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REVIEW ESSAY

Fragile Universals and the Politics of Empire

Catherine Hall. Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867. *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.*

Sankar Muthu. Enlightenment Against Empire. *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.*

Jennifer Pitts. A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France. *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.*

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The three works reviewed here exemplify the growth in scholarly interest in the historical impact of empire in the shaping of European intellectual and political traditions. Hall self-consciously situates her work within the rubric of post-colonial studies which, in a variety of scholarly fields, have attempted to place the imperial experience at the center of our understanding of modern political, social, and cultural history. It is through this critical-historical lens that Hall's work explores the discursive universe of Baptist missionaries in nineteenth-century Britain and Jamaica. Muthu and Pitts, on the other hand, focus more squarely on re-reading and re-situating the work of canonical figures of Western political theory in the context of their views on empire. Muthu's and Pitts's studies of the relationship between empire and political thought, like the field of political theory (and political science, more generally), exhibit little direct influence of the kinds of post-colonial analyses that has so marked the fields of imperial history, anthropology, and cultural studies in the last two decades. Indeed, in important ways, some of Muthu's and Pitts's claims about eighteenth-century criticisms of empire run counter to the presumption in much post-colonial scholarship about the complicity between Enlightenment political theory and imperialism.

Nevertheless, despite their differing methodological stances and historical scope, the works by Hall, Muthu, and Pitts considered here converge and complement one another in fruitful and sometimes surprising ways. All three focus upon representations, conceptions, and characterizations of non-European peoples as central to understanding the variety of stances—critical, justificatory, or otherwise—taken by various actors and thinkers *vis-à-vis* empire and imperial projects. Moreover, they all seek to chart important transformations in these conceptualizations that were concomitant with (and may even explain) important shifts in reflections upon the nature and purpose of empire. Taken together, these works fundamentally resist the idea that anti-imperialism, or indeed anti-slavery discourses, as intellectual traditions or trajectories can be simply charted as uninterrupted narratives of progress, attributable to something like the rise of humanitarianism or moral universalism. And in exploring the historical and conceptual grounds for the rise and *decline* of anti-imperial and anti-slavery discourses, these works offer important portraits of the fragility of forms of moral universalism in the face of imperial politics.

Muthu and Pitts, taken together, put forward a distinctive chronology for understanding the trajectory of European intellectual responses to imperial expansion. The proposed trajectory is constituted by two major moments of transformation, namely, (1) the emergence of critical and skeptical stances towards imperial expansion in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and (2) their virtual eclipse and replacement by liberal justifications of empire in the nineteenth century. While Hall's narrative falls in the later stages of this historical arc, in its focus on Baptist missionary abolitionism, it also charts, in microcosm, a parallel decline in the commitment to and confidence in moral universalism within the antislavery movement. Thus, another productive ground of comparison among the authors is the way in which each articulates and understands the causes and conditions of these key intellectual transformations.

One of the great virtues of Muthu's and Pitts's detailed attention to ways in which prominent political thinkers have grappled with the problem of empire is to call into question the assumed boundaries of canonical political theory. The canon of political theory is all too often presented and studied as pertaining solely to questions of domestic politics, for example, as a set of ongoing conversations about the nature of a just and stable political order. A sharp differentiation between the international and the domestic is also often bound to an implicit understanding of the international realm as the realm of pure power politics, whereas the domestic is the primary scene for thinking normatively about politics; it is the sole arena for conceptualizing political rights, moral obligations and duty, and justice.[1] By focusing on questions of empire, Muthu and Pitts not only demonstrate that the moral and political frameworks of many canonical thinkers extend to the international, but that indeed the very ways in which a theorist imagines political possibilities internal to the nation-state may be deeply connected to their understanding of global political, social, and economic processes. Here Muthu's examination of Kant and Herder, and Pitts's readings of Mill and Tocqueville, in particular, bring to the forefront these intersections.

Muthu's and Pitts's primary aim, however, is to explore the variety of stances taken by key thinkers *vis-à-vis* empire and imperial expansion with the view towards understanding those thinkers' theoretical underpinnings and intellectual trajectories. The unearthing of the criticisms of empire articulated by a variety of eighteenth-century authors such as Diderot, Kant, Herder, Burke, Smith, Bentham, and Condorcet is a central pivot around which both accounts revolve. For both Muthu and Pitts, these views, while not universal, are representative of a widespread skepticism about imperial expansion common to many prominent intellectuals of the late eighteenth century. Although widespread, however, they are also considered to be "historically anomalous" (Muthu 3), preceded and followed by the prevalence of imperialist sentiments and arguments. While Pitts's narrative charts the decline of this eighteenth-century tradition of imperial skepticism and its transformation into nineteenth-century imperial liberalism, Muthu focuses, instead, on the emergence and coherence of this tradition itself.

For Muthu, the writings of Diderot, Kant, and Herder in particular represent a "philosophically robust and distinctive strand" of what he terms "Enlightenment anti-imperialism" (2). Anti-imperialism here refers to a variety of criticisms of political and economic practices associated with European expansion, which when coupled with defenses of non-European peoples against subjugation and conquest, constituted, for Muthu, a fundamental challenge to prevailing imperial ideology and justifications of empire. While these three authors in particular are not often grouped together—indeed many would see them as holding divergent philosophical commitments—Muthu makes a compelling case that their anti-imperialism at least rests upon a coherent and common set of philosophical positions. Muthu articulates these positions in terms of a commitment to moral universalism, a conception of cultural diversity which views human beings as "fundamentally cultural beings," and an acceptance of a degree of moral incommensurability and relativism between practices and beliefs (268). The key variable in this triad is the second; the definition of "humanity as cultural agency" constitutes the substantive grounds of moral universalism and thus allows for a productive mediation between moral universalism and moral incommensurability. As Muthu argues, it is this unique ability to recognize at the same time the unity and diversity of humanity that made possible a "more inclusive and pluralistic political theory" that could ground anti-imperialist arguments (268).

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[1] For a classic statement of this kind see Martin Wight, "Why Is There *no* International Theory?" in *Diplomatic Investigations*, ed. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), 17–34.

While Herder's well-known suspicion of abstract reason is usually read as illustrative of a deep antagonism to Enlightenment philosophy, Muthu reintegrates Herder into that tradition by, provocatively, arguing that Herder's "seemingly peculiar synthesis of universalism and particularism" was in fact a more general feature of eighteenth-century thought (211). For Muthu, Herder's insistence on the moral singularity of cultures was tied to the idea of a single humanity, conceived of as both an anthropological universal and a moral ideal (211, 226–27). This portrait of Herder is perhaps less surprising than the argument that Herder's appreciation of cultural diversity was also shared by Kant and Diderot, who seemingly represent traditions of thinking Herder specifically criticized (consider, e.g., his critique of rationalist philosophies of history, on the one hand, and the atheistic tendencies of modern philosophy, on the other). Muthu's strongest arguments for viewing Diderot and Kant as invested in a model of humanity as cultural agency, and in line with Herder's philosophy, spring from a novel account of the origins of this new philosophical anthropology.

For Muthu, the understanding of cultural diversity and cultural agency as constitutive features of humanity was grounded in the rejection of the view of "natural man," especially as it was exemplified in discourses of noble savagery. More sharply, Muthu contends that the rejection of noble savagery represented a pivotal, conceptual transformation in the very idea of the human without which anti-imperialist political theory could not emerge. The image of the noble savage was tied to a tradition of social and political criticism in which moralists (Montaigne and Rousseau are taken as exemplars) employed exaggerated dichotomies between nature/culture and savage/civilized to criticize and relativize European institutions and social practices. For Muthu, while these portraits often took nature as an ideal and thus praised extant native peoples, such as the Amerindians, as exemplifying a closeness to nature, these accounts also had the effect of dehumanizing them. The exotic other-ing of natural man, the insistence of a profound gap between natural man and civilized man, could infantilize and even animalize natural man by portraying him as driven by pure instinct. One of the striking convergences between Diderot, Kant, and Herder, which Muthu unearths, is their conscious rejection of this view of natural man.

While Diderot playfully subverts the category of natural man in his fictional *Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville*, for Muthu, Kant offers the paradigmatic view of humanity as cultural agency, in which culture and freedom are integral to the definition of humanity (as the grounds that distinguish humans from animals). For Muthu, then, the historical possibility for the emergence of a "robust" anti-imperialist political theory required much more than a basic acceptance of human moral equality. A minimal moral universalism, according to Muthu, could not garner the necessary kind of meaningful moral commiseration with non-European peoples. Rather, only when humans were conceived of as cultural beings, as necessarily socially embedded, could the discourse of moral universalism become genuinely inclusive and generate respect for concrete humans. As Muthu writes, "the more the universal category of the human was particularized, the more meaningful and robust it became in moral practice" (123).

In a similar vein, in Pitts's assessment of the theoretical underpinnings of an eighteenth-century skepticism towards imperial ventures, Smith, Burke, and Bentham are viewed as putting forward a "tolerant and pluralist universalism" that combined a strong conviction in the rationality of all people with a sensitivity to cultural particularity. Indeed, for Pitts, the commitment to rationality itself allowed these writers to assume that all societies were in some sense fundamentally reasonable and, thus, made possible an acceptance of (and even a respect for) a variety of diverse social formations, institutions, and values. Moreover, Pitts is less sanguine than Muthu about seeing forms of imperial skepticism (or imperial optimism) as primarily rooted in a deep convergence of theoretical assumptions. This reticence is partially necessitated by her attempt to discuss in the same framework writers such as Burke and Bentham, for example, whose philosophies and political sentiments in many other domains were deeply antagonistic. But even in terms of the central contrast between eighteenth-century critics and their more imperial-minded successors articulated in her study, Pitts warns against accounting for this transformation in purely conceptual terms. She argues, "No explanation that rests on some set of basic theoretical assumptions in the liberal tradition can possibly explain such flexibility on the question of empire: liberalism does not lead ineluctably either to imperialism or anti-imperialism" (4). In eschewing arguments that seek to demonstrate a tight, logical relationship between liberalism and imperialism or anti-imperialism, Pitts instead emphasizes the fact that the broad-range of writers she examines, from Smith, Burke, Bentham, and Condorcet to the Mills, Constant, and Tocqueville, all accepted a vision of human unity and human diversity. What mattered most was how they negotiated the tension between "a belief in human unity and a recognition of cultural, social, and political variation," negotiations that could have radically different implications in the context of imperial politics (3). In this sense, while Pitts highlights many important shifts in theoretical understandings of progress, nationality, and civilization that marked the turn to empire among nineteenth-century liberals, these shifts are attributed to changing intellectual dispositions and attitudes, on the one hand, and to the impact of "pressures and anxieties of certain historical moments" (4), on the other.

For Pitts, the sixty-year period spanning the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a notable change in attitudes about empire. The criticism of empire and imperial expansion that emerged in the closing decades of the eighteenth century is steadily replaced by almost unanimous support for imperial ventures. The eclipse of eighteenth-century criticisms of empire importantly coincided with a period of imperial expansion and consolidation, as well as the singular transformation of the global economy in which Europe emerged as predominant. For Pitts, these large-scale transformations engendered a new kind of civilizational confidence that was reflected, intellectually, in the prominence of cruder theories of progress, narrower and restricted conceptions of nationality, and presumptions about the comparative superiority of European social, economic, political institutions. In a series of detailed chapters on a remarkable range of British and French thinkers, Pitts attempts to locate the long-term change in attitudes and their impact upon the consolidation of nineteenth-century liberalism. While Pitts stresses the fact that liberalism as a historical tradition did not logically necessitate imperialism, she also resists the claim that the imbrication of liberalism with imperialism in this period ought to be understood as fundamentally contradictory or anomalous. Rather, Pitts directs our attention to the variety of ways in which liberalism accommodated itself to imperialism and thus was shaped by these political imperatives and attitudes.

In charting and accounting for this transition in imperial attitudes, Pitts focuses on internal transformations within distinct traditions of liberal thinking. In the case of British liberalism, Pitts seeks both to highlight the prevalence of a skepticism towards empire common to thinkers such as Smith, Burke, and Bentham as well as to account for the manner in which the heirs to these intellectual traditions, such as James and John Stuart Mill, reoriented them in an imperial direction. For Pitts, the elder Mill is a crucial figure in this transition, for he "drew upon both Bentham and the Scottish historians in ways that violated the subtleties and insights of both traditions" (122). The younger Mill inherited not only his father's views on the necessity of imperial rule in India, but also justified imperial rule using a similar combination of utilitarian arguments affixed to cruder notions of stages of civilization. Pitts further argues that Mill also consciously attempted to correct what he construed as the defects of Bentham's strict and formal universalism by introducing into utilitarian philosophy a greater sensitivity to issues of "character" formation. What Bentham lacked, according to Mill, was an understanding of the diversity of national character, especially between peoples in different stages of civilization, a diversity that needed to be reckoned with in order to understand the appropriate institutions and legislation necessary for progress (136–37).

While Mill's imperial liberalism, especially his now well-known defense of despotism as the appropriate form of government for peoples not considered to have reached the stage of civilization, exuded civilizational confidence it also, for Pitts, was marked by domestic concerns about the coming of mass democracy. While Mill remained a committed democrat, he often invoked the nation to mark and defend the inclusion of the working class into the electorate, and thus entrenched the exclusion of colonized peoples from the sphere of self-government. This intertwining of conceptions of empire, nation-building, and anxieties about democracy was even more pronounced in French liberalism. For Pitts, the distance between Condorcet's and Constant's imperial skepticism and Tocqueville's argument for imperial expansion was marked less by a growing confidence in Europe's duty to civilize subject peoples, than a deep anxiousness about domestic political stability in the face of democratization. Empire and imperial conquest were understood and defended by Tocqueville as ways to stem the tendency towards decline in virtue and liberty at home. In this sense, while Mill's and Tocqueville's thought represent a kind of apex of imperial liberalism, the specific ways in which their political theory accommodated imperial ambitions were markedly different. While Mill's justification of imperial rule was limited in principle by the goal of training subject peoples towards self-government and, secondarily, marked the boundaries of a more inclusive democracy at home, Tocqueville's imperial ambitions seemed to be primarily motivated by domestic concerns.

While Muthu and Pitts are both concerned with charting key historical transformations in the ways that prominent political theorists thought about empire and imperial expansion, they conceive of these shifts in quite distinct ways. Muthu presents and accounts for the historical emergence of Enlightenment anti-imperialism in terms of a conceptual revolution in the definition of the human. Indeed, in some sense, this theoretical shift is understood as developing out of the inherent ambiguities in the theory of noble savagery itself. Thus, in terms of both the coherence and the development of this intellectual trajectory, Muthu places primary emphasis on conceptual change and innovation. Pitts, on the other hand, in assessing the shift from anti-imperial to imperialist tendencies, stresses instead the impact of a wide range of historical changes. In other words, while Pitts attends to the specific ways the liberal tradition internally takes on a more imperial guise, the change is conceived of as less driven by theoretical developments. This difference, in a sense, represents a difference in style and purpose. Muthu's work is more philosophically oriented: he seeks both to redeem Enlightenment thinking from charges that it was wholly or necessarily committed to unitary, abstract, and imperialistic conceptions of civilization and progress as well as to recover from this neglected strand of Enlightenment anti-imperialism philosophical resources for theorizing human unity and human diversity today. Pitts's work is more concerned to capture the complex array of motivations, dispositions, and theoretical commitments that shaped the historical turn towards imperial liberalism in the nineteenth century.

At another level, however, this difference in emphasis raises a number of substantive and methodological questions about how to characterize the unity of eighteenth-century critiques of empire and how to account for their decline in the early decades of the nineteenth century. One way to approach these issues would be ask, why, if eighteenth-century or Enlightenment anti-imperialism represented a philosophically robust tradition, was it so rapidly eclipsed or abandoned? While Muthu delineates the origins and emergence of this tradition largely in conceptual terms—indeed this focus engenders some of most compelling and original aspects of his study—in assessing its decline, Muthu instead points to the importance of changes in "intellectual sensibility or disposition, rather than entirely a difference in philosophical argumentation about human nature, cultural difference, and moral judgment" (280). Here Muthu aligns himself with Pitts's argument and concedes that the great distance between critics of empire in the eighteenth century and the imperialist thinkers of the later era may have had little to do with a fundamental change in philosophical assumptions about human unity and cultural diversity. But if the most prominent political theorists of the nineteenth-century thinkers could reconcile moral universalism, a recognition of cultural diversity and variation, with their defense and support of empire, to what extent would this call into question the internal consistency and strength of Enlightenment anti-imperialism? If Muthu is right that Enlightenment anti-imperialism was a tradition of thinking that was both robust and historically fleeting, how are we to understand its lack of historical efficacy?

Here, I think we encounter a certain tension between historical and conceptual/philosophical modes of assessing intellectual traditions and accounting for intellectual change and transformation. Muthu, in focusing on recovering the philosophical richness of a certain tradition of Enlightenment pluralism, simultaneously downplays questions about how to situate this tradition historically, both in its relation to other Enlightenment traditions as well as to their nineteenth-century successors. Were there eighteenth-century precursors of imperial liberalism, perhaps certain variants of natural right theories, that in some sense were more historically resonant than this anti-imperialist tradition? While Muthu insistently warns us against conceiving of "the" Enlightenment as a singular project with a uniform set of political and philosophic projects or entailments, what these other (possibly pro-imperialist?) stances or positions might be is left largely unexplored. Eighteenth-century political theory appears to be entirely dominated by critics of empire, or, to put it another way, the Enlightenment project emerges as inherently anti-imperialist.

The recovery of eighteenth-century criticisms of empire is important, for it serves to counter presumptions that take Western political thought to be either a simple story of the progressive unfolding of humanitarianism or a tradition that was uniformly "imperialist" in ambition and structure. At the same time, in securing this point, Muthu and Pitts are reluctant to locate internal instabilities, ambiguities, or limitations in eighteenth-century criticisms of empire that may account for their supersession by pro-imperialist arguments. In this sense, the emphasis on changes in intellectual dispositions and attitudes rather than in broad theoretical underpinnings as the key difference between eighteenth-century critics of empire and nineteenth-century imperial thinkers also severs these eighteenth-century writers from any direct connection to the historical development and transformation of intellectual attitudes about empire. For example, while Pitts does not shy away from pointing to the limits of Burke's and Smith's critiques of empire, these limits are not construed as causal factors explaining the failure of their more tolerant and inclusive philosophies to take root. Rather, for Pitts this failure is due to the growth in popular support for empire and virulent racial attitudes that together made criticisms of empire in the nineteenth century both unsustainable and increasingly unavailable. In Pitt's account, Burke's political failures, especially in the famous impeachment of trial of Warren Hastings, lie less in any weakness in Burke's political and rhetorical strategy than in the difficulty of "expanding his countrymen's straitened and stunted sympathies" (243).

Here, I want to make clear that I am not suggesting that the emphasis on changing dispositions is incorrect; indeed I am quite sympathetic to Pitts's conviction that the turn to and variation within imperial liberalism cannot be accounted for on the sole grounds of internal logics. Instead I want to draw attention to a set of methodological issues about how one can articulate a relationship between internal and external sources of intellectual change. In this regard, the case of Burke is especially illustrative. While Burke's denunciation of East India Company rule in Bengal is an exemplary case of the kinds of critical attitudes to imperial injustice that Pitts (and Muthu) want to highlight, the historical outcome of the trial of Warren Hastings was to make more permanent and secure British rule in India. Burke's plea for reforming imperial governance, while critical of existing practices, could be (and was) taken up by later writers such as James Mill as a call to ground imperial rule on a more moral basis, that is, in terms of reforming native society. In this sense, Burke's criticism of empire had a historically ambiguous legacy. Indeed, in the intellectual history of empire, the call for better and more humane forms of imperialism has often been constructed upon criticisms of past imperial practice. Kant's anti-imperialism provides a similar example of the mixed legacies of eighteenth-century responses to empire. Muthu persuasively draws our attention to the depth of Kant's understanding of humans as cultural agents and how this commitment grounded Kant's principled critique of imperialist conquest and expansion. At the same time, while Kant never wavered from a moral denunciation of imperialism, his view that imperialism unwittingly had drawn together the world's peoples into continuous interaction on an unprecedented scale, provided the empirical ground for imaging a future cosmopolitan world order. In the nineteenth century, such progressive visions of imperialism's role in world history would persist, more often than not shorn of any moral reservations.

Attending to the internal limitations and ambiguities of eighteenth-century responses to empire would help in better assessing and accounting for the transition in attitudes and dispositions that both Muthu and Pitts take as crucial to understanding the nature of nineteenth-century imperial political theory. Without such a connection between historical and conceptual transformation, between the external and internal sources of intellectual change, we are left with a slightly imbalanced portrait of the relationship between ideas and changing historical conditions. On the one hand, eighteenth-century anti-imperialism is presented as an autonomous and anomalous intellectual movement, with little direct connection to and impact upon historical attitudes on empire. The consolidation of nineteenth-century imperial liberalism, on the other hand, seems to be much more dependent upon and responsive to changing historical conditions and dispositions. Here I think Hall's study of the transitions of Baptist missionary discourses, read alongside Muthu's and Pitt's insights, may be helpful. Hall offers a textured account of the internal transformation of attitudes and dispositions that accompanied the decline of abolitionism. In this manner, Hall's narrative offers a nuanced account of the specific ways in which ambiguities and fragilities within certain forms of moral universalism became exposed in the context of imperial politics.

In her study, Hall draws upon and applies a number of theoretical insights from post-colonial studies and critical race studies that have made, since the appearance of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, a lasting impact upon the disciplines of history, anthropology, and literary and cultural studies. One of the key insights she attributes to this scholarly tradition is "the imperative of placing colony and metropole in one analytic frame" (9). Hall's attentiveness to this analytical framework produces a compelling portrait of the circulation of ideas and peoples between Britain and Jamaica, which together shaped the politics of empire in the nineteenth century. More substantively, it also highlights the concrete experience of imperial activities—of evangelizing, governing, and living in the colonies—in informing and transforming metropolitan attitudes to empire. A second aspect of post-colonial studies on which Hall draws is an emphasis on representations of otherness; Hall is especially concerned with how the representation of Jamaica's black population functioned as the site of political contestation. In this sense, like Muthu and Pitts, Hall also considers changing views of non-European and subject peoples to be integral to understanding transformations in political attitudes to empire.

While prominent intellectuals like Mill and Carlyle periodically enter Hall's narrative, her primary focus is the sphere of "everyday racial thinking" as it is understood in the life-world of the Baptist missionary movement. Hall concentrates on the writings, diaries, and letters of key figures in the movement as well as newsletters and journals, which together capture the discursive universe of its members. In doing so, Hall marks a major transformation in this world, from the optimism accompanying the abolition of slavery in 1833 to an increasing sense of disappointment and anxiety that reached a peak with the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865. While Muthu and Pitts often contrast the success of the anti-slavery movement to the fits and starts of anti-imperialism, Hall characterizes the arc of abolitionism, in the period between the 1830 and 1867, as one of decline in both the internal confidence and political salience of the abolitionist position (and thus more akin to the fate of eighteenth-century criticisms of empire). In accounting for this decline, Hall focuses more squarely on the tenuous grounds of abolitionist discourses of emancipation.

Hall begins her narrative in the age of emancipation. The missionary movement played a key role in the fight for emancipation, and thus the attainment of abolition marked a moment of triumph for its cause. Not only did its close association with abolition attract many followers and converts in Jamaica and Britain, it also undergirded its political strength in both arenas. In the build-up to emancipation, missionary accounts of the situation in Jamaica circulated widely in the metropolitan debate on slavery. According to Hall, these accounts of the brutality of slavery and plantation society served to soften popular views of the enslaved populations as necessarily entrenched in savagery and heathenism. Indeed, in their accounts of their encounters with settlers and slaves, missionaries often depicted the slave-holders as the real "savages" whose moral sentiments had been deeply corrupted by the unimpeded exercise of private despotism. Likewise, while the "Negro" race was seen as mired in forms of barbarism, the source of this degeneration was considered to be the institution of slavery itself. For Hall, the emancipation debates thus turned in fundamental ways on the "disputed figure of the African" and what his/her essential nature might be, marking the first of many wars of representation (108). The planters' iconic portrait of the lazy, evasive, and capricious native was countered by the missionaries' insistence that the native was more like a good-natured child in need of guidance and education. For Hall, seeing the Negro as an equal member in the universal "family of man" was premised on the belief that the slave had the potential to become a good Christian as responsible, industrious, and independent as his Baptist brethren. And the "great experiment" in Jamaica, the reconstruction of society in the aftermath of slavery, would be terrain upon which the missionary movement could demonstrate in practice the truth of its moral vision.

For Hall, the period of initial optimism was followed by a recurring series of crises and setbacks to the fulfillment of the "missionary dream"; rather than a potential utopia, Jamaica became the scene of disappointment and decay. Like the ambiguities that Muthu found inherent in the image of the noble savage, for Hall the contradictory views of the native that existed in the interstices of the philanthropic mind would be reworked in context of these crises. The universalism of missionary discourse was a deeply paternal one. Emancipation itself was often construed as a gift to the natives (rather than a right), and if the natives proved to be, in some sense, "unworthy" of this gift, sentiments of identification with the native would swing towards disavowal (128, 255, 320, 359). While the sources of crisis were many, such as the political entrenchment of settler society, the labor question, and worries over the stability of the Baptist mission itself, the burden of responsibility, in the minds of abolitionists as well as their critics, increasingly shifted to the ex-slave population. This shift manifested initially in the failure to "improve," and most crucially in their political rebelliousness. While the Morant Bay episode dramatically displayed the shift towards more racialized depictions of the insolent and irredeemably savage nature of the Negro in missionary discourse, there was a growing sense that the native that discourse had claimed to know and represent became more inscrutable. Rebellion not only turned notions of pity to contempt but also fed an anxiousness about an inability to "know the heart of the native[s]" and speak on their behalf.

Hall's history depicts a transformation of attitudes towards native subjects that underwrote the decline of abolitionism; it thus converges in many ways with both Muthu's and Pitts's accounts of the tenuous nature of forms of universalism when confronted with the politics of empire. To an extent, Hall's works confirms Muthu's and Pitts's claim that a simple belief in egalitarianism (or minimal understandings of moral universalism) in practice could not adequately guard against exclusionary imperial politics. On the other hand, Hall's account of the instabilities of the missionaries' understandings of equality also suggests that what made their commitment to universalism tenuous was less its minimal nature than the enhanced sense of cultural pre-conditions implicit within it. In elucidating the balance between universalism and pluralism that critics of empire were able to maintain, Muthu emphasizes the latter, that is, the degree to which the universalism of Kant, Herder, and Diderot was compatible with a remarkably deep investment in the incommensurability of moral beliefs and practices. Pitts, on the other hand, emphasizes the robustness of Smith's, Bentham's, and (perhaps most surprisingly) Burke's universalism (premised upon a commitment to the rationality of all people) as the bulwark against the slide into imperial liberalism. Indeed, in Pitt's analysis Mill, for example, is seen to have erred most profoundly in abandoning Bentham's strict universalism in favor of a view that different societies required different forms of government. By contrast, Hall's account of the fragility of Baptist antislavery discourse highlights a peculiar internal dynamic between universalism and culturalism. The difficulty of balancing universalism with pluralism is here tied to a certain vulnerability inherent in universalism itself which, when confronted by political resistance, gives way to harsher attitudes about the intractable differences between people, the inscrutability of other ways of life, and the ever-present potential for racial and cultural conflict. The way in which abolitionist exuberance and capaciousness could slide into moral disavowal, disillusionment, and an unforgiving stance towards others exposes an oscillation internal to the structure of imperial ideology. Hall's focus on the reverberations between metropolitan attitudes and colonial experiences usefully reminds us that it is also in the practical terrain of imperial politics that ideas about human unity and cultural diversity were negotiated, contested, and constituted.