

Review of Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, 2020), *Contemporary Political Theory* 21 (2022).

Dreamworlds of Race is the culmination—for now, at least—of what Duncan Bell calls his “loose trilogy” of works on the intellectual history of Anglo-American relations around the turn of the twentieth century. It follows hard on the heels of Bell’s *Idea of Greater Britain* (Bell 2007) and his *Reordering the World* (Bell 2016) and provides a novel, often surprising, survey of the imperial imaginaries of the Anglosphere at the zenith of its global extent, roughly from Victoria’s becoming empress of India in 1876 to the First World War. It also lay within the global moment, between the invention of the steam press and the widespread international imposition of copyright, when print exploded across the English-speaking world, leaving a vast and intimidating archive for historians to wrestle into shape. It is a tribute to Bell’s analytical subtlety, his writerly flair and his sheer *Sitzfleisch* that he can sustain a gripping argument not just across three books but, in this case, over four hundred pages, about the sometimes bloated, rambling, self-congratulatory and even repellent products of the era. *Dreamworlds of Race* sparkles with illuminating coinages and unexpected connections, and thereby renders even some of the least appealing, indeed most appalling, characters of the late nineteenth-century Anglo-world, such as Cecil Rhodes and Andrew Carnegie, both compelling and comprehensible. What makes the achievement of the book still more remarkable is that Bell can bring these unsavoury and often brutal paladins of empire into fruitful conversation with a host of other authors and discourses, from Victorian speculative fiction to recent Afrofuturism. Whether these promising threads indicate unfinished business for Bell remains to be seen.

Dreamworlds of Race maps the variegated landscapes of argument concerning Anglo-American unity from about 1880 to 1914 and exposes the mechanisms contemporaries proposed to reinforce that unity in the present and, still more compellingly, to project it into a peaceful future. For some of the most prominent, notably Rhodes, Carnegie and the American journalist W. T. Stead, the primary technology of unification was race, a biological-cum-cultural “cyborg assemblage” that could shrink physical distance and promote white supremacy across the world from Auckland to Aberdeen and from Sydney to San Francisco. Imperial Britain and its tentacular extension through its settler colonies formed one side of this imagined body; the United States, as it added an insular empire to its continental polity of conquest, was the other. Imagined as a global

whole and occasionally folding in other White peoples this “racial utopia” might at last be the vector of perpetual peace visionaries had dreamt of since the late seventeenth century. Yet only one side of the colour line would reap the fruits of that peace, of course: aboriginal “dying” races were assumed to be rapidly vanishing and White supremacy would rule over the remaining “darker” peoples of the Earth. If this were to be peace, it was a peace founded on dispossession, hierarchy, heredity and on pseudo-science as well as upon scientific fictions.

Bell’s magisterial account of this imaginary assemblage stimulates a host of reflections and reactions. For the purposes of this forum, I want to focus briefly on three that relate to my own interests as an historian—*oceans*, *treaties* and *monarchy*—and then conclude with a couple of less substantial points about the insubstantial: that is, regarding the peculiar prominence of *dreams* and *ghosts* in this utopian moment. I begin with the sea. The intellectual and political action of *Dreamworlds of Race* takes place during a time of greatly heightened oceanic consciousness, not just in the anglophone world of the Atlantic but also in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As Bell notes, contemporaries perceived that novel technologies, especially the steamship and the telegraph, had “annihilated” time and space, particularly *oceanic* space. Coal-fired ships and gutta-percha-wrapped cables sped bodies and communications over previously unimaginable distances and rendered conceivable what had before been unthinkable: political communities that extended over water rather than land, and that could encompass a planetary diaspora formerly divided by the seas not linked by them (Bell 2005). The United States and Canada were the only major segments of the Angloworld to be contiguous, while Australian federation after 1901 provided a model of greater integration for the wider settler world. But what if the novel distance-destroying technologies could in effect evaporate the world’s waters to make racial utopianism a reality? The Angloworld would then necessarily be de-territorialised—or, at least, differently territorialised. It would sit between the classic terracentrism of Westphalian mythology, firmly founded on bounded land, and the incipient aerial world that lay just over the imaginative horizon of most of Bell’s subjects, but which was just beginning to populate their dreams and nightmares, most notably in the work of H. G. Wells. Yet how did Carnegie, Rhodes, Stead and their ilk conceive of specifically *oceanic* space? Did they, like their equally vocal and prolific contemporary, Alfred Thayer Mahan, theorise or historicise it? Did they understand it as an alternative or competitor to territorial space? Did they integrate oceanic and terrestrial visions into their dreamworlds? And did they view sea power as a technology of White supremacy? In short, and to run a variation on Thongchai

Winichakul's illuminating concept, did they ever conceive of the "geo-body" of the Angloworld as what might be called a "hydro-body" (Winichakul 1994)?

The utopian racialist visions that Bell anatomises were not just ontological: they were also teleological. And, following in the footsteps of a hundred theorists from the long eighteenth century, the telos they sought was peace. Bell has uncovered a sunken archipelago of "imperial peace" theorists who believed, *contra* the so-called "democratic peace" theorists, that the victory of imperial rule would bring with it the triumph of peace itself. Among the pacific technologies they believed that empires might wield were *treaties* among (rather than within) empires. Treaties appear throughout *Dreamworlds of Race* as intermittent instruments for articulating the Angloworld: that is, both for joining and linking it and for expressing its governing ideals. As Bell notes, the Angloworld's dreamers returned repeatedly to the idea of an arbitration treaty as the mechanism for preventing war and calming conflict. Treaties could also be the formal agreements that could ground federalism and federation itself—as the etymology of those very terms, from the Latin *foedera*, or pacts, would have signalled to those with classical educations and to Americans. This sprinkling of treaty plans over the course of Bell's narrative inevitably raises the question of just how frequent such proposals were. The International Relations scholar Edward Keene has identified what he terms a "treaty-making revolution" in the last third of the nineteenth century, on the eve of Bell's explosion of racial utopianism (Keene 2012). How were these two epochal developments related, if at all? How did the visions of peace-making through treaties reflect other symptoms of the treaty "revolution", such as the late-century surge of multilateralism, the various Hague Conventions, or other species of pacification in the period that did not rely on the horizontal recognition of sovereign equality but the forcible imposition of imperial hierarchy? And how seriously were they taken in the decades before the Kellogg-Briand Pact, for example? The capacity for making such agreements had long been an index of sovereign equality and a condition for its recognition: with this in mind, one might ask whether the conditions of eligibility for this constrained club changed in the context of what Bell calls the "bio-cultural assemblage" of late nineteenth-century racialism.

Bell shows that the "bio-" part of that assemblage descended both somatically and culturally. It was inscribed on bodies and passed by inheritance, creating distinctions between peoples that racialists could then arrange in a hierarchy with the White "race" at its summit. Racialism thereby shared two defining characteristics—hierarchy and heritability—with another

exclusionary ideology of the era: that is, with monarchism. For some of the characters in *Dreamworlds of Race*, monarchy was a major stumbling-block to the integration of the Anglo-world. Running athwart that imagined community was a division between American-style republicanism, of the anti-monarchical variety, and British monarchism as the ligament of unification through shared subjecthood rather than via common citizenship. Since the mid-eighteenth century, British utopian writers had tended to project the institution of monarchy into the distant future even as they wished away many of the other retrograde features of their own societies; for tolerably obvious reasons, American speculative writers had long since expunged monarchy from the repertoire of their possible futures. Elsewhere, Bell has traced the malleability of late nineteenth-century monarchism in his study of Victorian “patriot queenship” (Bell 2006). With this in mind, one might ask how the two leading strains of heritable connection, racialism and monarchism, collided, coalesced or subducted in the period covered by *Dreamworlds of Race*. Was a racialist federalism the means to evade an unpalatable choice between republicanism and monarchy? How did an originally German monarchy in the British Empire relate to the “Saxon” element within Anglo-Saxonism, and how did this in turn inform Rhodes’s plan for his programme of educational elite formation to include German as well as anglophone scholars? Moreover, and going somewhat beyond Bell’s chronology, could the British Commonwealth be seen as one of the lasting legacies of the utopianism he traces, albeit one mostly cleansed of racialism by the elevation of the monarchy as its binding institution (Murphy 2013)?

A world of dreams is often a world of ghosts: that is, of spectral presences from the past with the power to materialise in the present and even to point towards the future. Any reader of *Dreamworlds of Race* will be struck by the proliferation of dreams (and their dreamers) in the forty years or so on either side of the turn of the twentieth century. Although Bell does not discuss this oneiric surfeit directly, it would be valuable to know more about why dreams became such potent vectors for, among other matters, racialism and federalism in this moment. Can the salience of dreams perhaps be connected to Freud’s discovery in 1895 of dreams as the “royal road to the unconscious”? Or were these merely two manifestations of a larger “dreamworld” at the time? The increasing prominence of spiritualism might provide one part of the answer (and Bell reminds us that Stead was interested in spiritualism as well as utopianism, for instance). Like electricity and the telegraph, spiritualism was a de-territorialising technology that dissolved time and space and helped to make transregional, and even global, unity within the Anglosphere conceivable. It also

raised spectres from the past, especially the eighteenth-century past. The era of the American Revolution saw the imagining of Parliaments that travelled across the Atlantic, of novel forms of imperial citizenship and of federal solutions to prevent the fission of an oceanic imperial monarchy. In their wake came an explosion of constitutionalism, American and otherwise, that would later inspire similar transnational charters in the aftermath of the First World War. All this is of course not to say that the schemes Bell has so brilliantly reconstructed in *Dreamworlds of Race* were derivative or unoriginal: rather, that they formed links in dream sequences that stretched back at least a century and projected forward for decades more, some even into our own time. Readers of his latest masterpiece can only hope that he will deploy his archaeological skills to excavate other dreamworlds, past, present and future, and to extend his current trilogy into a tetralogy or even a pentalogy.

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