

A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France

Jennifer Pitts

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Jennifer Pitts : A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France:

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Trenchant, timely, eloquent scholarship By Irami Osei-

FrimpongBurke, Smith, Bentham, Mill, and the Enlightenment play a critical role in how we conceive of the American political predicament, which is why the names still grace undergraduate syllabi. Five to seven page papers are written by eager nineteen-year-olds, and then arguments are forgotten en masse, even as the issues with which these thinkers wrestle remain in play in the form of immigration reform, Haliburton regulation, South American agri-businesses, the task of making moral judgments across profoundly diverse societies, and the American idea of a just war. Pitts' political project is to show how imperialism and colonialism, while inextricably tied to the Western 19th century political legacy, was a fashion that came into vogue, a system of oppression borne of contingent circumstance rather than a logical, necessary outgrowth of economic and political liberalism. She shows how Adam Smith's work, while serving as a foundation of economic and political thought, inveighs unambiguously against colonization. Smith decried colonization as an inefficient practice that exists not for profit, generally diffused, but for the vulgar pride of the home-world masses and the material interests of a select group of private company men. Pitts details Smith's nuanced, practical arguments concerning how maintaining colonies serves as an unnecessary drain on the national economy by shunting tax dollars towards colonial military protection. In addition, Smith points out how much easier it is to countenance the immoderate abuses of oppressed laborers, from a distance. Pitts' arguments bring to mind the great shame of how Smith's "invisible hand" has gained so much esteem over the years, but his warnings against imbalanced, rapacious private interests have been lost. Thankfully, Pitts rescues these arguments and places them in the forefront. She proceeds to discuss Edmund Burke, a fascinating figure and champion of political conservative institutions, who witnessed Indian labor degradation at the hands of the East India Company and went on to try Governor-General Warren Hastings for this malfeasance. Pitts uses the Hastings trial as a metaphor to flesh out Burke's thoughts concerning the confused array of responsibilities that belonged to the violent oppression of foreign labor with the aid of English Government arms; who is at fault/complicit? The trial splays Burke's evolving views on English Imperialism and the limits of government moral responsibility for private international acts. Pitts then traces the trajectory of imperialism through Bentham, James Mill, and J.S. Mill. All three are attached to the term utilitarianism, but Pitts keys in on how differing accounts of the concept of progress and the ability of individuals to determine their own path to happiness, rather than violent government paternalism as a civilizing force, manifests in their three radically different approaches to the colonial enterprise. Pitts fiercely blazes through Constant, with energy and aplomb and keen moral sense, aided, of course, by Constant's energy, aplomb and keen moral sense, and ends her treatment of Imperialism with what at first seems a loosely tethered discussion of Tocqueville. At first, I did not believe that her scholarship remained as focused during the beginning of the Tocqueville section, but then Pitts' anecdotal approach to Tocqueville gestalts in her final strokes, allowing a frightening portrait of Tocqueville to emerge. Tocqueville is portrayed as an outstanding scholar, insightful and aware of all of the degradation and oppression required to maintain French colonization of Algeria. He was sympathetic to the plight of the natives and without delusions that colonization civilizes barbarians. Still, Tocqueville baldly argues for colonization for the greater glory of France in this new world where other esteemed powers have colonies, in what amounts to a grand and awful rendition of keeping up with the Joneses. Pitts ends this section successfully portraying Tocqueville as deeply humane, perceptive, artistic, and yet still, with both eyes open, severe man, advocating for imperialism. It's haunting.

A dramatic shift in British and French ideas about empire unfolded in the sixty years straddling the turn of the nineteenth century. As Jennifer Pitts shows in *A Turn to Empire*, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Jeremy Bentham were among many at the start of this period to criticize European empires as unjust as well as politically and economically disastrous for the conquering nations. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the most prominent British and French liberal thinkers, including John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, vigorously supported the conquest of non-European peoples. Pitts explains that this reflected a rise in civilizational self-confidence, as theories of human progress became more triumphalist, less nuanced, and less tolerant of cultural difference. At the same time, imperial expansion abroad came to be seen as a political project that might assist the emergence of stable liberal democracies within Europe. Pitts shows that liberal thinkers usually celebrated for respecting not only human equality and liberty but also pluralism supported an inegalitarian and decidedly nonhumanitarian international politics. Yet such moments represent not a necessary feature of liberal thought but a striking departure from views shared by precisely those late-eighteenth-century thinkers whom Mill and Tocqueville saw as their forebears. Fluently written, *A Turn to Empire* offers a novel assessment of modern political thought and international justice, and an illuminating perspective on continuing debates over empire, intervention, and liberal political commitments.

Winner of the 2006 First Book Award, Foundations of Political Theory Section of the American Political Science Association
One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2005
"Jennifer Pitts . . . [shows] that support for imperialism is not inherent to liberalism by demonstrating that prominent 18th- and early-19th-century liberals in Britain and France were deeply critical of imperialism. . . . The book is beautifully written, and the scholarship is outstanding."
--Choice
"Jennifer Pitts helps us to see early-nineteenth-century imperial discourse in a new light by showing more clearly what came before."
--Michael Bentley, *Victorian Studies*
"An impressive and even pathbreaking

piece of work."--Theodore Koditschek, *Journal of Modern History*"This book is a brilliantly successful attempt to account for the apparent transition from the fierce, bitter assault on the idea of empire by the writers of the second half of the eighteenth century...to the often self-congratulatory, high-minded endorsement of a new kind of imperial mission less than half a century later.... Pitt's finest pages...are on Tocqueville and the Algerian question."--Anthony Pagden, *Perspectives on Politics*"This is an excellent book about late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century liberals and empire. Based on a wide range of material, which Pitts handles impressively, the book begins from a broad but workable definition of liberalism as involving a notion of individual rights and an attempt to widen social sympathies. Pitts deserves much credit for directing attention to liberalism's ability to negotiate difference in a context of empire and for her well-written, inspiring, and thorough analysis."--Casper Sylvest, *Political Studies* "This [is a] thoughtful and engaging book."--John Cramsie, *The Historian*"Jennifer Pitts . . . undermines the case for the reality of anti-imperialism by depicting the rise of 'imperial liberalism' as a major intellectual trend in both Britain and France between c. 1780 and 1850. She does so in a careful, acute and lucid account of the ideas on empire of Adam Smith, Burke, Bentham, the Mills, and de Tocqueville."--Anthony Howe, *European History Quarterly*From the Inside Flap"Exhibiting depth of research, jargon-free prose, and intellectual acumen on every page, this book is a well-balanced, seamless whole that reveals the impact of empire on the genesis of modern liberalism. It is a work of first importance not only for political theorists but also for readers in philosophy, history, and literature."--David Armitage, Harvard University, author of "The Ideological Origins of the British Empire" This rich and provocative book examines a subject of great current interest in fields from political theory to international relations to European history. It deserves and should receive a broad audience. The scholarship is both careful and persuasive, and Pitts has an appealing authorial voice. The passion to understand what makes a theorist reject or support foreign conquest drives her narrative and holds the reader's attention as the analysis unfolds."--Cheryl Welch, Simmons College, author of "Liberty and Utility"From the Back Cover"Exhibiting depth of research, jargon-free prose, and intellectual acumen on every page, this book is a well-balanced, seamless whole that reveals the impact of empire on the genesis of modern liberalism. It is a work of first importance not only for political theorists but also for readers in philosophy, history, and literature."--David Armitage, Harvard University, author of *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*"This rich and provocative book examines a subject of great current interest in fields from political theory to international relations to European history. It deserves and should receive a broad audience. The scholarship is both careful and persuasive, and Pitts has an appealing authorial voice. The passion to understand what makes a theorist reject or support foreign conquest drives her narrative and holds the reader's attention as the analysis unfolds."--Cheryl Welch, Simmons College, author of *Liberty and Utility*