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The Classical Liberal Idea of Equality

by Lee Ward

The origins and history of liberalism have been subjects of considerable interest of late. But I am not proposing here to offer a genealogy of liberalism *tout court*. Rather my intention is more modest. I would like to examine the classical liberal idea of equality. However, I embark on this task cognizant of a significant obstacle to our understanding of this important concept. I am mindful of Karl Polanyi's shrewd observation that much of the memory of the deep complexity of classical liberal political economy was lost in the transition to the later modern liberal economic orthodoxy especially insofar as the "elementary truths of political science and statecraft were first discredited, then forgotten." That is to say, politics and economics, as well as markets and the civil state have been in contact, conflict and cooperation since the dawn of the modern period.

I need perhaps to justify my focus on equality rather than freedom. Freedom, especially individual freedom, is no doubt integral to classical liberalism. And the undeniable blessings of freedom and its

justifiable limits have been the subject of intense and highly sophisticated debate for centuries. However, I would suggest that philosophical discussion about freedom among classical liberals has typically been framed within the moral framework supplied by two well-established principles: the concept of rights, on one hand, and the idea of harmony of interests, on the other. Both the rights-based and interest-based rationale for individual freedom share a common overriding normative premise, namely that restrictions on individual liberty are only justifiable on the grounds of preventing serious harm to the rights or interests of others. Arguably for classical liberals like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the 17th century through to John Stuart Mill two centuries later the central philosophical debate about freedom has revolved around the concept of harm. However, in my estimation the question of what the classical liberal position on equality is has received less attention and arguably signifies a more complicated situation.

The classical liberal idea of equality is both fundamental to liberalism but also rather amorphous. Today we tend to think of equality in terms of the tension between the **equality of**

opportunity (that is every individual having a fair chance) and **equality of result** (everyone achieving a similar standard of living). Historically, this binary choice has often been identified as the difference between classical liberalism of the 17th-19th century and modern welfare state liberalism of the 20th century. I want to amend this meta-narrative by highlighting what I take to be a forgotten or misunderstood issue: that is the tension among classical liberal thinkers with respect to how to guarantee or even just approximate a genuine equality of opportunity. I propose examining equality in the way we normally approach liberty, that is by reference to rights and interests. I want to suggest that the conceptual distinction within the various approaches to equality of opportunity lies in the difference between the emphasis on securing individual rights, on one hand, and the aim of securing the conditions for free competition of interests, on the other.

Admittedly, the distinction I want to draw attention to is one of emphasis. Practically every foundational classical liberal thinker adhered to the principle of private property rights, even as they each also showed some deference to the ideal of fair competition of interests. However, the difference in

degrees of their commitment to these notions had important implications for their political economy more generally. I want to focus on three areas of comparison in particular. First, I will examine a classical case study about financial crisis and political scandal known to history as the “South Sea Bubble.” Second, I will consider the issue of inheritance as classical liberal thinkers grappled with the normative and political implications of “unearned wealth.” Finally, I will examine the complex classical liberal position on empire and colonialism.

As promised, I will not offer a genealogy of classical liberal thought. But before I delve into the case studies I do feel the need to set out a brief schematic framework for the background context of classical liberalism as both a philosophy of natural rights and the harmony of interests. Liberalism emerged in the 17th century as the political and economic expression of the natural rights doctrine inaugurated by the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. For both Hobbes and Locke, the primordial moral fact is that all human beings are naturally born into a state of nature, that is, a condition of perfect freedom and equality. The major political implication of this moral truth is that

contrary to the tradition of philosophy since Aristotle, government is not natural, and its legitimacy depends entirely on consent. Hobbes and Locke would famously differ about the limits on government with Locke making central to his political teaching a natural right of property inhering in every individual's ownership of one's body. But broadly speaking, their view on the primary role of government was essentially the same. Government's primary task is to protect the rights of the individual from violation by other individuals and, in Locke's case at least, also from intrusion by the government as well. For these early classical liberals, one of the animating principles of government is the need to provide equal protection for all citizens under the law.

What I am calling the "Harmony of Interest" strain of classical liberalism is characterized by its rejection of the doctrine of natural rights and a much-reduced role of consent in the formation and preservation of society. Perhaps the best-known representatives of this interest-based liberalism are the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers David Hume and Adam Smith, who appealed to certain natural altruistic faculties and sentiments in human nature as proof against the "selfish system" of Hobbes and

Locke. However, we should not get too far ahead of ourselves here. It is good to recall that Adam Smith's confidence in the natural harmony of interests, what he called "the invisible hand," followed in the footsteps of another seminal classical liberal figure Bernard Mandeville, who famously argued that one can best serve the general interest, by pursuing one's own self-interest, or as Mandeville famously put it: "Privates Vices produce Public Good."

Hume and Smith "moralized Mandeville" by amending his formula somewhat with the affirmation that all human beings possess a faculty of sympathy and benevolence that drives us to seek the good of others in addition to our own. As such, the rightful role of government is not to protect natural rights (which either do not exist or lack political salience even if they do), but rather the government should set in place certain basic structures and intelligent policy that allows the free movement of interests among individuals to achieve sustainable harmony within society. For the harmony of interest classical liberals, the primary demand on behalf of equality is to make this pursuit of interest a meaningful enterprise for all individuals.

The differences between the way natural rights-based and harmony of interest-based classical liberals seek to guarantee equality of opportunity are subtle, at times being practically invisible in the actual practice of politics. But I want to suggest that these differences are significant and reflect potentially important alternative approaches to the question of what equality means in a liberal society. I do so with three issues in mind: the government's correct response to financial scandal, the legitimacy of estate taxes, and finally the historical debate about colonialism.

Financial Scandal: First, I want to cast your imagination back to England in the year 1720. This is the period of the infamous “South Sea Bubble.” The historical context is, of course, the Financial Revolution in England. The period from 1690 through to 1720 witnessed a dramatic transformation in English economic life through the establishment of public debt and the creation of the Bank of England in the 1690's, and later with the adoption of new forms of property and sophisticated financial combinations such as the East India and South Sea Companies. These joint-stock companies sold publicly traded shares and were governed by a corporate structure including a board of directors.

Developments in commercial banking included the use of bills of exchange for financial transactions and the establishment of an institutional framework intended to promote a stable system of credit.

Arguably the first major shock to the new financial system was the South Sea Bubble of 1720. The backstory is the politically well-connected South Sea Company created to conduct trade in the West Indies assumed through parliamentary legislation the national debt by providing holders of the debt an exchange of South Sea shares at the same nominal value. The Company's account books, and financial reports were entirely fraudulent, but among the unsuspecting public, reports of huge profits triggered a massive speculative frenzy over the summer of 1720 which witnessed the value of company stock skyrocketing from £100 a share to over £1,000 a share. When the bubble inevitably burst in late summer, it produced a financial crisis of bankruptcies and the serious risk of a nation-wide credit freeze. In the aftermath of the scandal, Robert Walpole and the Whig grandees close to the Hanoverian Court assumed the leadership role from which they would dominate English politics for the next several decades. In response to the public outcry, Walpole launched a parliamentary inquiry

into political corruption in the awarding of the South Sea Company's privileges, established a program of partial compensation for victims of the scheme, and stabilized the financial sector by engineering the reallocation of South Sea stock to the Bank of England and the East India Company.

At this time, the most important philosophical commentators on political economy in England were the Dutch émigré Bernard Mandeville and the authors of *Cato's Letters*, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. For our purposes, what makes this event interesting is that Mandeville was the inventor of the harmony of interest doctrine and *Cato's Letters* represents a full-throated version of the natural rights philosophy of John Locke.

Mandeville's argument about interests is best conveyed in his masterpiece *The Fable of the Bees*. The genesis of the *Fable of the Bees* was the lengthy doggerel-verse style poem entitled "The Grumbling Hive: or Knaves turn'd Honest" published by Mandeville in 1705. The central paradox of the *Fable* was presented in the subtitle "Private Vices, Publick Benefits." The "Grumbling Hive" served as a literary illustration of the proposition that demonstrable social good can arise

from the “vilest and most hateful qualities” of bees, and, of course, human beings.

The poem tells the tale of how a dynamic prosperous, freedom-loving hive suffered economic and political decline due to moral regeneration. In the flourishing hive, millions of bees worked busily to satisfy their own “lust and vanity.” These bees are not paragons of austere Calvinist virtue, but rather brazen patrons of corruption. Mandeville tells us: “there was not a Bee but that would, get more...than he should.” The sword of justice was not impartial as it checked only “the desperate and the poor.” Far from generating distrust and social breakdown, the greedy, selfish bees all pursuing their own interest strengthened the polity.

Mandeville insists: “Such were the blessings of that State; Their crimes conspired to make them great.” But with the advent of a moral reform movement in the hive, the newly chastened bees, now serious about virtue, precipitated a rapid decline in prosperity as luxury goods were banned to the great detriment of trade, and a whole host of occupations tied to commerce and manufacture disappeared from the economy of the hive. Eventually economic stagnation encouraged foreign attacks, which was repulsed only with great loss of insect life.

Reflecting on the sad fate of the moralistic hive, Mandeville reflects: “Fraud, Luxury and Pride must live, while we the Benefits receive.” The seriousness of the moral paradox at the heart of the *Fable* somewhat redeems Mandeville’s palpable delight at provoking the righteous indignation of the better sort of reader for he situated his own piece of whimsy in the very sanctum of modern ethical realism. Echoing that infamous teacher of evil Niccolò Machiavelli, Mandeville complains that “most writers are always telling men what they should be, and hardly trouble their heads with telling them what they really are.”

For their part, the normative ground of Trenchard and Gordon’s political economy was a philosophy of natural rights embedded in the concept of a state of nature exemplifying the juridico-theoretical concept famously illustrated in Locke’s *Second Treatise*. Echoing Locke, Cato declares “all men are born free.” Cato also made the classic Lockean move of connecting the “first law of nature,” that of self-preservation, with a natural right to acquire property derived from “the power which every man has over his own actions, and his right to enjoy the fruit of his labour, art and industry.” Liberty is inseparable from the individual’s self-ownership.

“Every man,” he says, “is sole lord and arbiter of his own private actions and property.” Arguably, Cato takes the logic of natural rights to a radical point beyond even what Locke explicitly endorsed when he directly stated that “liberty is the unalienable right of all mankind.” Locke certainly implied that the natural right to liberty (and property) exists outside the human capacity to renounce or surrender it completely, but he never actually used the phrase “unalienable rights.”

In Cato’s natural rights framework, the purpose of government is primarily “to defend every man and his property from foreign and domestic injuries.” But civil government’s role in protecting property does not empower it to direct individual’s in “their own affairs, in which no one is interested but themselves.” As a general principle, Cato is happy to let people take care of themselves, at least with respect to matters that do not involve harming others. But this insouciance about the effects of self-interest is always framed within the context of natural rights. In Cato’s gloss on familiar Lockean principles such as the derivation of the magistrate’s power from the natural executive power of individuals, what we see if anything is an even more spirited defense of popular resistance to unjust civil

authority than we expect from Locke. Government, Cato explains, is established only by the “wisdom and force of mere men,” and as such every individual “must act according to the light and dictates of his own conscience” in deciding if government is abusing its power. While Locke sought to inculcate a healthy suspicion of government among the citizenry, Cato took the emphasis on popular vigilance to a greater level and gave it a more concrete institutional focus through his advocacy of making “the interests of the governors and of the governed the same” as much as possible through “frequent fresh elections” and regular rotation in office.

OK: How did Mandeville and the authors of *Cato’s Letters* respond to the South Sea Financial Crisis? The short answer is very differently. Cato insists that “nations should be quick in their resentments, and severe in their judgments,” and in the context of the South Sea Scandal it is imperative to “load every gallows in England with directors and stock jobbers.” What Cato calls the “scum of the Alley” used their “prior intelligence, and knowledge of their own intentions” to raise and depress the national credit “at their pleasure as they saw their advantage.” While Cato viewed “exemplary”

punishments as a form of national self-defense to deter future crimes, it is important to recognize that this does not demonstrate a distrust or hostility to commerce *per se*, so much as indicate Cato's concerns about the harmful potentialities of the new financial instruments in the fledgling stock market. The new sort of "cabalistic learning" produced by this "new sort of property" threatens to change "honest commerce into bubbling," by plundering honest and industrious citizens and rendering the system of lending "precarious, uncertain and transitory." As such, Cato calls upon the "Ministry" to regulate the market and devise more transparent methods to manage public credit. For the perpetrators of illicit gain, Cato demands the severest punishment and compensation to the victims. With vengeance comes healing!

Unsurprisingly Mandeville's initial response to the crimes alleged in the South Sea Scandal was distinctly blasé. Even after the parliamentary inquiry into the malfeasance surrounding the South Sea Company shed light on the full extent of the corruption, Mandeville's reluctance to accept the need for rules to regulate markets was framed within a broader spirit of regulatory moderation and permissiveness that sought to dampen the fires of

retributive justice. On a practical level, Mandeville endorsed the pragmatic, largely non-punitive, approach to crisis resolution perfected by the Walpole administration in its bail-out policy. Mandeville rejected the spirited natural rights arguments of Trenchard and Gordon precisely because he feared that this kind of morally charged rhetoric was also capable of dowsing the flames of the private vices required to produce public benefits. Needless to say, Mandeville was pleased that they did not fill every gallows in England with Company Directors.

Inheritance: Another challenge to the classical liberal conception of equality is the question of inheritance, or “unearned wealth.” If we start by looking back to Locke, we see how central the right of bequest was to the classical liberal idea of property. For Locke, the natural basis for acquiring property is through labor or through trade. But he also identified one other natural grounding for property rights, namely inheritance. For Locke, a child’s right to inherit a parent’s property originates in a duty of parental care for their offspring. As he tells us in his *First Treatise of Government* “by the course of nature” not only do children have a “right to be nourished and maintained by their parents,” if

a parent dies, the children have “a natural right of inheritance to their father’s good.” Later in the *Second Treatise* Locke qualifies this inheritance right somewhat, when he declares that fathers typically enjoy the power to “bestow their estates on those who please them best.” But Locke seems to assume that what he calls the human desire to continue oneself in “their posterity” (a desire second only in intensity to self-preservation) means that for all intents and reasons the property one acquires in one’s lifetime will accumulate over generations within one’s family. But do the advantages produced by inheriting “unearned wealth” jeopardize equality of opportunity for beings that Locke describes as “promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties”?

Some later classical liberal thinkers (including John Stuart Mill) acknowledged the moral and economic problems posed for equal opportunity by inheritance. But perhaps the most dramatic critique of inheritance issued from the hero of the American Revolution and French Revolution, Thomas Paine. Paine adhered to Locke’s idea of the natural right of property but was deeply ambivalent toward inheritance. He drew radical implications from the

Lockean state of nature concept declaring that for “every child born” today, “the world is as new to him as to the first man that existed.” Paine asserts that poverty is “a thing created by that which is called civilized life. It exists not in the natural state.” The tragedy of human history is that the cause of poverty is social and it produces economic inequality that deepens and hardens over time. Unlike the basic equality enjoyed by those who live in the “natural and primitive state of man,” civilized life is characterized by what Paine calls dazzling “splendid appearances,” as well as shocking “extremes of wretchedness.”

In his 1795 book *Agrarian Justice* Paine offered a passionate defense of the French revolutionary government (which had just abolished feudalism) against the twin threats of conservative critics such as the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke, on one hand, as well as proto-communist thinkers such as the Jacobin outré Gracchus Babeuf, on the other. Paine proposed the creation of something called a National Fund to ensure equality of opportunity in liberal society. The National Fund plan is both radical and elegant in its simplicity. The inheritors of every landed estate in the nation will pay a 10% tax on the value of the estate upon the death of the

owner, and more than 10% if the owner dies without any direct heirs or close family. Based on English fiscal year figures, Paine calculated that this estate tax would generate £5.6 million per annum. Among the primary beneficiaries of the National Fund would be disabled people “totally incapable of earning a livelihood” and seniors over the age of fifty, who would receive £10 annually.

In addition, Paine declares that the National Fund “will furnish the rising generation with means to prevent their becoming poor” by providing a baby bonus for each child and a one-time £15 start-up fund for each newly married couple. (Fifteen quid was a lot of money in those days!). Paine judges that this payment to the “rising generation” is a strategic social investment in the community, as he judges “when a young couple begin the world, the difference is exceedingly great whether they begin with nothing or with fifteen pounds apiece.” Paine stipulates that the benefits must be universal in order to avoid creating invidious distinctions among the population. The overall purpose of the National Fund is unambiguously redistributionist as Paine predicts that in every thirty-year generational cycle, the entire “capital of a nation, or a sum equal thereto, will revolve once.” That is to say, every

generation will approximate something like a socio-economic state of nature.

What makes the contrast between Locke and Paine's attitude towards inheritance so interesting is that Paine is a Lockean. He grounds the right of private property on unmistakably Lockean grounds. But in contrast to Locke's argument for the sanctity of inheritance, Paine interpreted natural rights through a logic of interests which required partly curtailing the power of bequest in order to guarantee a considerable measure of equality of opportunity.

Colonialism: The last theme I want to address is colonialism. Classical liberals grappled with the perennial question of justice: Is the subjugation, or even simply subordination, of one people by another people consistent with natural human equality? Most classical liberals were happily in agreement about their opposition to colonization. In addition to Thomas Paine's celebrated role in America's War of Independence against the British Empire, we have a whole host of classical liberals who articulated powerful criticisms of imperialism. This is perhaps hardly surprising given that on its face, the philosophy of natural equality and self-government animating classical liberal thought

would not appear to be fertile theoretical ground for empire. For example, Thomas Hobbes expressed deep ambivalence toward the idea of colonies. He preferred a non-exploitive relation between colonists and native peoples who would in principle mutually benefit from enhanced agricultural development. Hobbes also identified overextension through colonial expansion, what he called “the insatiable appetite, or Bulimia, of enlarging dominion” as one of the principal causes of the dissolution of the commonwealth.

Later liberal thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith established a model of historical progress that posited modern commercial society as the zenith of social, political, and cultural development. But they pointedly associated imperialism with mercantilism and all the narrow-minded and short-sighted policies that implied. Hume dismissed the notion of any great advantages arising from an expansive territorial empire and insisted that beneficial global trade and commerce are badly injured by imperial wars. Smith echoed Trenchard and Gordon’s deep hostility to commercial monopolies like the South Sea Company, and he did so in terms of commercial privileges and protectionist policies that he declared

violate “the most sacred rights of mankind” to produce and trade freely. Smith’s philosophical opposition to the economic case for empire resulted in both his sympathy for the American cause in the imperial dispute with Britain in the 1760’s and 70’s, for which he proposed a loose imperial federation as a potential solution, and his harsh condemnation of the slave trade, which he believed victimized what he called a great “nation of heroes” in Africa.

The father of the Utilitarian school of philosophy Jeremy Bentham was famously vigorously opposed to imperialism. In his impassioned plea to the French National Assembly in 1793 Bentham called upon the revolutionary government to “Emancipate Your Colonies!” because the glories of colonialism are illusory, and indeed colonies bring no economic benefits at all. Bentham’s judgment for Britain was no less categorical: “It is not the interest of Great Britain to have any foreign dependencies whatsoever.” He also rejected any claims about moral or cultural superiority supposedly derived from natural or biological differences among peoples. The Benthamite commitment to modernization applied in principle as much to British society (for instance democratic electoral and legal reform) as it did to peoples overseas.

The other side of the classical liberal position on colonialism was, of course, John Stuart Mill. Mill is remembered as one of the greatest libertarians in human history, famously declaring: “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” However, Mill was also a defender of empire and colonization, albeit in a not uncomplicated way. As is well known, for most of his adult life Mill worked as a high-ranking official in the offices of the East India Company in London, a position in which he made decisions that affected the lives of millions of people on the other side of the world in the Indian sub-continent. Mill endorsed the proposition that cultural superiority could be valid moral grounds for one nation to rule another, infamously contending that “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians.” He hastened to qualify this somewhat with the requirement that this despotic rule must be enlightened such that “the end be their [i.e., the barbarians’] improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.” Perhaps the most interesting feature of Mill’s defense of colonialism is his insistence that imperial rule—despotic or otherwise—must be responsive to multivariate calculations relating to different factors depending

on particular historical and cultural contexts. Arguably, the three most important colonies in Mill's thought, each reflecting a different stage and element of his civilizational index were Canada, India, and Ireland.

The tripartite colonial model comprised of Canada, India, and Ireland was in reality a complex hybrid of settler colonies and conquered peoples. Canada was in Mill's estimation the most culturally advanced of the three at the time. The Canadian colonies contained both the descendants of a conquered French people and British settlers in a condition that Mill believed produced economic benefits both in the colony and the mother country. But in 1837 rebellions broke out which were the culmination of a long simmering constitutional crisis in which reformers in the Canadian colonies sought to make the government "responsible" to the elected representatives by refusing to approve "supply" or taxation required to support the colonial administration. The Canadian Rebellions of 1837 became a *cause célèbres* among liberal circles in England. Mill wrote a series of articles in 1837 and 1838 in the *London and Westminster Review* expressing support and sympathy for the Canadian rebels defending them on the constitutional grounds

that “they have a right” of supply that “we gave them,” and thus “the people of Canada have against the people of England legitimate cause of war.” Mill proposed that the Canadians be granted greater self-government by establishing separate responsible legislatures for their Upper and Lower provinces (the future Ontario and Quebec) in a loose federation governed by a federal legislature restricted to select matters of common concern. But with respect to British rule over India, Mill believed that the cultural disparity was much starker.

In a series of working papers written for parliamentary committees debating the future of the East India Company in 1857-58, Mill defended their administration as enlightened and effective. He also deployed Chapter 19 of the *Considerations on Representative Government* as an extended defense of the company and an opportunity to display the superiority of colonial administration by experts over and against partisan politicians in Parliament. In India, he concluded, the choice is between two despotisms; that of Parliament or India House, and he insists “it is not certain that the despotism of twenty millions is necessarily better than that of a few, or of one.” Mill’s tone in this episode is more of sadness than anger. In his view, India was too

backwards culturally and economically to be capable of the kind of self-government that he advocated for Canada. India, he insisted, “is still at a great distance from that state.” Mill doubted whether direct parliamentary rule over India would contribute as much to Indian improvement as the company supposedly had done and could in principle have continued to do. In the case of Ireland, however, any alternative to parliamentary rule was in Mill’s view simply not an option.

With respect to Ireland, the disparity of cultural development with England was a problem, but less important in Mill’s opinion than economic considerations. British colonization of Ireland was a long and complicated history of centuries of conquest, plantations, and periodic rebellions. The traditional hostility between Irish Catholics and British Protestants in some respects only intensified after the 1800 *Act of Union* dissolved the Irish Parliament in the wake of the 1798 Uprisings and absorbed the country into the Parliament at Westminster. With the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, which allowed Catholics to participate in British public life, Mill believed the main source of conflict between England and Ireland was now the awful economic system

whereby most of the majority Catholic Irish population were locked into an arrangement of rent payments to an English landholding class—as Mill described it “eight thousand persons”—who effectively owned the whole of rural Ireland. Mill believed this “vicious system, upheld by England” was a Malthusian time bomb primed to explode as the Irish population, which grew from five million in 1800 to over eight and a half million by 1840, put intense pressure on ever smaller parcels of rented land to feed the impoverished Irish cottier class. In the Irish countryside the subdivision of landholdings and the use of the potato for subsistence had encouraged early marriages and enabled large families to be supported on a precarious basis. Whereas in England in 1845 any farm under 100 acres was considered small, in Ireland 70% of tenant farms were less than fifteen acres and an astonishing 15% were one acre or less.

The event that sparked the Irish crisis was the recurring failure of the potato crop—the staple of the Irish peasantry—beginning in 1846. In the autumn of 1846 Mill began to write a series of 40 articles for the *Morning Chronicle* to explain to English readers the economic nature of the crisis and how it could be remedied. While it is not clear

that Mill fully grasped at this stage the enormous scale of the disaster in rural Ireland that would see a million people die and many more than that emigrate over a three-year period, he was definitive in his attribution of blame: “The difficulty in governing Ireland lies entirely in our own hands.” Even in the early phase of the famine, Mill described England and Ireland’s tortured relations in radical terms of reparations: “If ever compensation was due from one people to another, this is the case for it.” Mill predicted (rather condescendingly) that with the introduction of a system that returned land ownership to the native Irish, from “the present lazy, apathetic, reckless, improvident and lawless Ireland, a new Ireland [would] arise.” On the scale of cultural progress, the Irish were stuck somewhere between India and Canada, and Mill left for a future generation of British liberals the perhaps impossible task of resolving the empire’s Irish Problem.

In terms of colonialism, most natural rights classical liberals and interest classical liberals assumed a posture of opposition. How, then, can we explain Mill’s willingness to condone and even support it? I would suggest that Mill simply integrated a version of interest liberalism into the civilizational index of “advanced” and “backwards” cultures that assumed

prominence as a justification for the 19th century scramble for empire. That is to say, what is often called the 19th century liberal “turn to empire” exposed a weakness or problem within the classical liberal idea of equality, especially when it eschewed the doctrine of natural rights.

Conclusion: In conclusion, I don’t have any specific prescriptions about what guidance classical liberal thinkers can give us as we think through the meaning of equality in our country in our own time. The response to the 2008 Financial Crisis was definitely more Mandeville than *Cato’s Letters*. I can’t prove it, but I strongly suspect the current wave of populist revolt in several countries has its origins, at least in part, in the public feeling that justice was never really done after the Financial Crisis of 2008. Similarly, discussions about the notion of estate taxes, which were frequent and vigorous a decade or so ago, now seem quaint in the era of plutocrats like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Jeff Bezos, even as current debates about gender and racial equity that were largely unknown during the classical liberal period challenge traditional conceptions of unearned inheritance and force contemporary liberals to rethink the meaning of equality of opportunity. As for colonialism and

imperialism, until very recently I would have said without hesitation that (*pace* John Stuart Mill) most people today share that intuitive revulsion against denying peoples their right of self-government that most classical liberals felt in their bones. But the recent news that some leaders in a powerful nation with a proud liberal heritage are now even flirting with the idea of returning to the era of territorial empire suggests to me that we may well be on the cusp of a post-liberal age.

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