Comment by

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In one of the final chapters of the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx observed that much of what he was attempting to explain about labor exploitation in Britain by shredding its self-justifying, ideological mystifications stood fully exposed in Her Majesty's colonies. One imagines that he might have had recent events in India and the West Indies in mind as he wrote. In both places colonial rebellions in 1857 and 1865 had bared the political and social relations of labor on which the imperial project was grounded and stirred up racist reactions in Britain. For much of the century that followed, Marx's insight was largely ignored, by his adherents no less than his critics. In the 1930s, however, two sons of the West Indies, C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, writing of slave rebellion in Haiti and the transformation in labor relations in the British West Indies, respectively, took on the task of exploring important aspects of the interpenetration of metropolitan and colonial developments. Though powerful and influential, their work attracted more critics than imitators. Caribbeanists tend, with some justice, perhaps, to want to emphasize local events, personalities, and initiatives over imperial ones. Europeanists tend simply to ignore the colonies, writing the history of Europe as if metropole and colony were on different planets, their spaces in history as separate as their geographies. This intellectual division of labor is strangely (and amusingly) reminiscent of the seventeenth century, when colonial possessions were thought to inhabit spaces "beyond the line," meaning both a geopolitical space beyond the jurisdiction of international treaties and a social space beyond European moral conventions.

Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects,* whose central, organizing hypothesis is "that colony and metropolis are terms which can be understood only in relation to each other, and that the identity of colonizers is a constitutive part of Englishness" (p. 12), challenges this stubborn myopia and suggests how historical inquiry on the Continent as well as in Britain might be refocused. Appropriately, she credits James as a precursor in such an undertaking, but she in fact moves the boundaries further forward with her insistence that the vectors connecting metropole and colony were not asymmetric, running from center to periphery; ideas and people were remade by their colonial sojourns even as metropolitan developments profoundly shaped the colonies. Although she begins by mapping their separate spaces, she ends by showing that "Home" (as Britain was called) and colony were mutually imbricated, occupying in many ways a shared space. At a moment when the "homecoming" of their former colonial

#03225 UCP: JBS article # 420405

https://doi.org/10.1086/376465 Published online by Cambridge University Press

charges has so profoundly shaped contemporary politics from Britain to Italy, Hall opens possibilities for understanding such phenomena and intellectually "remapping" contemporary Europe in relation to its former colonies.

The narrative of *Civilising Subjects* is as far-flung as the British Empire, touching at times on India, Australia, and New Zealand, but it centers on the lives and hopes of the Baptist missionaries who, between the 1820s and the 1860s, journeyed from Birmingham to Jamaica, the largest of the British West Indian colonies. Drawing on an archive formed through a dense social and intellectual collective biography of missionary families and their associates, the book makes use of these "examined lives" to explore the bipolar world they fashioned. Marginal and powerless in their own society, these men and women saw in India and the British West Indies fields for imposing on the world their particular vision of God's grace. They would mold their black flocks into Christian and civilized (the words were bookends) men and women.

The book's title, *Civilising Subjects*, Hall informs us, carries a double meaning; the missionaries sought both to remake themselves into more civilized selves through their journey into the heart of darkness even as they civilized the heathen of the empire. The doubleness here seems to attach to the first word, wherein civilizing can be read both as achieving a kind of Christian discipline (especially "manliness") and rendering "the other" culturally familiar. One suspects a double entendre in the word "subjects" as well, however. On the one hand, the missionaries and their colonial parishioners share a common status as subjects of the British Crown, even as they inhabited sharply differentiated statuses as citizens of the nation-state. On the other hand, "civilization"—a kind of watch-word—lies at the center of a complexly linked discursive ensemble of "subjects"—nation and empire, Home and colony, culture and human nature, and the particularity of "Western" civilization and the universality of human rights. Threaded through Hall's narrative, therefore, these subjects form the principal elements of debate and agreement, and, as such, how they are understood both frames and limits the discursive and thus political responses to the midcentury crises over race, nation, and empire of which the Indian Mutiny and the Morant Bay Rebellion were particularly constitutive.

The double entendre of the title seems to be replicated throughout a text in which, in fact, multiple dualities are at play, mediating and modifying the primary one of metropole and colony. For example, there is the optimism of the heady era of abolition versus the postemancipation declension that followed; the subjecthood of empire versus citizenship in Britain; the antinomies of a missionary project for creating manly black

https://doi.org/10.1086/376465 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christians, which entailed independence of livelihood and church governance, versus the missionaries' anxiety to sustain white control; the public world of the missionary community and its engagement in contemporary politics versus the private world of domestic households, sustaining but unacknowledged; and, perhaps most important of all, the antiracist potential of a social movement at its zenith versus the racism that washed over its denouement.

In Hall's account the missionaries' journey was as much ideological as geographical. Having first targeted a "degenerate" but civilized India where they enjoyed only modest success, they turned increasingly to the slave populations of the West Indies. Although benefiting from the government's determination to ameliorate the conditions of slave life by encouraging religious conversion, the Baptists did not at the outset intend to interfere with slavery as such. In Jamaica, however, they found themselves in the midst of the massive slave rebellion of 1831, which was centered in the same northwestern end of the island where their missions were concentrated. Despite their deliberately apolitical, noninterventionist stance, they were labeled outside agitators and became special targets of the violent white reaction that followed the rebellion. This experience brought them, reluctantly, into full-throated opposition to slavery. The duality of body and soul could not be sustained it seemed; freeing the former became a precondition for ministering to the latter. In the process of publicizing their own plight in England, the missionaries opened the "sealed book" that the colonies had been to the larger British public. Less than two years later, Britain abolished slavery in its colonial possessions. During this same period, Dissenting religious groups moved more freely and visibly into British civil society. Being among the principal articulators of the humanitarian values that were seen to define and distinguish Englishness may well have provided a means to redefine their own social location at Home.

During the first decade of apprenticeship and the largely successful transition to free wage labor that followed, Baptist popularity and influence in Jamaica soared. Much like the planters, they could be and could do things differently beyond the line. Leaving behind any lingering class disabilities and commanding flocks far greater than any they would have seen in Britain, they assumed unwonted influence in civic affairs. They dreamed of building an alternative community, "a new Jerusalem"—a utopian idea shared by many otherwise dissimilar reform groups in the mid–nineteenth century. For the Baptists in Jamaica, however, this utopian dream entailed imagining Jamaica as a blank slate. As William Knibb put it, "the whole island . . . had to begin the world at once" (p. 137). Lurking behind that image as well, perhaps, was the rather blasphemous idea of the

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missionary as Creator. In any event, building "a good society" made Jamaica "a site for acting out white visions of how black people should live" (p. 136), which ultimately blasted the hopes of both.

On the other side of this Faustian image were genuinely good works and accomplishments, however, at least from the Afro-Jamaican point of view. Among the resident whites of Jamaica, the Baptist missionaries were by far the most radical in their vision of a future postemancipation society. They were instrumental in the development of the free villages, which afforded workers a measure of independence from the planters. Some of them worked to enfranchise these new black landowners and break the planters' monopoly on the colony's limited state powers. A few of them even challenged the strictest taboo of all by giving their daughters' hands in legal marriage to Afro-Jamaican suitors.

None of these initiatives could withstand the combined effects of the economic distress that descended on the sugar industry by midcentury, leaving the new social and labor initiatives stillborn; a reactionary colonial policy that stymied the growth of a more democratic polity; and the virulent resurgence of racism at Home, whose proponents deduced from economic distress and political crisis that blacks were inherently incapable of either free labor or democracy. Concurrent with these external confrontations were troubles arising from within their congregations and communities, as some of their black converts sought control over church properties that they had come to think of as their own, and as others "regressed" into African-inflected, syncretic beliefs and forms of worship. In the face of these challenges from within and without, Baptist optimism and antiracist commitments faltered. By the 1860s, the Baptist missionaries who remained in Jamaica espoused very different ideas from those of their predecessors who had led the abolitionist struggle thirty years earlier. Another violent black rebellion and an even more violent white repression brought seeming closure to the question of the blacks' state of civilization and thus their entitlement to freedom.

This is, of course, a familiar narrative, but Hall seeks to fashion a new perspective on it, in part, by reframing it in time and space. Or, at least, this is the implied promise and, I will argue below, the only partially fulfilled potential of the book. *Civilising Subjects* is structured around temporal as well as spatial phenomena, with sometimes a complex mixture of both. Toward the end of the book, for example, Hall alludes obliquely to "metropolitan time, colonial time, and familial time" (p. 440). Although one is left only to guess exactly what she is referring to here, she observes elsewhere that time was thought to have a different valence in the colonies (backward) and the metropole (progressive). She also draws our attention to the fact that there were actually two different groups of missionaries in

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Jamaica, both profoundly marked by their generational experience; one came of age during the heyday of abolition and the other during the crises of postemancipation. Time here, to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, is not "homogenous."

More important still, the divided spaces here are not just geographic. Space is gendered, racialized, and modulated by different temporalities. Men speak in public, while women write private letters to their families that sometimes get edited for publication in newspapers for a larger public. Missionary men suffer publicly under the verbal and physical attacks of planter foes, while women bury infants felled by a harsh tropical climate. Women's times and spaces, framed by domesticity and mortality, have a different pacing, and perhaps even a different valence than men's time. We see snippets of this: white missionary women filling in for their husbands, teaching black women domestic skills, and marrying and burying their children in joint ceremonies with their black parishioners. One would like to hear more on this phenomenon and the potential difference it made in the relations of mission and community. Indeed, the book is most powerful when—like the author's (with Leonore Davidoff) earlier *Family Fortunes* (1987)—it interweaves the private and public worlds of its protagonists. Private versus public becomes another duality to be examined and dissolved.

It is here, however, that the book may also be weakest, because Hall does not follow through on her most intriguing insights. The gendering of the missionary experience is repeatedly invoked in this book, but whether, how, or why that changed the basic narrative is unclear. Indeed, the narrative here is decidedly a male one, of which my brief summary above is an accurate rendition. While it is true that racial and gender dependency relations in the colonies mirrored class and gender relations in Britain, there is no evident causal linkage. By contrast, though rueful about the dearth of material on missionary wives, Hall provides numerous glimpses of their lives, activities, and relations with Afro-Jamaicans, as I noted above. One wonders whether this women's world might have provided a modification to the male narrative, if not a fully alternative one. Certainly that male narrative—of white hubris and religious declension—would not lead one to expect the persistent continuity of Baptist and Methodist influence that is fully evident in Jamaica up to this day. Casual observation suggests that Afro-Jamaican women are central to that continuity. Might there be a historical connection?

Of course, one hesitates to suggest other themes that this book might have taken on, given that it already takes on so much. The particular story of the Baptists plays out within a larger story of the British nation and its empire. Disparaged and marginalized within early nineteenth-century

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British society, the Baptist missionaries nonetheless form a kind of synecdoche for the British nation as a whole. Through them we witness how the literal making of individual selves took shape in metropole and colony. And just as for them the image of Englishness took shape most powerfully in its colonial mirror, so did anxiety over civilization and order—so heightened in the mid–nineteenth century—get refracted in the nation's colonial reflection.

One suspects that the link between the small and large narratives (which parallels the private and public divide) is related to Hall's two objectives stated at the outset: to understand how "racial thinking inscribes or is inscribed in the national," as well as the stubborn persistence and efficacy of "everyday racist thinking" (pp. 8, 13). Or, as she puts it, echoing Stuart Hall's famous formulation, she wants to investigate "how race was lived at the local level." Indeed, her strategy implies that racism's puzzling persistence and efficacy are perhaps the fruit of that very locality and "everydayness." One suspects that, in part, Hall has chosen the Baptist missionaries as her subjects, therefore, because they are perhaps among the few nineteenth-century social groups most likely to have been sympathetic to antiracism. In their story one can see both antiracism and racism unfold and articulate with other aspects of social life and with a life course. Although the great racist propagandists like Thomas Carlyle and Robert Knox stalk these pages, therefore, it is ultimately the ideas and convictions of these less well known personalities, the self-proclaimed "friends of the negro," that pose the core analytic challenge of the book.

Similarly, the city of Birmingham's self-identification took shape around its progressivism in general and abolitionism in particular; yet, it would provide fertile ground by the late nineteenth century for Joseph Chamberlain, who shaped the second stage of British imperialism so decisively, and for Enoch Powell, who in the mid–twentieth century heralded the rise of Britain's most recent racist reaction. It is not incidental, then, that Powell (and perhaps Margaret Thatcher) lurk around the margins of this book; the potential for either a racist or antiracist future is as alive in the present as it was in the 1840s and 1850s.

That earlier debate about Englishness—about which of the "two different conceptions of 'us,' constructed through two different notions of 'them'" would win out—ended in defeat for the antiracist forces (p. 25). As Hall shows, that debate had narrowed considerably by the 1860s; the arguments of the "negro's friends" had become ineffectual, tentative, and limited. In fact, there was hardly a debate at all, especially when compared to the one over slavery thirty years earlier. Indeed, what is striking is how much, by 1865, on which the missionaries and planters could agree. There were, to be sure, serious political differences between, say, John Henderson

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and Governor Edward John Eyre, but the essential criteria for civilized subjecthood, which is to say Englishness, was not among them. In one of his first speeches as governor, Eyre had piously counseled black petitioners for land and tax reform that what they really needed was proper marriages and household arrangements. Their problem was that they did not provide themselves (parents and children, boys and girls) with separate sleeping quarters at bedtime, not that they scarcely had the financial means for multibedroom houses in the first place. Baptist missionaries had been urging essentially that same message for more than a decade; "neat" and "orderly" were as important adjectives to them as to Eyre. The point here is not that there were not substantial and consequential differences between planter allies like Eyre and the missionaries; there most certainly were. But for the broader story of the failure of emancipation and its racial legacy, how they ended up with worldviews so closely aligned is the nub of the story.

Through Hall's analysis, I believe that we can discern a certain paradox, the significance and applicability of which extends far beyond the plight of her particular subjects. It would seem that it is only through empathy with the sufferings of the other that one can come to identify with and act politically in their behalf, but that empathy requires an imaginative construction of "them" as "like us" or at least capable of becoming so. The independence of mind and manliness that made one "like us," however, also opened the possibility for difference. In this scenario, then, "they can and should become like us and we must guide them through that process" is followed by "they are not like us [nor likely to become so]." As a result "they" become the distant subjects of our skeptical, if not hostile, regard. So, for example, the idea of redemption was crucial to an acceptance of the African as a fellow human being, with redemption being calculated in religious or political-economic terms or both. But the Baptist missionaries in Jamaica were not the last reformers who reasoned thus and found themselves hung on the horns of a dilemma: on the one hand, a cultural relativism likely to lead to political passivity; on the other hand, assumptions of cultural superiority and hegemony likely to end in racism.

In the nineteenth century this tension was negotiated through the notion of civilization and the civilizing process. Though spoken in terms of values, manners, religion, and education, underlaying these was in fact a specific set of novel, interrelated economic and social arrangements. Lurking beneath the skin of the civilized subject was the heathen within. Perhaps William Morgan, a veteran abolitionist and Baptist lay activist whose first visit to Jamaica came months after Morant Bay, exemplifies the tensions that his compatriots' felt between pluralism and prejudice. His "encounter with Jamaica raised new questions and possibilities and

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destabilised somewhat conventional anti-slavery wisdom. . . . Jamaica was indeed a different kind of society from the metropolis and might have its own culture. Being on the island changed how men thought. But the distance from the metropolis secured the peripheral relation of the colony in metropolitan thinking. . . . Whilst there, Morgan was able to reach for an understanding of this other place, those other peoples with their cultures located in particular histories. Once back in the metropolis, the hierarchy of relations, which had been only slightly dislodged, was reasserted" (p. 420). Enfolded back within the comfortingly smug myths of his Birmingham peers—manly citizens overseeing dependents at Home and abroad, all "in their various stages of being 'civilised'"—whatever brief glimmers of alternative possibilities he had sensed were extinguished (p. 432). The racial myths, then, may well have been as vital to class relations at Home as to race relations in the empire.

Regrettably, one finishes this important and fascinating book with the feeling that, despite its many merits, it has not realized the full potential of its own compelling materials and conceptualizations. For a book that makes much of mutually imbricated spaces and temporalities, the organization is puzzling. Divided into two parts, the book first follows the missionaries from Birmingham to Jamaica and then tells essentially the same story from the perspective of Birmingham. Some readers may find this disorienting, since the temporal order seems inverted. For example, we learn much about the social roots of the Baptist project in part 2, the fruits of which we have already read about in part 1. Hall never tells us why she made this choice. One might fill in one possible political justification. With the colonies coming first, the initiative might be imagined to have shifted there rather than being held by the metropole. Such a reading will not withstand the abundant evidence to the contrary, however: money and policy initiatives from the metropole were essential to the defense of black colonial freedoms. This ordering, moreover, makes the climax of the book somewhat anticlimatic. One can well appreciate the difficulties of organizing a book of this ambition and magnitude, and no imaginable scheme is without peril or immune from criticism. For me, however, this particular order sacrifices the necessary closure on some of the powerful themes raised by the text—which the epilogue is inadequate to recoup—and thus much of the book's punch is dissipated.

This is not merely a stylistic quibble. Both narratively and thematically, the argument depends on a profound temporal simultaneity. Most compelling of all is the fact that having set up the duality of metropole and colony, Hall works skillfully and subtly to complicate and partially undermine it. A number of the Baptist missionaries died and were buried in Jamaica, as were their children and grandchildren. It became Home,

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fusing two disparate usages of that word in ways that even they could not disentangle. For those at "home" in Britain, the West Indies were both distant and close, "a kind of outpost of the metropolis, an extension, or perhaps excrescence, of the self, rather than somewhere entirely separate . . . inside rather than outside" (p. 70).

The British had little patience for the French, who sought to assimilate their colonial possessions into "le plus grande France," but it is striking that Britain would be the first European colonial power to confront a twentieth-century immigration crisis as its former colonial subjects claimed their rightful place at Home. One suspects that ligatures—cultural, intellectual, and social—between colony and metropole were more varied and densely articulated than they had thought. The fact that Britain, like France, had to call on those "subjects" to act as "citizens" in defense of the homeland in two world wars probably contributed to those subsequent claims. But as with the missionaries in Jamaica, the migrants' story is likely to be more complex than that.

Indeed, nothing drives home the dizzying complexity of this simultaneous and multiply imbricated self-fashioning in metropole and colony than Hall's final paragraph, which offers us the image of Marcus Garvey, a child of the Methodists' and Baptists' Dissenting tradition, who met the first of his future wives at a church-sponsored debate over the relation between morality and civilization. The slogan of his United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—"One God, One Aim, One Destiny"—could have easily framed a meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society a century earlier. Indeed, for its anthem, sung at the opening and closing of each meeting, the UNIA adopted a missionary hymn, "From Greenland's icy mountains, to India's coral strand." Readers of the book will be reminded of an earlier reference to this hymn in Hall's text; it was sung to close the twenty-fourth anniversary celebration of the Birmingham chapter of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1847. The song, Hall notes, "celebrated missionary work across the globe, and reflected [the missionaries] own privileged position as givers of light to heathens in bondage to ignorance and sin" (p. 345). On one level, this image suggests the plasticity of all utopian programs and sensibilities: the "civilizing mission" could be adapted and put in the service of many disparate groups and objectives. The UNIA's mission, after all, was "to civilize" as well as reclaim Africa. On yet another level, however, this bizarre conjuncture reminds us that universalist discourses often mask particularistic ends and means. Once again, far beyond the power of place-names and grave markers to convey, the Baptists had sowed deeper than even they imagined.

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