



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

Jennifer Pitts

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A dramatic shift in British and French ideas about empire unfolded in the sixty years straddling the turn of the nineteenth century. As Jennifer Pitts shows in *A Turn to Empire*, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Jeremy Bentham were among many at the start of this period to criticize European empires as unjust as well as politically and economically disastrous for the conquering nations. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the most prominent British and French liberal thinkers, including John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, vigorously supported the conquest of non-European peoples. Pitts explains that this reflected a rise in civilizational self-confidence, as theories of human progress became more triumphalist, less nuanced, and less tolerant of cultural difference. At the same time, imperial expansion abroad came to be seen as a political project that might assist the emergence of stable liberal democracies within Europe.

Pitts shows that liberal thinkers usually celebrated for respecting not only human equality and liberty but also pluralism supported an inegalitarian and decidedly nonhumanitarian international politics. Yet such moments represent not a necessary feature of liberal thought but a striking departure from views shared by precisely those late-eighteenth-century thinkers whom Mill and Tocqueville saw as their forebears.

Fluently written, *A Turn to Empire* offers a novel assessment of modern political thought and international justice, and an illuminating perspective on continuing debates over empire, intervention, and liberal political commitments.

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