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# LIBERALISM AND EMPIRE

## Conflicting Perspectives on Late 19th

## Century American Imperialism

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### ABSTRACT

In an effort to undermine Lockean liberalism, some have argued that it is highly conducive to imperialism, the pursuit of empire, while others have argued that Lockean liberalism delegitimizes imperialistic impulses in response. This paper will examine two important thinkers who represent opposing viewpoints on American imperialism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While Indiana Senator Albert Beveridge ardently supported America's imperialistic endeavors in the name of Lockean liberalism, Yale sociology professor William Graham Sumner appealed to the same principles to oppose American imperialism. By analyzing their arguments and assessing the compatibility of their ideas to the tenets of Lockean liberalism, the paper demonstrates that Lockean liberalism neither promotes nor opposes imperialism by default. By advancing this viewpoint, the paper offers a critical evaluation of the relationship between imperialism and liberalism and seeks to animate a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between ideology and policy.

The era of American imperialism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries demonstrates a relationship between liberalism and the rise of imperialism in the United States. The nature of that relationship has long been debated amongst politicians and intellectuals. On one hand, pro-imperialists such as Albert Beveridge used liberalism to defend and promote American imperialism, while anti-imperialists such as William Graham Sumner argued that American imperialism goes against the liberal principles it was founded upon. In close analyses of these texts, we realize that each of these thinkers remains faithful to the fundamental principles of Lockean liberalism. Therefore, the observation that liberal thinkers could both support and oppose imperialism suggests that liberalism neither promotes nor opposes imperialism by default, and that different attitudes arose from premises unrelated to the liberal tradition itself.

In order to understand how both Beveridge and Sumner remain faithful to the basic tenets of liberalism, we must first understand the tradition itself. According to Lockean liberalism, the only legitimate

source of political authority comes from the individual himself. Government is created out of the consent of the governed with the purpose of protecting the individuals' rights and liberties. In this way, the freedom offered by a liberal government tends to be negative: the government protects individual rights and liberties by preventing others from restricting or infringing on those rights, rather than exercising its power to force responsibilities onto citizens. For an individual to have his or her rights preserved, the government must be limited by the rule of law agreed upon by the people, rather than having a body with the power to arbitrarily create, destroy, or change law according to its own interests. Locke himself said, "Without law, there is no freedom." In return for this freedom to pursue his self-interest, man has a responsibility to take advantage of that freedom and use the resources available to him to produce something greater. In sum, Lockean liberalism holds a desire for liberty, individual and property rights, and the rule of law.

Albert Beveridge justified imperialism by arguing that not all people are covered

by Lockean principles if they do not satisfy certain prerequisites. In *The March of the Flag*, Beveridge further argued that American imperialism was justified under its promotion of individual rights and liberties, the ideals of liberal political thought that America was founded upon.

Beveridge's argument centered on achieving a liberal ideal for the American people. He argued that imperialism broadened opportunities for white Americans to accrue more wealth and fully pursue their self-interest rather than be restrained by scarcity. In this way, imperialism aided the liberal tenets of individual rights and liberties by expanding the playground in which liberal ideas can be exercised. For example, Beveridge argued that "we must find new markets for our produce, new occupation for our capital, new work for our labor. And so, while we did not need the territory taken during the past century at the time it was acquired, we do need what we have taken in 1898, and we need it now."<sup>1</sup> Here, Beveridge asserted that industrialization in America has rendered the current boundaries insufficient for individuals to pursue their full potential. Imperialism would

afford increased opportunity for Americans, allowing them to realize the liberal goal of achieving their full potential and pursuing their self-interest without restraint from scarcity of resources. For example, Beveridge suggested that imperialism can lead to "an opportunity for the rich man to do something with his money, besides hoarding it or lending it."<sup>2</sup> Beveridge suggests that limited resources force the rich man to resort to hoarding or lending money instead of pursuing his true self-interest, such as manufacturing or other work. In other words, confinements of America's borders restricted Americans' individual freedoms. In order to enhance the freedom of individuals, Beveridge concluded that it was right and just for America to acquire new properties through the Spanish-American war and other imperialistic endeavors. Beveridge contrasted the pro-imperialist President William McKinley with anti-imperialist politicians—Bryan, Bailey, Bland, and Blackburn—by asking, "Shall it be McKinley, sound money and a world-conquering commerce, or Bryan, Bailey, Bland, and Blackburn, a bastard currency and a policy of commercial retreat?"<sup>3</sup> Beveridge

implies that liberal people are free to pursue their self-interest with no restraint, especially when acting upon self-interest may bring America into conflict with illiberal peoples and governments. For example, Beveridge had no objection to going to war against the illiberal Spanish empire to take control over its illiberal territories: the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. By characterizing the anti-imperialist position as a “commercial retreat”—in which America retreats from additional commercial opportunities for individuals to pursue—and contrasting it to the imperialist desire to expand commerce, Beveridge further argues that the anti-imperialist position is fundamentally opposed to the tenets and goals of liberalism because it restricts the individual’s ability to pursue his self-interest. Thus, Beveridge characterized the Democrats’ anti-imperialist stance this way to portray them as opponents of the liberal founding principles of America. Thus, Beveridge emphasizes that imperialism can promote progress toward the ideal of liberalism.

Beveridge also used liberalism to justify American imperialism by basing his argument on the claim that liberal principles and political

thought—such as the idea that government’s authority is contingent on the consent of the people—only apply to those capable of exercising those principles. In doing so, he excluded the indigenous peoples who live in America’s new colonies. When addressing the anti-imperialists, Beveridge said, “the rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, applies only to those who are capable of self-government.”<sup>4</sup> According to Beveridge, it was important that the United States afford those living in the colonies the benefits of living in a liberal society, but given that these people are incapable of setting up a liberal society and government, the United States must set it up and maintain it for them. Beveridge also assumed that the conquered peoples would welcome those principles of liberalism that they would benefit from as an American colony. When responding to the anti-imperialists, Beveridge asked, “would not the natives of the Philippines prefer the just, humane, civilizing government of this Republic to the savage bloody rule of pillage and extortion from which we have rescued them?”<sup>5</sup> By referencing the

illiberal Spanish rule the Philippines had been subjected to, Beveridge portrayed America as the Philippines’s “liberal savior”, freeing the peoples of the world from illiberal governments. In short, liberalism’s desirability and the inability of some groups of people to achieve liberalism justified imperialism. Beveridge pointed to America as the bringer of liberalism to illiberal lands and used this characterization to defend and champion America’s imperialistic activities.

That there existed those who believed that America’s liberal tradition supported—or even required—imperialism does not necessitate a conclusion that liberalism as an ideology is conducive to the pursuit of empire. Indeed, some, including William Graham Sumner, concluded just as assertively that America’s imperialist endeavors oppose the liberal framework the country was founded upon.

Sumner’s understanding of liberalism desired a minimal level of government interference. His ideal liberal society was one in which everyone was equal and free to pursue their self-interests. When government gets too big, as he argued in *What Social Classes Owe To Each Other*, it becomes an entity that only

serves the interests of the few and devolves into a plutocracy. In *The Conquest of the United States by Spain*, Sumner lamented that America was becoming ever more distant to its liberal roots by going to war with Spain: “We have beaten Spain in a military conflict, but we are submitting to be conquered by her on the field of ideas and policies... They are delusions, and they will lead us to ruin unless we are hardheaded enough to resist them.”<sup>6</sup> Sumner saw the Spanish empire as an example of imperialism’s opposition to the Founding principles of liberalism, not as an example to emulate. Sumner’s liberalism opposed imperialism in two key ways.

First, Sumner argued that imperialism was incompatible with the liberal ideals America was founded upon. Sumner pointed to a dichotomy between Americans’ great pride for government by consent of the governed and imperialism’s inherent neglect of this principle. Sumner explained, “[T]he reason why liberty... is a good thing is that it means leaving people to live out their own lives in their own way, while we do the same,”<sup>7</sup> then called out the hypocrisy of American imperialists by asking, “If we

believe in liberty, as an American principle... [w]hy are we going to throw it away to enter upon a Spanish policy of dominion and regulation?"<sup>8</sup> In the quote, Sumner implicitly reminded his audience of America under British colonial rule. He pointed out the contradiction between Americans' use of liberal principles to support independence from Britain and Americans' rejection of those same principles to justify its imperialistic endeavors. For Sumner, imperialism simply represented a change in colonizer: the colonized peoples remained without liberty or opportunity to self-govern. In other words, America would simply be succeeding Spain's illiberal state action. In this way, Sumner applied his understanding of the goals of liberalism and concluded that American imperialism was incompatible with America's liberal founding principles.

Second—and more importantly—imperialism would endanger the government's ability to keep its liberal promise to protect individuals' rights and liberties. Consistent with arguments presented in other works that we have read, Sumner believed that the sole responsibility of government was to provide

peace, security and order so that individuals could pursue their objectives according to each's self-interest, and government could only achieve this if it was kept as limited as possible. Imperialism was an impediment to government executing its liberal duty to its people because it increased the amount of government resources necessary to acquire and maintain an empire, transforming government into a plutocracy. Specifically, Sumner outlined 4 ways imperialism would favor a plutocracy: "War and expansion will favor jobbery... take away the attention of the people from what the plutocrats are doing... cause large expenditures of the people's money, the return for which will not go into the treasury, but



into the hands of a few schemers...[and] will call for a large public debt and taxes."<sup>9</sup> Sumner furthered that these burdens would prevent individuals from pursuing their self-interests by encouraging the government to acquire more resources in the name of maintaining its empire. Under such a government, Sumner argued that individuals are less free because of government's dependence on the individual and vice versa. Every individual was forced to contribute to America's imperialism regardless of whether it was or was not in his interest, and the added costs forced government to become more reliant on its citizens to acquire the resources to meet those costs. Thus, Sumner concluded that "expansion and imperialism are at war with the best traditions, principles, and interests of the American people,"<sup>10</sup> namely, America's liberalism. In sum, Sumner argued that imperialism was wholly opposed to liberalism because it not only contradicted the liberal political thought America was founded upon but also pushed American imperialists further away from liberal ideals.

One of the central conflicts in liberal political thought is determining to whom its

principles apply. Pro-imperialist liberals such as Beveridge did not see those non-Anglo Saxons as being civilized. If they were not civilized, the principles of liberalism do not apply. Liberalism simply expresses the desirability for liberty, individual and property rights, and rule of law. According to liberalism, there is ambiguity on the issues of to whom the principles of liberalism should be applied and to what extent the ideals of liberalism should be pursued. The pro-imperialists deemed that groups of people needed to reach a certain level of civilization to have the principles of liberalism applied on them, and used this assumption to justify an American empire by arguing that the people in areas they were colonizing did not achieve the necessary conditions. However, anti-imperialists just as forcefully opposed imperialism with liberal principles. As Sumner's essay pointed out, they did not view non-civilization and savagery as sufficient justification for America's imperialistic activities. Additionally, they argued that individuals should pursue their self-interests to the extent that they do not impede on others' naturally guaranteed individual rights and liberties. We may have our preferences and

opinions on these issues, but these opinions do not definitively conclude that liberalism favors or rejects imperialism by default. In sum, neither understanding of liberal political thought and its relationship to imperialism is incorrect.

Beveridge did not apply the tenets of liberalism to those he deemed to be uncivilized and illiberal, while Sumner applied the tenets of liberalism to all peoples.

Some pro-imperialists, such as Beveridge, further believed that imperialism enhanced the liberal ideal for the American people by ensuring more resources for individuals to better pursue their self-interests, much like how expanding a playground gives kids more options for play. While we may dismiss this as a narrow-minded view of imperialism, it aligns well with Beveridge's belief that liberal principles did not apply to people whose lands the United States would be colonizing. Thus, it was well and good that America colonized these lands for Americans to use to pursue their self-interests. Contrary to Beveridge's conclusion, Sumner believed that imperialistic activities would, in fact, impede the liberal ideal that American society should be striving for, in which individuals could pursue

their self-interests without restraint from the government. While Beveridge does not seem to oppose the additional resources and government action needed to sustain an American empire, Sumner argued that it was precisely this additional government action which makes imperialism incompatible and opposed to liberal ideals. Neither side is incorrect in his argument. Acquiring resources and property beyond America's borders at the time did allow individuals to pursue their self-interests. For example, the annexation of Hawaii in 1898 allowed James Dole to establish a pineapple company, something he would have been unable to do in the continental United States or Alaska. On the other hand, acquiring these overseas territories cost the United States. For example, acquiring the Philippines required the United States to fight a war against the Filipinos, resulting in thousands of American casualties. Building the Panama Canal cost the United States over \$9.4 billion in today's money and thousands of lives to disease. But at the same time, it enabled ships to cross from the Atlantic to the Pacific without going around the Americas, enhancing the freedom

to do commerce as they as they saw fit. In this way, liberalism does not support or oppose imperialism and imperialist activities in and of itself, and both pro-and anti-imperialists have used liberalism to justify and encourage or critique and oppose an American empire, as observed in a close analysis of each of the writings.

This is not to say that Lockean liberalism was not the driving ideology of American imperialism in the 19th century. American imperialism seemed to be mainly driven by liberalism—in particular, a desire for greater economic profit brought on by industrialization. Industrialization allowed goods to be manufactured at a much higher rate than before, and at a much lower cost, making it much easier for companies to become profitable. Imperialism seemed primarily driven by a desire for America and its businesses to become ever more profitable in light of the new possibilities for profit maximization enabled by industrialization. Beveridge reflected this sentiment in *The March of the Flag*, when he observed, “It means... Americans... will monopolize those resources and that commerce. In Cuba, alone, there are

15,000,000 acres of forest unacquainted with the ax. There are exhaustless mines of iron. There are priceless deposits of manganese. There are millions of acres yet unexplored... [and?][T]heir trade shall be ours.”<sup>11</sup> In the quote, Beveridge appealed to all the economic possibilities that new territories would bring for America's economy and commerce, in line with his support for imperialism on its ability to enhance progress toward the ideals of liberalism. Thus, while liberal ideology was certainly not the only ideology driving American imperialism in the late 19th century, it seemed to be the main driver of America's imperialistic pursuits and activities. Some may use this historical observation to conclude that liberalism indeed supports imperialism. However, that liberalism was the primary driver of American imperialism during that time does not mean liberalism ideologically supports empire-building. It merely reflects the success that the pro-imperialists had in gaining support for their opinion, or the resonance their ideas had across the country. Indeed, the fact that liberalism is used today predominantly to oppose imperialism suggests that liberalism as an ideology neither supports

nor opposes imperialism, and the predominance of one side of the debate does not provide insight that supports one side or the other.

To say that liberal thought is conducive or delegitimizing to empire would be a reductive conclusion to make. It is easy to look at both sides of this argument and decide—for one reason or another—that one is correct. However, such a conclusion fails to account for the complexity of the question at hand and the faithfulness of the arguments on both sides to liberalism. While liberal political thought explicitly articulates much of its principles, it also contains certain ambiguities: namely, to whom the principles of liberalism apply and to what extent may the ideal of liberal political thought be pursued. Thus, the use of liberalism to support or oppose imperialism does not come from the ideology itself, but from premises that attempt to answer these ambiguities in liberal political thought.

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