
H-France Review Vol. 5 (November 2005), No. 128

Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. xiii + 382 pp. \$39.50 U.S. / £26.95 (UK) (cl). ISBN 0-691-11558-3.

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Liberal justifications of Empire are nothing new. In spite of the rhetorical support liberals have given to universal or “natural” rights, to tolerance, and to the rule of law, it is a commonplace to point out that such ideals frequently were sacrificed or qualified when attention shifted from one’s fellow citizens to other races or ethnic groups. A case in point is Thomas Jefferson’s comments about the intellectual inferiority of blacks *vis-à-vis* whites, and his practical acceptance of American slavery in spite of his troubled comments and his perception of its obvious injustice. An equally famous example is John Stuart Mill who in *On Liberty*, one of the foundational works of modern liberalism, wrote that it was entirely legitimate to subject to “despotism” “those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.”[1] The liberal universalism of Jefferson and Mill had its limits when confronting the non-European “other.”

Jennifer Pitts has written an elegant and provocative book, *A Turn to Empire*, about the impact of empire on late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century liberalism, focusing on the shift that took place among English and French liberals during the sixty years straddling the turn of the nineteenth century. Early liberals like Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Benjamin Constant criticized European empire for its violation of natural rights, for the injustices it brought to colonized peoples and, additionally, for the disastrous economic, political, and cultural effects it had for the conquering nations. There was a dramatic shift from this critical stance after 1830, with famous mid-nineteenth century liberals like John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville vigorously supporting the conquest of non-European peoples and arguing that the liberal politics appropriate for European countries was fundamentally different from the despotic paternalistic politics appropriate for less developed peoples and societies. Pitts’ examination of this shift in liberal thought forces a reassessment of the liberalism of both Tocqueville and Mill. She makes a convincing case that empire was central, not peripheral, to their political thought.

The first two-thirds of the book details how the “turn to empire” looked in English liberal thought. Given the French focus of this forum, only a rough outline will be provided here. Pitts’ discussion begins with Adam Smith’s theories about progress and his analyses of the causes and complexity of social development. Unlike later liberals such as Mill, Smith had high respect for the achievements of other societies, even those that had not “advanced” to as high a level of economic organization as the “fourth stage” commercial societies of Western Europe. One reason for this was that Smith believed movement by any society from one stage to another was a complex affair that could not be attributed wholly to enhanced mental capacities or moral superiority. While European societies were more “advanced,” they were not necessarily “superior.” Smith’s criticism of empire also included astute insights about the injustices and excesses of European colonial power.

Edmund Burke opposed empire even more strongly. He condemned British imperial practices for their inhumane treatment of colonial peoples and for suspension of the universal moral and political norms that should operate in all territories. He attempted, unsuccessfully, to get the English public to feel sympathy for the indigenous populations of the colonies, and he was scathingly critical of the cultural presumptuousness of the English people and their leaders. Like Smith, he also believed that imperial

power over distant subjects was invariably abused unless it was made somehow accountable to those subject to it. And like Smith, Burke believed that justice must be based upon sympathy and a commitment to universal moral and political standards; he was critical of the “geographical morality” (Burke’s phrase) that permitted Europeans to believe that the moral standards they recognized for themselves were inappropriate for others. Both Smith and Burke believed that European, and especially British, commercial society was a great good, but they did not believe that this made European civilization morally superior. They both had, in the words of Pitts, “a sense of wonder at the complexity of societies and at the unintended consequences of human action. Both appreciated the astonishing array of social formations and institutions that human rationality can produce and thus respected a multiplicity of values as rational and moral” (p. 245).

As the nineteenth century advanced, British theories of progress became more triumphalist, less nuanced, and less tolerant of cultural difference. At the same time, British liberals became more convinced of Britain’s own fitness to spread civilization. Pitts focuses on this transformation in the thought of the famous Utilitarians. Bentham, for all of his grandiosity and panopticon rigidity, was more skeptical of empire than were his two famous successors, James Mill and John Stuart Mill. Both James Mill and his son spent much of their lives working for the East India Company, and both favored a well-intentioned despotism designed for the improvement of the indigenous population of India. It is John Stuart Mill, author of numerous passages (like the one from *On Liberty* quoted above) advocating civilizing despotism, who has most troubled subsequent defenders of liberalism. For all his radicalism with regard to domestic politics, and for all his sensitivity to the interests of women, he was convinced that people in the “civilized world” occupied a morally privileged position, and they had a legitimate right to decide the fate of people in “backward” societies.[2] Mill’s patronizing regard of others is exemplary, Pitts argues, of the imperialistic mentality of mid-nineteenth century British liberals. The more nuanced and pluralist theories of progress in the thought of earlier British liberals like Smith and Burke was replaced by civilizational self-confidence, an increasingly exclusive conception of national community and political capacity, and a ruder dichotomy between barbarity and civilization.

The last third of the book examines the “turn to empire” in French liberal thought. The figure that represents the early-nineteenth century opposition to empire is Benjamin Constant. Constant resisted the common idea that France represented the idea of freedom in the world and that French conquest was synonymous with the spread of the Revolutionary ideals of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” Constant’s attack of empire operated on several levels. Most obviously, he argued, imperial rule violated the rights of individuals in the conquered country and undermined the autonomy and traditional mores upon which social order had rested. The pretense that conquest was carried out for universal values and for the benefit of the conquered peoples was rejected as hypocritical.[3] Moreover, the process of foreign conquest was corrosive of both private and public morality, not only among the conquered people but also among the conquering people. This is the thrust of Constant’s *De l’esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation*, published in 1814, which focused on how the mores of the military and of conquest (obviously thinking of Napoleon and his armies) undermined beneficent mores in France. He suggested, for example, that military officers, having grown accustomed to imposing their will on subject populations, would be impatient with the dissent, debate, and sheer messiness of domestic liberal politics.

This opposition to empire gave way to support and defense of empire in French liberal thought after 1830. And the liberal theoretician that is exemplary here is Alexis de Tocqueville. As Pitts emphasizes, Tocqueville placed French colonialism at the center of his political concerns from the beginnings of his legislative career. In 1837, during his unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, he published two “Letters on Algeria.” In 1841, following his election to the Chamber, and again in 1846 as member of a parliamentary commission convened for the purpose of examining military requests for additional funds, Tocqueville visited Algeria to learn first-hand what the colonial project entailed. He

was one of the experts on Algeria in the Chamber of Deputies; his understanding of politics was inextricably tied to his understanding of empire.[4]

Tocqueville shared a great deal with Constant, and we know that he read some of Constant's writings.[5] Both were sensitive to the difficulty of sustaining a liberal regime in France; both wished to assure the protection of "rights," called for a constitutional and representative system that would insure the separation and balance of power, and insisted that a culture of civic involvement was critical for republican survival. But on the question of empire, there was a pronounced disjunction. Tocqueville supported the French conquest of Algeria, defending it on the grounds that it was necessary for French internal political solidarity and for its national preeminence as a great power. Constant, though he said little about Algeria *per se*,[6] had argued that putting liberty and representative government on a firm foundation in France required a rejection of imperial conquest, because such conquest violated the rights of the people colonized and because it undermined social mores necessary for liberty at home. Tocqueville argued that putting liberty and representative government on a firm foundation in France required the glory of imperial adventures and the heightening of national prestige that he assumed colonial conquest would bring.

To his credit, Tocqueville remained suspicious of the pretensions of Mill and other English imperialists who argued that colonial conquest was part of the obligatory civilizing mission of "advanced" societies. British imperialists argued that the conquest of a barbarous nation by a civilized nation was a duty undertaken in service of human progress, an altruistic act that was, in fact, costly for the conquering country. Tocqueville suspected that such pride and self-righteousness cloaked self-serving interests and that such self-righteousness would, in fact, lead to resentment and resistance by the indigenous people. Tocqueville himself would periodically hope that European empires would lead to a more civilized world, but his contact with American and Algerian societies forced him to recognize that empire had in fact failed to improve the life of indigenous peoples and colonial subjects.

But while Tocqueville was suspicious of the self-righteous motives that underpinned imperial ambitions, and sensitive to the socio-psychological dimension of empire in both the colonizing and the colonized societies, he nonetheless advocated the imperial subjugation of indigenous people in Africa. Indeed, he even supported the crop-burnings and *razzias* of General Bugeaud and the French forces in Algeria during the 1840s. "In order for us to colonize to any extent," he wrote in 1841, "we much necessarily use not only violent measures, but visibly iniquitous ones" (p. 213). Tocqueville was willing to justify such actions, Pitts argues, because he believed that the liberties and rights of the indigenous people of Algeria were less important than the positive role empire would play in France's internal and international politics. Internally, it was important to provide citizens with a dazzling endeavor that would force them out of their private spheres. Internationally, it was important to halt the decline of French preeminence *vis-à-vis* Britain and other nations.

Tocqueville's defense of liberty and democracy, therefore, was anything but universal. Many students of Tocqueville's thought have failed to recognize this because they have wanted to separate consideration of his domestic politics from consideration of his colonial politics. This allows scholars to emphasize the subtlety of Tocqueville's comparative and multi-layered considerations of democracy in America and France; how he analyzed, often simultaneously, the importance of historical factors (geographic location, availability of land, strength or weakness of "old regimes"), institutions (political systems, judicial systems, laws), and cultural mores (general level of education, religious belief, and, more broadly, what Tocqueville referred to as "habits of the heart"). What has been too often overlooked is that this nuanced analysis of western democracy was inextricably connected to an assessment of French social mores and France's place in the world. And, when Tocqueville thought about how French society was to regain the moral fiber to sustain liberty, he dreamed not only of the reinvigoration of French "virtue", but French national "glory" that countenanced ruthlessness toward others. In short, when he turned to

a consideration of the French colonies, his concern for French political stability and national prestige trumped any concern he may have had for the rights of the indigenous peoples for liberty and/or self-rule.

Pitts sensibly relates this to Tocqueville's anxieties about the stability and success of French democracy. Other factors, however, likely also played a role. It is significant, for example, that Tocqueville exuded an instinctive elitism, an engrained sense of his own superiority that adhered uncomfortably to his acceptance of democracy. This probably reflected the aristocratic milieu in which he was raised. Tocqueville, of course, never denied his sympathy for the role that aristocrats had played historically in protecting liberties in Old Regime France. What he lamented was how nobles had responded (or failed to respond) to the king's centralizing actions in the decades before the Revolution. What he regretted was that French nobles had been reduced to a closed group that compensated for their loss of real power by insisting on the importance of their privileges and distinctions; they had become a politically powerless caste living in a gilded ghetto. But for all his disapproval of noble powerlessness in pre-Revolutionary France, Tocqueville could not shake a sense of respect for what they had at one time represented and a deep nostalgic regret for their decline. This, of course, is one of the main themes of *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*. It is equally palpable in Tocqueville's *Souvenirs*, where one cannot help but be struck by his sense of aristocratic honor and his scorn for the masses: his caustic descriptions of working-class leaders like Blanqui; his belief that servants, even in the midst of the sociopolitical turmoil of the 1848 Revolution, should continue to respect social proprieties and do their "duty" (he is pleased that during the June Days his manservant returns to clean his boots and brush off his clothes).^[7]

Constant had no such regret, viewing nobles as the most visible representatives of a corrupt system in which there was a "privation of goal, of interests, of hopes other than those that are narrow and personal."^[8] Constant did not look back nostalgically on nobles for the culture necessary for a modern liberal politics, and he had less faith than Tocqueville in a patronizing ruling class. Tocqueville shared Constant's critical assessment of the "character" of modern citizens and the cultural dangers (fanaticism and self-regarding isolation) that modern democracies must avoid, but he retained an elitist aristocratic distrust of "the other" that made the support of empire easier.

One obvious implication of the contrast between Constant and Tocqueville—and a central message of this engaging book—is that liberalism is not necessarily for or against empire. The claim that empire is a violation of the essential doctrine of liberalism fails to address the historical reality that some of the most famous nineteenth century liberals like Mill and Tocqueville embraced empire. The contrasting claim that all liberalism is inherently racist and exclusionary fails to address the historical reality that many famous European liberals like Smith and Constant were vocal opponents of empire. Pitts' contribution to this debate is to help us understand how famous liberals of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century situated the consideration of empire in their thought, and to provide us with a lucid account of the doctrinal shifts that accompanied the nineteenth century liberal "turn to empire."

NOTES

[1] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts/Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 14.

[2] Mill's defense of his position was conducted in the language of "character" and "capacity," not in the language of "rights", something that influenced his stance on suffrage within Britain as much as it did his stance *vis-à-vis* the colonies.

[3] In his parliamentary speeches before the Chamber of Deputies during the 1820s, Constant criticized the colonial policy in Martinique and demanded that the population “without distinction of color or origin” be united under “the same laws.” [See Benjamin Constant, *Discours à la Chambre de Députés* (Paris: Dupont, 1828), t. 2., pp. 289-305 (séances du 16 juillet 1824 et du 8 janvier 1825), 490-98 (séance du 3 juin 1826); this quote, p. 495.] And he resisted the common notion that the Europeans were inherently superior. He applauded, for example, the blacks of Haiti who had become “very reasonable legislators . . . and statesmen as able and as polished as our diplomats.” [See Benjamin Constant, *Mélanges de littérature et de politique* (Paris: Pichon, 1829), p. 149; cited by Pitts, p. 181.]

[4] Jennifer Pitts has edited and translated Tocqueville’s writings on Algeria. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

[5] We know that Tocqueville read Constant’s political works of the Directory. See Robert T. Gannett Jr., *Tocqueville Unveiled: the Historian and His Sources for The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 32-8.

[6] Constant died in December 1830. His brief discussion of the French Algerian conquest of 1830 focused on the misguided use by the government of a foreign military adventure to shore up its flagging popularity.

[7] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs. Oeuvres complètes*, t. XII (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). See p. 135 for the description of Blanqui; p. 171 for the account of his manservant Eugène.

[8] Benjamin Constant, “De la force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s’y rallier.” *Oeuvres complètes, I: Ecrits de jeunesse (1774-1799)* (Tübingen: Verlag, 1998), pp. 367-68.

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