

## **John Wesley (and Empire)**

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In Wesley's 18<sup>th</sup> century the lineaments of what Hardt and Negri have famously characterized in our time as "Empire" were already beginning to make themselves manifest. While the imperial designs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were significantly based upon national interests as the great nation states of Europe sought colonies in Africa and Asia, the 18<sup>th</sup> century had begun to develop the economic bases of an imperial order that would include dimensions of economic exploitation, of international "trade", of the economic rights of the strongest protected by nation based military force, and a cultural expansion that threatened the integrity of outlying cultures; that is a number of the key ingredients of today's new form of empire.

In this emerging world stage of empire the English evangelist and church reformer, John Wesley, also took a number of positions that may be understood as a critique of empire.

John Wesley had been an instructor in Greek and classics at Oxford University where, with his brother Charles, he had founded the "holy club" of young men devoted to achieve entire holiness of life. Soon after his Father's death he had undertaken the work of missionary and priest in the English colony of Georgia for what was to be his only time to undertake the duties of a parish priest. After his return to England from Georgia (where his ministry among the English colonists had met with no success) he became persuaded that 'scriptural holiness was not something to be restricted to a spiritual elite but was a divine gift freely bestowed even upon those excluded from society and church.

Thus he launched into his life work of proclaiming the gospel to the marginalized and impoverished of British society and of organizing those who responded to his message into bands and societies to encourage one another to grow into the life of holiness. From these seeds grew the methodist movement and the variety of methodist and holiness denominations that have spread across the globe.

While Wesley is most remembered as a tireless evangelist and organizer he was also a trenchant critic of those who held wealth and power, and he regularly lifted his voice on behalf of the poor and excluded among whom he worked and lived. It was this combination of suspicion directed against the powerful and his identification with those who were the victims of power that brings Wesley into contact with the question of nascent empire.

Many years ago Franz Hinkelammert had already indicated that the two main pillars of the emerging British empire were the slave trade and the franchising of India under the East India Trading Company.<sup>1</sup> After a consideration of the use to which Wesley put the reports of other cultures that came to his attention we will turn to an examination of his perspective upon these main pillars of emerging empire.

### **Exploration of Other Cultures**

In some contemporary reflections upon empire, especially as this develops in the context of what is called post-colonial studies, the drive to explore and report on distant places is seen to be an essential part of the colonial apparatus and one that inevitably produces colonialist perspectives and practices<sup>2</sup>. Wesley was an avid reader of travelers'

reports on distant lands as an extension of his insatiable curiosity about the world about him, a curiosity that extended into all the sciences<sup>3</sup>.

It is important to notice how Wesley appropriated these early forays into what would eventually become cultural anthropology. For Wesley did not normally read these reports with an eye to discovering signs that the peoples of distant cultures needed the civilizing mission of Christian Europe, a motive that would eventually become one of the legitimating strategies of imperial ambition. On the contrary, Wesley generally emphasized those chronicles and descriptions that contrasted favorably with a supposedly Christianized Europe. Wesley read with an eye to emphasizing the superior values that were embedded in non-European cultures.<sup>4</sup>

Wesley did not suppose that the Christian West was the repository of wisdom for how to live in harmony with nature and with one's fellow human beings. He remarked that his goal in going to Georgia was to learn from the native peoples how to live in accordance with the prescription of Acts 2 and 4 concerning the community of goods. Thus in October 10, 1735, in a letter to a friend, he identifies his reasons for going to Georgia, a colony of England administered by Oglethorpe (*Works*<sup>5</sup> XII, 38-39). He admits that his chief desire is to "save my own soul" and supposes that by living and working among the native Americans he will be able to attain to a simplicity of life that he regards as essential to the attainment of holiness. He supposes that "it will be no small thing to be able, without giving offense, to live on water and the fruits of the earth" and hopes to banish from his thoughts the desire for externals that everywhere beset him in England. He remarks: "an Indian hut affords no food for curiosity; no gratification of the desire of grand, or new, or pretty things". But the principle thing seems to be that he

hopes to be able to learn from the native Americans how to live in accordance with the Pentecostal community's community of goods: "The same faithfulness I hope to show, through his grace, in dispensing the rest of my Master's goods, if it please him to send me to those who, like his first followers, have all things in common. What a guard is here against that root of all evil, the love of money, and all the vile attractions that spring from it!"

As it happened Wesley was not able to fulfill his dream of living among the Native Americans. The head of the Georgia colony, General James Oglethorpe, insisted that he devote his time to the spiritual direction of the English colonists in Savannah and to serving as Oglethorpe's own assistant in the management of the affairs of the colony. Nevertheless, many years later, in one of his homiletical reflections of the Sermon on the Mount, he would still recall this feature of Native American life that had first drawn him to journey to Georgia:

It is not easy to say, when we compare the bulk of the nations in Europe with those in America, whether the superiority lies on the one side or the other. At least, the American has not much the advantage. But we cannot affirm this with regard to the command now before us. Here the Heathen has far the pre-eminence. He desires and seeks nothing more than plain food to eat, and plain raiment to put on; and he seeks this only from day to day: He reserves, he lays up nothing; unless it be as much corn, at one season of the year, as he will need before that season returns. This command, therefore, the Heathens, though they know it not, do constantly and punctually observe. They "lay up for themselves no treasures upon earth;" no stores of purple or fine linen, of gold or silver, which

either "moth or rust may corrupt, or thieves break through and steal." But how do the Christians observe what they profess to receive as a command of the most high God? Not at all! not in any degree; no more than if no such command had ever been given to man<sup>6</sup>.

Much later in his career Wesley would turn to accounts of the peoples of Africa in order to insist upon the virtues of their societies, virtues that would serve to undermine the cogency of arguments for the slave trade. Thus Wesley writes in his "Thoughts upon Slavery"<sup>7</sup> of Guinea (then the name of the entire Central Western coast of Africa): "It appears that Guinea, in general is far from a horrid, dreary, barren country, - [it] is one of the most fruitful, as the most pleasant, countries in the known world" (61).

He speaks of the Fulani of Senegal and Nigeria: "They desire no more land than they use, which they cultivate with great care and industry" (62). He speaks of the remarkable justice of the customs of the people and of their general regard for the poor and the ill and concludes:

"Upon the whole, therefore, the Negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa, from the river Senegal to the southern bounds of Angola, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that, on the contrary, they are represented... as remarkably sensible... as industrious to the highest degree, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate; as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise; and as far

more mild, friendly, and kind to strangers, than any of our forefathers were.” (64-65)

But now Wesley turns to a comparison not with European forebears but to the existing state of affairs in the presumably enlightened West: “Our forefathers! Where shall we find at this day, among the fair-faced natives of Europe, a nation generally practicing the justice, mercy and truth, which are generally found among these poor Africans?” (65). It is especially important to note Wesley’s reference to “justice, mercy and truth” for these are the very characteristics that Wesley often associates with the renewed image of God.

Wesley’s evident appreciation of the virtues of Native American and African cultures undercuts what would become one of the principal legitimations of emergent empire: the civilizing mission of Europe, or what in England would be termed the white man’s burden. In today’s new form of Empire that has become the mission of extending freedom (of the financial market) and “democracy” (as the politics of marketing) to other nations and cultures.

### **Critique of Emergent Empire**

Wesley’s appreciation for the virtues of other cultures combined with his keen sympathy for the misfortunes of those who were the victims of avarice and violence made him into a critic of the imperial ambitions of the great European nations, including his own. Thus, in the sermon “A Caution against Bigotry” of 1750<sup>8</sup> in which Wesley also is led to emphasize the limitations of “heathen” cultures in his attack upon deism, he nevertheless issues the following broadside against the imperial designs of the great nations:

“It were to be wished that none but heathen had practiced such gross, palpable works of the devil. But we dare not say so. Even in cruelty and bloodshed, how little have the Christians come behind! And not the Spaniards or Portuguese alone, butchering thousands in South America. Not the Dutch only in the East Indies, or the French in North America, following the Spaniards step by step. Our own countrymen, too, have wantoned in blood, and exterminated whole nations: plainly proving thereby what spirit it is that dwells and works in the children of disobedience. (482).

But despite the rare foray into a critique of other nations Wesley is most concerned with the emerging imperial designs of England. Interestingly he does not pay much attention to Britain’s colonial expansion into North America even if he does remark upon the depopulation of the Americas in his sermon “The Imperfection of Human Knowledge<sup>9</sup>:

“How little better is either the civil or religious state of the poor American Indians! That is, the miserable remains of them: For in some provinces not one of them is left to breathe. In Hispanola, when the Christians came thither first, there were three millions of inhabitants. Scarce twelve thousand of them now survive...[,] Therefore are they decreasing daily; and very probably, in a century or two there will not be one of them left.” (345)

In the same sermon he also points to the suffering of the peoples of India and Africa in order to indicate the limits to our understanding of God’s providential ruling over history. “ In what condition, in particular, is the large and populous empire of Indostan! How many hundred thousands of the poor quiet people have been destroyed,

and their carcasses left as dung of the earth!” (345). And of Africa: “And who cares for thousands, myriads, if not millions, of the wretched Africans? Are not whole droves of these poor sheep (human, if not rational beings!) continually driven to market, and sold, like cattle, into the vilest bondage, without any hope of deliverance but by death?”(345)

But Wesley’s characterization of these vast continents of suffering has a somewhat different edge than a simple recognition of the (apparent) contradiction between the belief in a benevolent and ruling deity and the magnitude of human suffering. For this is not suffering that is basically inscrutable: it has a direct human cause. He is quite clearly coming as the direct result of British policy: the mercantile subjugation of India and the conduct of the slave trade.

In order to understand the significance of Wesley’s argument here it is helpful to return to the characterization of Wesley’s England offered by Franz Hinkelammert. He points out that England’s 19<sup>th</sup> century predominance in the industrial revolution as well as in the construction of empire depending upon two closely related ventures that had their origin in the beginnings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which were the principle political-economic realities with which Wesley had to contend. They were the transfer of the monopoly of the slave trade from Portugal to England by trade treaty in 1703 and the fostering of the East Indies Trading Corporation that developed as a result of the same trade agreement. We will come back to the slave trade in the next section but here deal with the emergence of Britain’s role in India.

What England acquired in 1703 from Portugal was the right to conduct and transport the textile trade with India. This was a potentially lucrative trade since India produced cotton cloth, a commodity very much desired in Europe as well as in Africa (in

exchange for slaves) and in the American colonies which otherwise had to rely on wool for clothing. However the inherent problem in this trade was that Europe produced virtually nothing that India wanted in exchange for its cloth. As a result gold poured into India in exchange for its cotton cloth setting up not only a huge trade imbalance but also a loss of Europe's currency reserves (the gold and silver coming from Spain's New world colonies).

Both England and France realized that a remedy for this situation would be to acquire not only the trade rights but also the production rights for the cloth. This meant subjugating the Indian subcontinent in order to take over the production of cloth. In the race to subjugate India England had the advantage in that it was able to first make use of mobile artillery<sup>10</sup>, which not only vanquished the French but made it possible for relatively small numbers of British soldiers to destroy vast numbers of Indian troops. In the end textile production was stopped in India and moved to England in what would become the basis of England's industrial revolution.

Against this background we must read Wesley's outraged remarks on British policy in India. For example in his Journal entry for Nov 13, 1776 we read one of his responses to Bolt's account of India:

“What consummate villains, what devils incarnate, were the managers there!  
What utter strangers to justice, mercy, and truth; to every sentiment of humanity.  
I believe no heathen history contains a parallel. I remember none in all the  
annals of antiquity: Not even the divine Cato, or the virtuous Brutus, plundered

the provinces committed to their charge with such merciless cruelty as the English have plundered the desolated provinces of Indostan.”<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, in a sermon from 1783, we read:

Look into that large country, Indostan. There are Christians and Heathens too.

Which have more justice, mercy and truth? The Christians or the Heathens?

Which are the most corrupt, infernal, devilish, in their tempers and practice? The

English or the Indians? Which have desolated whole countries, and clogged the

rivers with dead bodies? “O sacred name of Christian! How profaned!” O earth,

earth, earth! How dost thou groan under the villainies of thy *Christian*

inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>

And also in 1776 Wesley writes in his seasonable address to the inhabitants of Great Britain (after excoriating the slave trade):

And is the East-India trader a jot better? I fear not. They seem very nearly allied. For though here is no leading into captivity, as in the former; yet the refined iniquity practiced there, of fomenting war amongst the natives, and seizing the chief of the plunder, has been as conspicuous to the serious and attentive. What millions have fallen by these means, as well as by artificial famine! O earth, cover not thou their blood! It will speak to heaven and to the inhabitants of the earth to the latest posterity.<sup>13</sup>

But Wesley does not merely sound a prophetic protest against this injustice. He also supposes that God will judge England for these unspeakable crimes:

“...we may call the myriads that have been murdered happy, in comparison of those that still groan under the iron yoke. Wilt not thou visit for these things, O Lord? Shall the fool still say in his heart, "There is no God?"<sup>14</sup>

Wesley has moved from being an observer of human misery who must simply have recourse to the inscrutable providence of God to one who finds the causes of human misery in the imperial policies of his own nation.

### **The Slave Trade**

This transformation is even more evident in Wesley's perspective on the other main pillar of British economic prosperity, the slave trade, the monopoly rights to which England had also acquired from Portugal in 1703. Although in his sermon on "The limits of human knowledge" he seemed to simply point to the apparent contradiction between this suffering and what one might expect to be the case if a good God presided over the affairs of human history, already by the 1770s Wesley was placing the blame not on inscrutable providence but on English greed. Moreover the activity of God has now been transformed from that of inscrutable providence to that of one who acts in history to punish those who cause such great suffering in the world. One might say that his general orientation has changed from that of a Roman stoic to that of a Hebrew prophet.

In his "Thoughts upon Slavery" of 1774 Wesley not only writes of the prosperous, peaceable and indeed just character of the African cultures that had been devastated by the slave trade, he also indicts the injustice and cruelty of those who foment and conduct this trade. Thus he writes of the injustice of the manner in which slaves are acquired:

“It was some time before the Europeans found a more compendious way of procuring African slaves, by prevailing upon them to make war upon each other, and to sell their prisoners.”(*Works XI*, 65).

He then turns his attention to the horrors of the “Middle Passage”

But in what numbers and in what manner are they carried to America? ...so many are taken on board our ships; but at least ten thousand of them die in the voyage; about a fourth part more die at the different islands, in what is called the seasoning. So that at an average, in the passage and seasoning together, thirty thousand die; that is, properly, are murdered. O Earth, O Sea, cover not thou their blood! (67).

After considering the miserable conditions of those slaves who finally make to the plantation Wesley exclaims: “Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures in the visible world should live such a life as this?” (68).

He summarizes this whole saga of monstrous suffering:

“...where is the justice of taking away the lives of innocent, inoffensive men; murdering thousands of them in their own land, by the hands of their own countrymen; many thousands, year after year, on shipboard, and then casting them like dung into the sea; and tens of thousands in that cruel slavery to which they are so unjustly reduced?” (70).

But Wesley is not content to denounce the horrors of this unjust suffering. He also goes to the economic roots of the problem and to an identification of the avarice that propels this violence. For example he addresses himself to the merchants who profit from this trade:

This equally concerns every merchant who is engaged in the slave-trade. It is you that induce the African villain to sell his countrymen; and in order thereto, to steal, rob, murder men, women, and children without number, by enabling the English villain to pay him for so doing, whom you overpay for his execrable labour. It is your money that is the spring of all, that empowers him to go (77).  
And then turns his attention to the plantation owner:

Now, it is your money that pays the merchant, and through him the captain and the African butchers. You therefore are guilty, yea, principally guilty, of all these frauds, robberies, and murders....therefore, the blood of all these wretches who die before their time, whether in their country or elsewhere, lies upon your head (78).

For Wesley however this is not merely a matter of individual or even corporately organized greed and violence on the part of those who take part in, or profit from, this trade. It is also, as he begins to see, a matter of national policy. Thus Wesley writes of the Caribbean colonies that at that time received the main number of slaves to work the sugarcane plantations: "First, it were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated for ever; yea, it were more desirable that they were altogether sunk in the depth of the sea, than that they should be cultivated at so high a price as the violation of justice, mercy, and truth" (73).

And then he turns his attention to the ways this entire system of international trade was alleged to be to the benefit of the English people as a whole, and to the prosperity of the nation:

First, wealth is not necessary to the glory of any nation; but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country. These are necessary to the real glory of a nation; but abundance of wealth is not....

Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood, of our fellow-creatures (77).

As he was to do with respect to the colonial policies in India, so also here Wesley further moves toward a claim that God will punish England for its complicity in this human suffering. He takes as his point of departure the uprising of the British colonies on the North American mainland:

...”and as we are punished with the sword, it is not improbable but one principal sin of our nation is, the blood that we have shed in Asia, Africa, and America. Here I would beg your serious attention, while I observe, that however extensively pursued, and of long continuance, the African trade may be, it is nevertheless iniquitous from first to last. It is the price of blood! It is a trade of blood, and has stained our land with blood!

And this in turn is linked to what he has said about the colonial policies in India. And is the East-India trader a jot better? I fear not. They seem very nearly allied. For though here is no leading into captivity, as in the former; yet the refined iniquity practised there, of fomenting war amongst the natives, and seizing the chief of the plunder, has been as conspicuous to the serious and attentive. What millions have fallen by these means, as well as by artificial famine! ...O ye Governors of this great nation, would to God that ye had seen this, and timely done your utmost to separate those tares from the wheat of fair and honest trade!

... "There can be no peace, saith the Lord." While "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground," ... Shall I not visit for these things? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" Yes, my brethren, we have much reason to fear and tremble, as upon the brink of fate.<sup>15</sup>

Thus Wesley has moved from thinking of this suffering as a fate in the hands of the inscrutable providence of God to thinking of it as having specific economic and political causes. This then means that God is not some mere spectator to this suffering but rather one who rises up to overthrow those who inflict that suffering upon their fellow human beings.

The move that Wesley does make in relation to slavery that he does not in relation to India is to support those who purposed to abolish the slave trade. Thus he lends his support to the work of Lord Wilberforce in ending the African slave trade.<sup>16</sup> A similar move does not seem to have been made in relation to India and indeed it would have been difficult to find allies in government to stop the juggernaut of emergent empire. After all, it did, as Wesley himself acknowledged, seem to contribute, at least at that stage, to the potential prosperity of the working poor.<sup>17</sup>

However Wesley does realize that the gospel itself contains the impetus for a very different sort of economics than that instantiated in the slave trade or the East India Trading Company. Instead of one based upon greed and violence he articulated the vision for one based upon open generosity. Moreover it is this economy of communal sharing of goods with all who have need that Wesley imagined would be the force that could transform the earth from a scene of suffering usually augmented by so-called

Christians into a new world in which so much unnecessary suffering would be abolished. This at least is the vision implicit in his sermon on “The General Spread of the Gospel”.

### **Conclusion**

In evaluating Wesley’s views on Empire we note a number of important ways in which he comes into opposition to the emerging empire of his own day. To be sure this opposition has very real limits. When combating Deist views he occasionally falls into the sort of negative assessment of other cultures that would ultimately become a legitimation for empire. Although he is critical of the brutal suffering caused by proto-imperialist extensions into South America, India, the East Indies, and Africa he is not critical of the planting of England’s North American colonies. And, finally, he stops short of a direct appeal for the reversal of England’s designs on India. Thus when, in the century following his death, Britain undertook in earnest the task of constructing and extending the “British Empire” it was possible for many of those associated with the movement he had initiated to become apologists for empire. Just as many “methodists” lost contact with Wesleyan devotion to the improvement of the condition of the impoverished (and the condemnation of the snares of prosperity) and sought instead to gain respectability among the emerging middle classes of Britain and America, so also the imperial search for new colonies in Asia and Africa often went hand in glove with an evangelical missionary zeal that had lost contact with a critique of the nation’s putative “innocence”. Wesley had not developed a systematic critique of European ambition, any more than he had developed an economic theory that would have exposed the roots of an industrial capitalism barely in its infancy in his own day.

However, within these limits, Wesley's critiques of the emerging policies of empire can be quite instructive for those who take on a similar stance today.

Wesley is not persuaded by those who suppose that other cultures require the intervention of the West in order to acquire virtue or civilization. Whether this intervention be couched in terms of a "civilizing mission" as happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or in terms of extending the blessings of the free market as happens today, Wesley was not taken in by the pretensions to social virtue that too often serve as a cloak for naked self-interest on the part of stronger nations at the expense of weaker ones.

Wesley is quite clear that the principal cause of human suffering is Western avarice and violence and he is unrelenting in his critique of the supposed superiority of a society or civilization for which these become the main motivators of imperial ambition. In terms of our own situation it is noteworthy that Wesley keenly diagnoses the economic interest that is the chief animator of those policies that cause human suffering on a stupendous scale.

As a theologian and reader of the Bible, Wesley also knows how to call upon those who profit from systems of exploitation to turn away from injustice in order to avert the judgment of God. For Wesley, the practice of injustice on such a scale must necessarily result in the destruction of the perpetrators of such terrible suffering. And this must be true not only for the individuals who directly promote and profit from such policies but also for the nations that are enriched and corrupted thereby. Although Wesley did not have the benefit of more recent critiques of Imperialism and of Empire, he offers perspectives that continue to be useful in the critical understanding of the ways in which empire is related to the magnitude of human suffering which is its cost.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Franz Hinkelammert “Las condiciones económicos-sociales del Metodismo en la Inglaterra del Siglo XVIII” in *La tradición protestante en la teología latinoamericana: Primer intento: lectura de la tradición metodista* edited by José Duque (San José, Costa Rica: DEI, 1983) 21-30.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Musa Dube *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Randy Maddox “Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory” in M. Douglas Meeks, ed. *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2004), 21–52.

<sup>4</sup> The case is different, however, when Wesley finds it necessary to contest deist assertions about the sufficiency of the natural light of reason for the attainment of the marks of faith. When this is the issue Wesley is all too ready to produce illustrations of the negative character of those nations that live without the light of the Gospel. Even here, however he will generally have to admit that Christian nations are not in a significantly better state, as we shall see.

<sup>5</sup> All Wesley citations unless otherwise noted are from the Jackson Edition of the *Works of John Wesley* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition [1872] (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), hereinafter cited as *Works*.

<sup>6</sup> Sermon on the Mount #8 in *Works* V, 365. It is important to note that Wesley is not repeating a sort of “noble savage” ideology. In this sermon he has been quite clear about what he takes to be the viciousness of some aspects of Native American life. This is why he has said at the outset: “it is not easy to say... where the advantage lies” in a comparison of European and American customs.

<sup>7</sup> *Works* XI 59-79.

<sup>8</sup> Sermon xxxviii (of 1750) in *Works* V, 479-92

<sup>9</sup> Sermon lxxix (of 1784) in *Works* VI, 337-349.

<sup>10</sup> Hinkelammert, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Works* IV, 89.

<sup>12</sup> “Mystery of Iniquity” in *Works* VI, 265.

<sup>13</sup> *Works* XI, 125-6.

<sup>14</sup> Journal entry of Feb. 23, 1776 in *Works* IV: 68.

<sup>15</sup> “A Seasonable Address” in *Works* XI, 126.

<sup>16</sup> *Works* XIII, 153.

<sup>17</sup> See the Journal entry for April 18, 1785 in *Works* IV 302. Nearly a century later Karl Marx in his articles on Imperialism in India published in the New York Daily Tribune of 1853 will also lament the carnage that resulted from England’s policies in India but will provide a sort of secular theodicy for this suffering by supposing that it is a necessary stage in the ultimate preparation of India to participate in the coming revolution of the proletariat. Fortunately Wesley offers no such theodicy, secular or otherwise.