
“Another World Is Actual”: Between Imperialism and Freedom

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There have been two distinctive aspects to James Tully’s approach to the study of imperialism over the years, and both are put to work in these remarkable volumes.¹ The first is his belief in two seemingly contradictory claims: (i) that imperialism is much more pervasive than usually thought (conceptually, historically and practically); and yet (ii) that there are many more forms of resistance to it than usually appreciated. The second is the way Tully places the situation of indigenous peoples at the heart of his analysis. This goes back to his groundbreaking work on Locke, and his extraordinary re-interpretation of Locke’s work in the context of early modern discourses of imperialism. But the situation of indigenous peoples also deeply informed his argument in *Strange Multiplicity*²—and not only in terms of the central motif of the lectures provided by Haida artist Bill Reid. In that book, he sought to reveal and defend a much richer conception of legal and cultural pluralism than had hitherto been appreciated by liberal constitutionalists and their critics. Indigenous peoples are not simply a litmus test for our thinking about pluralism but represent a much deeper challenge to the way we conceptualize notions of citizenship, sovereignty, democracy and freedom in the first place—and indeed the nature of political philosophy itself.

However, in order to appreciate these distinctive claims—to really *see* the space opened up by this approach—Tully calls for nothing less than a major perspective shift in contemporary political theory. He casts his approach as a

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form of “public philosophy” that is distinct from the usual “analytic,” “historical” and “genealogical” approaches in the field. What is distinctive about Tully’s notion of public philosophy is its fundamentally *practical* nature.³ Theory, on its own, loses its privileged place not only in terms of the position of the theorist standing above the political fray but also in the orientation of the activity of political theory itself. The elaboration of this shift is complex but in essence involves moving away from the central activity of political theory being the construction of abstract theories that are meant to validate or redeem practical claims made in political argument, to engaging with (by seeking to understand, clarify, compare, contrast etc.) the actual claims and practices themselves. This shouldn’t be confused with a demand that political philosophy become more empirical or practical in a way analogous to the relation between ethics and “applied ethics”. Rather—drawing on diverse sources, but especially the late Wittgenstein and Foucault—it involves taking activity and practice as primary and prior to theory. Hence, we focus on the particular language games we find ourselves in and attempt to examine them from a range of different perspectives. We do this through historical and conceptual comparison: listening to others and the way they understand and justify their practices, looking for similarities and dissimilarities across different games and across time, drawing analogies and seeking out ways of speaking and acting differently.

Taking his cue from Wittgenstein’s famous analysis of the indeterminacy of rule-following, Tully sees a close analogy between the inherent linguistic freedom this analysis implies (of the possibility of going on differently always being present in any language game), and the practical extra-linguistic freedom of “enactment and improvisation within the inherited relations of power in which the vocabulary is used.”⁴ This is nothing less than the “civic” or democratic freedom of citizens; the freedom to enter into dialogue with those who govern and to call the prevailing norms of recognition and action coordination to which they are subject into question.⁵

What does this approach yield in terms of an analysis of modern imperialism? The first result is a subtle and extended conception of empire that is both diffuse and yet relentlessly hierarchical. It bears a passing resemblance to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*⁶ (and Tully draws on that work in various places in these volumes), but is importantly different. For Hardt and Negri, what makes Empire distinct from the imperialisms that preceded it is the replacement of territorial and spatial expansion with a strategy of *intensification*. Empire does not have an outside; it is “everywhere and nowhere,”⁷ marking a radical break with state-based colonialism and dissolving distinctions between civil society and state, public and private, natural and artificial. Tully, on the other

hand, sees much greater continuity. On a methodological level, the difference is significant too: The totalizing, Spinozist ontology of Empire runs against Tully's Wittgensteinian attention to the rough ground of everyday practice and historical detail. For Tully there always remains—at least potentially—an “outside” to Empire, although it can't be determined *a priori* (or confirmed *a posteriori*) through transcendental argument.⁸

What are the distinguishing features of Tully's conception of imperialism? The deep roots of modern imperialism are to be found in the very nature of the state system itself, including the forms of international law and global governance that have emerged since the end of World War II. The philosophical roots of this system can be found in both Hobbesian and Kantian political thought, and especially the idea of the European constitutional state (embedded within a cosmopolitan world order of like-minded states) as the logical terminus of a theory of modernization and development. This meta-narrative about the relationship between constituent power—a multitude exercising its power both as and in order to become a people—and constitutional form (the modern state) continues to exercise a powerful influence on contemporary politics. As a result, even those who take themselves to be criticizing the contemporary state system often operate within an unquestioned horizon fixed, in part, by this imperial legacy.

Although cosmopolitan democrats and liberal universalists think of themselves as offering arguments that transcend earlier imperial orders, in actual fact they are built on the same foundations. This is true for three reasons, according to Tully. First, they presuppose the normative and juridical language of the international system of constitutional states, even when criticizing it. Second, many still adopt a social scientific language and philosophy of history that links development and modernization with progress towards a Euro-American ideal type. Third, even when embracing the language of self-determination and broader human rights norms, this remains within a horizon shaped by informal imperialism. The very global structures required to enforce human rights, for example, although potentially of enormous value, also remain entangled within the structures of informal imperialism. Thus, the room for maneuver that any democratic, self-determining people has is constrained by the terms set by the current global order of states and its legitimating meta-narratives and practices. What the current international order allows, argues Tully, is only forms of “low intensity democracy” (i.e., elite representative democracy) usually oriented towards neoliberal social and economic ends.

Even self-declared postcolonial theorists can't escape the grip of informal imperialism. They are correct in identifying the many ways in which the “hegemon” formally and informally structures the field of possibilities for freedom

and also about the opportunities for modifying these forms of governance from the inside. This is because both formal and informal imperialism has always worked, to varying degrees, through the customs and practices of local populations, and this opens up the possibility for exercising the kind of Wittgensteinian and Foucauldian linguistic and practical “civic” freedom mentioned above. However for Tully, even this is ultimately not an *alternative* to contemporary imperialism, but rather “a move within the strategic and tactical logic of informal imperialism.”⁹ It’s not a dead end, but it’s not a radical break either. Despite the pervasiveness of imperialism, “another world is actual.”¹⁰ Just because “Western imperialism” governs through indirect and informal means and so actually *depends* on the active collaboration of those subject to it, another world of pluralism persists within the “interstices of globalisation.” And one of the most astonishing examples of this fact is the survival and resurgence of indigenous peoples worldwide.

Tully discusses the situation of indigenous peoples in two chapters that reflect his distinctive argument about the nature of imperialism. In “The Negotiation of Reconciliation” (I chap. 7), he outlines the contours of both an alternative history of and normative framework for relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (the comparative/historical goes hand in hand with the normative throughout Tully’s argument). In the next chapter, “Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom,” the tone is somewhat bleaker, given its focus on the main obstacles that remain for negotiating reconciliation today.

The problem, Tully claims, lies with two crucial “hinge propositions” that secure the system of internal colonization under which indigenous peoples continue to live. The first is the claim that exclusive jurisdiction over indigenous peoples is not only legitimate but effective; and the second is that there is basically no viable alternative. Either the state continues to exercise exclusive jurisdiction—even in the context of treaty-making—or indigenous peoples must overthrow it and exercise their own.¹¹ These propositions are woven so deeply into the structure of modern politics, Tully argues, that they are almost impossible to dislodge directly. Instead, they have to be put into question through a multiplicity of immanent approaches and techniques that challenge and modify them from within. These are as much struggles *of* freedom as *for* freedom and they have the potential to lead to “the same kind of freedom for indigenous peoples that Western political theorists and citizens already enjoy.”¹²

But how do these struggles *of* freedom amount to a genuine alternative to imperialism? More specifically, how can we distinguish forms of contestation that *modify* an imperial relationship—leaving the underlying structures

intact—from one that *transforms* it? For Tully, transforming an imperial relationship involves bringing it under the democratic authority of those subject to those relations of power. But what does this actually mean, given the pervasive and deeply embedded nature of imperialism? The appeal to democracy is at the heart of many of the critical moves Tully makes, especially in the concluding chapters of volume II. To de-imperialize a relation is to bring the constitutional and constituent structures of three crucial dimensions of imperialism (direct rule, indirect rule and informal and neo-liberal rule) under the “participatory shared authority of those subject to them.”¹³ This involves a kind of civic or reflexive freedom of negotiating with and against the norms and practices to which we are subject.

Three crucial aspects of this kind of freedom are important to note here. First, democracy as civic freedom is contrasted with “low intensity” and elite-representative democracy. Tully appeals to the myriad forms of participatory (i.e., “high-intensity”) democracy, and indeed there is a need to expand the “severely limited field of possibilities of direct participatory freedom.”¹⁴ Second, Tully is concerned to shift our perspective from standard ideals of modern citizenship—rooted in conceptions of modernization and development, legal status, representative institutions and “vote-centric” activity—to forms of “diverse citizenship.” Diverse citizenship represents a distinct understanding of citizenship *per se*. It consists of all those “singular civic activities and improvisations of the governed” to exert democratic control over those forces governing them.¹⁵ There is “another world of pluralism”¹⁶ to discover, Tully insists, *if only we would look more carefully*. Third, and finally, civic freedom tracks those forms of government (broadly understood) and relations of power acting on individuals, not national or cultural membership. This is because many of the harms individuals and groups suffer from today are the result of agents and practices that cut across states within which one enjoys the status of *civil* citizen. And so “global citizenship” must be at once local and transnational—or “glocal” as Tully puts it—which is importantly distinct from “cosmopolitan.” Cosmopolitan citizenship merely replays the Kantian (false) choice between either a world state or a federation of republican constitutional states.

Here we reach a crucial juncture in the argument and one that I think needs greater elaboration: Which of these “singular activities” best manifests civic freedom? In other words, which offers the greatest hope for “de-imperializing” social and political relations? Tully makes clear that the critical activity of comparing and contrasting modes of “citizenization” must occur “from the perspectives and normative criteria of each.”¹⁷ But then how do we judge which activities are freedom enhancing (i.e., transforming) and which are not (merely

modifying)? Doesn't the Wittgensteinian and Foucauldian approach he adopts make it difficult to embrace anything other than the task of modification as opposed to transformation?

Tully shifts back and forth between these possibilities without ever really making clear where the boundary between modification and transformation lies. No doubt it all depends on what we mean by transformation. Part of his argument is that we must kick away some of the familiar ladders we use to reach the heights of ideal theory and stick more closely to the rough ground of the ordinary. At the same time, however, this shift of perspective from the theoretical to the practical also entails a parallel emphasis on the capacity for *internal* self-transformation and self-reflexive activity, which Gandhi exemplifies. This is an intriguing double movement. The decolonization of our practical relations depends also on the decolonization of our imagination, and the two are clearly intertwined. But what still requires explanation is how the myriad of daily forms of resistance and contestation that constitute "diverse citizenship" adds up to genuinely transformative modes of collective political action. Thus we return to some familiar questions about the nature of democracy, especially the relation between participation and representation. One of the signal strengths of these two volumes is how they work to de-familiarize some of these common questions, casting them in novel and arresting ways.

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Notes

1. James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key: I Democracy and Civic Freedom; II Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
2. James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
3. See the discussion by Tony Laden in this symposium.
4. Tully, *Public Philosophy I*, 245.
5. Tully, *Public Philosophy I*, 310.
6. Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge Mass., Harvard UP, 2000)
7. Hardt, Negri, *Empire*, 190.
8. Tully, *Public Philosophy I*, 130ff.

9. Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, 161
10. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 301
11. Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, 276-7.
12. Tully, *Public Philosophy* I, 288.
13. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 217.
14. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 217.
15. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 248.
16. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 301.
17. Tully, *Public Philosophy* II, 248.

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