

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain

Review Number:

1156

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 November, 2011

Editor:

Simon Gunn

James Vernon

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£20.95

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

University of California Press

Place of Publication:

Berkeley, CA

Reviewer:

Jacob Glicklich

The most forceful initial impression that emerges from this collection is the diversity of topics covered. The work focuses on the patterns of British imperialism, liberalism and modernity in the 19th century, exploring the degree to which liberalism was distinctive and the specific ways in which it was coercive. This includes a focus on the writings, and ambiguities, of figures like Macaulay, Mayhew and Stubbs. Also prominent are discussions of specific practices and social technologies, from the architecture of entertainment to discourses on masturbation. A considerable effort has been made to ground and link these issues, but the collection retains a varied aspect, dealing briskly with an array of subjects that are not commonly brought together even in the field of the history of empire. For any academic collection the editors' introduction represents both an analysis and a promise, an overview of the contributions and their links that assures the reader of their relevance in sequence. To succeed, a text like *Liberal Modernity* must persuade through different writings that stand both in their own right and as links in a larger multi-author exploration of its theme. The complexity of the titular concepts of the work raises the stakes considerably, suggesting a wide-ranging and culturally intense argument as to how ambiguous, and widely-present, patterns organised behavior and understanding during the heyday of the British empire. Or, as Gunn and Vernon put it, their collection works to explore and redevelop the discussion of when and how British modernity appeared, and the ways in which its distinctive aspects were connected to imperial structures (p. 1).

This concept continues through a discussion of the origin of, and debates over, liberalism, modernity, and

their intersection. Gunn and Vernon continually stress plurality and the need to overcome conceptual restrictions. Their analysis of modernity provides less a solid definition than a description of the terrain over which academic debate on these concepts has been carried on. They show particular debts to Foucault and to the study of political economy in recent scholarship. This section also reflects on the long debate over British peculiarity, seeking to understand both distinctive factors in British life and the way that it functioned as part of a larger intellectual and imperial process. Additionally, the overall promise made by the collection is the diffuse yet still ambitious claim to 'provide different understandings of [liberal modernity's] character, location, and periodization that we hope will generate new ways of conceptualizing the peculiarities of Britain's historical development' (p. 7). This is a promise that the collection overall renders effectively, creating a useful overarching piece of analysis in the vein of Ames' *Germany's Colonial Past* (1) or Clancy-Smith's *Domesticating the Empire*. (2) It should be noted that this applies to the British sphere, which is to an extent problematic because, as Burton has argued, this is a sphere that threatens to become the single privileged focus of work on European imperialism in general. (3)

The work lacks subsections or grouping of specific smaller themes, and one awkward component is the lack of a compelling sense of internal organization for the 12 articles. The closest that emerges is a loose chronological theme, with the first articles exploring early 19th-century themes and the later pieces moving from the 19th into the 21st century (p. 17). The tendency towards this arrangement is certainly understandable yet it does weaken the collection by presenting a succession of recaps, and fast forwarding through the same periods in different venues, and the collection might have benefited from tighter organization and a sharper focus on the prevalent issues that the authors use to organize their analysis; in particular government, historiography, gender and trans-Victorian links. This problematic aspect does not undermine the effectiveness of the articles, both as separate pieces and as a sequence, although it does reduce the ease of reading them, and limit the wider thematic links of the work as a whole.

The collection proper begins well with Catherine Hall's investigation into Macaulay as both a crafter of symbols and a symbol himself in the intersection of political and intellectual currents. Macaulay's prominent focus involved the making of subjects, an element carried through his presentation of history as a growth of civilized standards and moral authority, marked by a portrayal of the dangers to stability offered by poverty, radicalism and improper use of the past (p. 36). James Epstein's analysis in the next chapter changes the emphasis towards the study of more direct colonial structures, although the focus remains on the complexity of the intellectual backdrop associated with such these regimes. In the context of norms of British liberty they related to Trinidad, Epstein explores the diverse proposals and labour schemes for integrating Chinese settlers. He argues that such efforts 'reveal much about experiments in free labor, the construction of racial hierarchies, and the way in which a discourse of colonial development and governance was conceived across a series of linked imperial sites' (p. 46). This approach utilised particular British discourses on how to define and control recent free labour, and shows the unstable attempts by the liberal metropolitan imagination to grapple with complex colonial realities. The limited length of the piece does have the drawback that the material conditions existing in Trinidad at the time are described in insufficient detail, and this undermines aspects of the applied theory. Epstein nevertheless provides a useful reflection of the way that, problematic and contradictory as liberal imperialist ideologies were, they became doubly so in relation to limited information on the metropole's own sources of power. This idea continues in John Seed's reflections on the intellectual construction of the figure of the poor. Applied effectively to the internal class Other of mid 19th-century British society, this analysis reflects on the superior perspective offered by Marx to the details and ambiguities that surface in Mayhew's collection. Ironically it was Marx, despite his association with grand theory, who came closer to proximity with physical, exploited human lives than Mayhew.

Concerns over the construction of information and its limits, common in the analysis of Mayhew, Macaulay, and the regulation of labor in Trinidad, emerge centrally in Tom Crook's intervention, one of the more striking of the collection. In large part this piece is successful because it draws on more novel specifics and effectively connects them to modernity's liberal power. Crook argues for a common link between the regulation on spying, masturbation and voting in the context of paradoxical elements of the British

conceptual system (p. 79). The development of a culture of non-orable secrecy, rejection of masturbation as negating liberal society and avoidance of accountability through the secret ballot show a common awareness of widespread practices both essential / inevitable and yet disruptive to stability. They were all aspects which appealed to the liberal self but were dangerous in their wider implications of asocial autonomy from the responsibilities of the rational subject. Crook's reading of these elements is effective in large part through his presentation of rarely linked aspects as part of a common wider thread, living up to the ambition of the collection and suggesting a wider potential in combining biopolitics with the study of information systems in the context of Victorian social technology.

His work is followed by Thomas Osborne's article on 'rational governmentality', involving elements of constitutional and political history, which may have been more profitably juxtaposed with Hall's related historiography. While exploring the ideological links between liberal politics and liberal history Osborne also highlights the disconnect, and even tension, between them. Osborne and Crook's pieces talk largely in different languages, and both lack direct connection to the process of imperial control. This theme reappears prominently in Tony Bennett's linking of habit to structures of direct control, particularly relevant to how British liberal society defined and regulated Aborigines. Bennett explores the deep interest in defining the pre-existing conditions of Australian Aborigines and how they should be changed, with as Aborigines commonly being portrayed as pre-modern and stagnant (p. 115). This discourse was never an easy one, however, leading to debates and contradictions even within the same armchair colonial theories. Consistently, however, the British represented the natives as being incapable of improvement or being externally civilized. An effective piece in its own right, Bennett's work is particularly valuable in augmenting other articles in this collection, a reminder of the very significant threat of modernity for those defined by the colonial culture as pre-modern and un-improvable. The violent and indeed genocidal context that shaped, and emerged from, these debates gives an added relevance to the assessment. Even more than Epstein, Bennett specifically captures the significance of prevailing and shifting norms in the 19th century, and the high consequences of existent ambiguities inside liberal ideology.

Peter Bailey's work covers a wider internal sphere than most of the collection, exploring the ramifications of liberalism not merely in terms of history texts or regulation, but in the way that leisure was constructed for, and debated by, liberal society in the climate of industrialisation. In Bailey's reading there was little that was accidental and much that was fraught about the emergence of acceptable patterns, but by the end of the 19th century these formed 'a viable accommodation of leisure to a modern lifestyle', although debates continued on the acceptability and limits of pleasure (p. 133).

Gavin Rand's piece jumps back to more conventional terrain, arguing for the significant role played by empire in India in the development of British government, liberty and linked values. In terms of the construction of colonial urban space and the rhetoric of imposed modernity, Rand asserts that empire cannot be understood in separation from liberalism's nominal claims to universality and rationality (p. 146). His piece is particularly suggestive in combination with Bennett's, showing the way that modernity formed a coercive colonial instrument both on populations seen as improvable and those who weren't, although with very different discourses and material results.

Linked to a degree by a more open-ended chronology, the final pieces in this collection analyse political power in different spheres and with different conclusions. Jon Lawrence contrasts with the tone of much of the collection in emphasizing continued liberal and hierarchical elements in British political culture 'so much so that it might be more fruitful to think in terms of 'conservative' rather than 'liberal modernity in the British case' (p. 147). The emphasis is on British particularity, ongoing paternalist leadership and a deep elite barrier against democracy.⁽⁴⁾ What's lacking from this piece is the colonial dimension. It's not surprising due to limits of length and not necessary for its argument in itself, but this does produce a bit of disconnect from the other pieces, taking a different tack without the common ground that could assess conflicting arguments.

In what could be a companion piece to Crook, David Vincent presents a narrative of the 21st-century misuse of information powers, and links this to the earlier construction of British state power. What is shown is an

extensive and mostly negative path, with liberal modernity making an accommodation with secrecy, and with boundaries tenuously framed by first a private honour code and more recently a nebulous legal framework.

Chris Otter's focus on contemporary crisis introduces the idea of ecology to political discourses. Otter sees a significant and barely recognized link between liberalism and environmental transformation, particularly in the context of coal and wheat (p. 183). These resources produced a double environmental break, with British liberalism's norms of free trade and material growth encouraging a long-term global pattern of deregulation and 'development' that has contributed substantially to the current environmental crisis (p. 197). A somewhat similar critique of origins of deregulated economy and their foundations appears in Mary Poovey's work. She argues that there is a deep contradiction between neoliberal and imperial constructs of simultaneously autonomous and self-directed market forces, as well as historical narratives that emphasize 'Great Men' (p. 200). Whereas most pieces in this book focus on the post-Victorian period, Poovey identifies the Bretton Woods system and growing United States power as changing the organization of narratives. In relation to 20th-century privatization and the fallout from the 2007 economic collapse, Poovey sees the dominant neoliberal stories as dangerous both in their excessive and inadequate focus on individual actors. The piece is a forceful, creative and effective one, but it feels only weakly joined to the larger collection, particularly the direct colonial context. The highlighted instruments of coercion are United States power and corporate influence rather than the imperial state

One benefit of these articles, and the links formed within them in this collection, is to build an awareness of the process of empire as being connected to diffuse mental constructions in ostensibly depoliticized environments. This is hardly a fresh theme, but it merits repetition and further emphasis. This collection shows an awareness of how individuals and discourses advanced the imperial dimension of liberal modernity through explicit claims, justifying narratives and perceptual definition. While there remains further potential in reading Victorian texts critically for wider aspects, particularly relating to gender, this collection represents a significant advance in terms of the diversity of specific topics and the way these are mostly related to common underlying themes. Particularly valuable is the construction of power that emphasizes the use of information, partaking heavily of biopolitics without the overt emphasis on eroticization and imperial sexuality that has sometimes dogged analysis of the metropole's consciousness.⁽⁵⁾ This collection is nevertheless slightly disappointing, insofar as it doesn't live up to the potential implicit in the authors involved and the wider connections. While potent and valuable, it does not achieve the level of essential insight beyond a few areas, in large part due to the structure of the collection. The average length of an article is 15 pages, with an array of specific foci that leave little time to effectively flesh out the most compelling conclusions in a particular theme. In addition the organization of the whole could be improved, with tighter connections, more pairing, the contrast of similar works, and a better sense of how these pieces represent compatible approaches, as well as occasionally productive tension.

Despite these limitations *Liberal Modernity* remains an effective and illuminating collection, of considerable interest to scholars researching empire, intellectual culture, state power or class in the Victorian context. This volume forms the first volume released under the Berkeley Series in British Studies.⁽⁶⁾ It remains to be seen what the full range and impact of this series will be, in particular how extensively scholars tie together diverse specific aspects, and how prominently the wider tropes of empire, liberalism and modernity displayed here continue to inform the wider study. Under the selection and editorship presented in this volume the series is a highly promising one, and taken in itself *Liberal Modernity* is a valuable resource.

Notes

1. *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, ed. Eric Ames and Marcia Klootz (Lincoln, NE, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith (Charlottesville, VA, 1998). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Antoinette Burton, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*. (Durham, NC, 2005). Indeed, Gunn and Vernon themselves express misgivings about the loss of comparative

elements, and the way that their work risks ?Collapsing complexity and difference and reifying a Western, and even specifically British, story of modernity? (p. 12).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Ironically Lawrence sees the crucial move against this system deriving from Thatcher?s govern-ment.
[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. See the critique of Ann Laura Stoler?s ?terse and tender ties? and the concern that this prioritization distorts awareness of imperial coercion.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Editors Mark Bevir and James Vernon.[Back to \(6\)](#)
-

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1156>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7799>