# Bentham and the Development of the British Critique of Colonialism

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This article examines Bentham's contribution to anti-colonial thought in the context of the development of the British radical movement that attacked colonialism on the grounds that it advantaged what Bentham called the 'Few' at the expense of the 'Many'. It shows that Bentham was influenced as much by Josiah Tucker and James Anderson as by Adam Smith. Bentham's early economic critique is examined, and the sharp changes in his arguments after 1800 assessed, in the context of the American and French Revolutions and the effects of British industrialization. The article also highlights the importance of Bentham's writings inspired by the Spanish colonial crisis of the early 1820s. They show developments in his economic analysis and include some very acute discussions of the psychological satisfactions that elites could gain from colonialism. The article ends with a brief comparison between Bentham and later radical thinkers to put his ideas in context.

Jeremy Bentham made what is arguably the greatest single contribution to a radical critique of colonialism that began to emerge in the mid-eighteenth century and culminated in the work of J. A. Hobson and H. N. Brailsford in the early twentieth century, at which point it was displaced by Marxism. It is also important to see the evolution of Bentham's thinking in the context of the epoch-marking events of his lifetime, especially the British wars with France (which were part of a battle for empire and for global supremacy), the loss of the American colonies and the concurrent consolidation of Britain's dominant position in India.[1] His views on colonialism were also strongly influenced by his increasingly critical attitude towards ruling European elites, as we shall see. This essay is based not only on material made available by Bowring and by Werner Stark but also on recently published writings, especially those relating to the Spanish colonial controversies of the early 1820s, and on an as yet unpublished memorandum of 1831 on the colonization of Australia.[2] It is likely that there is yet more to be found

[1] For details see *Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. P. J. Marshall, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1999), vol. 2: *the Eighteenth Century.*

[2] W. Stark (ed.), *Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings*, 3 vols. (London, 1952–4); J. Bowring (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 11 vols. (London, 1838–43); Jeremy Bentham , *Colonies, Commerce and Constitutional Law: Rid Yourself of Ultramaria and Other Writings on Spain and Spanish America*, ed. P. Schofield (Oxford, 1995). One of the pieces in the latter volume, 'Observations on the Restrictive and Prohibitory Commercial System' (1821), was published in Stark, vol. 3, pp. 381–417, but all references herein are to the 1995 edition. Another of his major works on colonies, 'Emancipate Your Colonies!'


*Utilitas* Vol. 23, No. 1, March 2011
doi:10.1017/S0953820810000427

on Bentham's attitudes to colonialism in the archives, so any judgements on his overall contribution are more than usually provisional.

## I

Radical critiques of colonial expansion and governance shared a number of common features. In the first place, radicals were convinced that peaceful, open 'commerce' would make nations prosperous in unexampled ways and that war, the possession of colonies and the host of restrictions that traditionally surrounded both foreign and colonial trade were enemies of commerce.[3] For most critics, the economic costs of acquiring, holding and defending colonies far exceeded whatever benefits accrued from their ownership. As offshoots of Britain, white settled colonies should therefore be set free and left to their own devices: dependencies with large native populations might be retained to ensure good government but the cost to the nation had to be recognized. Second, the critics also believed that, although the nation as a whole got no benefit from empire, certain groups within it that were intimately connected with elite governments did gain from it and had a vested interest in trying to retain or add to it. It was therefore important to expose these groups who, it was claimed, often misled the nation about the value of overseas possessions and who, as Adam Smith declared, turned the international trade that 'ought naturally to be, among nations, as among individuals, a bond of union and friendship' into 'the most fertile source of discord and animosity'.[4] Bentham made arresting contributions to both of these strands of thought, though it will be argued here that his contribution to the second strand was greater than to the first: his analysis of vested interests and their ability to maintain themselves through empire was unsurpassed in its rigour and thoroughness.[5]

written in 1793 but not published until 1830, is in Bowring, vol. 4, pp. 408–18, but can now be found in Jeremy Bentham, *Rights, Representation, and Reform: Nonsense upon Stilts and Other Writings on the French Revolution*, ed. P. Schofield, C. Pease-Watkin and C. Blamires (Oxford, 2002) from which all references are taken.

[3] The connection between commerce and peace is discussed in A. O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977). See also Tom Paine who, in *The Rights of Man* described commerce as 'a pacific system, operating to cordialize mankind by rendering nations, as well as individuals, useful to each other'. *The Thomas Paine Reader*, ed. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (London, 1987), p. 309.

[4] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford, 1976), p. 493.

[5] I am much indebted here to D. Winch, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies* (London, 1965), ch. 3. My account differs in its stress on Bentham's place within liberal thinking rather than within classical economics and in paying more attention to Bentham's writings of the 1820s. See also L. Campos Boralevi, *Bentham and the Oppressed* (New York, 1984), esp. pp. 120–41; D. Winch, 'Bentham on Colonies and

Bentham was, to some extent, following in the footsteps of the economist he most admired, Adam Smith, in attacking the belief that the possession and defence of a colonial empire was economically beneficial to a nation. In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith emphasized the importance of the home market to growth. His main concern was with the employment of 'productive labour' rather than maximizing profits and, on that basis, he thought agriculture, manufacturing and trade were important in that order. By raising profit rates in manufacturing for export and in foreign and colonial trade, 'mercantilist' restrictions had diverted capital from agriculture and domestic industry and thus harmed the economy. Tariffs favouring colonies could not increase trade or employment because 'no regulation of commerce can increase the quantity of industry in any society beyond what the capital can maintain. It can only direct part of it into a direction into which it might not otherwise have gone.'[6] One implication of that analysis was that resources thrown out of employment in foreign trade would easily find employment at home. As for trade itself, domestic transactions were better than those done with foreigners. Domestic trade 'generally replaces by any such operation two distinct capitals that had both been employed in the agriculture and manufactures of the country' while foreign trade 'will give but one half the encouragement to the industry or productive labour of the country'.[7]

Nonetheless, Smith was also aware of the impact of foreign, especially colonial American, trade in increasing productivity and stimulating domestic growth by widening the market through the international division of labour.[8] In the *Wealth of Nations* he even claimed, on one or two occasions, that foreign trade was a 'vent for surplus' for some commodities. 'Without such exportation', he wrote, 'a part of the productive labour of the country must cease and its annual produce diminish',[9] implying that unemployment of resources was a feature of British society and foreign and colonial markets important to prosperity, a conclusion at variance with his usual position. Some historians have assumed that 'vent for surplus' is simply a mercantilist

Empire', *Utilitas* 9 (1997), pp. 147–54; and P. Schofield, *Utility and Democracy: the Political Thought of Jeremy Bentham* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 8. On Bentham's economics see T. W. Hutchison, 'Bentham as an Economist', *Economic Journal* LXVI (1956), reprinted in the same author's *The Uses and Abuses of Economics: Contentious Essays on History and Method* (London, 1994), pp. 27–49.

[6] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 453.

[7] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 368.

[8] A. I. Bloomfield, 'Adam Smith and the Theory of International Trade', *Essays on Adam Smith*, ed. A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson (Oxford, 1975).

[9] *Wealth of Nations*, p. 372. On the implications of 'vent for surplus' see D. P. O'Brien, *The Classical Economists* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 170–2.

residue totally out of keeping with Smith's leading ideas.[10] In recent years, however, it has been claimed that his apparently conflicting observations on the benefits of foreign trade are not incompatible.[11] However, Smith himself did not resolve the contradiction between 'vent for surplus' – which could be used to justify colonialism – and his other arguments about the primacy of domestic growth based on agriculture which he expressed much more often. Moreover, he was also pragmatic enough to suggest that the American colonial crisis could be solved, and the thirteen colonies saved for the empire, through the setting up of an imperial customs union, though he must have had little hope that such an outcome was politically possible.[12]

In his anti-colonial writings of the 1780s and 1790s, Bentham ignored 'vent for surplus' and was critical of Smith's plans for retaining the American colonies as contradicting the main message of the *Wealth of Nations*.[13] In formulating his own position, he also acknowledged the influence of Josiah Tucker and James Anderson.[14] Like Hume and Smith, Tucker understood that trade between nations was not a battleground for control of limited supplies: God had created a world of different soils and climates 'exciting a reciprocal Industry' and 'an Intercourse mutually beneficial and universally benevolent'.[15] But in a series of pamphlets beginning in the 1740s, Tucker insisted that the key to Britain's progress as a nation in the previous century was its domestic growth not its possession of colonial markets.[16]

[10] L. E. Staley, 'A Note on Adam Smith's Version of the "Vent for Surplus" Model', *History of Political Economy* 5 (1973), pp. 438–48.

[11] R. A. Blecker, 'The "Unnatural and Retrograde Order": Adam Smith's Theories of Trade and Development Reconsidered', *Economica* 64 (1997), pp. 527–37. See also H. Myint, 'Adam Smith's Theory of International Trade in the Perspective of Economic Development', *Economica* 44 (1977), pp. 231–48.

[12] Winch, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, ch. 2. Smith's customs union proposal is in G. H. Guttridge, 'Adam Smith on the American Revolution: An Unpublished Memorial', *American Historical Review* 38 (1932–3), pp. 715–20.

[13] See Bentham's unpublished preface to the second edition of *A Defence of Usury* in Stark vol. 1, p. 194. See also 'Colonies and Navy' (1790?) in Stark, vol. 1, pp. 212–13. For Bentham's youthful criticism of colonial rebellion see Campos-Boralevi, *Bentham and the Oppressed*, pp. 121–2.

[14] J. Bentham, 'Essay on Universal Peace. Essay IV: A Plan for Universal and Perpetual Peace' (1786/7), in C. W. Everett, *Jeremy Bentham* (London, 1969), p. 195. The essay was first published in Bowring, vol. 2. For Tucker, see B. Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1970), ch. 2. Anderson is discussed in C. F. Mullett, 'A Village Aristotle and the Harmony of Interests: James Anderson (1739–1808) of Monks Hill', *Journal of British Studies* 8 (1968–9), pp. 94–118.

[15] Josiah Tucker, *The Case for Going to War for the Sake of Trade Considered in a New Light; Being the Fragment of a Greater Work* (1763), in *Four Tracts on Political and Commercial Subjects* (Gloucester, 1776), p. 75.

[16] Josiah Tucker, *The True Interest of Great Britain Set Forth in Regard to the Colonies; and the Only Means of Living in Peace and Harmony with them* (1774), in *Four Tracts*, pp. 213–15.

He attacked colonialism because he associated it with war and with plunder, and both were disastrous to domestic economic growth: wars raised taxes and prices and depressed industry as a result; tribute such as that flowing from India promoted luxury and diverted energies from productive labour. There had been increases in overseas trade but they were mainly the result of the cheapness that had followed increases in domestic productivity and wars for trade and colonies had hindered rather than helped that process.[17] Fighting to retain the American colonies was counter to Britain's interests because war undermined domestic prosperity and because, freed from British control, the colonies would soon recognize that it was in their interest to maintain their trade links with Britain, their best supplier and customer.[18] Tucker also claimed that America's colonial status had harmed Britain's growth in another way. The colonies were exempt from the restrictions on the emigration of skilled labour that he thought had contributed strongly to Britain's domestic success and had 'enticed' people away with promises of new land.[19] He thought that once the nation understood the true nature of its relationship with the colonies it would let them go.[20]

Anderson took much further Tucker's emphasis on the importance of the home market and the deleterious effects of emigration on growth.[21] He conceded that the peopling of colonies in America had led to an increase in trade with them but went on to claim that the increase in exports was bought at the expense of a much lower rate of domestic growth. America had been draining the mother country by emigration for over a century and, Anderson claimed, without that drain Britain's population in 1780 would have been 15 millions rather than the actual figure of 9 millions: without the settlement colonies, therefore, British output and productivity would have been very much higher than they actually were and the lost output would have dwarfed the gains from colonial exports. He concluded that 'our American colonies, instead of augmenting the trade and industry of Britain, have tended greatly to diminish them both'.[22] America was also a large territory with a sparse population, very difficult and costly to defend, and Anderson estimated that, without that burden, the nation's

[17] Tucker, *The Case for Going to War*, p. 82.
[18] Tucker, *The True Interest*, pp. 202–10.
[19] Tucker, *The True Interest,* pp. 214–16.
[20] Tucker, *The Case for Going to War*, pp. 97–8.
[21] Anderson thought that domestic trade exceeded foreign and colonial trade by at least twenty times. James Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain with Regard to her America Colonies Considered. To which is added an Appendix Containing the Outlines of a Plan for a General Pacification* (London, 1782), p. 130.
[22] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, ch. 4, esp. pp. 94. 96. See also pp. 118, 120–1.

defence costs would have been about £6 million rather than the actual £20 million.[23] As things were, taxation for colonial defence was high and manufacturing prices had risen as a result, depressing domestic growth. Non-colonial trade had also been harmed and an excuse was given to industry to demand protection that further lowered economic efficiency.[24] Anderson thus concluded that Britain would be much better off without its transatlantic possessions. His optimism about the ability of the economy to grow once it was freed of the colonial burden was almost boundless. When faced with the argument that the colonies had served to prevent overpopulation, he first pointed out that it was the young and vigorous who left and paupers who stayed behind.[25] But he also strenuously denied that Britain was overpopulated and declared that if the land was 'fully improved' then agriculture could support 'not less than a hundred times its natural inhabitants'.[26]

## II

Bentham's first detailed analysis of colonialism was made in an essay of 1789 discussing the prospects for eliminating war as a means of settling disputes between nations.[27] War was portrayed as disastrous because, whatever object might be gained by it, the economic and social costs to the nation always exceeded the benefits, a view he shared with Tucker.[28] It undermined prosperity, disturbed the social order and thus offended against the utilitarian aim of ensuring the greatest good of the greatest number. In Bentham's view, the desire for colonies was the most potent source of war between nations and would remain so as long as it was widely believed that they were sources of great wealth that had to be protected. It was imperative, therefore, to alert the nation to this fallacy; and for this purpose he felt it necessary to strengthen Smith's anti-colonial arguments by reverting to Anderson's stress on the priority of the domestic market over the foreign.

Bentham repeated Smith's argument that the nation's output was determined by the extent of its capital resources and that to divert capital artificially to colonial trade meant reducing it elsewhere. He also reproduced Smith's hierarchy of employments, with agriculture as the most productive sector in the economy, and claimed that artificial

[23] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, pp. 24–38, 109–10.
[24] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, pp. 106–9, 110–17.
[25] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, pp. 127–8.
[26] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, pp. 133–6.
[27] It preceded Kant's famous essay 'Perpetual Peace', which was published in 1795. See I. Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 93–130.
[28] Bentham, 'Essay on Universal Peace. Essay III: Of War Considered in Respect of its Causes and Consequences' (1789), in Bowring, vol. 2, p. 545. See here S. Conway, 'Bentham on Peace and War, *Utilitas* 1 (1989), pp. 82–101.

'encouragement of any of the branches of manufacture which produce articles which are at present sold to the colonies is a proportionable discouragement to agriculture'.[29] He followed that with an account of the possibilities for growth that was more Andersonian than Smithian. If foreign or colonial trade was lost there was no need for alarm: 'the capital that would otherwise have been employed in the lost branch would be employed in agriculture'.[30] Bentham then confronted the objection that too much capital in agriculture might create overproduction and denied that it was possible. As agricultural output rose, prices would fall and that would stimulate marriage, thus increasing population and the demand for manufactured goods as well as agricultural products. 'It is impossible therefore that you can ever have too much agriculture.'[31] So holding territories as colonies brought no benefits to the nation but cost them dearly in terms of defence, war, and the expense of governance, activities which were profitable only to those with a direct interest in them.[32] Bentham noted that governments as yet did not understand that:

> trade is in essence advantageous – even to the party to whom it is least so. All war is in essence ruinous: and yet the great employments of government are to treasure up occasions of war, and to put fetters on trade.[33]

All of Bentham's other writings on colonies in the 1790s were composed in this same context of the need to avoid war, on the assumption that this was the chief way in which governments could promote the greatest good of the greatest number, and they contained the same economic analysis in which Smith was fortified by Tucker and Anderson.[34] For example, his most detailed attack on colonies was made in 'Emancipate Your Colonies!' in 1793 with the aim of persuading the French revolutionary government to abandon its colonial possessions lest war over them should eventually destroy the liberty and equality the Revolution had initially promised.[35] In that work, he also made his most detailed and thorough dissection of the economics of colonialism. As well as interfering with the liberty of colonists to use their resources as they pleased, which he called 'an aristocratical abomination', Bentham showed that the battery of tariffs and other restrictions on colonial trade reduced the traffic rather than increased it and led to a

[29] 'A Plan', pp. 197–8.
[30] 'A Plan', p. 199.
[31] 'A Plan', p. 204.
[32] 'A Plan', pp. 223–4.
[33] 'A Plan', p. 209.
[34] See, for example, the unpublished postscript to *The Defence of Usury* (1787) and the fragment 'Colonies and Navy' (1790) in Stark, vol. 1, pp. 201–7, 211–18.
[35] Jeremy Bentham, 'Emancipate Your Colonies!' (1793), *Rights, Representation, and Reform*, pp. 289–315.

misallocation of resources that lowered income in the mother country as well as in the colonies.[36] He admitted that the former could exploit the latter by taxing its exports to them: but the profits would be offset by the costs of preventing smuggling and 'the expence [sic] of a marine capable of blocking up all their ports, and defending so many vast and distant countries against the rival powers, with the inhabitants on their side'.[37] In another unpublished piece written at this time, Bentham also explained that war for colonies was the single most important cause of high government expenditure and that was largely paid for out of taxes levied on the poor and, as a result, reduced wealth and offended against the greatest happiness principle.[38]

What underlined the madness of colonialism for Bentham was the fact that, as Tucker had predicted, the ex-colonies of America remained a key partner of Britain in trade.

> Turn to the United States. Before the separation, Britain had a monopoly of their trade: upon the separation of course she lost it. How much less is their trade with Britain now than then? On the contrary it is much greater.[39]

Colonies and fighting for colonies distracted nations from their true interests in peace and the unfettered development of the capitalist market. Without that distraction Bentham was convinced that future prosperity was assured. 'What a spring would not the commerce, the population, the wealth of the nation take, which are at present confined, when set free from the fetters in which they are now held by the care of their defence.'[40]

## III

Bentham's economic case against colonies in the 1780s and 1790s was based on the primacy of the domestic market and the marginality of foreign and colonial trade to prosperity. His analysis upheld, though not explicitly, what became known as Say's Law, the proposition that whatever was produced by a nation could be consumed within that nation. Freer trade was desirable because overseas transactions increased the variety of goods available and reallocated factors of production to more efficient uses; but it could not increase employment of either capital or labour. When Bentham returned to the subject in the

[36] 'Emancipate Your Colonies!', pp. 299–303. Bentham, however, denied Smith's claim that a British monopoly of colonial trade would raise prices and profits, arguing instead that internal competition would prevent that.

[37] 'Emancipate Your Colonies!', pp. 304–5.

[38] Jeremy Bentham, 'Short View of Economy for the Use of the French but not Unapplicable to the English' (1789), *Rights, Representation, and Reform*, pp. 193–203.

[39] 'Emancipate Your Colonies!', p. 302.

[40] 'Of War, Considered in Respect of its Causes and Consequences', p. 545.

early 1800s the context in which he was writing was different and his views were modified accordingly. Bentham, in fact, now contended that agriculture was not, as he had argued in the past, a sink for any amount of capital and labour. His change of view seems to have been triggered by the scarcity and high prices of 1799 rather than by Malthus's claim, published in the previous year, that population increase had a natural tendency to outstrip the growth of agricultural output.[41] Bentham now had to admit that the 'application of capital to agriculture can not keep pace with the accumulation of the aggregate mass of capital' and that manufacturing was rapidly growing 'beyond the means of homebred sustenance'. It would take 'some centuries' for changes in agricultural organization, and the rises in productivity associated with that, to cope with the problem. In the meantime, 'if capital and hands must migrate – and emigrate ere long the hands must do or starve', the best outlet was the empire 'provided our expence [sic] in governing and defending them does not increase with their population'. Colonization was a bad option for Britain 'so long as the land suffices for its inhabitants in prospect as well as existence' but it would become a good one in future when 'colonies, though still a drain, are notwithstanding, and even because they are a drain, a relief'.[42]

He still believed that colonization in the past had not been a paying proposition to the mother country though it was of benefit to the world to have new land opened up. The one clear benefit from it was a relatively small one – an increase in the variety of commodities available in the market, an increase in value but not in 'the quantity of real wealth': if the American colonial trade had not existed Europe would have lost some new items of consumption 'but in compensation we might have had a greater quantity of victuals'. Bentham also asserted that the flow of precious metals into Europe that followed earlier colonization had merely raised prices rather than contributed to growth.[43] However, 'taking futurity into the scale' the opening up of new lands in the past would turn out to be beneficial because by 1900 'the population would have extended beyond the utmost number for which the soil would be capable of affording subsistence' and, without emigration of capital and labour, the prospect was for a 'great diminution of relative opulence, a severe sense of general poverty and distress'.[44]

[41] See introduction to Stark vol. 3, p. 30. Malthus produced the first edition of his *Essay on the Principles of Population* in 1798. On Bentham and Malthusianism see Campos Boralevi, *Bentham and the Oppressed*, pp. 48–52, 106–8.

[42] 'Defence of a Maximum' (1801) in Stark vol. 3, pp. 299–302.

[43] Jeremy Bentham, 'Method and Leading Features of an Institute of Political Economy (including Finance) Considered not only as a Science but as an Art' (1801–4) in Stark, vol. 3, pp. 352–4; 'The True Alarm' (1801), in Stark, vol. 3, p. 142.

[44] 'Institute of Political Economy', p. 355.

If unemployment was a possibility (and in the future a certainty) then Bentham's argument came close to Smith's analysis of 'vent for surplus'. A generation later, Bentham's support for Wakefield's plans for assisted emigration suggested that he stood by what he had written in the early 1800s. Wakefield adopted a 'vent for surplus' approach and used it to deduce that the amount of land in Britain was insufficient to employ the whole supply of capital and labour, and that 'systematic colonisation' was necessary to prosperity.[45] In his plan for a Colonisation Society in Australia written in 1831, Bentham praised emigration as a means of relieving the British taxpayer of the expense of supporting paupers as well as offering the poor in Britain a chance to better themselves. His plan, he believed, would also give 'encrease [sic] to the market for the produce of the Mother Country: thereby in this same Mother Country, over and above prevention of subtraction from, making positive additions to the existing stock in the *matter of wealth*'. He fully expected such growth to continue until Australia had a population as dense as Europe's.[46]

Schofield says that 'Bentham did consistently maintain that colony-holding was economically disadvantageous to the mother country'.[47] Bentham may have claimed to be consistent here but it seems clear from the above that he was not. In his writings of the 1780s and 1790s he certainly took that view, arguing trenchantly that foreign and colonial trade were marginal to the economy and implying that, if the encouragement given to colony trade were removed, the capital and labour involved would switch back to the most profitable activity, namely domestic agriculture. By 1801-4 he had shifted radically from that position. He still insisted that *past* colonization had cost far more than it brought in benefits, but with overpopulation and excess capital now a long-term prospect he claimed that *in future* those territories with much empty land would be worth having and peopling them could stimulate growth in Europe, always provided that the costs of their defence could be kept within reasonable bounds. Although he did not say so very explicitly in the context of colonization, he abandoned Say's Law at this time, accepting that there could be unemployed capital and labour in Europe as the century progressed.[48] Similar thinking lay behind his support for colonization in Australia in 1831.

[45] On Wakefield see Winch, *Classical Political Economy*, chs. 6 and 7; Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, chs. 4 and 5.

[46] See the typed MS 'Colonisation Society', 5 August 1831 [008–150/1] in University College Bentham Project Archives. Emphasis is from the original.

[47] Schofield, *Utility and Democracy*, p. 218.

[48] Schofield notes that Bentham had in 1830 changed his mind about whether colonies were a stimulus to trade. *Utility and Democracy*, p. 220, note 69.

The shift in Bentham's views on colonies between 1793 and the early 1800s cannot be characterized simply as a conversion from a *laissez-faire* perspective to a state interventionist one. His economic ideas were always developed in the context of his utilitarian principles and that implied a pragmatic attitude to the role of states and markets in the economic process. In economic terms, the greatest happiness of the greatest number was served if the economy provided security for lives and property, subsistence for the whole population, and also promoted first opulence and then greater equality.[49] In the 1790s, Bentham apparently believed that the free market was adequate to serve all four ends. By 1800, overpopulation and other problems, such as the adverse effects on the economy of the abandonment of the gold standard in 1797, had convinced him that governments needed to intervene in the market to ensure that the four ends were achieved. Between the early 1790s and early 1800s he developed a profoundly different way of looking at the long-term workings of the capitalist economy which prompted him to devise a different theoretical toolbox: in turn, these conceptual innovations influenced his views on how the four ends noted above could be achieved.[50]

It is nonetheless true that in his writings of the early 1820s on the Spanish colonies Bentham reverted to an economic analysis very similar to that of the 1790s, arguing now that, in return for benefits to a few, restrictive colonial trade misallocated resources, raised prices and lowered the nation's growth. It also led to smuggling and the high costs of trying to prevent it; induced a mutual hatred between locals and foreigners and invited the latter to retaliate; and caused disputes between different groups and regions within the nation as to who should benefit and who not. Nothing was said about the benefits of colonization. Throughout the argument it was assumed that tariffs diverted capital and labour rather than brought them into employment and that Say's Law was in operation.[51] Some remarks he made about French colonialism in 1830 suggest a similar reversion to earlier thoughts: he then spoke of colonies as the 'fruit' of war and added: 'Bitter is the fruit to the inhabitants of the parent territory, whatsoever it may be to the inhabitants of the soil into which population is translated.'[52] It can be argued that since neither Spain nor France

[49] Stark vol. 1, pp. 91–4. For a detailed discussion see P. J. Kelly, *Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice* (Oxford, 1990).

[50] Hutchison,'Bentham as an Economist', pp. 38–41.

[51] Jeremy Bentham, 'Observations on the Restrictive and Prohibitory Commercial System' (1821), in *Colonies, Commerce and Constitutional Law*, pp. 353–70. See also 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria' (1822), in *Colonies, Commerce and Commercial Law*, pp. 120, 146.

[52] 'Houses of Peers and Senates' (1830), Bowring, vol. 4, p. 436 and note.

suffered from the overpopulation problems which beset England at this time the analysis of the 1780s and 1790s was still relevant to them. However, the frequent references to Britain in the Spanish writings suggest strongly that Bentham felt his arguments applied equally to his home country, so he can be accused of some inconsistency in his views on the latter.

Despite this, however, it should be noted that in all his writings about colonies from the mid-1780s onwards, whether they were about Britain or Spain or France, and irrespective of whether he adopted a Say's Law or 'vent for surplus' perspective, Bentham remained convinced that the 'Old Colonial System' of tariffs, prohibitions, preferences and bounties was both inefficient and corrupt. Bentham's views on colonial governance also remained fairly constant over the same period. In 1793, besides emphasizing the economic futility and inequities of colonialism, he made the point that it was impossible to govern justly subjects thousands of miles away in whose interests and concerns Europeans could not properly share; and he also asserted that, although maintaining and defending them was a huge expense, colonial subjects would have neither the means nor the desire to support the mother country if it were attacked.[53] In the case of white-settled colonies he was a firm supporter of self-government and independence which would remove any danger of dominance and exploitation of patronage by elites in the mother country: his colonization plan of 1831 was based on that assumption.[54] After 1800 Bentham wanted to foster British communities abroad but he was determined to avoid creating a white, centrally controlled British empire.

It is true that, in the early 1800s, he maintained that, from the perspective of general culture and civilizational influence, the American ex-colonists, who were 'exhibiting an unvaried scene of sordid selfishness' would have been better off under the benevolent eye of a country with a more developed sense of the public good,[55] though even here it was clear that Bentham still believed it was up to the colonists to decide their own fate. At this time, he waxed unusually lyrical about the future of British settlement colonies.

> The retribution for the past expence is a scene from *Paradise Lost* – a prospect such as the angel shewed to Adam: men spreading in distant climes, through distant ages, from the best stock, the earth covered with British population, rich with British wealth, tranquil with British security, the fruit of British law. [56]

[53] 'Emancipate your Colonies!', pp. 291–5, 305–8.
[54] See the memorandum 'Colonisation Society' [008–186/7] dated 13 August 1831, in the Bentham archive at University College London, pp. 42–3.
[55] 'Institute of Political Economy', pp. 355–7.
[56] 'Defence of a Maximum', p. 302.

His pride in British civilization and its spread – perhaps enhanced by the excesses of, and the conflicts generated by, the French Revolution that he had once admired – reached something of a peak at this time. Nonetheless, he produced a similar argument about the abiding influence of metropolitan culture in the early 1820s in the Spanish context. In trying to persuade the Spanish people to give up formal control of their colonies he reminded them of how much 'informal' control they could still exercise over settlers in Latin America, the Spanish 'Ultramaria': there was a natural 'mutual sympathy' and 'in language, institutions, customs, religion, she is already yours'. All the more reason, Bentham urged, to give them constitutional freedom. 'All these same bonds of sympathy and connection . . . to some men these were reasons for keeping you in subjection: with us they are reasons for leaving you free.'[57]

His attitude to dependencies, where European settlement on any considerable scale was impossible, was somewhat different.[58] In 1793, Bentham had argued that, although it could bring no economic benefit to the colonial power, it was in the long-term interests of India to be governed by a civilized nation like Britain. He reiterated that sentiment in 1829 and was ready also to apply it to China should that country fall under British control.[59] At the turn of the century, he spoke of Egypt (recently invaded by France) in a similar manner. 'It would be to Egypt an advantage beyond all price, to be under the government of Britain – that is, under a government of universal and perpetual security.'[60] Nonetheless, his was a more cautious Orientalism than that of his successors. In the case of India, he shared Burke's view that it was dangerous to leave a few Englishmen in charge of a country whose customs they understood little and sympathized with even less, especially when they were free of the critical eye of their peers in England. He understood that what the British brought with them had to be adapted imaginatively to the local scene if it were to be successful. Consequently, he was keen to see Indians actively involved in their own governance even if under overall British control.[61]

## IV

Bentham returned to the colonial question in the 1820s in the context of the struggle for power between the Spanish monarchy and the

[57] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 126–7.
[58] For analysis of the background here see S. Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2008).
[59] 'Emancipate Your Colonies!', pp. 310–11, 314.
[60] 'Institute of Political Economy', p. 356.
[61] J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: the Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005), ch. 4.

elected chamber, the Cortes, and the argument in Spain over the retention of the South American colonies. His thinking on this issue was also strongly influenced by his mounting hostility – shared by Paine, Cobbett and others – to what he saw as the corruption of the elite political systems of the time and his conviction, held since about 1810, that such corruption was endemic in limited monarchies.[62] He now thought that it was impossible to abolish corruption simply by demonstrating its harmful effects on the nation at large and came to the conclusion that it could only be eliminated by a system of representative democracy which would cut governmental costs, lower taxes and thus give the 'subject many' liberty and the chance of prosperity. Bentham's detailed and penetrating analysis of the additional power that colonies and warfare for colonies put in the hands of the 'ruling few' and the difficulties involved in preventing them from exercising that power, was very innovative. But his work did have its antecedents; and his own early views on these subjects should also be noted if only to show how much more they were advanced when he returned to the subject thirty years later.

Smith's indictment of a 'mercantilist' system centred on government and business was a key part of Bentham's intellectual formation here, though he had a different emphasis than Smith who had argued that the 'capricious ambition of kings and ministers' was less influential in promoting colonialism than 'the impertinent jealousy of merchants and manufacturers'.[63] Tucker, too, was still an influence on him in the 1820s[64] and the former had recognized that there were numerous groups who benefited directly from colonialism and the wars that it generated, including the military, politicians on the make, those financial or business interests that were stimulated by conflict, and elements of the press.[65] Tucker also feared that if these groups were able to exercise political authority for long the resultant militancy would produce not only economic disaster but also threaten the political liberties won since 1688.[66] Like Tucker, Anderson also noted that there were a number of vested interests for whom war and colonies were profitable. Interestingly, he saw this combination of business, finance and governmental forces as centred on the capital with the industrial provinces the main losers as taxation increased.[67] All of these critics

[62] For background see P. Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': the Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996). Jeremy Bentham, *Official Aptitudes Maximised, Expence Minimised*, ed. P. Schofield (Oxford, 1993).
[63] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 493.
[64] Jeremy Bentham, 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', p. 136.
[65] Tucker, *The Case for Going to War*, pp. 83–96.
[66] Tucker, *The True Interest*, p. 198.
[67] Anderson, *The Interest of Great Britain*, pp. 100–05.

were suspicious of the state as the instrument of the ruling few and hoped to limit its size and curb its powers, a sentiment with which Bentham heartily concurred.

In the late 1780s he had attacked colonies because they provoked warfare and thus prevented the attainment of 'three grand objects – simplicity of government, national frugality, and peace'.[68] In 1789, he took advantage of the Revolution to offer the French some advice on economical government he hoped the British would also take. Although, following Smith, he recognized the need for government to provide public goods – services necessary to society that the market could not provide because they were not privately profitable – like his master he thought of much public expenditure as 'waste' and a means of transferring wealth to the 'few' by taxing the 'many'. Colonies were 'a plentiful source of expence which is all waste'.

> All public expence being an engine of corruption, all waste possesses in that character a malignity over and above what belongs to it in the character of waste. Waste in this manner begets and supports waste. The expence of each useless establishment is employed in bribing men to institute and support the others.[69]

In the 1790s he returned to the charge, arguing that the only outcome of holding colonies was 'to make places, and wars that breed more places'.[70] Accordingly, he called on the French and the British to abandon their colonies, leaving them nothing to quarrel about, and to accept disarmament and cheap government.[71] In this context, his chief concern was to educate the politically aware to understand their own interests so that they would be able to use reason to tame man's passion for pugnacity; to make diplomacy transparent rather than secret, so that the naturally peaceful inclinations of the citizenry could have play; and to set up means by which arbitration and other forms of diplomacy would replace warfare in disputes since he was convinced that 'it is from ignorance and weakness that men deviate from the path of rectitude, more frequently than from selfishness and malevolence'.[72]

## V

When he returned to confront these issues in the 1820s – in the Spanish context in which no economic excuse could be found for colonialism on the grounds of overpopulation or chronic unemployment – Bentham

[68] Bentham, 'A Plan', p. 196.
[69] 'Short View of Economy for the Use of the French', pp. 199–200.
[70] 'Emancipate Your Colonies !', p. 309.
[71] 'Short View of Economy for the Use of the French', p. 201.
[72] 'A Plan ', p. 212.

took this analysis much further than before and as a result made perhaps his greatest contributions to radical thought. In doing so, he also anticipated modern economic analyses of rent, defined as income that accrues to any factor of production beyond that necessary to bring it to market, and rent-seeking behaviour.

Bentham's thinking in the 1820s was based on a two-stage model of human evolution that was clearly a crude version of Smith's four-stage conjectural history of mankind's development. In 'the early stages of Society' when men were divided into hostile 'bands', hereditary absolute monarchy was the key to security and to the greatest happiness of the majority. But in 'a mature state of society' when 'profound peace is frequent' – a peace built on capitalist commerce though Bentham does not mention that here – absolute rule was otiose. Societies like Spain and Britain had replaced absolutism with limited monarchy but Bentham went on to argue that the latter was no true solution to the problem and that such societies were still dominated by their monarchs and the 'sub-ruling few' linked to them.[73] In a different work written around the same time, Bentham spoke of this ruling elite as a 'natural aristocracy' which existed 'in every civilised nation' and was made up of a cluster of interlocking and overlapping aristocracies which included 'landed', 'lawyer', 'moneyed', 'literary' 'spiritual' and other branches, usually under the overall control of the monarch and his court.[74] These limited monarchies had much patronage at their disposal; and, since Bentham assumed that everyone was driven to further their own interest to the utmost,[75] he argued they would use that patronage to try to corrupt the elected assemblies that were designed to limit their powers and, in some circumstances, they might be so successful as to turn a country back to despotism.[76] Colonies and the wars they generated meant, he said, 'murder on the largest scale',[77] but they provided extra means for public expenditure and the further dispensation of patronage, or what Bentham called 'the sweets of government', that involved a 'sinister sacrifice' of the needs of the

[73] 'Summary of a Work Intituled Emancipate Your Colonies' (1820), in *Colonies, Commerce and Constitutional Law*, note a, pp. 340–2. For similar sentiments earlier, see 'An Essay on Perpetual Peace', p. 209. See also Conway, 'Bentham on Peace and War', p. 88.

[74] Jeremy Bentham, 'Codification Proposal to All Nations Professing Liberal Opinions' (1822) in Bowring vol. 4, note to p. 558. See also J. Dinwiddy, *Bentham* (Oxford, 1989), p. 87.

[75] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 34–7.

[76] 'Summary of a Work', pp. 288–97; 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 85–6.

[77] 'Emancipation Spanish' (1820), in *Colonies, Commerce and Constitutional Law*, p. 258.

many to the greed of the few.[78] War, he thought, was the most effective way of transferring wealth into the hands of ruling elites and 'this may be seen as one main cause, though not the only cause, of the wars by which, in every country, the subject many have been, or are doomed to be, afflicted'.[79] Bentham also noted that, through the generation of additional means for patronage, even an unsuccessful colonial war could bring benefits to the elite groups.[80]

Bentham listed those in Spain who were direct beneficiaries of colonialism, a list that, with a few modifications, could have been made of English interests and which had strong similarities to Tucker's. '[T]his vast concatenation of particular interests' included: the King, his court and associated 'Grandees'; a number of government ministers; the higher echelons of the army and navy; members of the judiciary and the clergy who got posts in the colonies or in connection with them; the members of the elected assembly in receipt of patronage; and 'Merchants, Manufacturers, and Artisans' who were in trades that benefited in various ways from tariffs and other restrictions on colonial and foreign trade. He also counted in those 'Political writers or Orators expecting emolument or reputation by advocating the claim of dominion over Ultramaria'; and all in Ultramaria itself who obtained benefits from the colonial connection. Besides that, all those persons or groups who had an expectation of future benefits would also favour retaining the colonial connection.[81]

While the few gained, the many lost. The amount of rent, or what was later called the 'unearned increment', gained through patronage, war expenditure or the restrictions on trade imposed in a colonialist regime was offset by a much greater loss to the rest of the nation.[82] The system involved a transfer of income from the many poor to the rich few. Even if the transfer had been between people of equal monetary worth, Bentham insisted that the pleasure gained by one party would be less than the pain endured by the loser. But when, as was the general case, the poor were taxed for the benefit of the rich the loss of happiness felt by the former was enormously greater than that acquired by the beneficiaries,[83] an argument which shows how well Bentham understood the idea of diminishing marginal utility.

[78] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 25–6, 32–3, 75. He also pointed out that if the colonies resisted then the costs, and the available patronage, would be much increased. (pp. 52–65).
[79] 'Emancipation Spanish', p. 227. Compare Tom Paine's claim that 'taxes were not raised to carry on wars, but that wars were raised to carry on taxes' (*Rights of Man*, p. 226).
[80] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', p. 37.
[81] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 38–40.
[82] 'Emancipation Spanish', pp. 228, 231.
[83] 'Emancipation Spanish', pp. 226–8, 231–2.

In the 1820s, Bentham also considered in much more detail the question of how the rich got away with such policies. In considering economic prohibitions, he talked, as he had in the 1790s, of a failure to understand the benefits of free trade and of 'the continuation of human blindness' that still required 'the removal of the film of error'.[84] But he also realized that there was another problem of great complexity that had to do with the comparative organizational capabilities of the ruling groups in relation to the rest of the nation. The germ of the argument can be found in Smith,[85] but Bentham took it much further and, in a brilliant piece of analysis, he anticipated the theory of distributional coalitions developed by Olsen as a branch of the modern theory of rent.[86] Those able to combine effectively could restrict competition in their own interest by forming a powerful lobby capable of influencing government policy on their behalf. Whether they could achieve success depended, first, on the strength of their 'combined public exertions' which were more likely to be successful if, amongst other things, the capitals involved were large and the persons concerned few in number so that they could combine together easily; if their cause was driven by the knowledge that the prize of winning was great; and if they had the ability to put across their case well, using 'obscurity and confusion insofar as correct conception would be unfavourable to their cause'.[87] Second, their cause would be much enhanced if they took the trouble to forge secret connections with those in government. Success was more likely if the group seeking special favours already had access to, or was otherwise related to, powerful people with similar interests – in which case 'a portion of the time allotted for refreshment will in this particular instance be added to the time allotted for official business' and 'the sympathy which is produced by social enjoyment' would aid the forging of agreements. These 'private opportunities' could then be used to promote 'sinister and corruptive influence'.[88]

Hence there arose a conflict between the 'particular interest' of the small privileged group and the 'universal interest'. A well-formed particular interest group was a 'compact, harmonising body; a chain of iron' while the mass of individuals who made up the universal interest, the interest of the many, 'are on every such occasion an unorganised, uncombined body: a rope of sand'. Although all losers by

[84] 'Observations', p. 367.
[85] See, for example, *Wealth of Nations*, pp. 462, 655.
[86] M. Olsen, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven, 1982).
[87] 'Observations', pp. 370–1.
[88] 'Observations', pp. 371–2. Compare Smith's view that 'people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment or diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the publick' (*Wealth of Nations*, p. 145).

the privileges gained by an interest group, the latter were too scattered, too differentiated and too numerous to combine. Moreover, even though the harm done to the whole economy by the restrictions imposed on behalf of special interests was considerable, what each individual lost was 'too small to afford sufficient inducement to apply his exertions to the support of his trifling share in the common interest'. So the particular interest won out and that distorted the economy. Hence it was that '[t]he concentration of immense capital in single hands, great facilities for combination, and sometimes a union of both', furnishes 'a power of evil which is too commonly allowed to immolate the general good'. In addition, interest groups often succeeded by skilful use of propaganda and their ability to ensure that the downside of what they proposed was not discussed.[89] Hence there had grown up a thicket of regulation and restriction that supported an interlocking set of vested interests so complex that, as 'custom covers it with its mantle' and habit gives it a fixed authority', so 'error and folly become immoveable and immortal'.[90]

Bentham was impressed by the tenacity with which the wealthy and privileged pursued their self-interest;[91] and when considering the benefits that accrued to the few, especially those in government, he used a very elastic sense of the word 'profit' to indicate that not only wealth was reaped but that a variety of other delights were available to them, all of them 'instruments of corruption'. Power meant the ability not only to sell offices to subordinates but to exact vengeance or deprive enemies of reward. It could also be measured in the 'ease' with which a well-paid job could be done, in terms of immunity from punishment for wrongdoing, and in the pleasure to be had from granting, as favours to relatives and friends, jobs that could have been distributed on merit. The esteem that such patronage brought to the bestower also lingered on long after the power was exercised, as the status in society accorded to ex-ministers showed.[92] Bentham, indeed, had a very acute sense of the seductiveness of power and the status it conferred on those associated with it: hence the fervent desire for titles and honours that bestowed a 'factitious dignity' on the recipient and gave the already powerful not only profit in the sense noted above but also presented them with the means of stifling opposition or shoring up support for the status quo.[93] 'So mighty is the force of those delusions of which titles and

[89] 'Observations', p. 375.
[90] 'Observations', p. 378.
[91] 'Rid yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 135–7.
[92] 'Emancipation Spanish', pp. 232–7.
[93] 'Emancipation Spanish', pp. 237–46.

ceremonies are the efficient instruments, that hitherto human reason has not anywhere been able to resist it.'[94]

There was no doubt either that the ruling elite's command of propaganda helped their cause, as in their insistence that tariffs were necessary to prevent foreigners from harming the nation: 'and thereupon comes the parade of patriotism displayed, at a cheap rate, – at the expense of only a few pompous words'.[95] Bentham was convinced that governments deliberately played upon the public's thoughtless nationalism; and, whereas in the 1790s he had been willing to accept that government policy reflected 'the sincerity of honest delusion', by the 1820s he had concluded that it was driven by 'the perversity of corrupt intention'.[96] In this context he spoke of his own country as 'a multitude composed of imposters and their dupes' who had been flattered into believing that 'they are of a mould different from and finer than that of the rest of mankind'.[97]

More generally, Bentham bewailed the masses' ignorance of their own interest.

> In such state is the understanding even of the subject many, with such deplorable effect have they been dazzled and fascinated by that *phantasmagoria* of power, which their oppressors, corruptors, and deluders have never ceased to ply them with – so effectually have they been persuaded to ascribe to this drain the opulence derived from real sources, – that, while bent to the ground by the *burthen*, they have as yet scarce begun to consider it in any other light than that of a *benefit*. 'Our Colonies –our dependencies' – is still the language: as if the men, whose feet were in chains, should with one voice cry out: *Away! away! never shall you take them off: these are* our *chains*.[98]

At the same time, Bentham knew how seductive 'that phantasmagoria' was. Just as acutely as he understood the lure of power and status so Bentham was aware of the immense difficulty of overcoming the authority of elites when they had all the resources of a long tradition behind them and especially when they could command a rich language of power that represented a hierarchical and authoritarian society as both benign in effect and necessary to social order. Such 'fictions' were extremely hard to overcome.[99]

[94] 'Emancipation Spanish', p. 244.
[95] 'Observations', p. 367.
[96] 'Observations', pp. 373–4. Bentham thought that the agricultural interest, especially the landlords, in England formed one such group: 'Observations', pp. 375–6. See also his analysis of the weakness of public creditors in 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', p. 46.
[97] 'Summary of a Work', p. 291.
[98] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', p. 52. Emphasis is in the original.
[99] I am aware that Bentham usually talks of 'fictions' in a more restricted sense than this but given the general tenor of his writings I think it legitimate to use the word in this setting. On 'fictions' see R. Harrison, *Bentham* (London, 1983).

When considered in conjunction with his description of the organizational advantages possessed by elites, Bentham's analysis often suggests, despite his best intentions, that colonialism and elite domination in general were almost impossible to avoid. On the other hand, Bentham was shrewd enough to recognize that some of the ruling few might turn against colonialism in certain circumstances. If, for example, the cost of retaining colonies led to social unrest or to rises in taxation serious enough to prompt a strong demand for retrenchment, those groups, including the monarch, who feared that they would suffer thereby might oppose colonies and support the 'universal interest', thereby turning an 'intolerable, into a more or less mitigated, despotism'.[100]

## VI

Given that the great bulk of Bentham's writings on colonies remained unpublished in his lifetime, the transmission of his ideas rested largely upon disciples like James Mill, and the latter's interpretation did not reflect the complexity and subtlety of his master's thinking at some critical points. Mill shared Bentham's scorn for the 'old colonial system' and was a passionate advocate of free trade. He also stood by Say's Law, as had the Bentham of the 1780s and 1790s; but, probably under David Ricardo's influence, Mill maintained belief in it throughout his career and was hostile to the kind of innovatory economics that Bentham had developed in the early 1800s.[101] Bentham's abandonment of Say's Law gave him his justification for advocating colonization as a remedy for unemployment and as a means of creating growth in the metropolis through increased exports. Mill, on the other hand, never gave up the idea that foreign and colonial trade were marginal factors in growth and that Britain could find employment for all its capital and labour internally if necessary. On Ricardian principles colonization could have been justified, even if all factors of production were fully employed initially, on the grounds that it cheapened land and therefore allowed for higher wages. However, Mill's claim, made in the 1820s, that colonies of settlement were useful in taking off a 'redundant population' in the mother country, though no doubt reflecting Bentham's views, lacked

[100] 'Rid Yourself of Ultramaria', pp. 41, 49–51: 'Summary of a Work', pp. 297, 336–8.
[101] For a robust defence of Say's Law see James Mill, *Selected Economic Writings*, ed. D. Winch (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 150, 318–19. See also Hutchison, 'James Mill and Ricardian Economics', in *The Uses and Abuses of Economics*, ch. 3; and, more generally, R. D. Collinson Black, 'Bentham and the Political Economists of the Nineteenth Century', *Bentham Newsletter* 11 (1988), pp. 24–37.

logical force because it did not have the latter's economic reasoning behind it.[102]

Later in the century, as free trade was established and the old colonial system abolished, it became more common among critics of empire to ignore the Say's Law approach to foreign and colonial trade though in a different manner than the Bentham of the early 1800s. Richard Cobden, for example, was much more aware of how interdependent, and therefore how vulnerable to international economic upheaval, modern industrial nations were becoming than his predecessors had been. He attacked colonialism not just because free trade enhanced income but because, given the vital importance of international trade to prosperity, the wars it inspired threatened the existence of the industrial, liberal society that was emerging in Britain and elsewhere.[103] The 'marginalist' approach to foreign trade put forward by Bentham in the 1790s and subsequently by James Mill was, however, revived by J. A. Hobson as part of his anti-imperialist crusade at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hobson was convinced that the root of the imperial problem was excess saving by the rich that led to a search for safe overseas markets for surplus capital. His solution was a radical redistribution of income and wealth that would eliminate over-saving, revive the domestic market and, in the process, reduce foreign investment and trade to much lower levels. Hobson invoked Smith on the importance of the home market in support of his own position: there is no evidence that he was aware he was actually following in the footsteps of Bentham and James Mill.[104]

James Mill also popularized Bentham's distinction between the 'Few' and the 'Many' and the latter's argument that colonies were a means of enhancing the wealth and the authority of the former as well as the greatest source of war between European powers. Perhaps inevitably, however, much of the rigour and thoroughness of Bentham's analysis was lost in the process of popularization.[105] Later radical thinkers such as Cobden became uneasily aware that, despite free trade and Gladstonian financial rigour – both of which Bentham would have applauded heartily – the powers of traditional elites had been trimmed rather than fully removed. They feared that these elites would trade on the ignorance and passions of the masses to create warfare in the

[102] James Mill, 'Colony' in *Essays* (London, 1828), pp. 7–13.
[103] R. Cobden, 'A Letter to Henry Ashworth' (1862), in *Political Writings*, 2 vols. (Bristol, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 17–18; P. J. Cain, 'Capitalism, War and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden', *British Journal of International Studies* 5 (1979), pp. 241–2.
[104] J. A. Hobson, 'Free Trade and Foreign Policy', *Contemporary Review* 74 (1898). See also P. J. Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism: Radicalism, New Liberalism and Finance, 1887–1938* (Oxford, 2002), esp. pp. 67–78.
[105] Mill, 'Colony', pp. 31–3.

name of empire and thus use conflict to regain their own lost authority and to turn back the clock of economic and political progress:[106] hence the dismay and anger amongst liberals and radicals when Disraeli tried to construct a new 'imperial' policy in the 1870s.[107] However, the discussion of the machinations of the elite – called the 'Upper Ten Thousand' in the debate of the 1870s[108] – usually lacked depth; and the indictment of aristocrats, financiers, the military and the 'Jingo' masses that emerged would have been more far more penetrating had Bentham's acute analyses been more readily available and better known.

Twenty years later, the range and penetration of Hobson's analysis of the forces supporting imperialism and of the manner in which they played on the ignorance of the populace was much more impressive than that of his immediate predecessors. Even so, his obsession with the supposed primacy of finance often distorted his analysis and there was nothing in his work to equal, for example, Bentham's acute understanding of the organizational strengths that helped to give the few mastery over the many.[109] In one important respect, however, Hobson's analysis did go much further than Bentham's. Bentham saw elites as consciously serving their own interests in promoting colonialism. Hobson wanted to do the same: but, almost despite himself, he showed on a number of occasions how elites, though benefiting in concrete ways, were also captured by the imperial process in the sense that they often passionately believed that imperialism promoted the best interests of the British nation as a whole and those of the conquered peoples.[110]

In matters of government, James Mill stood by Bentham's demand for representative government at home, the abandonment of policies of colonial expansion and the freeing of settlement colonies from British rule. All these positions were endorsed by later critics. On the question of India, Bentham had worried that Britons might lack the sympathy necessary to rule Indians well and wanted the latter to have a say in their own government under overall British tutelage. James Mill, like his son John Stuart, held Indian values in contempt and was much

[106] M. Taylor, 'Imperium et Libertas? Rethinking the Radical Critique of Imperialism during the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 19 (1991), pp. 1–23.

[107] P. J. Cain, 'Gladstone, Radicalism and the Liberal Attack on Disraelian "Imperialism"', *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. D. Bell (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 215–38.

[108] See W. R. Greg, 'Foreign Policy of Great Britain: Imperial or Economic?', *Nineteenth Century* 4 (1878), pp. 393–407.

[109] J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a Study* (London, 1988; first edn. 1902), pt. II; Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism,* chs. 3 and 4.

[110] Cain, *Hobson and Imperialism*, pp. 118–22.

more arrogantly assured that the mother country knew what was good for its dependents. Hence his claim that a British government, even if staffed by the hated 'Few', was much better than anything the Indians could devise for themselves.[111] Like Bentham and the Mills, critics from the 1860s onwards did not believe that the subcontinent was worth occupying in economic terms and recognized that its dominance by Britain gave openings for older elites to survive and flourish. But, Cobden and a few supporters apart, they thought that British government was good for India and that 'anarchy' would break out if Britain should leave – though a minority were keen to give Indians more say in administration, a policy Bentham would have approved.[112]

## VII

Since so much of Bentham's critique of European colonial policies remained unpublished or difficult of access until recent times his contribution to the evolving debate on them has been seriously underrated. His Spanish writings were published only fifteen years ago and have yet to be properly evaluated: but, as this article has tried to show, they took his own earlier analysis of the roots of policy, and that of his predecessors, much further than before. Indeed, it is argued here that, in many ways, these writings, especially those that give a close analysis of the benefits that elites received from colonialism, represent the most acute and innovatory aspects of his thought in this field. When they are added to his better-known economic analyses of colonialism written between the 1780s and early 1800s, and set against the broad currents of liberal and radical questioning of the causes and consequences of empire across two centuries, it would be no exaggeration to say that Bentham made one of the greatest contributions to anti-colonial literature anywhere in the Western world and one which in some ways was never improved upon in Britain. His work has much to offer historians in their quest for a better understanding of Europe's imperial past.[113]

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[111] Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, ch. 5.
[112] R. J. Moore, *Liberalism and Indian Politics, 1872–1922* (London, 1966).
[113] I should like to thank Philip Schofield for reading an earlier draft and making many useful suggestions. Constructive comments were also made on versions of this essay presented at the University of Geneva in 2006 and the British Studies seminar at the University of Texas at Austin in 2009.