In *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, Duncan Bell writes “Liberalism is a specter that haunts Western political thought and practice” (62). Moreover, Bell states “Most inhabitants of the West are now conscripts of liberalism: the scope of the tradition has expanded to encompass the vast majority of political positions regarded as legitimate” (69-70). Such provocative statements underscore the importance of Bell’s project of interrogating the connections between liberalism, particularly in its nineteenth-century British forms, and the ideologies of empire. Taking what he terms a “summative conception” of liberalism\(^1\), thus allowing him to sidestep some of the definitional debates while highlighting the diversity of liberal thought, Bell approaches this task by examining a number of the key themes of, and intellectuals who engaged with, liberal discussions of imperialism and empire. While such a broad conception of liberalism is certainly helpful in constructing an expansive archive of liberal thought, and is able to capture the shifts in this thought that Bell highlights, it nevertheless has the potential to reduce the force of the Bell’s argument. As such, the book may be criticised by those taking a more stipulative conception of liberalism, arguing that some of the thinkers Bell considers were not truly or fully liberal, or that their writings on imperialism and empire were marginal to the articulation of the liberal tradition.

Bell’s central argument in the book is that when settler colonialism is brought back into the frame of analyses of imperialism in liberal political thought, claims of the antithetical relationship between liberalism and empire become untenable, as many liberal thinkers, while at times rejecting imperial expansion, endorsed and even argued for settler colonialism, and some of its attendant projects and aims. In so doing, Bell makes a compelling case for considering settler colonialism alongside both metropolitan political thought and other forms of imperial rule. Furthermore, in his examination of a variety of liberal thinkers, Bell successfully demonstrates how the settler colonial imaginary served as a space of projection where these thinkers could develop and test their theories of civilizational advancement, while simultaneously assuaging the anxieties of the metropole.

Together with settler colonialism, the other core theme of Bell’s book is the “historical-mindedness” of liberal thought on empire. Here Bell demonstrates not only the prominent role played by historians in the thinking on and justification of empire, but also the centrality of concerns about tradition, development, progress, and the lessons that could be gleaned from history. Additionally, in his account, particularly in his discussion of Green, Spencer, and Sidgwick in Chapter 10, but also in Chapter 5, and in other places throughout, Bell brings the temporal logics underpinning much liberal thought on empire to the fore, showing how “civilization” was temporally coded as “a marker of the present, and a guide to the future” (259). As such, and by pointing to the progress narratives that drove and predicated much liberal imperialist thinking, Bell exposes some of the guiding

\(^1\) “…the liberal tradition is constituted by the sum of the arguments that have been classified as liberal, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals, across time and space.” (70)
assumptions underlying aspects of both liberal and international thought, not only in the
nineteenth century, but also today.

A subsidiary, but nonetheless significant theme of Bell’s book is the role of race, racialised thinking, and whiteness in liberal thought on empire. Bell argues that for thinkers such as E.A. Freeman, “Race was the basic ontological category of global politics” (335), and multiple liberal intellectuals of the Victorian era sought to unify the “English race” in order to “harness its purported world-historical potential as an agent of order and justice” (182). Moreover, for these thinkers the concept of “civilization” was racially inflected and coded as white. Here, once again, Bell’s focus on settler colonialism is significant as it allows him to draw out the racialised thinking at the base of much liberal thought of the era, a fact sometimes glossed or minimised in accounts of liberal “anti-imperialism.” Even movements nominally against imperialism, then, are shown to reproduce racist logics.

While Bell’s study is primarily focused on liberal thinkers in Victorian Britain, it would, however, be interesting to examine the interconnectedness of racialised liberal thought across and outside of the English-speaking world. Indeed, a more global approach may strengthen the case for the imbrication of liberal thought and imperialism. In particular, an analysis of how such ideas travelled and influenced early liberal internationalists and International Relations scholars on both sides of the Atlantic would be productive in advancing this line of study. Furthermore, interrogating global settler colonial discourses, particularly those in the settler colonies themselves, in conversation with the literatures on (anti-)Blackness and indigeneity, may help uncover additional linkages between liberal thought and empire, while furthering the project of (de)colonising liberalism. This is not so much a criticism of Bell’s book, so much as call for taking this project further and continuing the work of decolonisation.

Finally, Reordering the World does not claim to be a comprehensive account of liberalism and empire, and as such Bell points to a number of avenues of possible future research. At various points throughout the book, such as in his suggestion that “‘Democracy’ has supplanted ‘civilization’ as the defining feature in discourses of global governance” (204), Bell hints at continuities between liberal thought on empire and contemporary political thought and politics. Bell certainly does not suggest that this is a straightforward story of linear continuities, and further questioning of ways in liberal imperial thinking has endured, shifted, and continued to inform political thought, and guide social scientific research represents one such avenue of potentially fruitful study. However, in so doing, it may be necessary to combine a summative conception of liberalism as used by Bell with a somewhat more stipulative one in order to expose the ways in which some of liberalism’s core concepts and assumptions were and continue to be inflected by imperial and colonial modes of thought. Overall, Duncan Bell presents a compelling analysis of the imbrication of liberalism and imperialism in British political thought, while highlighting its diversity and Janus-faced nature, as well as the shifts and processes of reinvention it underwent. As such, it represents a valuable addition to the literature on the coloniality of European political thought.