I would like to start by thanking Sidra Hamidi for the invitation to participate in this symposium on *Reordering the World*, and Owen Brown, Ceyda Erten, and Alan Kellner for writing such thoughtful responses. It is a pleasure to engage with serious critical readers.

I am grateful for the generous praise of the reviewers. In what follows, I’ll focus mainly on points where they challenge the arguments of the book, as this is more productive for scholarly debate. I will respond under two general headings: liberalism and scope.

First, though, I’d like to say something about the genesis, arguments and aims of the book, for readers who may not have encountered it. *Reordering the World* collects together a dozen or so of my essays from the last 15 years, and adds a long new chapter on theoretical and historiographical issues about liberalism and empire, a new chapter on the historian and imperial ideologue J. R. Seeley, as well as an extended Introduction and Coda. The opening essays in the volume address a variety of theoretical and methodological issues concerning the study of liberalism and empire – it is on these that Owen, Ceyda and Alan focus their attention. The remainder of the chapters probe broad general themes in British imperial political thought – including shifting conceptions of time and space, the role of the monarchy, political theology, visions of empire as a form of global governance, and the twentieth century echoes of racialised arguments about the destiny of the “Anglo-Saxons” – as well as more fine-grained analyses of a range of thinkers, some still well-known, others (now) more obscure, namely John Stuart Mill, T. H. Green, Herbert Spencer, T. H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson, Seeley, J. A. Froude and E. A. Freeman. The bulk of the historical material focuses on British intellectual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though some essays push further back into the early Victorian era and a couple range through the twentieth century and into the present. There are various themes running through the volume, but the two most prominent are: (1) the central role of settler colonialism in Anglo-American liberal visions of empire, and (2) the importance of history – as metaphor, analogy, precedent, imaginative template, and inspiration – running through justificatory arguments about empire. Although I emphasise these themes, I hope that the essays can be read profitably for a variety of reasons, and from different angles, and that the volume will be of interest to scholars in history, political theory, and international relations.

**Liberalism**

Alan, Ceyda and Owen all discuss the role that liberalism plays in the book. Owen notes that my adoption of the “summative” conception of liberalism might blunt the force of the argument, as my expansive account of the tradition would be rejected by those adopting narrower, more-focused “stipulative” conceptions. He argues that it might be better to combine the two in order
to intervene in contemporary political theory. Ceyda discusses the problems that arise from concentrating on Anglo-American liberalism and imperial experience. Alan is the most critical. He charges me with failing to identify what exactly is at stake in attempting to define liberalism in the first place. He also makes the intriguing suggestion that we would be better off without traditions, so that we could read thinkers (such as Mill) without prejudging the type of argument that they made. “All one needs to take as given,” Alan writes, “is that these texts and thinkers are worthy of careful attention.”

I’ll return to Ceyda’s worries in the next section. I am sympathetic to Owen’s concern, although I think that it is already answered in my account of the ways we might think about liberalism. I don’t claim that the summative approach to tradition-construction is the only defensible one – far from it. I argue that we need to adopt different interpretive protocols to address different types of question: one size doesn’t fit all. As such, there are circumstances when it is appropriate to employ canonical or stipulative approaches. If we want to make ethico-political interventions into current debates, for example, detailed contextual analyses may not get us very far; indeed they may be hopeless or even counter-productive. Some kind of stipulative account would be needed. In the “Coda,” I argue that while the contextual analysis I pursue across many of the chapters complicates existing accounts of liberalism, it is today imperative to decolonise liberalism (371-2). In other words, I suggest the need to develop stipulative conceptions for a particular purpose. Charles Mills’s recent call (in *Racial Liberalism*) for a radical decoloned form of liberal political philosophy is exemplary in this respect. Stipulative conceptions, though, are not very useful for pursuing detailed historical inquiry. Calibrating the methodological protocol to the type of question being addressed is vital.

This leads me to Alan’s points. While I find his proposal appealing, I do not think it is practicable – liberalism (and other traditions) are too deeply ingrained in our political imaginations and vocabularies to be discarded. We cannot wish them away. However, I do think that they need to be problematised. This is one of the main aims of my discussion of liberalism. The category “liberalism” is, I think, both inescapable and deeply unhelpful. It needs to be interrogated, historicised and conceptually disaggregated rather than rejected. Moreover, I think that I make the stakes of the debate clear. The chapter “What is Liberalism?” does not directly address imperial themes: it is intended as an intervention into questions of tradition formation in general, and liberalism in particular. I had become frustrated with the often unreflective use of the term liberal – as if it had a self-evident meaning – across different scholarly debates and discourses, many of which characterised it in contradictory ways, and I wanted to make sense of this phenomenon. In the chapter I give various examples of prominent liberal thinkers who insist on the importance of discursive boundary-working – of attempts to delineate who counts as a liberal or not (63-4). One recurrent example of this is the question of whether or not libertarians or social democrats are “real” liberals. So one response to Alan is to point to the fact that the question of how to define liberalism has run through the history of liberalism itself, and remains a prominent topic.

The stakes in the debate over the relationship between liberalism and empire are at once historical and political. The question animating many post-Cold War scholarly accounts of the topic is: can liberalism (today) be anti-imperial? If liberalism is intrinsically imperial, then it would need to be discarded, but if it can be shown that liberal imperialism was just a contingent phase in the history of the tradition, the path remains open. If so, what kind of liberalism is most suitable? The problem
is that in order to give a decent answer to such questions we need a plausible and widely shared account of liberalism past and liberalism present – otherwise, the debate is deeply confused and confusing. But such clarity is precisely what is absent. In the book I contrast the work of Domenico Losurdo and J.G.A. Pocock to highlight how differences over the meaning of liberalism can play out:

[Losurdo] contends that the British slave trade peaked in the eighteenth century, well after liberalism was consolidated by the settlement of 1688, and that in North America chattel slavery reached its apogee in the early nineteenth century, following the victory of liberalism in the War of Independence … If we adopt the current conventional understanding of liberalism, as Losurdo does, this throws up a disturbing puzzle about liberal attitudes to domination, hierarchy, and exploitation, and it underpins his sweeping critique. The normative conclusions that Losurdo draws about contemporary liberalism are derived from, and are only intelligible in relation to, his interpretation of the tradition. But the puzzle dissolves if we adopt (for example) a Pocockian interpretation, because on that account neither Britain nor the United States was liberal in any meaningful sense before the nineteenth century (72-3).

Interpretations of the liberal tradition thus shape historical debates and contemporary political thinking alike. My intention in “What is Liberalism?” was to shed light on such disputes by showing how different understandings of liberalism have been constructed, and the implications of adopting different methodological protocols. As noted above, I argue that canonical, stipulative, and contextualist protocols all have value, but we need to be careful about how they are used, for they issue in very different understandings of liberalism.

Alan also criticises my reading of Sankar Muthus’s Enlightenment Against Empire. Although he agrees with my critiques of canonicity and the lack of attention paid to settler colonialism in the literature, he suggests that I err in identifying Muthu with them. In my account of Muthu – and also Karuna Mantena and Jennifer Pitts – I have misunderstood “both the political theoretical points and historical conclusions of these books.” Or, to “put the claim more softly, much can be salvaged from these books and much can be defended in them against Bells’s attacks.” This criticism misses the mark. I selected Mehta, Muthu, Pitts and Mantena for discussion because I think that they are excellent books, and because they have been influential in shaping debate over liberalism and empire. Indeed each has influenced my own work in one way or another. I do not claim to offer comprehensive critiques of them. Rather, I use them to illustrate two tendencies in the literature, the first methodological (canonicity), the second historical-interpretive (identifying radical breaks in imperial discourses). The main problem arises, I suggest, when a canonical approach to political thought (i.e focusing on a select number of exemplary individuals) is used to ground generalisations about broad patterns of political thinking. I also suggest that adding settler colonialism to the mix complicates some of their historical claims. In other words, I am interested in how their arguments are framed, the methodological assumptions employed, and the historical narratives produced. Each book manifests these tendencies in different ways. Enlightenment Against Empire is the least
directly relevant to my historical analysis, insofar as it focuses chiefly on the late eighteenth century and does (as I note) discuss settler colonialism. But I included it because it makes a sweeping claim about a rupture in imperial discourse between the late eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century (29), and derives this conclusion from a canonical protocol. In contrast, I argue that adopting a contextualist protocol leads to the conclusion that mid-nineteenth century liberalism “was just as diverse, and contained just as much critical energy, as the intellectual world of the late eighteenth century” (49). There was no major rupture.

The upshot of my analysis is that British imperial discourse was marked by greater continuity than is usually recognised, and that it was in the settler colonies, not India, that (to adapt Mehta) liberalism found the concrete place of its dreams.

Scope

Ceyda rightly notes that the historical analysis in *Reordering the World* is chiefly restricted to the Anglo-American world (and mainly Britain), in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She suggests, again quite rightly, that “a greater variety of imperial practices existed in different geographies” at the time, including Russia, and the Persian and Ottoman empires, and she argues that because of the mismatch between the scope of my analysis and the wide geographical variation in imperial practices and ideologies, “the title and vocabulary” of the book “are misleading in their reach.” She continues: “Bell’s methodological choice of focusing on Britain as the sole empire interacting with liberal political thought has consequences for how the readers of the work then construct liberalism and empire in their own imaginations.” She also makes a more specific point about the use of my term “imperial imaginaries.”

I would defend the title and vocabulary I employ. There would be a problem if the book proceeded without a clear discussion of the limits of the investigation, thus leaving the intended scope ambiguous and open to being read as making universal claims. But throughout *Reordering the World*, including in the opening passages and in the concluding remarks (2-3, 363), I specify the temporal and geographical limits of the analysis – the book is principally concerned with the nature and fate of political thinking in Britain (and occasionally the United States) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on c.1875-1914, Eric Hobsbawm’s “Age of Empire.” In other words, I make no claims to either universality or comprehensiveness. As I write, the book is “[o]ffered as an invitation for further reflection rather than an exhaustive account of the topic” (8).

But this is not all there is to say about scope. Here it is worth drawing a distinction between the substantive historical claims I make about liberalism and empire, and the methodological strategies I suggest might be helpful for understanding the topic. While the former are strictly delimited, the latter are potentially more expansive. I accept, of course, that focusing on Britain means that I do not pay attention to the complex histories of other parts of the world, and I agree entirely that a fuller historical-interpretive account of liberalism and empire would need to encompass a much wider range of materials and contexts. Developments in the burgeoning and overlapping fields of comparative political theory and global intellectual history are most welcome, and help to provincialise narratives about the Euro-American experience. This is all for the good. There is also
much more to say about intellectual dynamics within the Angloworld and the wider British imperial order. As I suggest in the Coda – and as Owen points out in his review – a comprehensive account of the Angloworld would require, among other things, an analysis of the reception and circulations of ideas about liberalism and empire in other British imperial spaces. Some excellent work has been done on this topic in recent years (e.g. by Andrew Sartori and C. A. Bayly). I see these types of project as complementary.

The methodological arguments in chapter 2, 3 and 4 are, in contrast to the specific historical claims, at least open to travelling beyond British experience. (Whether they are “universal” is another matter). To put the point a different way, I don’t see any problem with a substantive historical-interpretive focus on Anglo-American liberalism, given the explicit claims I make about the limited scope of the argument, but I do think that the methodological tools are in principle capable of being employed in different spatial and temporal contexts, though they would most likely generate very different results. It remains an open question whether they are useful in probing other traditions, other political vocabularies, other histories. I hope they are, but only time will tell.

Ceyda also suggests that there is a problem with my use of the term “imperial imaginary” in Chapter 4. In particular, she suggests that there is an unacknowledged slippage between my accounts of multiple imaginaries and “the” modern imperial imaginary – a shift, that is, from the plural to the singular. I should have formulated the argument a bit more clearly. Briefly, I want to suggest that there are indeed multiple imperial imaginaries, including the modern British one, and that these vary considerably across time and space. I agree with Ceyda that there is no singular imperial imaginary. I think that my (plural) notion of imaginaries is also employable in different geographical and historical contexts.

Reordering the World stresses the importance of settler colonialism in British liberal visions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and suggests that this has important consequences for how we might think about liberal political thought, past and present, and the intellectual history of modern Anglo-American imperialism. But I make no claims to exhaustiveness – there is much work still to do on tracing the ways in which political theory and empire have intersected, and continue to intersect, within and beyond the Angloworld.

In conclusion, I’d like to reiterate my thanks to the contributors for such a fruitful discussion.