberalism of John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle, and ending with Maine and his contemporaries James Fitzjames Stephen and John R. Seeley. Rather than taking liberal empire to be a project of reform and improvement, Mantena shows how Maine transformed a liberal but “anomalous” project into an alibi of empire, arguing that Indian society needed protection from the trep-
idations and destructive modernizing impulses of an imperial project that hoped to "civilize" the subcontinent (pp. 53, 93). The idea of "protection" was a powerful one for Maine, who believed that Indian forms of social organization—village communities and caste—would enable India to survive (pp. 53, 149, 151) and that the goal of imperial rule was to offer to preserve customary forms of legal and social practice through codification of the rule of law. The idea of a holistic and stable culture animated early twentieth-century sociologists and anthropologists who were critical of evolutionary models of civilizational progress; figures such as Franz Boas and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown relied on "culture" as a way of disavowing and delegitimizing imperial interventions into the politics and practices of colonized groups (pp. 82–88). Mantena argues with extraordinary insight that "The social thus emerges to mark the limits of politics" (p. 73). Through his theories on the social, Maine rendered India apolitical, commodifying how Indian women and their families experienced a wide range of legal events, such as widowhood, inheritance, and adoption. Mantena’s arguments begin to explain how the emergence of social theory produced legal reforms that buttressed patriarchal claims in Anglo-Indian law.

The coda, an examination of modern politics of empire, offers a short but clear-eyed assessment of America’s liberal alibis in going to war against Iraq, and it more fully explains why the idea of the alibi of empire is something that needs careful thought, for the past and for the future.


In Britain during the late nineteenth century, any man or woman feeling under the weather could seek relief in a broad range of fantastically named products, from Dr. J. Collis Browne’s Chlorodyne or Smedley’s Chillie Paste to Dr. Scott’s Electric Hair Brush and Macaura’s Blood Circulator. However, this burgeoning medical marketplace brought conflict as well as profit. At the end of a long period of reform, a unified and recognizably modern medical profession had emerged, distinguished by a shared education, highly regulated qualifications, and an ethos of public service. As Takahiro Ueyama shows, despite the ideals of the profession, practitioners were not above lending their names and their credibility to products sold in the marketplace. This in turn prompted medical institutions to try to distance their professional members from the commercial hurly-burly by prosecuting those who endorsed some of the more apparently outlandish products.

The book explores a number of facets of the late-Victorian medical marketplace, focusing on London in the 1880s and 1890s. Chapter two explores the new advertising techniques used to sell medicines. Ueyama makes a convincing case for the distinctive character of the late-nineteenth-century medical marketplace, in which entrepreneurs sold not just remedies for disease but the means of obtaining good health. He shows how the use of text and image were skillfully combined to create a fantasy of abundant health as a commodity that could be purchased. The focus of the book is on the conflict between a professional ideal of public service and practitioners’ desire to profit from this medical marketplace. Through a series of case studies, Ueyama explores how the Royal College of Physicians, the General Medical Council, and sections of the medical press led efforts to control the sale of patent remedies and doctors’ participation in the more “quackish” end of the medical market, particularly their endorsement of medicines and therapeutic devices such as electrical belts that claimed to revitalize blood and nerves. Such efforts often proved unsuccessful, for the conflicts were far from clear cut. Efforts to discredit patent medicines ran into opposition from the developing pharmaceutical profession, while actions taken against the vendors of electrical devices were opposed by some electrical engineers eager to expand the market for their skills and knowledge. The final chapter deals with a campaign by the British Medical Association against medical massage establishments. While medical massage began as a regular form of therapeutics that claimed to restore bodies worn out by the stresses of modern life, some massage establishments were a cover for prostitution.

Ueyama takes seriously the (to modern eyes) slightly ludicrous medical fringe and reveals its significance, evidenced in the huge size of the market for therapeutics; the skill, effort, and investment in advertising; and the widespread craving for health and vitality, not just for freedom from disease. The book has some flaws. The chapter on medical massage sits slightly to one side of the larger argument. Massage was not inherently “quackish”; conflict arose not when doctors endorsed its use, but when it was misused by non-medical entrepreneurs as a means of selling sex rather than selling health. Ueyama also overstates his claim that historians

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