

International Thought and Victorian Liberalism

Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America. By DUNCAN BELL (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020; pp. 488. £30);

Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber. By WILLIAM SELINGER (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; pp. 268. £75);

Liberalism at Large: the World According to the Economist. By ALEXANDER ZEVIN (London: Verso, 2019; pp. 544. £25).

It has been some time since the last attempt at a synthetic study of Victorian political thought.¹ To produce such an account now, which did justice to the changing shape of the scholarship since the beginning of the twenty-first century, would be a forbidding task. Most obviously, new work on established canonical thinkers—including J.S. Mill, Thomas Carlyle, Walter Bagehot, Herbert Spencer, T.H. Green and James Fitzjames Stephen—has offered important reassessments.² Other studies have explored how wider publics engaged with and interpreted these celebrated purveyors of ‘higher’ criticism.³ But historians have also applied sustained pressure on the question of what counts as ‘political thought’, resurrecting the writings of numerous less well-known figures for both context and content, and attempting to find new methods of studying ‘popular’ political thinking.⁴ Fresh themes have emerged, not

1. H.S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke, 2000). Even this was a brief introductory account, by a scholar who had previously written mainly on French history. Earlier efforts include M. Francis and J. Morrow, *A History of English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1994); C. Brinton, *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1933). G. Stedman Jones and G. Claeys, eds, *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), has plenty to say about Britain, but as part of a much wider European, American and in parts global survey.

2. See especially for these figures, G. Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J.S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge, 2013); A. Jordan, ‘Thomas Carlyle and Political Economy: The “Dismal Science” in Context’, *English Historical Review*, cxxxii (2017), pp. 286–317, and Jordan’s extensive range of further publications on Carlyle; D.M. Craig, ‘Bagehot’s Republicanism’, in A. Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 139–62; M. Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Abingdon, 2007); J. Morrow, ed., *T.H. Green* (Aldershot, 2007); G. Conti, ‘James Fitzjames Stephen and the Landscape of Victorian Political Thought’, *Modern Intellectual History*, xviii (2021), pp. 261–74.

3. D. Stack, ‘The Death of John Stuart Mill’, *Historical Journal*, liv (2011), pp. 167–90; E. Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2017).

4. For popular political thought, see J. Gibson, ‘The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism’, *Journal of British Studies*, lvi (2017), pp. 70–90; M. Roberts, *Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero* (Abingdon, 2020).

least empire and the law, and old ones have had new glosses applied, notably parliamentary theory and the past.⁵ At the start of the 2020s, with important new publications appearing at a rapid clip, it feels as if we are at an inflection point for the study of Victorian political ideas.⁶

Arguably the most significant recent development in the study of nineteenth-century British political thought is the much closer attention now paid to its 'international' dimensions. Impelled by the rise of 'new' imperial histories, the explosion of global and transnational history, the resurgence of comparative history, and the newly powerful shibboleths of global intellectual history, historians of Victorian ideas have found themselves grappling with new patterns of cross-national and inter-imperial intellectual entanglement.⁷ The study of 'international' thought in this context has proceeded in two main modes, often found in harness, but analytically separable. The first comprises the study of British ideas about political problems which reached beyond the boundaries of the nation: empire, global order, international law, politics overseas.⁸ The second involves examining how British ideas rested on, paralleled, or interacted with patterns of thought expressed in other national (or colonial) contexts. There are daunting conceptual challenges at the point where these approaches meet.

None of the three books on which this article centres fits exclusively within nineteenth-century British history, and none focuses purely on the problem of international thinking.⁹ Substantively, they do not have very much in common. All, however, are concerned to some extent with the perennially vital problem of the identity of 'liberalism', and

5. For empire and law, see D. Bell, 'Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought', *Historical Journal*, xlix (2006), pp. 281–98; R. Bourke, 'European Empire and International Law from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries', *Historical Journal*, lxiv (2021), pp. 812–21.

6. Not least given growing uncertainty about whether the 'Victorian' age ought to be studied as a distinct period: see M. Taylor, 'The Bicentenary of Queen Victoria', *Journal of British Studies*, lix (2020), pp. 121–35. This article assumes that, as far as the study of British liberalism is concerned, the label retains some value.

7. For introductions to these historiographies, see, respectively, S. Howe, ed., *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (Abingdon, 2010); W. Steinmetz, ed., *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 2019); J. Belich, J. Darwin, M. Frenz and C. Wickham, eds, *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016); S. Moyn and A. Sartori, eds, *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013).

8. Foundational work here includes D. Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2007); I. Hall and L. Hill, eds, *British International Thinkers from Hobbes to Namier* (Basingstoke, 2009); C. Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880–1930: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009); L. Benton and L. Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). For political-historical work on these themes, see Alex Middleton, 'Victorian Politics and Politics Overseas', *Historical Journal* (advance access, 14 Oct. 2020, DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X20000382).

9. All three works, indeed, lay claim to twenty-first-century political and theoretical relevance. This article deals only with their historical contributions. For an argument in favour of prioritising the political issues and categories which mattered to the Victorians, see J.P. Parry, 'The State of Victorian Political History', *Historical Journal*, xxvi (1983), pp. 469–84, at 469–71; and for this approach as applied to English Liberalism in particular, see J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993).

all have significant things to say on the subject. ‘Liberalism’ has long been the great prism through which scholars have looked at Victorian political and intellectual culture, so much so that the term has been used in a huge variety of sometimes incompatible ways.¹⁰ The volumes under review all treat it mainly as a practical political ideology, with definite premises and concrete goals, and as a recognised label to which Victorian actors consciously subscribed. But the books disagree sharply about the defining content of ‘liberal’ ideology. Examining their contrasting approaches does much to bring into focus the challenges and opportunities which currently face historians of Victorian political thought, and of liberal thought especially, who aspire to reach beyond the domestic sphere. This article looks in turn at the arguments developed and methods adopted in books by Duncan Bell, William Selinger, and Alexander Zevin, before reflecting more broadly on the possibilities opened up by recent scholarship. It commends each volume, and makes some suggestions about other considerations and questions which might foster an even more sophisticated ‘international’ understanding of Victorian liberalism.

I

Duncan Bell’s *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* completes a trilogy of books by the same author about the imagining of world order in (mainly) the nineteenth century.¹¹ It is a study of ‘international’ thought on the full spectrum, dealing both with ideas about the organisation of global politics, and with the analogies and interactions between commentators on the theme in Britain and the United States.

Bell’s earlier books dealt in large part with imagined projects for the consolidation, and in some cases the unification, of Britain and its settler colonies. *Dreamworlds of Race* looks at comparable schemes which prioritised the other axis of the ‘Angloworld’, and which proposed the forging of closer connections between the United Kingdom and the United States, between 1880 and 1914. It deals in particular with the ‘boldest’ arguments about the promotion of Anglo-American

10. Sometimes ‘liberalism’ describes a political philosophy, sometimes a national sensibility, sometimes a party-political alignment, sometimes a broader political movement, sometimes a loose agglomeration of assumptions and outlooks, sometimes a literary aesthetic. For the last, see D. Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 2017); and for the vigorous arguments among social scientists and historians of political thought about the concept of ‘liberalism’, see D. Bell, ‘What is Liberalism?’, *Political Theory*, xlii (2014), pp. 682–715. See also, for the state of play a generation ago, R. Bellamy, ed., *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth-Century Political Thought and Practice* (London, 1990).

11. D. Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ, 2021). The earlier books are D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); D. Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2016). See also Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order*.

integration, which stretched in some cases to visions of transatlantic political federation.¹² The book explains that most such projects were premised on claims about the unique capabilities of the Anglo-Saxon race for civilisation, progress, government and the maintenance of international peace. By showing how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, thinkers and politicians prioritised affinities of race over the boundaries of nation, and by tracing their disagreements over how those affinities could best be bolstered and liberated for the benefit of the rest of the world, the book offers a major reframing of modern Anglophone political thought on concepts of 'empire' and global order.

Much of the book is concerned with the ideas and interactions of four men, whom Bell presents as 'the most high-profile and influential advocates of Anglo-American integration'.¹³ These are the Scottish-born American plutocrat Andrew Carnegie, the campaigning British journalist W.T. Stead, the celebrity imperialist Cecil Rhodes, and the novelist and social theorist H.G. Wells. Their respective attitudes towards racial union, the agendas which lay behind their writing, and the reasons why their perspectives changed over time, are teased out with consummate skill. The most arresting dimensions of the book, however, are the ones signposted in its title. *Dreamworlds of Race* is preoccupied with the ways in which *fin de siècle* Anglo-American political thought revolved around utopias and dreams. It is consistently attentive to the use of the language of 'dreaming' by its subjects, and develops a robust taxonomy of the different forms of utopianism pursued by contemporaries. With these themes in mind, the book reaches well beyond the standard modern 'political thought' source-base of political and scholarly tracts and articles. It deals not only with quantities of private correspondence, but also with poetry (especially by Tennyson) and imaginative literature. As Bell puts it, '[t]he line between fictional extrapolation, political manifesto, and social analysis was blurred, even dissolved' as *fin de siècle* writers increasingly straddled genres.¹⁴ The chapter on science-fiction representations of the 'Angloworld', especially, is an eye-opening reminder that there are still worlds left to conquer for historians of nineteenth-century political thinking.¹⁵ The range of reference, and the facility with which Bell draws on diverse branches of political theory to frame his readings of historical texts, is exceptional.

The book is an exploration of an 'imaginary', not a deliberate unfolding of a historical thesis. The freedom which this framing permits is underlined by the content of the conclusion, which deals with late twentieth-century 'steampunk' fiction, and with the 'Afro-modernist'

12. Bell, *Dreamworlds*, p. 4.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

thought of W.E.B. Du Bois and Theophilus Scholes. But the implications of *Dreamworlds of Race* will be felt mainly by historians of Victorian and Edwardian political thought. The book's stress on the technological contexts and content of nineteenth-century political thinking—developing arguments Bell has made in earlier work, into a striking conception of 'cyborg' politics—is particularly stimulating, as are its discussions of the relationships between contemporary philosophical traditions and arguments about international politics.¹⁶

Questions remain about the purchase of the discourses described in *Dreamworlds of Race*. Those discourses do not feel quite as coherent, and perhaps not quite as influential, as the ideas about the consolidation of the British (settler) empire addressed in Bell's earlier monograph, *The Idea of Greater Britain*. That visions of Anglo-American union were more diffuse might be expected, given that they stretched across distinct political cultures, and especially as they are studied here through such a wide variety of sources. Even with the great drifts of primary material that Bell presents, however, it is not easy to make out their reach. Bell is clear that he is not trying to make a case about the contemporary dominance, or otherwise, of a particular discourse. Nonetheless, his British subjects are not all of the same rarefied cultural and intellectual status as most of those who crop up in *Greater Britain*, and there is a lingering sense that arguments about Anglo-American integration may have been a somewhat more specialist pursuit. At times the book seems to indicate that the racial 'dreamworlds' it describes were mainly the concern of a group of converts talking among themselves, and that attempts to win over communities of the unregenerate did not progress terribly far. As it shows, there were developed critiques of the arguments it charts, which suggests that the idea of transatlantic union did gain a certain amount of cultural purchase. But it would be valuable to see a more forensic treatment of how widely that idea penetrated.

What, then, of Victorian liberalism? Bell's last book, *Reordering the World*, was in part an argument about the relations between liberalism and empire, mainly in nineteenth-century Britain. *Dreamworlds of Race* is more reticent on the subject, but adds importantly to Bell's earlier contentions. *Reordering the World* positioned itself against influential scholarly assertions that the spirit of imperialism was inseparable from the basic assumptions behind nineteenth-century liberalism—a position which, as we will see, continues to attract supporters—preferring the difficult-to-refute empirical argument that not all self-described 'liberal' intellectuals actually thought about empire in the same way.¹⁷ For Bell, their writing on imperial expansion and political

16. D.S.A. Bell, 'Dissolving Distance: Technology, Space, and Empire in British Political Thought, 1770–1900', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxvii (2005), pp. 523–62; Bell, *Dreamworlds*, pp. 35–41.

17. Cf. U.S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Political Thought* (Chicago, IL, 1999).

organisation, as on various other matters of contemporary significance, was 'polyphonic', though at times the disagreements involved might almost seem to border on dissonance.¹⁸ What *Dreamworlds of Race* shows is that Victorian and Edwardian liberalism could be compatible with even grander, cross-national and cross-imperial schemes of racial rapprochement and unification. All three of the book's British protagonists were (self-identified) liberals.¹⁹ They did not agree about the virtues of formal empire; but they all thought that the future ought to be Anglo-American. In order properly to understand Victorian liberalism, Bell seems to indicate, we need to think more seriously about how different imagined patterns of international affinity cut across one another, both imperial and extra-imperial. It will be intriguing to see how the implications of this challenging point are developed in future work on nineteenth-century British political ideas.

The way *Dreamworlds of Race* approaches the complexities involved in studying patterns of thought which operated between national contexts is suggestive rather than programmatic. The book's aim is to make sense of overlapping patterns of discourse, not to look in detail at particular networks, or at the reception histories of specific texts. At times, indeed, the analysis is so comprehensively joined-up that the book omits to mention the nationalities of new figures being introduced. But *Dreamworlds of Race* goes well beyond the purely formal analysis of imaginative schemes and theories. It examines private and published exchanges across the Atlantic, discusses personal relationships and party-political motives, and attempts to make sense of the relations between public pronouncements and behind-closed-doors machinations. Other historians have investigated Anglo-American reforming networks, and different kinds of connections between the nations, but from a history of political thought standpoint this is all quite novel. Through this particularly apt case-study on thinking about Anglo-American union, Bell points to the existence of much deeper commonalities between nineteenth-century British and American political thought, and hints at the means by which they can best be studied. *Dreamworlds of Race*, as such, though relatively unassuming about its methodological strategies, deserves to be read as much for its suggestions as its substance.

II

The 'international' credentials of William Selinger's *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* are less immediately apparent.²⁰ Its relevance for the purposes of this article lies in how it represents the strengths of a more traditional 'history of political thought' method in looking

18. Bell, *Reordering*, p. 240. For a comparable analysis of liberal thought, see Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism*, ch. 2.

19. Bell, *Dreamworlds*, pp. 101 (Stead), 137–8 (Rhodes), 161, 193 (Wells).

20. W. Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019).

between national contexts. Selinger and his occasional collaborator Gregory Conti seem to represent a new axis in the history of British political thought, both committed to asserting the significance of ‘parliamentary’ themes, both interested in contemporary political theory, both eager to make arguments about the passage of ideas across international lines, and both willing to contribute robustly to headline debates about the nature of ‘liberalism’.²¹ It is not a coincidence that both historians have published their first books in Cambridge University Press’s storied *Ideas in Context* series, which had not previously attracted many contributions on Victorian political thought.²² It may be that their work signals a belated coming-of-age for the ‘Cambridge School’ approach in relation to nineteenth-century British political thinking.

Parliamentarism makes a sharply defined argument. Its case is that historians have failed to understand significant chunks of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European political thought, because they have overlooked the intellectual project to which many of the era’s most celebrated thinkers were committed. That project was not ‘liberalism’—or at least, not in the guises in which intellectual historians usually present it—and certainly not ‘democracy’, to which historians have allocated much too central a role. Rather, it was ‘parliamentarism’. For Selinger, classical parliamentarism advocated four things: an elected legislative assembly, ministers who sat in that assembly and required its support, a constitutional monarch, and a system of political parties. This broad model was understood by contemporaries to have originated in practice in England, but it was taken up as an ideal by writers from a wide range of different countries, and spread across much of Europe (and beyond) in the nineteenth century. Selinger argues that we need to reinterpret modern political thought through this paradigm, and that theories of parliamentarism constituted ‘Europe’s most important constitutional tradition’.²³

Parliamentarism is consciously about ‘great theories’ and great names. The figures given extended treatment include Edmund Burke, Germaine de Staël, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, Walter Bagehot and John Stuart Mill. All are set illuminatingly within their intellectual environments—alongside other major and not-so-major political writers—as the *Ideas in Context* series ostensibly demands. Selinger declares an interest in political practice as well, noting that many of his protagonists operated in parliaments as well as theorising about them, and that they ‘struggled with the real pathologies of

21. Conti is the author of *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019). For my review, see *History of Political Thought*, xli (2020), pp. 510–13.

22. For an analysis of these works in a different context, see M. Skjönsberg, ‘The History of Political Thought and Parliamentary History in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Historical Journal*, lxiv (2021), pp. 501–13.

23. Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 4.

parliamentarism'.²⁴ This represents a potentially exciting advance on the often strictly textual 'Cambridge' approach, but does not ultimately end up having any particularly profound interpretative consequences.

Selinger's recovery of 'parliamentarist' discourse is trenchantly written, and winningly succinct. Perhaps as a result of the speed at which it moves, however, it does sometimes feel a little arbitrary, in terms both of the writers chosen and the specific issues discussed. This has consequences for how far we can go with its claims about nineteenth-century liberalism, which are bold and important. Selinger (with Conti) has argued elsewhere, in a response to Helena Rosenblatt's recent attempt to characterise liberalism as an essentially ethical project, that it is better to see it as a fundamentally *political* movement, based on shared ideas about representation and the framing of constitutions.²⁵ Selinger's book argues that the theory of parliamentarism was supported by 'an astonishing array of political thinkers, especially ones associated with the movement of *liberalism*'.²⁶ For Selinger, treatments of liberalism which present it as a vehicle for opposition to democracy, through the defence of limited suffrage and allied checks, miss the crucial point that liberals were very often vigorous advocates of 'parliamentarist' structures.²⁷ He notes that the origins of the term 'liberal' in a modern sense lay with demands for parliamentary rule in Spain, and argues that practical parliamentary politics provided 'one of the most powerful demonstrations of liberal values in action'.²⁸ Parliamentarism was 'an exceptionally compelling and influential' strand of liberal thought.²⁹

International connections and comparisons factor in to Selinger's arguments at several points. Some of his most striking claims for the significance of the 'parliamentarist' version of liberalism he describes rest on its cross-national circulation and purchase. Parliamentarism, he suggests, became the dominant paradigm of free states across Europe, thanks in large part to the French Revolution of 1789, and found echoes as far afield as Spanish America.³⁰ These are, however, hints which would need to be developed in more detail. The book contributes also to our knowledge of transatlantic institutional comparisons, discussing how the United States constitution became the principal straw man for mid-nineteenth-century European parliamentary theorising.³¹ Most fundamentally, however, the book is a study of Anglo-French political thought, with all its protagonists coming from the two sides of the

24. Ibid., p. 4.

25. W. Selinger and G. Conti, 'The Lost History of *Political Liberalism*', *History of European Ideas*, xlvii (2020), pp. 341–54. Cf. H. Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

26. Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 5.

27. Ibid., pp. 6–7.

28. Ibid., pp. 16, 14.

29. Ibid., p. 14. The book emphasises, however, that liberalism and parliamentarism were not identical: see, for example, *ibid.*, p. 13.

30. Ibid., pp. 83, 135.

31. Ibid., chs. 5–6.

Channel.³² Its analysis is pitched at a more formal level than Bell's. There is some discussion of social connections between its English and its French subjects, but the exchanges between them are not charted in any detail. Selinger is not afraid to note absences of influence: though he argues that the vision of parliamentarism which ultimately triumphed in Victorian Britain was essentially that of Benjamin Constant, he concedes that Constant does not appear to have exerted any direct stimulus.³³ But formulas are sometimes chosen which obscure the nature of international exchanges: what, for instance, does it mean to claim that the arguments of a French circle were 'continuous with' those of particular eighteenth-century British writers?³⁴

The difficulty with Selinger's chosen approach, when it comes to making sense of the 'international' dimensions of modern political thought, is the same one we find in so much historical scholarship which prioritises 'great' theories and theorists. The book is not systematically interested in how the similarities and divergences between them arose. Rather, its aim is to explore how they related at a more rarefied, abstract level. As a result, the internationally minded reader is left with as many questions as answers. Do we find comparable parliamentary theories developing in Britain and France because of the circulation of particular texts, or the influence of specific networks? Or was it analogous social, economic and political experiences which meant that similar visions of politics gained purchase? We know from several generations of scholarship that the social, cultural and intellectual relationships between nineteenth-century Britain and France were uniquely intimate, and that exchanges between the two nations' public spheres operated on an even more industrial scale than those between Britain and the United States, as discussed in Bell's *Dreamworlds of Race*.³⁵ *Parliamentarism*, more so than most methodologically comparable work, edges right up to the precipice of serious, sustained engagement with these issues. But it does not quite take the leap, and so the internationally minded reader is left tantalised. For historians mainly interested in making sense of nineteenth-century British political thought, it is becoming increasingly clear that better understanding and conceptualisation of the intellectual-cultural relationships between England and France is one of the great desiderata.

Finally, a point about novelty. Selinger may well be right to say that historians of political thought have overlooked the 'parliamentary' dimensions of nineteenth-century British liberalism, and his neatly

32. Echoing the model adopted in J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005). Pitts is now one of the editors of the *Ideas in Context* series.

33. Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, pp. 164–7.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

35. There has been a larger amount of recent work about Britain's intellectual and political impact on France than *vice versa*: see, for example, E. De Champs, *Enlightenment and Utility: Bentham in French, Bentham in France* (Cambridge, 2015); J.A.W. Gunn, *When the French Tried to be British: Party, Opposition, and the Quest for Civil Disagreement, 1814–1848* (Montreal, 2009). *EHR*, CXXXVII. 584 (February 2022)

distilled and provocatively pointed arguments around the subject will certainly prove significant reference points. *Parliamentarism* is an important, clearly conceived, and well-constructed book, and reading it through the partial lens applied here does not do full justice to its strengths. But it is worth noting that historians who deal with the grubbier world of party politics have been making the theme of 'parliamentarist' ideas and practice fundamental to their treatments of liberalism and the Liberal Party for decades, albeit in rather different ways.³⁶ In this case, as in others, historical understanding would probably be advanced by intellectual and political historians reading more of one another's work.

III

Alexander Zevin's *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist*, published by Verso, the modern incarnation of New Left Books, does not lack boldness.³⁷ An 'intellectual biography' of the British newspaper the *Economist*, the book's introduction sweeps aside all previous studies of the periodical, and identifies fatal conceptual flaws in most of the leading scholarly approaches to the study of 'liberalism' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It takes issue, in particular, with the 'Cambridge School' in the history of political thought, arguing that this loose scholarly grouping suffers from internal fissures when it comes to the study of liberalism, besides not having made the subject a priority.³⁸ *Liberalism at Large* is not particularly interested in the international circulation of ideas. It is a study of a British periodical in a mainly British context, at least as far its nineteenth-century portions are concerned. But it is very interested in attitudes towards questions of empire and world order.

Zevin's case is that if we want to understand modern liberalism, we need to understand the *Economist*. He argues that, almost throughout the period since the paper's founding in 1843, it has represented 'the dominant stream of liberalism', besides which no other strands were 'so central or so strong'.³⁹ More specifically, looking at the *Economist* can show us how mainstream liberals responded to three critical sets of issues which did not feature in liberalism's 'core doctrine': the rise of democracy, imperial expansion, and the ascendancy of finance.⁴⁰ The *Economist* offers a 'continuous record' of the encounter between

36. For example, Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, which is not in Selinger's bibliography. Selinger does cite the work of Angus Hawkins on these themes, but does not grapple with its implications in any detail.

37. A. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist* (London, 2019).

38. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, pp. 7–8. Zevin does not, however, cite Stefan Collini in this connection, though Collini's *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1979) is referred to later: p. 451, n. 11.

39. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, p. 15.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

classical liberalism and these new challenges, of a variety simply not available in other kinds of source.⁴¹

What were the elements of this 'dominant' liberalism, as projected during the nineteenth century? At its core, it looks suspiciously like the economistic and rather bloodless version of Victorian liberalism that historians so often took for granted before the 1980s. The *Economist*, the book suggests, presented the doctrine of laissez faire 'in its clearest and most consistent form'.⁴² In Zevin's account of the paper's early years, it seems that even the provision of a nightwatchman by the state would have been seen as unwarranted interference with the rights of private enterprise. Democracy was an equally unwelcome spectre, especially during the editorship of Walter Bagehot. From the 1850s on, however, Zevin shows that empire moved decisively towards the centre of the picture, and that the *Economist* became a consistent supporter of colonial projects (both Britain's own, and those of other countries), and of the forcing open of markets by military and naval power.⁴³ For Zevin, it is clear that imperialism was integral to mainstream liberalism in the later nineteenth century, and that the *Economist* gave 'authoritative expression' to those urges, in the form of 'a consistent, case-by-case justification of liberal imperialism'.⁴⁴ On Zevin's account, indeed, it was clashing attitudes towards empire which drove the 1880s split in the Liberal Party.⁴⁵

Liberalism at Large makes a significant contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century British political thought. Perhaps its most important point, however, is one of its most basic, about sources. The book can be read as an extended argument that we ought to take newspapers seriously. Historians of Victorian elite political thought, though increasingly willing to wade through large quantities of articles in elite quarterly and monthly periodicals, have for the most part continued to draw the line at daily and weekly newspapers. These largely remain fodder for media historians, and for the less prestigious study of political 'opinion'.⁴⁶ In showing how effectively and consistently papers such as the *Economist* maintained philosophically committed editorial lines, in this particular case over an extremely long period of time, *Liberalism at Large* will make this exclusion much harder to defend.⁴⁷

41. Ibid., p. 15.

42. Ibid., p. 31.

43. Ibid., p. 51. Cf. the similar pattern of political ideas discussed in D. Todd, 'John Bowring and the Global Dissemination of Free Trade', *Historical Journal*, li (2008), pp. 373–97.

44. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, pp. 129, 394.

45. Ibid., pp. 130–33.

46. Though for an effective exploitation of newspapers in an intellectual-historical context, see G. Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 2010). Historians of popular politics have led the way in using newspapers to access political ideas: see, for example, E. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992).

47. See also, along comparable lines, D. Butterfield, *10,000 Not Out: The History of the Spectator, 1828–2020* (London, 2020).

How compelling is the book's argument about the character of liberalism, and about the significance of a particular imperial and international vision within that liberalism? The first issue is that the book's conceptual scheme is not obviously more robust than those it critiques. It objects to attempts to extend the history of 'liberalism' back any earlier than the political existence of the term. But the argument it then presents about the usage of the words 'liberal' and 'liberalism' in early nineteenth-century British discourse is too brisk to be entirely satisfactory, and should be read alongside recent and more detailed work by David Craig, which Zevin could not have taken account of.⁴⁸ The next steps are not easy to follow. First we end up back in the familiar embrace of John Stuart Mill, who we are told 'captured' a 'synthesis that was missed in France', in which 'there was a totalizing fusion of the political ideas of the rule of law and civil liberties with the economic maxims of free trade and free markets'.⁴⁹ We are then presented with a straightforward-seeming 'leap from ideology to organization', with the demise of Whiggism and the formation of the Liberal Party, pinned to the Willis' Rooms meeting date of 1859. This new organisation, we are told, was 'to be led by the charismatic Gladstone', which is true enough, but that was not until 1867.⁵⁰ Zevin's story here is explicitly about an 'exceptional ideological-organisational double development', but like so many histories of liberal thought, it is not one which pays much attention to the organisational side.⁵¹ His analysis remains largely immune to the struggles, divisions, and profound inconsistencies which shaped Liberal Party politics in nineteenth-century Britain.

The second issue lies in how the book supports its argument about a 'dominant' form of liberalism. *Liberalism at Large* aims to provide us with 'an antidote to the standard eclecticism of most accounts of liberal ideas', which frequently 'adduce everything and its opposite in a grab-bag going back at least to Smith'.⁵² It certainly offers a thorough account of a particular strand of self-identified 'liberal' political argument. But the book does not weigh it against the others that were available. Occasional comparative sections make clear that other Victorians who considered themselves liberals disagreed strenuously with the *Economist's* line, but the book does not seem sure what to do with this, except to assert that these alternative liberalisms were relatively marginal. *Liberalism at Large* is analytically embarrassed by the fact that the *Economist* ended

48. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, p. 11. See also D. Craig, 'Tories and the Language of "Liberalism" in the 1820s', *English Historical Review*, cxxxv (2020), pp. 1,195–228. Zevin seems to overlook J. Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–1852* (Chichester, 2011), which contains much relevant discussion, especially in ch. 1.

49. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, p. 11.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

up siding with the Liberal Unionists for two decades after 1886, and glosses over the period in a handful of pages.⁵³ Presumably the fact that Unionists ended up merging with the Conservative Party means that they cannot be treated as authentic inheritors of the liberal tradition, and the book's narrative only gathers steam again once the newspaper decides to swing behind aspects of New Liberalism in the Edwardian era. But what happened in the 1880s and 1890s must surely be central to any general argument about the identity of Victorian liberalism, and Liberal political practice.

The decision to frame the argument around 'dominance' obscures the significance of what Zevin is really doing. His book is about a particular *kind* of nineteenth-century liberalism, which competed with other contemporary versions, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so. The *Economist's* liberalism, which owed much of its character to its implicit faith in the principles of political economy, was rationalistic, anti-democratic and conservative. For Zevin this creed found its most elegant, authoritative and coherent expression in the hands of the *Economist's* third and most celebrated editor, Walter Bagehot.⁵⁴ The other great mid-Victorian representative of this 'scientific' liberalism, it might be suggested, was Bagehot's brother-in-law, intimate friend and sometime *Economist* contributor William Rathbone Greg, who shared a similar interest in dissecting the internal politics of foreign states, and who regularly ended up arguing along similar political and economic lines.⁵⁵ Liberals of this breed had considerable philosophical overlaps with more patrician, paternalistic, aristocratic varieties of 'Whig-Liberalism', and members of both groups responded negatively to the radical, popular turn of the later Gladstone.⁵⁶ So it is not especially surprising to see the *Economist* move towards the Liberal Unionists, and the shift does not have to be explained by convictions about empire. Indeed, there was no consensus among British Liberals in the 1880s and 1890s that Ireland and Home Rule ought to be seen through an imperial lens.⁵⁷

Liberalism at Large offers an important guide to an important strand of liberal thinking. Understanding the worldview with which the *Economist* newspaper was associated is clearly vital to understanding the politics and political thought of the later nineteenth century, and Zevin's book needs to be widely read. But it is hard to go all the way with its more sweeping claims.

53. Ibid., pp. 130–33.

54. For another recent reading of Bagehot, see C. Marshall, *Political Deference in a Democratic Age: British Politics and the Constitution from the Eighteenth Century to Brexit* (Cham, 2021), ch. 4.

55. A. Middleton, 'William Rathbone Greg, Scientific Liberalism, and the Second Empire', *Modern Intellectual History* (advance access, 30 Mar. 2021, DOI: 10.1017/S1479244321000160).

56. J.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986).

57. E. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1876–1906* (Cambridge, 2007).

IV

That three such distinct readings of nineteenth-century British liberalism can be produced simultaneously speaks to the continued vigour of the subject, as well as to the capacity of 'liberal' ideas to organise themselves into different patterns under different pressures. Selinger's insistence that parliamentarism 'defined liberal thought and practice' in the early nineteenth century is surely incompatible with Zevin's claim that the *Economist* represented 'the *dominant* stream of liberalism'.⁵⁸ At the least, the *Economist*'s suggestion in the 1850s that parliament ought not to meet so frequently while Britain was fighting wars would have appalled some of Selinger's protagonists.⁵⁹ The issue is to some extent one of vantage points. Selinger reads forward from the eighteenth century, and so tends to emphasise the continued significance of Hanoverian concerns in the Victorian age. But Zevin needs to make sure that his nineteenth-century story aligns with the one he wants to tell about the twentieth, if his portrait of the *Economist* as a 'continuous record' of a particular kind of liberalism is to bear weight. Bell's emphasis on the 'polyphonic' character of nineteenth-century liberal thought, as it related to empire and racial union, is also hard to square with Zevin's insistence that a particular vision of empire was closely associated with a 'dominant' kind of liberalism.

So the volumes under review suggest that intellectual historians are unlikely to resolve their arguments about the identity of Victorian liberalism any time soon. These books certainly demonstrate that there is interpretative mileage in marrying the study of international questions and connections with inventive expansions of the source base typically employed in examinations of the history of nineteenth-century political thought. Future work on 'liberal' ideas in Victorian Britain may also benefit, however, from taking account of some further considerations, opened up by recent scholarship on related problems. The thrust of the following suggestions is that there might be advantages in thinking more systematically and structurally about how liberal thought related to its international contexts.

First, there are parallels to be drawn with new work on the history of historical writing. It is well established that history, and especially constitutional history, was one of the principal modes in which the Victorians conducted their political arguments.⁶⁰ But recent studies are starting to reveal more clearly how far nineteenth-century British historiography, at least at the elite levels, was indebted to influences from Continental scholarship. James Kirby's *Historians and the Church*

58. Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, p. 115; Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, p. 15.

59. Zevin, *Liberalism at Large*, p. 57.

60. J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981); A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015).

of *England* (rev. ante, cxxxii [2017], pp. 1,629–31) and Joshua Bennett's *God and Progress* (rev. ante, cxxxvi [2021], pp. 222–4), for instance, have been recognised mainly for their achievements in recreating the religious cast and context of much of the most influential Victorian history: but they are significant also for the connections they draw between British historiography, and contemporary French and German scholarship.⁶¹ Other studies have begun to ask about the connections between Victorian history-writing, and the progress of the discipline in the United States and the settler colonies.⁶² It is becoming increasingly clear that the politically powerful narratives constructed by liberal historians, not least their arguments about the historical descent of liberty, must be understood in part in terms of the patterns of international exchange which lay behind them. Working out how far these patterns overlapped with the counterpart connections which helped shape the development of liberal political thought—at least of the formal variety, and potentially in its more 'popular' guises as well—would be an important advance.

There are questions to ask, next, about what the Victorians made of foreign liberalisms. In the British context, 'liberal' was, of course, an imported political word, as both Selinger and Zevin remind us.⁶³ But there has been surprisingly little historiographical interest in the precise terms on which nineteenth-century British theorists, politicians and commentators identified authentic counterpart (or competing) 'liberalisms' overseas.⁶⁴ Who did the Victorians think qualified as a liberal in France, in Germany, in Spanish America, in the Ottoman Empire, and what were the tests they applied? At the least, discursive battles over what counted as 'liberal' on foreign fields must have constituted an important part of domestic struggles over the definition of liberal politics, and presumably—from the 1880s—over the identity of the true inheritors of the traditions of the British Liberal Party. More ambitiously, it may be that looking in a concerted way at British thinking on external 'liberalisms' could help to advance debates (which, as we have seen, remain lively) about what the Victorians understood to be at the core of 'liberal' doctrine. Either way, investigation of this theme would surely bear valuable fruit for political and intellectual historians alike.

61. J. Kirby, *Historians and the Church of England: Religion and Historical Scholarship, 1870–1920* (Oxford, 2016); J. Bennett, *God and Progress: Religion and History in British Intellectual Culture, 1845–1914* (Oxford, 2019). This perspective has largely been absent from even the most acute analyses of Victorian liberals' historical writing: see, for example, Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism*, ch. 5.

62. Bell, *Dreamworlds*, makes some gestures in this direction; see also, for example, A. Behm, *Imperial History and the Global Politics of Exclusion: Britain, 1880–1940* (Basingstoke, 2018).

63. Though see D. Craig, 'The Language of Liberality in Britain, c.1760–c.1815', *Modern Intellectual History*, xvi (2019), pp. 771–801.

64. See, however, M. Freeden, 'European Liberalisms: An Essay in Comparative Political Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vii (2008), pp. 9–30.

There are connected issues around the domestic impacts of foreign representations of British liberalism. A point which emerges with particular force from Selinger's *Parliamentarism* is how widely foreign observers, European and otherwise, treated Britain as a global beacon of parliamentary liberalism.⁶⁵ There are various existing treatments of this theme in different foreign contexts.⁶⁶ And indeed it is, in part, the exceptional status of the political and constitutional example presented by nineteenth-century Britain to the rest of the world which makes it so dangerous to immerse British liberalism within any general intellectual history of European or global liberalism. But just how much influence did foreign hymns to the British constitution, of the kind that were the stock-in-trade of the post-1848 European radical leaders touring Britain, have on British constitutional thought?⁶⁷ How far did writing on British liberal politics and ideas produced overseas have an impact on theory and practice at home? And what, in particular, were the intellectual consequences of foreign critiques of British liberalism? This last question is a version of a familiar observation. Complaints that historians of Victorian liberalism need to take better account of its opponents and alternatives are long-standing. Donald Winch noted thirty years ago that without a developed understanding of 'illiberal' thought, the history of political argument in nineteenth-century Britain was in danger of becoming a story of internal disagreements among professed liberals.⁶⁸ All three books under review are susceptible to versions of this criticism, though all have good intellectual and practical reasons for maintaining the focus they do. There is certainly no shortage of work left to do on domestic anti-liberalism. As historians increasingly come to terms with the ways in which nineteenth-century political debate was connected across international lines, however, we will also need to know how the Victorians channelled and combated international criticism, and caricatures, of 'liberalism' in Britain.

Finally, there is more to be said about intersections between specifically imperial liberalisms, of the kinds which Bell and Zevin are preoccupied with dissecting. New work on imperial emulation and comparison is making it increasingly clear that engagement with foreign empires was critical to nineteenth-century imperial thought and imaginaries, both

65. Selinger, *Parliamentarism*, for example p. 165.

66. For example, E. Biagini, 'Liberty, Class and Nation-Building: Ugo Foscolo's "English" Constitutional Thought, 1816–1827', *European Journal of Political Theory*, v (2006), pp. 34–49. This theme is however surprisingly marginal in the recent D. Moggach and G. Stedman Jones, eds, *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), which focuses largely on political thinkers' attitudes towards their own countries' revolutions.

67. There are important suggestions on this front in G. Claeys, 'Mazzini, Kossuth, and British Radicalism, 1848–1854', *Journal of British Studies*, xxviii (1989), pp. 225–61; J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006).

68. D. Winch, review of Bellamy, ed., *Victorian Liberalism*, in *Utilitas*, iii (1991), pp. 326–9, at 328–9.

within and beyond Europe, and that Britain was no exception to this pattern.⁶⁹ It is still not entirely clear how far Britain's possession of a globe-spanning empire was genuinely formative of domestic Victorian liberal thought, as opposed to the imperial world being a canvas on which liberal (thought-) experiments were conducted.⁷⁰ But it is not at all clear whether Victorian 'liberal imperialism' owed much, if anything, to engagement with the theory and practice of other self-consciously 'liberal' empires, most obviously that of France.⁷¹ Certainly, the British were often dismissive about the relative merits of other contemporary transoceanic colonial empires, but there was also plenty of more forensic, scientific interest in their structures and policies.⁷² This is not to mention the many ways in which Britain's imperial projects depended on the expertise and circulation of foreign actors.⁷³ Tracing how these encounters affected British imperial political thinking, and through it—perhaps—the wider horizons of liberal thought, will represent a major, but potentially transformative, undertaking.

V

Historians of Victorian liberalism have always faced fearsome definitional and conceptual challenges. This is especially true of those whose work enters into the world of political ideas, given the complex fault-lines between political-scientific and more purely historical approaches to the subject.⁷⁴ Matters will only become more complicated as the international dimensions of, and pressures on, liberal political thinking in nineteenth-century Britain begin to attract more concerted historiographical attention. But a more satisfactory account of how Victorian political thought operated must surely go beyond the alternatives of treating British intellectual culture as hermetically sealed, or of submerging it entirely within wider oceans of European, Atlantic or even 'global' political thinking. There is, of course, plenty of existing scholarship which looks at particular international influences

69. See, for example, A. Lester, K. Boehme and P. Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilization and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 336; J. Sexton and K.L. Hoganson, eds, *Crossing Empires: Taking US History into Transimperial Terrain* (Durham, NC, 2020).

70. See A. Sartori, 'The British Empire and its Liberal Mission', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxviii (2006), pp. 623–42; R. Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, 2008).

71. For important gestures in this direction, however, see R. Toye and M. Thomas, *Arguing About Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956* (Oxford, 2017).

72. Middleton, 'Victorian Politics'. Bell, *Dreamworlds*, touches on this theme in relation to US imperialism.

73. S. Conway, *Britannia's Auxiliaries: Continental Europeans and the British Empire, 1740–1800* (Oxford, 2017); S. Tuffnell, 'Anglo-American Inter-Imperialism: US Expansion and the British World, c.1865–1914', *Britain and the World*, vii (2014), pp. 174–95.

74. As examined in D. Craig, 'Political Ideas and Ideologies', in D. Brown, R. Crowcroft and G. Pentland, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 13–31.

on particular writers, thinkers, and political actors: the need now is for historians to find ways of holding British political thought structurally in tension with ideas, theories and patterns of representation generated and circulated overseas.⁷⁵ The books discussed here all deserve to be widely read, as significant contributions to a developing debate about how this vital interpretative operation might be conducted.

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75. Possible clues to viable methodologies can be found, in a different context, in the studies discussed in A. Middleton, "'High Politics' and its Intellectual Contexts", *Parliamentary History*, xl (2021), pp. 168–91.