Review: Duncan Bell’s *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (2016) by Ceyda Erten

Duncan Bell’s *Reordering the World* walks the reader through a historical-political analysis of how liberal political thought was constructed and interacted with notions of empire in nineteenth-century Britain. Unpacking two expansive vocabulary, liberalism and empire, proves to be an arduous task that Bell aptly fulfills. The book argues that existing accounts linking these two ideas and their coevolution lack the necessary focus on settler colonialism and are restricted by the fixation on an assumed liberal canon. Bell contests both of these shortcomings and aims to instead presents a more contextualized narrative in this book, which collects Bell’s essays published elsewhere and adds to them by coherently bringing together the political theorist’s work in book form.

In these times, global thinkers and communities continue discussing the role of ‘liberalism,’ often understood as an exported set of practices from ‘the West.’ *Reordering the World* is especially pertinent to these discussions, for it explores an important story of emergence and contestation as the British Empire crafted liberalism as an idea to be transported to its colonies. Bell situates the “long parade of thinkers” (2) from Bentham to Mill to Sidgwick along the imperial project and presents how these makers of ideas approached questions around the legitimacy and reach of the empire. Contrary to purely economic accounts that claim these thinkers to have supported liberalism for the sake of economic growth and dispersion, Bell documents how “economic vitality alone was insufficient to captivate and enthuse generations of liberal thinkers. It was the specific political status—or at least self-image—of the colonies that provided the key” (365). The expansive book of fifteen chapters not only discusses the vocabulary of liberalism and empire, but also explores themes such as time, the monarchy, space, race, nation, theology, and republic. Bell approaches liberalism “chiefly as an actor’s category, a
term to encompass thinkers, ideas, and movements that were regarded as liberal at the time,” (5) challenging today’s readers to step further out of commonplace treatments of the word and academics to take on a variety of perspectives instead of a single author’s definition of liberalism.

While Bell evaluates the many studies “of liberal attitudes to empire” (20), his account remains limited to how these attitudes viewed a particular form of empire practiced under the British reign. Needless to note, a greater variety of imperial practices existed in different geographies in the nineteenth-century, such as the Russian, Persian and Ottoman Empires. These imperial accounts are merely passing notes in Bell’s account, as he describes the oft carried contempt against these empires by the liberal thinkers he has selected to focus on. For instance, the chapter discussing E. A. Freeman’s attitudes to empire mentions that “his hatred of the ‘Turk’” that motivated his campaigns against the Ottoman Empire in the 1850s to 1870s. The reader gets a very brief glimpse of why this was, namely due to Freeman’s religious hatred; however, the analysis lacks depth when it comes to evaluating ‘empire’ as a notion broader than what Britain practiced at the time. With this, the treatment of liberalism in relation to empire also remains restricted to the British experience.

Liberal thoughts interacted with the many hands of empires across the globe, especially with those aforementioned and were geographically closer to the study’s main driver, Britain. While Bell’s work is surely valuable in describing how Anglo-American liberalism interacted with Anglo-American imperial practices, the title and the vocabulary are misleading in their reach. Especially in a work that contributes the crucial historical account on settler colonialism, one would expect greater attention to the usage of ‘empire.’ Beyond Britain, there existed multiple “imperial imaginaries” (95), a term Bell introduces as “aspects of social imaginaries
that pertain to the justification or governance of empire.” Bell makes the jump from approaching imperial imaginaries in this comprehensive manner and shifts to the language of “the modern imperial imaginary” which is suddenly singular and restricted to the British imperial experience. One might argue that Bell’s approach to liberalism is context-driven, for he understands liberalism through thinkers’ self-evaluation as liberals at the time. Even with that, once the author chooses to put the notion of liberalism into conversation with the notion of empire, the multiplicity of imperial imaginaries in the nineteenth century need to be brought into the analysis without the post-hoc adjudication of a singular ‘modern’ imperial imaginary. Similarly, in a book that pertinently discusses “the tyranny of the canon” (48), Bell limits himself to English-writing thinkers of liberalism. The portrayal of liberalism then remains one of formation in Britain by British liberals, and the only route of dispersion becomes exporting practices. The “imagined geographies” (61) that Bell observes as “assumed or endorsed by British liberals” (61) existed outside of Britain; for example, the Ottoman Empire’s early 19th century trade routes with China carried not only goods, but also ideas between the two geographies and created two imperial visions on the geographical space of Central Asia. Approaching empire in this more globally-situated perspective could have allowed Bell’s account to reach beyond Britain as the sole center of liberalism and would have then created alternative possibilities for the dissemination of liberalism, or other set of practices, through empire. However, through this singular “imperial imaginary,” the account becomes unilinear, and more importantly, ‘empire’ is by default understood in this intimate relation with liberalism and not through contesting or complementary ideas, thinkers, or practices elsewhere in the world during the same time period of the study. 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. By not taking an explicitly global approach, the crucial contributions of the work overestimate their reach and do not address the very critiques the author identifies through settler colonialism and canon-making. One way to resolve this could be through renaming the scope of the word ‘empire’ to the Anglo-American imperial practices, which the work discusses thoroughly.

The book is nevertheless crucial for these times, for it thoroughly explains how European and American political thought in the nineteenth century created the ‘us versus them’ narratives on imagined geographies. Bell, a careful reader of history and political theory, brings forth questions on the roots of assumptions and critiques of British liberal thought upon the imperial practices that this government exercised upon populations it attempted to colonize. *Reordering the World* shows how a great number of political thinkers, such as Mill and Spencer, wrote into the liberal ideologies that served Britain’s imperial policies and in return shaped the experiences of those encountering these ideologies.

In 2007, when the Anglo-American alliance is still strong but under the guidance of very different leaders in positions occupied by liberal internationalists in the recent decades, Bell’s book is a must-read for those curious to understand how liberalism and imperial attitudes are at present utilized by Britain and the United States, despite how the meanings of ‘liberalism’ and ‘empire’ have significantly changed since the nineteenth century. Bell argues that “[the] broad understanding of liberalism was produced by a conjunction of the ideological wars fought against ‘totalitarianism’ and assorted developments in the social sciences. Today we both inherit and inhabit it” (65). With this backdrop in mind, political thinkers of the current decade need to pay closer attention to how their imaginaries are crafted around this notion of liberalism and whether another set of reactionary ideologies can emerge at the face of totalitarian practices of
different scales in assumed liberal democracies. In addition to Bell’s perspective, one needs to add alternative yet simultaneously present imperial practices, interpretations of liberalism, and totalitarian attitudes in geographies beyond the “Angolosphere” (181) so that the work can wholly address ‘empire.’