CHAPTER I

Victorian visions of global order: an introduction

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I. INTRODUCTION

For much of the nineteenth-century Britain, standing at the heart of a vast
and intricate network of power and patronage, dominated global politics.
The Victorian empire was the largest that the world had ever known,
spanning all the continents and oceans of the planet, and shaping the
lives of hundreds of millions of people. The political, cultural, and eco-
nomic dynamics of our own age bear the imprint of this tangled history.

The British empire is the subject of a vast scholarly literature.[1] In recent
years a fertile, and rapidly expanding, subfield has investigated the multiple
ways in which empires have been theorised – imagined, explained, justi-
fied, and criticised.[2] This dovetails neatly with a strand of scholarship that
explores the development of international thought, analysing how thinkers
of previous generations conceived of the nature and significance of political
boundaries, and the relations between discrete communities.[3] The spatial
reorientation of intellectual history has been catalysed by two broader
developments: a fixation, ranging across the social sciences and humanities,
on the dynamics and normative status of globalisation, and more recently,
a concern with the revival of empire, driven primarily by American foreign
policy.[4] As well as highlighting the richness of past thinking about empire
and international relations, scholars have demonstrated that much of what
has been greeted as exhilaratingly original in current thinking about global
politics, has roots deep in the history of western political reflection. As
Istvan Hont argues, for example, there is little that is conceptually novel in
contemporary accounts of globalisation, and issues such as the complex
and potentially destabilising relationship between international commerce
and state sovereignty were staple topics in eighteenth century political
discourse.[5]

Yet despite the surge of interest in the history of imperialism over the last
quarter of a century, the array of arguments addressing the Victorian

I

empire, and the practices of nineteenth-century international politics more generally, have received surprisingly little sustained attention from historians of political thought. *Victorian Visions of Global Order* seeks to help fill a significant gap in both intellectual history and the history of political theory, through exploring some of the most prominent and interesting ways in which thinkers based in Britain imagined the past, present, and future of global politics during the long years of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901).

In *The Expansion of England* (1883) J. R. Seeley lambasted 'our childish mode of arranging history'.[6] He was referring to the common tendency to partition, label, and judge the past according to which monarch happened to be sitting on the throne, whether Elizabeth, George III, or Victoria. In so doing, he suggested, the historical imagination was constrained, the identification of long-term patterns of continuity and change obscured. This charge carries considerable weight, and the authors of the following chapters do not stick rigidly to the exact span of Victoria's rule, sometimes reaching further back in time to trace connections with the intellectual worlds of preceding decades, even centuries, and sometimes moving forward into the early twentieth century. A case can nevertheless be made for examining the Victorian period as a distinctive era, both politically and intellectually. The 1830s saw the end of what J. G. A. Pocock, following Reinhart Koselleck, refers to as the 'sattelzeit', an era of disruption and transformation in patterns of discourse, conceptions of temporality, and understandings of the political universe, which began in the mid-eighteenth century and intensified over the revolutionary period and during the Napoleonic wars. Pocock argues that this period witnessed the end of 'early modernity' and the birth of 'the modern'.[7] Liberalism was its most significant progeny. In Britain the Roman Catholic Relief Act (1829) and the Reform Act (1832) ushered in a new era, marked above all by the rise of liberalism, the slow gestation of democracy, the increasing importance of ideas about nationality and 'national character', and the move from mercantilism to free trade.[8] The 1830s also witnessed a distinct break in the *dramatis personae* of theoretical debate. The decade saw the death of Jeremy Bentham (1832) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1834), intellectual polestars of their generation, whilst Thomas Macaulay, F. D. Maurice, Thomas Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill, to name only some of the more influential, rose to prominence.[9] Mill's celebrated 'reaction' of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth, while exaggerated, was not completely illusory. The 1830s likewise signalled the end of what C. A. Bayly labels the 'first age of global imperialism'. He argues that the European drive for overseas empire

can be divided into three main epochs. If the first saw the European states beginning their brutal march across the globe between 1520 and 1620, and the third, stretching through much of the nineteenth-century and reaching its pinnacle in the 'Scramble for Africa' from the 1880s onwards, saw them fight over the remaining unoccupied territories, it was the middle epoch, reaching from 1760 to 1830 and driven by the imperatives and might of the 'fiscal military state', that saw the greatest 'percentage of the world's resources and population seized and redistributed'.[10] It was also the first that was truly global in reach, encompassing territories in south and southeast Asia, North America, Australasia, much of the middle east, and southern Africa. Victorian imperialism deepened and extended these foundations.

The end of Victoria's reign is less clearly defined; the customary terminal date for the long nineteenth century is 1914. Nevertheless, the South African War (1899–1902), which acted as such a shock to British publics and elites alike, was a significant point of rupture, and can act as a convenient point to frame the volume. Victoria had been buried before it reached its bitter conclusion. At the century's end, Britain had entered the democratic age, albeit partially and often grudgingly, attacks on the shibboleth of free trade were on the rise, socialism in its diverse forms was gaining some adherents and more enemies, and organic and welfarist theories of state and society dominated debate. Liberalism was on the retreat, its recrudescence in the wake of Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign imminent but not yet discernable.[11]

The term 'visions of global order' captures something important about many of the positions covered in this book.[12] It signifies both the ambition and the prophetic mode of enunciation that characterised much of the thinking about empire and international politics during the century, highlighting the all-encompassing nature of many Victorian theoretical projects. This was an age of grand (and grandiose) theorising. It was also an age in which intellectual generalists thrived, and the crossing of what in the twentieth century many would come to regard as sturdy disciplinary walls was the norm. It is very hard to separate 'the political' (or 'political theory') from other domains of nineteenth-century thought – it was embedded in, and shaped by, political economy, theology, jurisprudence, the emerging social sciences, especially anthropology, literature, and the writing of history.[13] Much of the most influential and interesting political thinking was articulated, moreover, in registers and formats that often escape the eye of historians of political theory, who have tended to focus on canonical figures even as they seek to locate them in their multifarious

contexts. This is a valuable exercise, but when applied to the Victorians, and especially when probing the history of international and imperial thought, it can lead to omission and distortion. There are few 'canonical' figures to examine, which has meant, in practice, that a great deal of attention has been lavished on John Stuart Mill.[14] Whilst this has led to a much fuller understanding of the centrality of empire in his political vision, Mill has frequently, and usually implausibly, stood in as representative of his time, and in particular of liberal attitudes to conquest and imperial rule. Consequently, wider patterns of thought and contrasting political and theoretical tendencies have often been elided.[15] It is important to avoid basing sweeping generalisations about a vibrant and conflict-strewn intellectual environment on a very limited range of sources; and it is also essential to recognise the different registers, outlets, and modes of systematic political reflection that shaped the intellectual life of the time.[16] Any comprehensive exploration of Victorian imperial and international thought must traverse both sophisticated theory and more mundane forms of speculative, reflective or prescriptive political discourse. Following this injunction, the chapters in this volume range from detailed historical reconstructions of public policy debates to analyses of some of the most complicated political theorising of the era, in doing so encompassing figures as diverse as W. E. Gladstone, Frederic Harrison, L. T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson, H. M. Hyndman, James Lorimer, Henry Maine, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, D. G. Ritchie, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, J. R. Seeley, Herbert Spencer, Travers Twiss, and John Westlake.

The languages used to theorise world order have an extensive and intricate history; much of our own vocabulary emerged or assumed its current meanings during the long nineteenth century. Jeremy Bentham coined the term 'international' in 1789 to replace the 'law of nations' as an appellation for law that extended beyond the state, governing the 'mutual transactions of sovereigns'.[17] Today it is so commonly employed that its genealogy is often forgotten, as is its problematic formulation, which stresses 'nation' where it invariably refers to 'state'.[18] The terms associated with empire (including imperialism, imperial, colony, and colonisation) also have highly complex histories, some stretching back millennia, others of far more recent provenance. Here is not the place to chart these histories, but it is worth indicating that the meaning of empire was not fixed during the nineteenth century, connoting as it did an assortment of different, and sometimes contradictory, processes and political forms. During the six-teenth and seventeenth centuries, the term 'empire' signified the lands

comprising the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland, and it was only in
the second quarter of the eighteenth century that it became popular as a
designation for the totality of the British state and its overseas territories,
principally lands in the Caribbean and North America.[19] Although its
terms of reference varied, it was widely employed throughout the
Victorian age. For some, it meant simply the full array of British posses-
sions throughout the world; for others, it was used in a more differentiated
sense, referring, for example, to the British empire in India, the empire of
settlement, and so forth.[20] Whilst acknowledging that Britain possessed an
empire in India, Africa, and the Caribbean, Seeley denied that the colonies
in Australia, New Zealand, the Cape, and Canada constituted an empire
'in the ordinary sense of the word', preferring to see them as an integral part
of a British 'world-state'.[21] Differentiation often followed from the con-
flicting lessons the Victorians drew from ancient Roman and Greek modes
of foreign rule, although it also frequently expressed the semantic vague-
ness that characterised much political discourse at the time.[22]
'Imperialism', meanwhile, was a term used for much of the Victorian
period to characterise the purportedly despotic municipal politics of
France; it was only in the 1870s that it entered mainstream usage to refer
to aggressive policies of foreign conquest, and even then confusion over its
meaning was rife.[23] These definitional conflicts continue to this day, most
conspicuously in the emotive debates over whether or not the United States
should be classified as an empire, and if so, whether it represents a
depressing continuation of western imperial history, or a significant
break from it. The history of political thought provides ample ammunition
for all sides, replete as it is with diverse and sometimes incongruous
accounts of the character of empires, colonies, and imperialism.

II. POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXTS

Historians conventionally divide the Victorian period into early, middle and
late, although they often differ over the precise demarcation points.[24] In this
short introduction it would be foolhardy to attempt either a comprehensive
account of the manifold social, political, economic, and intellectual,
developments spanning the era or an exhaustive synthesis of recent scholar-
ship.[25] It is useful, however, to briefly outline some of the basic features that
historians have identified as shaping the character of British political life
in the decades under discussion in this book, both to establish the general
historiographical context and to highlight the ways in which the following
chapters conform with and challenge these lines of interpretation.

In very general terms, the early years of Victoria's reign, up until the 1850s, were marked by pessimism and apprehension. Emerging victorious from over a decade of war against Napoleonic France, the country was soon riven by internal discord and unrest. Indeed the first half of the century was characterised, argues Boyd Hilton, by 'a constant sensation of fear – fear of revolution, of the masses, of crime, famine, and poverty, of disorder and instability, and for many people even fear of pleasure'.[26] Apocalyptic visions of bloody revolution alarmed and energised the ruling elite, leading to harsh punitive legislation and then, following an acrimonious struggle, to limited franchise reform. All of this took place in the context of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, which simultaneously re-calibrated the economy and uprooted many traditional ways of life. Aside from the Reform Act, the other key piece of legislation was the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, a defining moment in British history, and one that was to play a pivotal role in the political imagination for the remainder of the century. As a result of constitutional reform, the crushing of dissent, the strength of popular conservatism, the flexibility of the governing elite, increasing affluence, and, argues Miles Taylor, the existence of an imperial system that lowered the tax burden on the middle classes and simultaneously provided a 'safety valve' for the removal of political agitators and excess population, Britain escaped an eruption of revolutionary fervour in 1848.[27] The mid-century years saw the flowering of a more optimistic mood; the 1851 Great Exhibition, a paean to British confidence, economic dynamism, and political power, symbolically inaugurated a new era. The period stretching from the early 1850s to the late 1870s is often seen, indeed, as an 'age of equipoise' characterised by 'stability, optimism, social solidarity, relative affluence, and liberality'.[28] 'Old corruption' was defeated; a popular monarch sat on the throne.[29] The previous social discord receded into the background, partly through exhaustion and partly through clever government intervention, whilst the economy flourished. Despite occasional invasion 'scares', there was no serious threat to the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.[30]

This optimism was soon to falter: during the closing years of Victoria's reign, and especially from the 1880s onwards, the horizon once again darkened, although not to the degree seen earlier in the century. Global competition, both economic and geopolitical, seemed more intense and threatening. The swift rise of a unified Germany flaunting its imperial ambitions, the post-Civil War dynamism of the United States, the perception of a menacing Russian threat in the East: all generated consternation. Such concerns triggered the publication of numerous popular novels and

short stories envisaging the outbreak and trajectory of future wars that the
British would fight against a variety of enemies, most commonly
Germany.[31] This was also the period of the rapacious 'Scramble for
Africa', as the European powers sought to divide up the remaining terri-
tories of that vast continent.[32] Domestic political clashes turned increas-
ingly bitter, especially over the extension of the franchise, the prospect of
Irish Home Rule, and then the war in South Africa. The economy was
thought to be in free-fall, whilst the 'social question' once again raised its
head.[33] Individuals across the political mainstream feared the perfidious
march of 'socialism', a term vague even by the prevailing standards of
political argument, seeing it as a potential threat to all that had been
achieved during the century. When Victoria died in 1901 the political
elite of the country was deeply divided.

The chapters in this volume offer considerable support to this tripartite
historical narrative. The repeal of the Corn Laws generated, as Anthony
Howe argues in his contribution, an outbreak of optimism about the pacific
effects of international trade, which was (partly) extinguished in the closing
two decades of the century by a bleaker assessment of the international
situation, and a loss of confidence in the powers of free trade to overcome
dangerous rivalries. Casper Sylvest highlights how the mid-century years
witnessed the blooming of international law, regarded by many of its
proponents as a key agent for fostering moral progress in world politics.
Likewise, as I examine in my own chapter, during the last three decades of
the century international competition and domestic unease intensified
interest in the settler colonies, for many people saw the immense expanses
of land across the Atlantic and in the South Pacific as a means of guaran-
teeing British power and prestige, as well as spaces in which to foster a new
breed of rugged imperial patriots.

But a number of chapters also complicate the standard picture. In
particular, the view of the mid-Victorian era as an age of equipoise needs
to be balanced by a recognition of the existence of widespread anxiety over
Britain's place in the world. Arrogance and pride co-existed with appre-
hension and frustration. Looking back on the early 1850s, Henry Maine
told his Cambridge audience in 1888 that the 'generation of William
Whewell may be said to have had a dream of peace', exemplified by the
atmosphere surrounding the Great Exhibition, but the 'buildings of this
Temple of Peace had hardly been removed when war broke out again,
more terrible than ever', and he pointed to the Crimean War (1854–6) as
inaugurating a new period of conflict. To believers in the possibility of
peace this represented 'a bitter deception'.[34] The campaign in the Crimea

demonstrated the ineptness of the British Army, whilst the Sepoy
Rebellion (1857–8) and the prolonged controversy that followed
Governor Eyre's brutal repression of the Morant Bay rebellion in
Jamaica (1865) highlighted the precarious hold of the British over their
subject populations, challenged (as Karuna Mantena argues in her chapter)
the very foundations of the liberal imperial mission, and served to harden
racial attitudes.[35] British failure to help the Danish, as had been promised,
over Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, the devastating Prussian victory over
Austria at Königgrätz in 1866, and increasing unease at the potential
bellicosity of Napoleon III, all fuelled fears that British power was eroding
dangerously. This does not mean that the equipoise was illusory – and it is
important to remember that many commentators at the time thought that
international and imperial affairs, aside from moments of high drama, such
as wars, resonated little with the public[36] – but rather that the relationship
between domestic and foreign affairs needs to be conceived in a more
nuanced and dynamic manner.[37]

The political languages that the Victorians drew on and developed were
constantly evolving. Most prominent of all was liberalism, the subject of
many chapters in this volume. Analysing the development and structure of
liberalism is a formidably difficult task. This is mainly because it is what
Raymond Geuss terms a 'Janus-faced historical phenomena', simultan-
eously comprising a constantly shifting abstract theoretical structure, 'a
collection of characteristic arguments, ideals, values, and concepts', and a
complex 'social reality, a political movement that is at least partially
institutionalized in organized parties'. Such an amalgam presents difficul-
ties for 'traditional forms of philosophy' – and, it might be added, tradi-
tional forms of the history of philosophy – which tend to focus on the
'analysis and evaluation of relatively well-defined arguments', not on the
dynamics of political contestation, and the interweaving of principled
argumentation, rhetorical ploys, tactical manoeuvre, and power.[38] The
term liberal was first used in Spain circa 1810 to refer to a political party
demanding the circumscription of royal power and the creation of a
constitutional monarchy modelled on that in Britain.[39] It was employed
in Britain increasingly from the 1830s onwards.[40] Drawing on a variety of
different (and sometimes conflicting) intellectual positions, including
Benthamite utilitarianism, classical political economy, the historical socio-
logy of the Scottish enlightenment, civic humanism, and long-standing
whiggish organicism, liberalism in its diverse and competing forms shaped
the political thought (if not always the political practice) of much of the
Victorian age. It underwent constant adaptation and reinvention: at

various junctures its proponents drew on, reacted against, or incorporated numerous influences, including evolutionary theories (both pre- and post-Darwinian), continental political thought, especially Comte and Saint-Simon, the marginalist revolution in economics, and various shifts in the philosophical current, particularly the rise of idealism, to name only a few of the more significant.[41] The Liberal party, which had emerged from the shell of the Whigs, and also incorporated Peelite Tories and a miscellaneous collection of Radicals, dominated parliamentary politics for much of the mid-Victorian era, until it fragmented over Home Rule in the 1880s.[42] Even after this parliamentary collapse, however, liberal thought remained vibrant, mutating as its advocates wrestled with the lessons taught by the idealists who, following the inspirational example of T. H. Green, had come to dominate British philosophical debate.[43]

Mirroring the general influence of liberalism, much of the international thought of the mid- and late-Victorian periods can be seen as composing a species of 'liberal internationalism'. Encompassing figures as diverse as Cobden, Mill, Maine, Sidgwick, Spencer, Hobson, and Hobhouse, liberal internationalism was powered by the twin engines of international law and international commerce, its adherents (often adopting the mantle of prophets) believing that when combined and properly directed the two could generate a transformation in international 'morality', ushering in a new, more harmonious age. The international domain, so it was argued, need not be governed by the ruthless logic of militaristic competition and incessant conflict. There were, of course, many different strains of this loose (and often imprecisely articulated) cluster of beliefs, and it spanned intellectual and sometimes even party political divides.[44] There were also assorted positions that stood in opposition to it – including pacifism, promoted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the more radical members of the energetic peace movement, a plethora of socialist and Marxist visions of world order, the pragmatic realism of Lord Salisbury, forms of jingoistic imperialism, as well as the glorification of war, albeit quite rare in Britain, that Karma Nabulsi has helpfully labelled 'martialism'.[45] Nevertheless, liberal internationalism was probably the most widespread mode of thinking about global politics during the closing decades of the century, at least among the intellectual elite. Its influence lasted well into the twentieth century, and continues to this day.[46]

One of the main fault-lines running through nineteenth-century British visions of global order concerned the role of the empire. Victorian thinkers tended to divide the world into different imaginative spheres, each generating radically diverse sociological accounts and competing ethical

claims. The most important divide separated the 'civilised' and the 'non-civilised' (savage or barbarian) spheres, and it was argued that the relations between civilised communities should assume a very different form from those governing the relations between the civilised and non-civilised. This distinction did not preclude the existence of considerable variation within each category – it allowed, for example, the construction of elaborate hierarchies of civilised states, as well as differentiation between types of 'savage'. But there was no consensus on how or where to draw the lines, on the actual content of civilisation, or over how deeply ingrained the distinctions were. Levels of civilisation could be assessed in relation to the socially dominant modes of theology, ascribed racial characteristics, technological superiority, political institutions, the structure of family life and gender relations, economic success, individual moral and intellectual capacity, or (as was typically the case) some combination of these. This bifocal, though fluid, conception of global order provided the theoretical foundations for justifying empire: it simultaneously deprived 'non-civilised' communities of the protective sovereign rights that were held to govern relations between the 'civilised' states while legitimating conquest in the name of spreading civilisation.[47]

Most nineteenth-century British political thinkers supported empire in one form or another, but this allowed for significant variation in the intensity of their support, the types of arguments offered in its defence, and the actual shape, size, and purpose of the empire envisaged. There were also notable critics of empire and imperialism, most famously Richard Cobden and Herbert Spencer, and the various positivist and socialist writers examined by Gregory Claeys in his contribution to this volume.[48] Sweeping claims about the political thought of the time – for example, about the inescapable connections between liberalism and empire, often generated by a reading of Mill's work – neglect much of the theoretical and political diversity of the era. The following chapters seek to paint a far richer picture of the time, one that stresses the variability, conflict, and dissonance, as well as the continuities, in conceptions of empire and international politics.

III. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book opens with Anthony Howe's panoramic account of the 'rise and fall' of the ideology of free trade. The Repeal of the Corn Laws, combined with the 1847 Repeal of the Navigation Acts, propelled the British state into a new political and economic age, a transition that was to have profound