One central aim of Duncan Bell’s expansive yet detailed collection of essays, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016) is to highlight the (historical) diversity of arguments for and against Greater British imperialism and settler colonialism. The book does so by focusing on strategies of argument in Part II, “Themes” (e.g., on cyclical vs. progressive philosophies of history as criticism or defense of British imperialism) and in individual thinkers, in Part III, inside (e.g., J.S. Mill) and outside the canon (e.g., British historians). Part I is a series of methodological reflections and disciplinary interventions on the basis of those reflections. Bell’s book is impressively researched and well written. Its geographic focus is greater Britain and its temporal scope reaches into both the 19th and 20th Centuries, with “the bulk” of the essays focusing on the period Eric Hobsbawm called ‘the age of empire’: 1875-1914. Even with restricting his source material to greater Britain, Bell’s account of liberal debates about empire, imperialism, and settler colonialism is expansive. (The book “clocks in” at nearly 400 pages.) Bell treats each term in the book’s subtitle differently. He focuses on how liberalism gets *defined*, whereas he focuses on how empire is *defended* and *criticized*. Bell tracks, that is, in the case of the concept “liberalism,” the intellectual battles over its definition, use, employment, scope of application in politics, and its place in a (fractured) ‘tradition.’ With “empire,” Bell tracks a political-historical phenomenon more than a concept. I focus my attention in this brief essay on Bell’s reflections on methodology in Part I and its entanglement with these varying interpretive strategies of liberalism and empire.

Bell provides two significant hermeneutic typographies in Chapter 3. One typography identifies three types of answer to the question, “What is liberalism?” There are prescriptive, comprehensive, and explanatory answers. One can prescribe norms for (in)correct use of the word, take stock of all available meanings, or provide an explanation of the word’s history and how it came to mean what it does now. In addition to having different kinds of answers, there are also, for Bell, three “methodological strategies,” or, “protocols” for going about answering the question. A *stipulative* protocol provides necessary conditions for a philosophical position to count as “liberal.” A *canonical* protocol looks to the canon for “exemplary writings” already characterized as “liberal.” The *contextualist* protocol seeks to situate a text or figure in a constellation of other texts engaged with it politically. Although Bell does not state just what the relation is between the types of responses and the protocols, his discussion situates his own definition: Bell “seek[s] to reframe the way in which the liberal tradition is understood,” and he does so by providing a Summative conception of liberalism.

Bell defines liberalism – he calls it a summative “conception” – or, rather, “the liberal tradition is constituted by the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and

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1 Bell, *Reordering the World*, 2.
recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space.” In other words, Bell’s summative conception of liberalism aims to summarize the varieties of thinkers and positions categorized as liberal; to ward off the threat of mis-ascription of any thinker according to an external and/or anachronistic standard the thinker himself (in Bell’s essays all primary sources are men) would not attribute to himself. These are virtues of his conception. It aims not to prescribe any singular definition of liberalism but to appreciate the vast diversity of thinkers who are not only called liberals by others but also self-identified liberals. (The latter requirement of self-ascription is necessary, as well; one is not a liberal if only third parties call a thinker liberal.)

Although Bell’s summative conception of liberalism has many virtues, and I agree with it insofar as one wants a definition or conception of liberalism. More importantly, however, one question is missing in Bell: What’s at stake in defining liberalism at all? Perhaps we can take a pragmatic approach to answering it: What would be the consequence of not defining it? I would argue, nothing bad would result; possibly something good would. Not trying to define liberalism or identify a tradition might help to undo what Bell calls “the tyranny of the cannon,” since one would not look around for “true” or “classical” liberals or for “liberal” critiques and defenses, say, of settler colonialism. Without a conception of liberalism one might look instead simply for critiques and defenses. Additionally, the canon itself might then be released from the tyranny of a backward hermeneutics, for example, retroactively attaching the label “liberal” or “belongs to the liberal tradition” to J.S. Mill. The canon would still direct readers to Mill, to be sure, but it would no longer assure in advance that Mill’s arguments are liberal or that they contribute to a tradition of liberalism. Different features of a text light up depending on what one assumes is in it. If one presumes Mill is a liberal, one will find a liberal doctrine in his writings. Mill’s On Liberty, for example, can be about liberty – as it clearly is – without being a text contributing to liberalism. Bell is right that the canonical protocol “takes as given the very thing that should be investigated.” One might read the canon and not fall into a pernicious version of this protocol if one does not assume the canon is a set of thinkers that fall into camps. All one needs to take as given is that these texts and thinkers are worthy of careful attention. In short, I agree with Bell that the canon can tyrannize, but think we need not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

In light of the above, I would like to defend (partially) one of the works Bell attacks in Chapter 2, which is a targeted criticism of Uday Singh Mehta, Sankar Muthu, Jennifer Pitts, and Karuna Mantena. Each commits an historiographical sin of her/his own: Whether it is by ignoring settler colonialism (identified wrongly, I think, as Muthu’s mistake), restricting its “archive” to the canon (Muthu and Pitts are guilty of this but Mantena avoids this historical sin), or by thinking of liberalism as more internally coherent than it is (Mantena). (Many arguments are leveled against Mehta, but I am less interested here in them.) Although I agree that all three errors Bell identifies are egregious errors of historiography with significantly scholarly effects, I would argue he misunderstands both the political theoretical points and historical conclusions of those books. To put that claim more softly, much can be salvaged from these books and much can be defended in them against Bell’s attacks. One weakness Bell identifies in existing scholarship on empire in political theory is that it focuses on anti-imperialism, but that “Once we expand the interpretive

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4 Bell, Reordering the World, 70.
5 Bell, Reordering the World, 48.
6 Bell, Reordering the World, 67.
aperture to encompass settler colonialism, the ‘anti-imperialism’ of the Enlightenment begins
to look rather less clear-cut.” His target here is Sankar Muthu’s *Enlightenment Against Empire*.

I agree that scholarship on empire should expand its aperture to include settler colonialism. However, Bell seems misguided to make Muthu his target for two reasons. First, because Muthu does examine settler colonialism. Second, because Muthu’s work treats
regions (France and Prussia) and a time period (the 18th Century) outside the scope of Bell’s
own text. Rather than seeing Bell’s critical thrust, attention to settler colonialism encourages
us instead to “go beyond” merely links between liberalism and empire in the 19th and 20th
centuries to *pre-liberal* configurations, ideologies, and theories about settler colonialism and
empire. In other words, instead of being a criticism of Muthu’s book, Bell is in fact pointing
us to its importance. In defense of Muthu, then, the point of his book is not only or even
primarily to make an *historical* intervention but instead to make a more historically sensitive
*interpretive* intervention. Focusing on canonical figures, Muthu aims to reinterpret and
resituate those canonical figures and their texts. Arguing that Muthu focuses on the canon is
true; only, instead of that fact resulting in Bell’s critical thrust, it is instead trivially true.
Criticizing such a focus on the canon misses the mark insofar as the aim of such a focus is
precisely to give canonical texts new meanings.

Ultimately, the word “Liberalism” in *Essays on Liberalism and Empire* is not merely or
accidentally first in the subtitle. Liberalism occupies the primary conceptual position of the
book. Bell is not oppressed by the tyranny of the canon, however. Bell is under the tyranny
of an unnecessary “–ism.” Liberalism holds pride of place in structuring Bell’s analysis of
empire and settler colonialism. It need not have.

I want to close by making clear that Bell makes good on his promise of providing a
summative conception of liberty that is both internally variegated and impressively
expansive. By focusing on debates and on historians’ own interpretations and defenses of
greater British empire, Bell does a great service to intellectual historians, political theorists,
and scholars of international relations by showing the great diversity of criticisms and
defenses of empire – all under the self-given label of liberalism. In many ways, Bell’s essays
in Part I are reflections on the politics of interpretation; his political intervention now is to
make possible a liberal critique of contemporary empire by showing there is no necessary
conceptual connection between liberalism and empire.

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7 Bell, *Reordering the World*, 45.