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**Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism.** By

Alexander Livingston. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 260p. \$99.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Matthew Festenstein, *University of York*

William James has been a congenial, irritating and elusive subject for political theorists. In a famous essay, Bertrand Russell claimed that, while pragmatism begins with liberty and toleration it ultimately can have no way of reconciling disagreement except through “the arbitrament of the big battalions. By this development it becomes equally adapted to democracy at home and imperialism abroad” (Charles R. Pigden (ed.), *Russell on Ethics*, 1999, p. 231). For Alexander Livingston, James should be understood as a sensitive critical analyst of this will to power, not its mouthpiece. On this interpretation, behind both philosophical monism and imperialism lies a shared craving for authority in an uncertain world which can be shaped through human agency. This craving pulls the modern self into fantasies of sovereign mastery or powerless resignation in the face of a world without fixed foundations. For Livingston, James’s pragmatism works to “unsettle the closure of abstraction, dogmatism, and self-certainty and to resignify uncertainty, risk, and chance as occasions for creative freedom” (p. 13). Livingston’s book brings together the study of pragmatism with research into empire, “interrogating its complicated relationship with the rich mythology that underpins American empire” (p.15). He makes especial

use of what he calls James's anti-imperialist *Nachlass*, the speeches, notes and correspondence that sprang from James's furious reaction to the occupation of the Philippines. At the same time, Livingston seeks to show that James's is a distinctively American anti-imperialism, entangled in the ideology and patterns of anxiety that it criticizes: "the idioms of pioneer freedom, frontier mastery, individualism and democratic faith that give James's anti-imperialism its critical purchase also threaten to co-opt his political thought into a distinctively uncritical faith in the liberal nationalism he challenges" (p. 52).

Livingston's first chapter focuses on the role played by Ralph Barton Perry's 1935 monumental biography, *The Thought and Character of William James*, in the interpretation of James's political thought. Livingston argues that Perry, in seeking to rescue James's pragmatism from association with Italian fascism (expressed, for example, by his Harvard colleague William Y. Elliot in *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics* (1928)), was led to depoliticize James's thought and so to present his anti-imperialism as a matter of personal temperament rather than as having any important link to his philosophy. The rest of the book seeks to identify some of these links, without simplistically suggesting that James's pragmatism implies a specific political doctrine or, indeed, that questions of personal temperament can be expunged. Chapter 2 outlines shared concerns with the pragmatic consequences of a craving for certainty that Livingston finds both in well-known philosophical works such as *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, and in correspondence and occasional writings on corporate "bigness" and worship of success. Like success worship, philosophical monism, with its promise of "*édition de luxe*" of the world, against which all actual apprehension seems distorted, provides an object of intense craving

that can also motivate a passive resignation in the face of its unachievability. Chapter 3 turns more directly to ideologies of imperialism and puts James's vision of the strenuous life in dialogue with Theodore Roosevelt's martial rhetoric. A shared ideal of strenuous heroism – which was immensely important for James in a number of ways – is transformed by Roosevelt into a brutal rallying cry for a will to power. Here Livingston brings out how James subverts, without entirely divesting himself of, the masculine republican discourse that Roosevelt seeks to mobilize for imperialist expansion.

In the following chapter, Livingston foregrounds an important methodological feature of James's argument; namely, its use of exemplars and narratives, to explore his address on the martyred colonel of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment, Robert Gould Shaw. James's brother Wilky had been a member of this regiment and was horribly injured in the assault on Fort Wagner in which Shaw died. Characteristically, Livingston sets the speech ( which James himself dismissively referred to as an academic composition) alongside "The Will to Believe" and, more strikingly, Gilles Deleuze's idea of the "stutter," to unearth from it a complex account of the hesitant emergence of political conviction from social and embodied experience. Chapter 5 shines a spotlight on another theme that runs through the text, the relationship of pragmatism to American exceptionalism, vividly endorsed in Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*. Considering George Santayana's characteristically lofty judgment that James held a "false moralistic view of history," Livingston finds in James as well as in his student W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* a form of meliorism that is open to tragedy and finitude.

Livingston's readings of James are sophisticated and scholarly. Drawing both on the historical sources and a wide range of contemporary political theory; this is an imaginative attempt both to reconstruct James's point of view and remain sensitive to the blindspots and evasions that it entails. If Perry's James was a figure whose thought and character supported the USA's moral authority in the 1940s, Livingston's is emphatically one for the present moment, at least in political theory. This is an immensely fruitful strategy for interpreting James: *Damn Great Empires!* makes a major contribution to the literature, alongside such important work by George Cotkin (who is more skeptical) and, more recently, treatments by Kennan Ferguson and others. Commentators sometimes struggle to discern a yield for political theory in James's writings and often use him as a springboard for their own cultural and political speculations. There is some risk of this in Livingston's approach: while anti-imperialism is James's most clearly defined political concern and one that focused his activism, it was largely restricted to the last decade of his life. However, Livingston deftly draws on his source material to ground a rigorous discussion that is a model of its kind.

Where Livingston's dialectic of closeness to, and distance from, James's point of view seems to participate to some extent in James's elusiveness to us, however, is in his assessment of the significance of his anti-imperialism. Sometimes it seems that Livingston wants to make a case for James's hesitant and ambivalent approach to agency as an important corrective to aspirations to sovereign mastery, but this is an orientation rather than an argument in the text. Further, Livingston's argument in effect is that James is both a theorist of imperialist myopia and a myopic theorist, at least in some respects: this seems fair enough. Nevertheless, as the transition from

James to DuBois in the final chapter suggests, there is a question about the extent to which James provides an indispensable resource for thinking about race, empire and domination, even at the hands of such an alert and ingenious reader as Livingston.. Most obviously, there is an inevitable focus on the metropolitan psyche and ideological formations rather than the colonial impacts or political economy of US intervention. And there is not very much at all to go on if you want a picture of how a global order should or may be organized. Livingston's outstanding study calmly skewers many of the critical and polemical clichés that have gathered around James's pragmatism, including Russell's. But it is unlikely fully to dispel the sense that, even at his most politically committed, James is a supreme theorist of subjectivity rather than power.