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Jennifer Pitts: A Turn to Empire

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One

Introduction

IN THE CLOSING YEARS of the eighteenth century, a critical challenge to European imperial conquest and rule was launched by many of the most innovative thinkers of the day, including Adam Smith, Bentham, Burke, Kant, Diderot, and Condorcet. They drew on a strikingly wide range of ideas to criticize European conquests and rule over peoples across the globe: among others, the rights of humanity and the injustice of foreign despotism, the economic wisdom of free trade and foolishness of conquest, the corruption of natural man by a degenerate civilization, the hypocrisy required for self-governing republics to rule over powerless and voiceless subjects, and the impossibility of sustaining freedom at home while exercising tyranny abroad. European explorers, wrote Denis Diderot in 1780,

arrive in a region of the New World unoccupied by anyone from the Old World, and immediately bury a small strip of metal on which they have engraved these words: *This country belongs to us*. And why does it belong to you? . . . You have no right to the natural products of the country where you land, and you claim a right over your fellow men. Instead of recognizing this man as a brother, you only see him as a slave, a beast of burden. Oh my fellow citizens!¹

While Diderot's criticism of empire was among the most radical and thoroughgoing, skepticism about both particular imperial ventures and the general project of unlimited European expansion was, by the 1780s, widespread among intellectuals. Just fifty years later, however, we find no prominent political thinkers in Europe questioning the justice of European empires.² Indeed, nineteenth-century liberals, including most prominently Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, turned decisively from the earlier thinkers' skepticism about empire and supported the expansion and consolidation of European rule over non-European subjects. "Despotism," wrote Mill, "is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end."³ Mill and Tocqueville were joined in their support for empire by many of their liberal contemporaries as well as by other political thinkers of their age, including Hegel and even Marx to some degree. But while both British and French liberals in the nineteenth century undertook to advocate and justify imperial rule, they did

so in divergent ways that reflected their countries' different degrees of international power and reputation—Britain was secure, dominant, and culturally confident, while France, which had lost much of its earlier empire by the end of the Seven Years' War, was politically unstable at home and had not yet regained power abroad—and that also reflected the somewhat different courses taken by liberalism in each country.

This book examines several important moments in the development of a strand of British and French political thought that appeared, by the 1780s, to hold the promise of a critical approach to European expansion, and its displacement by an imperial liberalism that by the 1830s provided some of the most insistent and well-developed arguments in favor of the conquest of non-European peoples and territories.⁴ This sea change in opinions on empire accompanied an increasingly exclusive conception among European thinkers of national community and political capacity. The liberal turn to empire in this period was also accompanied by the eclipse of nuanced and pluralist theories of progress as they gave way to more contemptuous notions of “backwardness” and a cruder dichotomy between barbarity and civilization.⁵

The historical and theoretical questions addressed in this inquiry include the following: What were some of the theoretical underpinnings of the criticism of empire we find expressed in the late eighteenth century, and what changes accompanied the decline of such critiques and the emergence of new justifications of empire? What intellectual dispositions have been conducive to skepticism about empire, and what beliefs and modes of moral judgment have led to the conviction that the conquest and despotic rule of other peoples is justified? How did discourses surrounding the conceptions of progress and nation change in ways that led to support for imperial rule?

This book considers the thought of British and French political thinkers of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, paying particular attention to figures—Burke, J. S. Mill, and Tocqueville—who were not only political philosophers of the first order but also active in the politics and administration of the British and French empires. Edmund Burke viewed his sustained condemnation of British actions in India as the most important political work of his life.⁶ John Stuart Mill worked from the age of seventeen for the British East India Company; he rose quickly to one of its most influential posts; and he fought for the Company's continued rule there, resigning only after the Company lost its battle to maintain control over Indian affairs when Parliament assumed direct rule over India in 1858. Alexis de Tocqueville established himself, early in his parliamentary career, as the Chamber of Deputies' expert on Algeria and as a prominent defender of French conquest and settlement there. The work of all these thinkers combined engagement in concrete debates over impe-

rial conquest and governance with broader philosophical reflections: on the nature of Europe's relations to the non-European world, on the duties of powerful countries toward more vulnerable societies, on the relationship between responsible representative government at home and despotic rule abroad. This study also addresses thinkers—Smith and Bentham—who, although not legislators or colonial administrators, followed the progress of their countries' empires closely and critically.⁷

Liberalism, Pluralism, and Empire

The thinkers considered here, for all the great differences in their thought, can be said to have shared a commitment to the values of equal human dignity, freedom, the rule of law, and accountable, representative government. They were universalists in the sense that they adhered to the principles that all human beings are naturally equal and that certain fundamental moral principles are universally valid. All eschewed both biological racism and the relativism that regards cultures as mutually incomprehensible or founded on irreconcilable values. As we shall see, their different universalisms—their different negotiations of the tension between a belief in human unity and a recognition of cultural, social, and political variation—had remarkably different implications as they responded to the political questions surrounding the imperial expansion of European states.

Because of the shared political and philosophical commitments among the central thinkers considered in this book, all might be regarded as members of a liberal tradition, broadly conceived. To be sure, “liberalism” emerged as a self-conscious tradition only in the nineteenth century and is thus anachronistic as a description of earlier thinkers' self-understanding. While Tocqueville, Bentham, J. S. Mill, and Constant explicitly described themselves as liberals, Burke and Smith would not have recognized liberalism as a tradition or category of political thought.⁸ Still, while it is impossible and probably counterproductive to attempt anything like a definitive or narrow definition of the term, liberalism has been usefully evoked to describe overlapping strands of thought long prior to the term's invention at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁹ Cheryl Welch's definition of liberalism, following early-nineteenth-century usage—in which liberalism “connote[s] a commitment to certain individual rights (specifically equality before the law, freedom of the press, and religious freedom), opposition to the policies of the mercantilist state, opposition to monarchical power if not to monarchical government, and a certain expansiveness of social sympathies”—captures well the range of commitments shared by the thinkers considered here.¹⁰ While some might dispute

an application of the last phrase to Burke's thought (a question addressed in chapter 3), this definition suits these thinkers remarkably well.

The question "what happens when liberalism encounters the world?" is more central to liberal thought than was long appreciated, as recent scholarship has begun to suggest.¹¹ There has been considerable disagreement in the literature and in popular understandings of the tradition about what the "liberal" position on empire has been, and about what the implications of liberal thought are for international justice more broadly. Some have claimed that liberalism has always contained an imperialist core: that a liberal insistence on progress and establishing the rule of law has led liberals over and over again to support imperialist projects. In this view, nineteenth-century Britain and the French *mission civilisatrice* serve as typical examples of the imperialist logic of liberal political thought.¹² Others suggest that liberalism is inherently anti-imperialist, given its commitment to human equality and self-government: in this account, otherwise liberal thinkers who support empire merely reveal an illiberal side or smuggle illiberal ideas into their arguments. Jeremy Bentham himself used this argument polemically when he wrote to the Spanish people that if they maintained their domination over their New World possessions, "in vain would you continue your claim to the title of liberals."¹³

The first view cannot explain the many thinkers widely considered liberals who strongly opposed European imperialism, particularly in the eighteenth century. The second disregards the fact that many of the staple concepts of liberal political thought have indeed been mobilized in favor of the European imperial enterprise, and that European liberalism was forged alongside, and deeply affected by, imperial expansion. Liberals—in different times and under diverse circumstances in the history of the liberal tradition—have been among imperialism's most prominent defenders and its sharpest critics. No explanation that rests on some set of basic theoretical assumptions in the liberal tradition can possibly explain such flexibility on the question of empire: liberalism does not lead inevitably either to imperialism or anti-imperialism. Rather, we must investigate the pressures and anxieties of certain historical moments to understand how thinkers whom we understand to exist within a broad but identifiable tradition could have disagreed so thoroughly about one of the most important political developments of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the expansion of European colonial empires.

While I want to insist that there is no logical necessity that liberalism be a tradition critical of empire, I also suggest that, if liberalism can be said to rest on a commitment to human dignity and equality, the support for empire among so many nineteenth-century liberals poses a theoretical problem that requires explanation. This is not to say that support for empire is ipso facto illiberal. Rather, the endorsement of radically differ-

ent political standards for different people implied by imperialism requires theoretical justifications that form an often unexpected and indeed uncomfortable element in liberal thought in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Nor should we believe that there is simply a gap between liberal theory and liberal practice, or that liberal practice, under political pressure, found itself unable to live up to its theory. Rather, this book examines the articulation of liberalism as a practice. Liberal theory has been constituted by its engagement in politics, and it is an important if often overlooked historical fact that the creation and consolidation of empires was central to that process.

The issue of empire draws out aspects of thinkers' theories in surprising and productive ways. It focuses our attention on certain blind spots or incisive moments that are not always apparent in their views on domestic politics. Writings on imperial politics allow us to answer more fully, for instance, who are the objects of a thinker's exclusions. John Stuart Mill was attuned to a degree remarkable for a man of his day to the ways in which European society and laws infantilized women, treating them as wards incapable of bearing adult responsibility. At the same time, he accepted with little question the view that Indians were similarly immature and incapable of self-government. In contrast, Burke is often considered the oligarchic thinker par excellence. As I argue in chapter 3, however, Burke's writings on international and imperial politics draw our attention to his powerful opposition to oppression by the few over the many and his own self-understanding as a reformer in the service of the vulnerable and excluded. These works suggest that what appears to be Burke's remarkable indifference to the sufferings of the French people under the ancien régime may be itself a blind spot in his thought, rather than an indication of broader and deeper commitments to aristocratic rule at any cost, as it is often taken to be.

This book asks how thinkers' views about cultural diversity, progress, and nationality affected their moral and political judgments regarding non-Europeans. I suggest that a strong conviction of the rationality of all people and the fundamental reasonableness of all societies was essential for robust resistance to imperial expansion and rule. Simple belief in human moral equality proved to be inadequate for genuine respect for unfamiliar people and insistence on humane and egalitarian relations with them. Condorcet, for instance, argued that European conquests had been cruel and wrong; but, believing non-Europeans to be, on the whole, backward and incapable of self-government or self-improvement, he hoped for a pacific settlement of Europeans throughout the world, leading to a partnership of unequals in which kind Europeans would take trusting savages into their care and tutelage. Although Condorcet's language, passionately critical of European depredations abroad, bore considerable

resemblance to that of his more robustly critical contemporaries, his brand of what we might call a nonpluralist anti-imperialism proved to be a fragile construct.

A central concern of this book, then, is how the thinkers under study analyzed and judged unfamiliar societies. Did their views of moral judgment speak to the difficulty of understanding unfamiliar others in different social contexts, or address the biases that beset moral and cultural judgment? How critical were they about their sources of information on non-European societies, especially when invoking them to demonstrate “backwardness”? Did they regard personal observation of such societies as important for proper judgment? Many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, for instance, drew attention to the dangers of basing theoretical and political judgments on sources that were notoriously biased and unreliable. Tocqueville insisted on seeing Algeria for himself; he altered his views about what was practicable and appropriate for French Algeria as a result of his journeys, and forbore from writing about India because of his inability to travel there. James Mill, in contrast, boasted that his writing about India was the more impartial and well informed because he had not been distracted by the arbitrary observations that are the lot of a traveler and had instead confined himself to a thorough canvassing of the (English-language) literature on India.

Not merely the philosophical arguments, but also the rhetorical practice of these thinkers illustrates the difficulty of engaging in moral reasoning about strangers, of extending the limits of moral norms. Burke’s parliamentary speeches draw explicit attention to this problem of appealing to an audience in familiar moral language, when one is discussing people whom it hardly understands, and for whom it has little sympathy. How does a thinker not only develop a nuanced and respectful understanding of an unfamiliar society for him- or herself, but also articulate this understanding for the larger society? Arguments about the audience’s hypocrisy play a crucial role in this process of attempting to expand the scope of moral norms, for hypocrisy appears to be a failure to expand that scope, an unwillingness to apply such norms to strangers. Burke, Bentham, and Constant all drew upon accusations of hypocrisy in an effort to prompt their audiences into a more respectful and equitable frame of mind. Also on the level of rhetoric, I want to suggest that the thinkers most critical of empire are those most inclined to use irony and humor in their arguments. The confidence—even self-righteousness—of imperial liberalism requires a kind of presumption incompatible with the sharply ironic, self-critical stance so characteristic of the eighteenth-century thinkers considered here. We encounter an earnestness in J. S. Mill or a grand high-mindedness in Tocqueville that is quite foreign to the style of Bentham or Burke.¹⁵

Scope and Summary

I begin, in chapter 2, with a discussion of Adam Smith's theories of progress and moral judgment, arguing that he developed resources for cross-cultural respect that nineteenth-century theorists of progress would fail to maintain. As a theorist of development, Smith combined, on the one hand, a belief in universal moral principles and the possibility of moral progress, and on the other hand, a posture of respect for precommercial and non-European societies. Smith approached the radically different moral and political commitments and practices to be observed in precommercial societies, then, with the thought that they were the result not of the ignorance or distorted values of their members, but rather of a familiar process of judgment employed in very different circumstances.

Chapter 3 discusses Burke's critique of the British empire in India and Ireland. Burke, whose understanding of moral judgment and societal development shared important features with Smith's, produced a singularly scathing indictment of British imperial practice in both hemispheres. In his works on India and Ireland, Burke analyzed with remarkable sensitivity the forms of political and moral exclusion that characterized Britain's relations with its colonial subjects. Burke perceived that British actions in the world were governed by a restricted notion of moral and political community that led to contempt for imperial subjects and a willingness to suspend ordinary British moral and political norms. There is considerable irony in the fact that while the late eighteenth century is known for defenses of the rights of man, perhaps the most notorious opponent of this formulation also sustained what may have been the most dedicated and impassioned advocacy on behalf of a remote people suffering at the hands of a European state. Attention to Burke's writings on India and Ireland is indispensable for a proper understanding not only of what lay behind his suspicion of the revolutionary "rights of man" but also of the possibilities generated by his own response to vulnerable groups. These writings reveal the pluralism and tolerance that underlay Burke's well-known hostility to grand ideologies and sweeping reforms based on abstract principle. While none of Burke's contemporaries matched either the breadth or the direct political involvement of his fight against imperial injustices, I argue that Burke's achievement was not that of a uniquely sensitive and eccentric figure. Rather he shared with others, including Smith and Bentham, a critical posture toward European claims of cultural and political superiority, a skepticism about whether political change could or should be imposed by an imperial power on very different societies, and a concern about the dangers that exercising despotic power abroad posed to political liberties at home.

As I argue in chapter 4, Bentham, whose utilitarian theory would be exploited by subsequent generations as the theoretical bulwark of the British government in India, himself insisted on the injustice, corruption, and presumptuousness of the European effort to rule distant subjects whose interests were best known to the people themselves. Bentham's writings on empire betray none of the enthusiasm for "progressive" despotism over backward subjects that would come to dominate the writings of his self-designated successors.

With James Mill and J. S. Mill, among others, British utilitarians abandoned Bentham's remarkably egalitarian and emancipatory posture toward empire. The common assumption of a continuous tradition of utilitarian imperialism not only distorts Bentham's own theoretical and political enterprise and leads to misreadings of some of his writings; it also fails to recognize the novelty of the Mills' thinking on empire. It was only when cruder theories of progress and "barbarity" had become dominant; only when a narrower conception of nationality began to take root; only when both the British state and the East India Company perceived a need to solidify their rule with an appropriately "progressive" ideology, that Benthamite utilitarianism was transformed into the imperialist doctrine it is widely understood to have been.¹⁶

As in Britain, late-eighteenth-century France evinced a growing moral and political disapproval of empire. Its most potent exponent was probably Diderot, but we find this critical posture to varying degrees in other thinkers, such as Diderot's coauthors of the *Encyclopédie* and the *Histoire des deux Indes*; Condorcet; and, in the early years of the next century, Benjamin Constant.¹⁷ In chapters 6 and 7, I discuss the shift in liberal views on empire in France that is, perhaps, best captured by a contrast between the writings of Constant on the "spirit of conquest" and those of Tocqueville on the French empire in Algeria and the West Indies. I argue that although Constant shared with Tocqueville many concerns typical of nineteenth-century French liberals—above all the desire to build a cohesive liberal society in the wake of the Revolution and the empire—Constant was suspicious of imperial conquest in ways that his liberal heirs were not.

Tocqueville, the most prominent and highly respected of the liberal advocates of empire in mid-nineteenth-century France, believed that conquest of Algeria would contribute to the foundation and perpetuation of the liberal order he sought for France, by providing a grand collective political project for an apathetic public as well as a laboratory for the municipal self-government he had admired in America. I examine the ways in which Tocqueville overcame earlier liberal concerns about the dangers or injustices of empire and came to believe that his liberalism might demand, or at least be materially assisted by, empire.

Tocqueville's enthusiasm for empire is in some ways so unexpected that it has escaped some readers altogether. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, seems simply to have extrapolated from the elements of pluralism in *Democracy in America* to argue that "Tocqueville believes in the exercise of rights even in immature communities . . . for otherwise men will never learn to stand and respect reciprocal liberties. Hence his opposition to paternalism and colonialism, every form of rule by outsiders no matter how benevolent."¹⁸ Such a claim suggests that to ignore Tocqueville's writings on empire is to misunderstand quite profoundly the implications of his writings on Western democracies. Moreover, Tocqueville's writings on Algeria should not be dismissed as merely an oversight or blind spot in the career of an otherwise enlightened liberal pluralist. For these works demonstrate particularly forcefully the degree to which a concern to place the modern democratic nation on a secure footing drew nineteenth-century French liberals into an exclusionary and violent international politics that so many of their predecessors would have seen as a betrayal of liberal humanitarianism.

This book focuses on treatments of European imperial expansion into territories with substantial indigenous populations, relations with whom were regarded as a central question of imperial policy. For Britain and France during the period in question, these were predominantly non-European populations in Asia and North Africa. I consider treatments of Ireland as well, because the British colonization of Ireland was seen by many, including Burke and Mill, to pose questions very much like those Britain faced in non-European colonies such as India. For Burke, these were problems of the political and moral exclusion of populations the British settlers considered inferior, and he regularly drew connections between his own efforts on behalf of Irish Catholics and Indians, two excluded and, as he said, "oppressed" peoples. For Mill, Ireland and India posed similar problems and questions about how best to govern a backward society, though only in the case of Ireland did he acknowledge Britain's complicity in that alleged backwardness.

I discuss only briefly these thinkers' treatments of the North American settlement colonies, although Smith, Burke, and Bentham all participated actively in debates about the fate of the American colonies, before and during the American War of Independence. Certainly the American conflict and eventually the loss of most of the New World settler colonies affected the views of Smith, Burke, and Bentham about imperial rule in other parts of the world. Their exposure to and involvement in the debates surrounding independence of American colonies (and in Bentham's case, Spain's South American colonies as well) inflected their attitudes toward other imperial matters. In particular, the American crises made all three thinkers wary of imperial overreach and conscious of the many problems

involved in ruling at great distances over people whose interests are different from—and often opaque to—those in the metropole who seek to control their fates.

Smith believed either independence or complete political incorporation was the only just policy regarding the American colonies (see chapter 2). Burke, who acted as agent for the colony of New York, was sympathetic to the colonies' demands. Although he pleaded for an accommodative policy that would reconcile the colonies to the imperial structure, he accepted the Americans' bid for independence when it became clear that Britain would not adopt such a policy of conciliation. Bentham alone of the three was initially hostile to the demands of the American colonists, primarily because he objected to the natural rights language in which they were so often couched by both colonists themselves and their British supporters such as Richard Price.¹⁹ But he too soon came to believe that, for reasons of both justice and prudence, European states ought to emancipate their settler colonies. By the late 1780s, Bentham had become an enthusiastic supporter both of American independence and of the American system of government, though he remained famously hostile to natural rights arguments and was quoted at the end of his life arguing that he had opposed American independence because of the bad arguments offered in its support, instead of "the only good one, viz. the impossibility of good government at such a distance, and the advantage of separation to the interest and happiness of both parties."²⁰

At this time, the central problems in America were considered to be relations with settlers very much like the metropole's population in their social and political culture, members of the metropole's community of moral and political concern.²¹ The problem of relations with Amerindians was less central to debates surrounding imperial policy in America by the late eighteenth century, although a few British observers did hold that American settlers could not be trusted to deal justly with the indigenous population, and that the continuation of the imperial relationship was justified as a means of protecting Native Americans from rapacious settlers. In contrast to this relative neglect of the question of Native Americans in the larger debate over the colonies' status in the 1760s and 1770s, the question of relations with and rule over a "subordinate" population was central to debates in the settler colonies of Ireland and later French Algeria. How to treat distinct indigenous populations—whether conceived of as inferior, or vulnerable, or wrongly excluded—remained central to British and French understandings of the political dilemmas of these colonies as well as nonsettlement territories such as India.

While a thorough treatment of these thinkers' views on the struggle with the American colonies is beyond the scope of this book, then, I consider how their arguments about such settler colonies contributed to their

views about British and French rule over indigenous populations in colonized territories. Similarly, Tocqueville's travels along the American frontier, and his understanding of relations between European settlers and Amerindians, bore in important ways on his analysis of French imperial policy in Algeria. Tocqueville's hope that Algiers might prove to be a "Cincinnati on the soil of Africa"—an economic dynamo with traditions of local self-government and self-reliance—illustrates the way in which he drew lessons from America not only for French democracy but also for the French Empire.

The turn to empire among liberal thinkers in Britain and France during the early decades of the nineteenth century was characterized by certain shared theoretical features, most prominently an increasingly secure belief that Europe's progressive civilization granted Europeans the authority to suspend, in their relations with non-European societies, the moral and political standards they believed applied among themselves. Still, Smith, Burke, Bentham, and Constant, despite certain affinities in their distaste for empire, differed in their particular diagnoses of the problems associated with European imperial expansion. Likewise, Mill and Tocqueville, though they were prominently identified with the justification and exercise of imperial power in their respective countries, disagreed—explicitly, as we will see—about what sort of empire could be justified, and how. Much of the theoretical discussion of the earlier thinkers' criticism of empire and the eclipse of that criticism among their successors, then, must be particular to each thinker and is carried out chapter by chapter. Still, certain features of the changing political, economic, and intellectual landscapes provide an important backdrop to these theoretical developments, and I address these in brief in the following section.

Historical Contexts

Political Developments in the British and French Empires

The transformation in political thought that I describe in this study took place alongside great changes in the British and French empires as well as domestic political upheavals. From the Seven Years' War through the end of the American War of Independence, Britain's imperial energies increasingly shifted from the settler colonies of the New World toward Asia and the rule of largely non-European subjects.²² Britain's great military successes throughout the Seven Years' War—in Canada, the West Indies, Africa, and South India—led the British public to regard their state as a territorial as well as a maritime power and to see their empire, for the first time, as truly global. At the same time, the loss of the preponderance of the British colonial settler populations meant that the British Empire

could no longer be regarded as almost exclusively European and “free.”²³ As David Armitage and Kathleen Wilson have recently shown, these developments of the second half of the eighteenth century challenged the long-held British belief that their empire, unlike those of the Portuguese and Spanish, or even the French and the Dutch, was one of commerce and not conquest: that it was characterized by, and responsible for spreading, free British institutions and political practices.²⁴ This image was, of course, always to a considerable degree an illusion, particularly in its assumption that North America was essentially vacant land whose acquisition did not require conquest of indigenous peoples but rather purchase from them or merely settlement alongside them. Still, as long as the majority of colonial subjects could be seen to be fellow Europeans, who still shared the metropole’s history and political culture, and were closely linked by commercial and family connections to residents of the mother country, the British Empire could be envisaged as “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free,” in Armitage’s words.²⁵ If colonists lacked formal representation equivalent to that enjoyed by some Britons, they had considerable political autonomy through colonial assemblies, and, crucially, they were recognized to have political standing; they enjoyed inclusion in the British circle of moral and political recognition. By the late eighteenth century, with the loss of the American colonies and the expansion of the empire in India through a series of military campaigns sustained over several decades, the fantasy of the peaceful trading empire extending British freedom abroad became ever harder to sustain. Although many continued to labor under the illusion of the free and peaceful empire of trade and settlement, more astute observers had become deeply troubled by British imperial despotism, by both its injustices to foreign peoples and the dangers it posed to liberty at home.²⁶

Britain’s nonsettlement colonies, primarily in India, underwent profound administrative changes at the end of the eighteenth century. Until that time, trading companies with minimal parliamentary oversight were, both nominally and in practice, largely responsible not only for trade and diplomatic relations with Asian states, but also for the acquisition and control of territory and the deployment of military forces. In the late eighteenth century, the British East India Company still considered itself primarily a trading company, though in acquiring territory and considerable military capacity it had begun the transformation to a governing body, a transformation that Smith, Burke, and others considered not just bad for trade but more importantly dangerous to the Company’s Asian subjects. Beginning in the 1760s, the East India Company’s debts and increasing territorial reach occasioned a protracted struggle between Parliament and the Company over the Company’s status, duties, and privileges.²⁷ By 1833 the Company had lost its commercial privileges and become entirely a

governing body, essentially the sovereign of an enormous territory. Its civil service had become regularized and professionalized with the eclipse of older patronage networks and the foundation of Haileybury College, where Company servants were trained in languages and administration. The Company remained the official ruler of India until 1859, when its administrative apparatus was folded into the state; this paved the way for Queen Victoria's acquisition of the title Empress of India in the 1870s.

Better preparation of Company servants for work in India in the nineteenth century did not lead to greater esteem for Indian civilization. Indeed, at the higher levels of administration, admiration for the achievements of Indian culture was far more widespread in the eighteenth century, even among Britons working for the expansion of the empire. Prominent among eighteenth-century colonial administrators were Orientalist admirers of Indian civilization such as Sir William Jones, a pioneer of the European study of Sanskrit and Indian literatures.²⁸ Even Warren Hastings, who invoked Asian traditions of arbitrary government as justification for his own despotic rule, professed respect for Indian civilization, learned several Indian languages, and collected antiquities.²⁹ Eighteenth-century Europeans were also less disposed to missionary activity in Asia than their successors. The greater influence of Evangelical missionaries on imperial politics in the nineteenth century meant that colonial administrators were more willing to intervene in Indian religious and cultural life than they had been. As Evangelical missionaries increased their activities in India and became important sources of information about Indian society, the missionaries' own conviction in the superiority of Christian Europe over non-Christian societies came more and more to inflect British attitudes toward India, even outside Evangelical circles.³⁰ Both increased power and new disdain for Indian civilization meant new widespread efforts to intervene in Indian cultural practices and newly determined attempts to transform them.

France, in contrast, had lost much of its territory in both North America and Asia to Britain and later to America. After the burst of expansionist fervor under Napoleon, and in the wake of his defeat, the French public and political leadership under the Bourbon restoration were widely hostile toward expansion. By the time the French conquered the city of Algiers in 1830, however, French political leaders had come to believe that Britain's growing empire was a major source of its international power and had to be imitated if France was to remain a significant power. Empire was by no means a *fait accompli*: supporters of empire during this period, Tocqueville most notably, believed that they must actively advocate conquest or squander France's opportunity to be a significant international power. The argument that critique was unthinkable in the nineteenth century, whereas it had been conceivable in the eighteenth,

cannot hold. For many in the eighteenth century, including Adam Smith, already believed that no European country could be persuaded to give up its colonies, in which so much honor and self-respect were invested. And critics of empire survived throughout the nineteenth century, even if their voices were muted and their influence negligible. Indeed, Smith's arguments themselves remained prominent among those critics who remained: political economy continued to generate arguments against conquest and imperial rule and bolstered the moral critique.³¹

The erosion of absolutist or *ancien régime* powers and the partial emergence of the democratic nation-state produced pressures and anxieties for liberal thinkers of the period that may have facilitated a turn to empire. Tocqueville believed that the vicissitudes of French politics in his day required a dramatic solution, and he turned to the conquest of Algeria as a possible solution to political problems that seemed intractable to any purely internal response. J. S. Mill developed a restrictive, normative understanding of nationhood that required *both* the bonds of fellow-feeling forged by a common political culture *and* the capacity for self-government that was peculiar to a small group of European nations. The narrowness of his definition of nationality reflected his belief that nationhood was an arduous achievement: if this was true for Britain, how much more so, on his account of progress, for backward peoples. At the same time as the development of democracy produced profound anxieties for liberal thinkers such as Tocqueville, it also meant that they had a commitment to their state's political order that their *ancien régime* predecessors such as Diderot did not have. They were not, it seems, prepared to be as scathingly critical as those earlier thinkers about a political order whose precariousness seemed so worrisome and whose potential for progress so hopeful.

Civilizational Confidence

One of the most striking contrasts between the views of the eighteenth-century thinkers I consider here, and those of their nineteenth-century successors, might be described as the dramatically increased sense of cultural or civilizational confidence exhibited by thinkers across the spectrum of nineteenth-century political thought, from conservatives to liberals and radicals. While Europeans in the late eighteenth century undoubtedly were becoming increasingly secure in their sense of superiority—intellectual, moral, political, economic, and technological—over the rest of the world, we find among a number of eighteenth-century thinkers a continued sense of the fragility of their own civilization's achievements, persistent doubts about the justice of European political and social orders, and respect for the achievements, and the rationality, of other societies.³² Although most European thinkers of this period believed Europe had

indeed made economic and political progress beyond other societies, many doubted whether Europeans were sufficiently responsible for or knowledgeable about the causes of their progress to presume to govern “backward” societies, especially by force. In the nineteenth century, a number of factors, from the end of the ancien régime in France and the extension of suffrage in Britain, to the abolition of the slave trade and eventually of slavery in European colonies, to the economic and technological breakthroughs of the industrial revolution, lent a conviction even to radical social critics such as J. S. Mill that European (or at least British and French) political culture was unimpeachably superior to those of the rest of the world’s societies.

The earlier view that Europeans were in no position to spread their political cultures and institutions was articulated particularly powerfully among those who had experienced the injustice of autocratic regimes within Europe, including Germans such as Kant and Herder and French critics of the ancien régime such as Diderot.³³ Their antipathy toward their own regimes led them to regard the violence of imperial expansion as a form of injustice characteristic of European politics in their day. As I discuss below, none of the British thinkers considered here doubted so thoroughly the justice of the British political order at home, although Bentham regarded British laws and institutions as to a great extent absurd and unjust. While James Mill and other utilitarian radicals followed Bentham in this disdain for British legal obfuscations, they judged Indian society (the particular object of their interest) to be so far behind Britain in political and civilizational advancement that even arbitrary and unaccountable rule by the British was preferable to any sort of local government. John Stuart Mill, more reconciled to the prevailing political order in Britain than his father, was all the more confident that a British despotism was the best government to which backward societies could aspire, and also that such a despotism could be exercised knowledgeably and benignly to induce progress in such societies.

Critics of empire in the eighteenth century regarded European imperial expansion as bound up with, and to some extent analogous to, the horrors of the slave trade and slavery. As P. J. Marshall has shown, British reformers in the 1770s and 1780s—notably Burke and William Wilberforce (like Raynal and Diderot in France)—fought slavery in the West Indies and British injustices in India as twin evils.³⁴ Similarly, Hugh Mulligan, the author of a 1788 work entitled *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression* and dedicated to Wilberforce, linked British oppression of West Indian slaves with British depredations in India, Ireland, and Africa in a series of four dialogues in verse. He complemented the poems with copious footnotes citing Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes*, other works that charged East India Company servants with exacerbating the famine in Bengal by

price gouging, and still others arguing for free trade with Ireland.³⁵ It is striking that this marriage of “humanitarian” causes had fallen apart by the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas the opposition to slavery spread in the early decades of the next century beyond the coterie of reformers and intellectuals that had first led the movement, to be taken up by much wider circles, evangelical and otherwise, such unqualified criticism of British actions in India faded by the late 1790s. Marshall argues that while both “slavery and the East India company appeared to have won reprieves in the 1790s,” when Britain was preoccupied with Jacobinism and then Napoleon in France, opposition to slavery soon regained its former vigor, while “many sections of British opinion . . . were coming not merely to acquiesce in what was being done in India but to express positive enthusiasm for it.”³⁶ By the 1830s, liberals such as J. S. Mill and Tocqueville could take for granted that slavery was an evil to be eradicated; but they abandoned the skeptical posture toward *imperial* expansion that had characterized the foremost critics of slavery of the earlier generation.

The contrast with the fate of the antislavery movement highlights one important reason that criticism of British imperial expansion faded after the 1790s. Justification of British imperial rule from that point, through much of the nineteenth century, began to rest primarily on arguments that Britain brought (and was alone capable of bringing) good government to India. The outstanding violence and corruption of British actions in India during the previous decades—military campaigns against formidable Indian enemies, the vast private fortunes gained—gave way to more subtle forms of oppression such as onerous taxation and export policies, policies that were justified as part of a system of improvement in which the benefits of secure property and the rule of law were said to replace despotic indigenous governments. Civil servants trained at Haileybury College in administration and Indian languages, and regarded as impartial professionals, were replacing the rapacious “boys” Burke had disparaged as partly responsible for the violence and disorder of the Company in India. And, as Marshall notes, reports from India were also becoming uniformly positive about Company rule by the turn of the nineteenth century in a way that they had not been earlier, when dissenters had sent damning reports back to England about Company servants’ crimes.³⁷ Thus, while Burke could insist on “the Evils which arose from a System of sacrificing the Being of that Country [India] to the Advantage of this,”³⁸ nineteenth-century European observers were not prepared to believe that the colonial system either intended to or actually did sacrifice Indian interests to British. Indeed, many (including both James and John Stuart Mill) held that British rule in India was in fact costly to Britain, but that it was nonetheless justified by the great benefits it conferred on its Indian subjects.

Moreover, the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery removed one of the most glaring injustices of eighteenth-century European politics and society from the sights of reformers. Radicals no longer could—or needed to—point to slavery as evidence of barbarousness or injustice of the European political order. On the contrary, after the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1838 and French colonies in 1848, the persistence of slave-trading in Africa, rather than indicting European imperial activities, seemed to vindicate them, as both religious and secular reformers called for Britain to penetrate areas of West Africa where the slave trade persisted and abolish it there as well.³⁹ Tocqueville, as I argue in chapter 7, regarded the abolition of slavery in the French West Indies as essential for keeping the islands within the empire.

Economic Development and Industrialization

The far greater cultural confidence of mid-nineteenth-century Europeans, especially Britons, compared with their predecessors of a few generations earlier can also be attributed to the extraordinary surge in economic and technological development of the first decades of the nineteenth century. That surge itself was probably due in good measure to British exploitation of colonial resources, particularly slavery and the almost limitless land in the New World. Conversely, the stagnation attributed to the Indian economy by nineteenth-century Britons was due in part to the effects of British rule itself. Thus when nineteenth-century Britons contrasted their own progressive society with backward India, they were observing, on both sides of the comparison, phenomena that had not existed before 1790 and that were partly the consequences of colonial rule.

While many in eighteenth-century Europe asserted Europe's economic superiority over other "civilized" societies, particularly China and India, it was still possible to argue that the opulence and refinement of Chinese and Indian manufactures, and the greater well-being of their poorest subjects compared with those in Europe, demonstrated that those societies were Europe's equals in prosperity.⁴⁰ Kenneth Pomeranz's painstaking comparisons of economic data in the eighteenth century suggest that standards of living, mortality and fertility rates, quality of manufactures, and technological innovativeness were comparable in the most economically advanced areas of Asia (the Yangzi valley, parts of Japan, and Bengal) and Europe (England and the Netherlands). Pomeranz has argued that it was not until the last decades of the eighteenth century that some western European economies became decisively more productive than those in parts of China, Japan, or India. He also demonstrates that Europe's surge in productivity was probably due in large part to serendipities rather than to long-standing patterns of superior economic arrange-

ments.⁴¹ Although a portrait of Asian societies as stagnant was beginning to emerge, when eighteenth-century Europeans compared their own society with those of China or India, it did not seem obvious to them, as it did to French and British observers several generations later, that their own societies were dramatically more progressive, wealthier, or superior or more enlightened in their social and political practices.

Moreover, colonial rule itself was probably crucial for Britain's rapid economic development in the nineteenth century, primarily by easing land constraints shared across Eurasia and providing voracious demand for European manufactured goods. Colonial expansion violated many principles of Smith's economic theory: it diverted capital away from where it would "naturally" be invested; it effectively taxed the majority of the nation not involved in the colonial trade for the benefit of a few, and it imposed great military expenses on the metropolitan citizenry. While Smith believed the benefits of global trade could be had without the costs of imperial rule (whether over European settlers or non-European populations), the new economic analyses synthesized by Pomeranz suggest that the violence and coercion of European colonial rule were essential to Europe's vast economic growth in the decades after Smith's death, which was denied to countries like China that continued to follow the path of trade alone.

It is likely, too, that parts of nineteenth-century India were indeed "backward" compared with what they had been before the spread of British power in India. When nineteenth-century British observers of India claimed that Indian society was marked by economic stagnation, and cultural traditionalism, they described phenomena that were in some measure true thanks to their own exploitative rule. D. A. Washbrook has detailed the ways in which British rule in the early decades of the nineteenth century caused deurbanization and deindustrialization in many parts of India. British rule—including misgovernment and the imposition of a trading regime favorable to British industrial interests—contributed to the destruction of a vibrant and high-quality manufacturing economy, the emergence of an "increasingly agrarian and peasant-based" Indian society, and the onset of a decades-long economic depression.⁴² Although some British observers recognized the role of British rule in these pernicious developments, particularly regarding the East India Company's disruptive efforts to fix property rights, the widespread assumption was that Indian culture was responsible for the society's backwardness and British rule was the country's main hope for enlightenment and advancement.

In cultural respects, as well, British rule may well have helped cause Indian society to become more "traditional" than it had been: the caste system became more rigid, and its effects penetrated areas of Indian society and religion where it had not been influential; revivalist Hindu and

Muslim movements developed in reaction to the threat of Christian proselytizing, “making Indian society more overtly ‘religious’ and ‘sectarian’ than prior to British rule.”⁴³ As Washbrook argues,

The predominant effects which [British rule in India] had (both intended and unintended) were less to transport British civilization to the East than to construct there a society founded on the perpetuation of “Oriental” difference, as Edward Said has put it. India became a subordinate agricultural colony under the dominance of metropolitan, industrial Britain; its basic cultural institutions were disempowered and “fixed” in unchanging traditional forms; its “civil society” was subjected to the suzerainty of a military despotic state. British rule before the Mutiny may be credited with having fundamentally changed Indian society. But this change moved against the anticipations of “modernization” and left it with a vast legacy of “backwardness” subsequently to undo. (399)

While Indian backwardness was invoked as justification for civilizing British rule by liberal supporters of the empire, then, that rule more probably created, exacerbated, or entrenched aspects of Indian society that the British considered backward.

Race and Human Difference

Changing perceptions of race and new forms of racism also contributed to the dramatic shift in European perceptions of many non-European societies, even among those, such as Mill and Tocqueville, who reviled theories of biological differences among races. Many scholars have noted the transition from a belief in human uniformity to one in heterogeneity that occurred around the end of the eighteenth through the first decades of the nineteenth century. Roxann Wheeler has argued that by 1770s the “ubiquitous commitment to human similarity was beginning to show some weak spots” and that by the 1790s the shift away from biological universalism was widespread. Nancy Stepan notes that a new consensus took hold in the mid-nineteenth century, when Britain saw “a change from an emphasis on the fundamental physical and moral homogeneity of man, despite superficial differences, to an emphasis on the essential heterogeneity of mankind, despite superficial similarities.”⁴⁴ While all the thinkers considered in this book were explicitly committed to a belief in human equality and biological uniformity, the intellectual context of an increasing insistence on the depth of differences among human groups as the nineteenth century progressed is reflected in the development of their views on non-European peoples and on empire.

Smith, Burke, and Bentham shared their era’s presumption of human uniformity, and in their reflections on cultural difference, all three always insisted on the equal rationality of all human beings, as I argue in chapters

2 through 4. By the mid-nineteenth century, in contrast, European discourse reflected a pervasive assumption that human groups are characterized by deep differences in temperament and ability. Such a notion inflects the work of Tocqueville and J. S. Mill, even though both of them rejected biological theories of human difference. Tocqueville argued heatedly against the racist theories of his friend and disciple Gobineau, calling them “false and pernicious.”⁴⁵ Mill likewise criticized the nineteenth-century penchant for biological explanations of human difference—a tendency he tellingly compared to the tendency of “primitive peoples” to attribute to divine intervention whatever they cannot explain.⁴⁶ The racism of Mill’s contemporaries also should be taken into account when we consider his effort to prosecute Governor Eyre of Jamaica, as I argue in chapter 5. Mill was contending with virulent racism among Eyre’s British defenders, including such prominent and eloquent writers as Carlyle and Ruskin. Mill’s insistence, in that context, on the importance of securing justice for Britain’s black and white subjects alike represents a striking commitment to the moral equality of different races.

And yet Mill’s own writing is shot through with the language of human heterogeneity in a way that has affinities with racist discourse, and he himself insisted that “I never intended to deny the influence of races” (CW 15:691). As Georgios Varouxakis has noted, although Mill explicitly rejected biological determinism and racial explanations, his “tacit assumptions and his use of language” often suggest a relation between physical or biological factors and human character.⁴⁷ Many of his statements about “national” character betray both an untheorized and blunt categorization of human groups and a suggestion of physical determinism: “The most envious of all mankind are the Orientals. . . . Next to Orientals in envy, as in activity, are some of the Southern Europeans. . . . With the French, who are essentially a southern people . . .”⁴⁸ Although Mill regarded biological explanations as lazy and crude, he considered the identification of the “character” of different human groups—and the ranking of those groups on a scale of advancement—an essential element of sociological analysis. As we will see, he considered Bentham’s neglect of such categories and hierarchies one of the most important failings of Bentham’s thought.

Theorists of progress came to hold that progress was a matter of increasing rationality and cognitive capacity, so that members of societies regarded as being at “earlier” stages of development came to be described not simply as rational human beings acting within different contexts of social organization but rather as themselves cognitively limited: mired in error or enslaved to superstition, incapable of the abstract thought necessary for abiding by contracts or treaties, “untrustworthy” and lacking in “character,” and incapable of participating in their own governance not

simply because of illiteracy or lack of education but because of deeply rooted (if often vaguely described) civilizational deficiencies.⁴⁹ As a result of these features of nineteenth-century philosophies of history and theories of progress, the very idea of linear development or progress has been described as imperialist in character. And yet Adam Smith's theory of history and his broader moral and political theory show that there were eighteenth-century understandings of historical progress that could be developmental while resisting any implication that non-Europeans ought to be excluded from ordinary standards of political respect, inclusion, or reciprocity.

All the thinkers considered here, then, can be described as universalists who negotiated in different ways the tensions between universalistic moral commitments and a recognition of particularity. All were universalists in the sense that they were committed to the idea of human uniformity and human moral equality and rejected theories of polygenesis and the biological racism that was gaining currency throughout this period.⁵⁰ Still, their universalism took different forms with radically different implications for international politics and cross-cultural judgment. Burke and Mill would likely have agreed that the British Empire, in Burke's words, should be "united on one common bottom of equality and justice."⁵¹ But they developed significantly different understandings of how that equality might function in practice, given the undeniable differences between European societies and their colonial subjects. In the universalist vision informing the imperial liberalism that arose in the first half of the nineteenth century, Europe stood at the pinnacle of a universal history, a vantage point that was thought to grant Europeans the knowledge and moral authority necessary to impose progress on less advanced societies, using violence and coercion when these were deemed necessary by appropriately informed and well-intentioned colonial authorities. This progressivist universalism justified European imperial rule as a benefit to backward subjects, authorized the abrogation of sovereignty of many indigenous states, and licensed increasingly interventionist policies in colonized societies' systems of education, law, property, and religion. With the development of this strand of imperialist liberal thought, a more tolerant and pluralist universalism was eclipsed, one premised on the equal rationality of all human beings and the belief that standards of morality and justice that governed relations within Europe also obligated Europeans in their dealings with other societies.