In the autumn of 1904 Leonard Woolf, a recent graduate of Cambridge University, began preparations for a seven-year sojourn in Ceylon, modern day Sri Lanka, where he was to work for the British Imperial Civil Service. As Woolf attested in his autobiography, *Growing* (1961), he collected clothes, books, letters from close friends, and finally, his beloved pet dog to take with him on his travels (11). Reserved for a second trunk were the complete works of Voltaire, a series of books that amounted to almost seventy volumes. Their purpose, he grandly claimed in his memoirs, was “to prepare me for my task of helping to rule the British Empire” (*Growing* 12). From the perspective of 1961, the author’s words satirized the naiveté of the then “unconscious imperialist” of 1904. Then, if not in 1961, he earnestly believed that the British Empire represented an attack upon prejudice, barbarism, and inhumanity. Voltaire had pedagogic value for the putative imperialist, demonstrating how colonial administrators could encourage the advance of the regions they governed through the practices of education, free expression, and restraint of judicial excesses and corruption, allowing them to enact their moral responsibility to improve and reform the subjects over whom they ruled. Voltaire represented the work of empire. Alas, the work of empire interrupted Woolf’s Voltairean idyll.

When Woolf returned to Britain from Ceylon in 1912, he did so, he stated, as a committed anti-imperialist (*Growing* 247). The arbitrary nature of imperial justice, the exploitation rather than nurture of Ceylon’s population, and the inability to improve the lives of those living in Britain’s foreign possessions all raised doubts about empire. Woolf failed to eradicate rinderpest, a bovine disease, from the cattle of the province of Hambantota that he governed, or to replace the *chena* system of cultivation, an exhaustive method of subsistence farming, with British agricultural methods that would encourage the production of goods for export (*Diaries* 68, 82-94). His only

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* Luke Reader is Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of California, Irvine.
administrative success was an ability to increase crop yields to meet taxation needs (113). Botched hangings and the practice of flogging, which Woolf oversaw in his role as a judge, merely indicated the inefficiency and cruelty of British justice (Growing 168; Letters 132-133). The Village in the Jungle (1913), a novel that Woolf wrote based upon his experience of Ceylon, had as its only British character an English judge able to survey his province but incapable of administering justice due to his inability to understand his constituents. It was through the eyes of an omniscient British narrator that the book translated the inexplicable colony for the domestic audience. Moreover, the novel's bleak ending in which the Ceylonese jungle consumed the eponymous village registered concern about the efficacy of imperial rule, but also suggested that in the absence of foreign intervention colonial possessions would remain outside of identifiable forms of historical progress.

After Woolf resigned from the Imperial Civil Service in 1912, he worked as a freelance journalist and essayist, established a publishing house, the Hogarth Press, and married the writer Virginia Woolf, nee. Stephen. He also began to interject his experience of empire into politics. During World War One (WWI), he worked to construct systems of international arbitration that would prevent further war, which proved influential in the establishment of the League of Nations. Following the end of the Great War, Woolf joined the Labour Party and served as Secretary of the Labour Party Committee on International Questions (LPACIntQ) and, after 1922, as Secretary of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Imperial Questions (LPACIQ).

Woolf's position on the two Labour Party advisory bodies was to prove influential. His role as Secretary required him to write minutes, shape agendas for the bi-monthly meetings of each committee, and disseminate information throughout the Labour movement. This granted him a critical role in the development of party policy regarding foreign affairs and colonial policy. Woolf wrote many scores of unpublished memoranda and research documents and drafted pamphlets, books, and articles during his twenty-three years as Secretary of the LPACIQ. His unpublished works and published writings present a vastly underutilized resource that illustrate attempts by Labour Party leaders to reconcile concern about imperialism with a need to articulate a policy towards empire as a potential party of government. Particularly noteworthy were memoranda he wrote in 1925, 1933, and 1941, which later became official statements of policy regarding the British Empire for the Labour Party. Through his work, scholars can understand how Woolf identified himself as an anti-imperialist writer. His process of self-identification and categorization also provides a method for
studying how anti-colonial critics of empire functioned as part of an imperialist landscape of knowledge.

This article contends that despite a stated desire to bring about an end to empire, Woolf’s work for the LPACIQ actually presented a renewed model of imperial rule. Although Woolf opposed empire for its inherent tendency towards economic exploitation, his work nevertheless presumed that the development of colonial space remained contingent upon British experts on imperial policy successfully enacting methods of human management. The result of critics of empire relying upon the presumptive authority of British colonial experts to determine and direct the development of imperial subjects was to present the condition of those living in Britain’s foreign possessions as one of abjection, which only further intervention could reform. This discursive strategy had two implications. The first developed a racial dynamic that identified difference as a source of deficiency amongst the inhabitants of Britain’s foreign possessions, creating a set of problems that only continued intervention by colonial experts could solve. The second was that instead of establishing a series of processes that encouraged decolonization, Woolf’s work created a set of conditions that allowed for continued intervention by imperial reformers, this time to meet a sense of moral responsibility and social obligation towards the inhabitants of Britain’s foreign possessions. In other words, the same Voltairean impulse that drove Woolf to Ceylon also defined his later anti-imperial writings. Studying Woolf’s writings in this regard possesses important scholarly implications. Through Woolf, historians can understand the function, purpose, and prose of anti-colonial writers as imbricated with empire and part of, not apart from, a broader imperial terrain. Woolf’s unpublished writings make this point clear. His work for the Labour Party remained reliant upon the technologies of colonial rule such as adaptation to British economic and agricultural practices, observation, and an understanding of methods to encourage social and cultural advancement.

A recent trend in the historiography of the British Empire is to consider quotidian events and interactions in the imperial metropole as infused by the presence of empire. This epistemological shift, termed the “new imperial history,” attempts to reinsert empire into British history. One historian, Antoinette Burton, suggests that the relationship between Britain and its empire functions as a dialectic rather than a dichotomy, with each integer at once indistinct and an influence that informs the development of the other (486). Andrew Thompson notes that colonialism was part of a “larger imaginative complex,” which provided the nation an analytical lens that forged attitudes to class, culture, race, and gender (6). Catherine Hall suggests
that through these perspectives it becomes possible to understand how “important political and cultural processes and institutions were shaped by and within the context of empire” (“Introduction” 2). Woolf’s writings, and their historical context, illuminate the methods by which empire infiltrated the daily activities of British people, shaped the given world they inhabited, and informed the approach of individuals towards national institutions (2-3). The result provides an opportunity to understand the influence of empire upon national institutions, a study that Richard Price notes is lacking from works associated with the “new imperial history” (607, 613).

To date, there has been no extensive analysis of Woolf’s work by historians studying the Labour Party and decolonization. Stephen Howe has briefly drawn upon Woolf to suggest that his work for the LPACIQ typified the efforts of Labour leaders to advocate reforms that would prepare Britain’s colonies for self-government (47-48). Partha Sarathi Gupta suggests that despite ethnographic assumptions of Britain’s colonial population, Woolf’s work for the LPACIQ remained focused upon the goal of self-governance for colonial subjects, especially in Africa (33, 54, 126, 275-276). Bernard Porter considers Woolf’s work as typical of anti-imperialist agitation that led to the collapse of the British Empire (292). This material illustrates a concern evident in general writings about decolonization by such historians as John Darwin or Ronald Hyam: a lack of disassembly of the language and assumptions of anti-colonial writers, particularly in regards to how these texts functioned within a broader set of imperial discourses.

International Relations (IR) scholars have studied Woolf in more detail than have historians. Academics working within this field consider Woolf’s efforts to develop international mechanisms of regulation that would prevent colonial administrations from exploiting resources, land, and labor, and soothe tensions between rival European Great Powers, as indicative of his anti-imperialism (Ashworth 210-213; Callaghan 121; Etherington 177-182). Peter Wilson provides the most significant analysis of this position in his monograph *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf* (2003). For Woolf, international regulation of imperial policies through the League of Nations would compel colonial powers to act to fulfill the economic and social well-being of those living in their foreign possessions and reduce international rivalries created by competition for overseas territory. According to Wilson, the result was that Woolf’s work bore an “abiding” concern with the “nature, cause, and cure of imperialism” (83, 84-85, 104). While economic exploitation and regulatory power informs scholars of the methods by which Woolf criticized empire, their approach is ahistorical. IR scholars typically base their analysis of Woolf’s work on empire on two monographs,
International Government (1916), a study of the potential of supranational government, and Empire and Commerce in Africa (1920), a discussion of economic policy towards European possessions in Africa. The problem is that studying regulation ignores the question of historical and cultural context. By connecting Woolf’s texts to unpublished writings rarely studied by IR scholars, academics can begin to understand how, despite criticizing aspects of colonial policy, Woolf’s work remained socially and culturally bound by imperialist assumptions and made space for empire in its interpretive gaze.

Literary critics have provided useful analyses of The Village in the Jungle. Amindo Roy and Elleke Boehmer both argue that Woolf’s novel was an exposition of colonial discipline and justice, which measured the experience of empire against the ideal and found the latter wanting (Roy 151, 174; Boehmer 93, 96). Another critic suggests that the inability of the novel’s English judge to evaluate, organize, or fairly decide cases in his district had a specific rhetorical purpose. It reflected the failure of British judicial impartiality and the tools of surveillance, instruction, and knowledge gathering upon which the empire depended (Kerr 267-271). The biographer Victoria Glendenning, who published a popular study of Woolf, continues this argument, suggesting that while it is possible to read The Village in the Jungle as a paternalistic or imperialist text, its function is as a piece of work opposed to empire (152). The same ontological problem remains evident with IR and literary writings. Both read selected published writings onto Woolf’s anti-imperialism, while ignoring complicating archival materials.

Woolf’s own writings dispute assumptions about his intellectual labor. Despite apparent concerns about the disciplinary nature of colonial rule, he remained committed to the efficacy of British law, arguing in Ceylon, “If one has a bad law, I believe it is almost better to enforce it than to leave it unenforced” (Diaries 167). Indeed, Woolf suggested that to resist was to remain fundamentally unready for self-government. As he wrote in 1933, application and adherence to law were two determinants of the progress of colonized nations (Memo no.122 4). In Growing, Woolf reflected that social advancement could occur only with British help. The conclusion of his autobiography provided his audience with an imagined life in which he served as governor of the Hambantota region, making “my District and Province the most efficient, the most prosperous place in Asia” (247). To function, this counterfactual view of his life required an assertion of Woolf’s innate ability, duty, and moral responsibility to govern.
Applying Woolf to a discussion of regulation and international government ignores the complicated view of empire and racial conceptions betrayed by his own writings. Empire and Commerce in Africa certainly advanced critiques of imperialism, but it also stressed the need for European states to continue to play a role in African affairs that would characterize Woolf's later writings on empire (361). Woolf's writings sought to define the character of this intrusion. The architecture of Woolf's argument was to present intervention as a moral duty that could prevent economic exploitation of Africa. His description of Africa as populated by what he termed "non-adult races" provided the foundations for his argument (358). The presumed inability of African nations to manage their own affairs required Britain and other European nations to adopt a supervisory role over the continent (359). Although Woolf indicated the potential for African maturity, he argued that this would require foreign observation and management, privileging his function and experience as an expert able to diagnose and cure societal and cultural deficiencies in both colony and metropole. The result was to demand a search for methods to induce European nations to transform policies of economic exploitation into "an instrument of good government and progress, not for a few hundred white men, but for the millions of Africans (358-359). IR focus on Woolf's analysis of the consequences of capitalist investment fail to study the manner by which his work created the scaffolding for an interpretation of imperial reform that required an assessment of the colonial subject's suitability for self-government.

A 1920 pamphlet, Mandates and Empires, written for the League of Nations Union, provided a potential method for nurturing colonies towards self-government. Woolf used this document to consider Britain's responsibilities towards the former German and Ottoman possessions that it administered as mandates on behalf of the League of Nations. He noted that mandatory administration regulations required colonial powers to act as the trustee of the interests of their territory and forbade activities that furthered the economic interests of European powers (7). Through this policy, Britain, acting on behalf of the League powers, should encourage the "tutelage," of the mandated territory, creating a bond that Woolf and the League characterized as the "sacred trust of civilization" (15). Through the mandatory system of government it would be possible to ameliorate late nineteenth-century colonization, particularly the forced imposition of European political and economic systems, which left the population of Africa without "the knowledge necessary for its understanding; in a word, he is unable to take his place in it as a free man" (12). Woolf urged a focus upon education policies and the development of institutions like training colleges, technical schools,
and universities that would enable Africans to adapt to western European mores. British experts would educate African subjects in their economic and political systems and provide local administrators through mandatory rule, granting greater political autonomy as knowledge, and numbers benefiting from education, increased (13-14).

Both Empire and Commerce in Africa and Mandates and Empire derive their interventionist impulses from Woolf’s earlier work on supranational government. Draft documents and research notes for International Government suggested methods through which forms of international government, arbitration, and judicial resolution could obviate or defuse national tension. These functioned by applying two characteristics of national legislatures, the construction of rules governing individual conduct and methods of altering the constitution and behavior of a society, to international decision-making bodies (“Untitled Document”). This would in turn require the organization of experts into legislative councils and judicial bodies able to resolve disputes, translate the rules and practices of individual nations into international law, and decide the appropriateness of actions designed to reform the behavior of a society (Scope and Function of an International Authority). The result of this argument was to provide the logos of Woolf’s approach to colonial subjects.

Imperial subjects remained outside of the scope of Woolf’s vision of international co-operation. Indeed, the weighting of votes in an international decision-making body favored the Great Powers and nations that possessed a colonial empire (Scope and Function of an International Authority). The result was to stress a system of organization that presumed certain nations outside of the bounds of human society because of their political condition. While Woolf’s work provided a visionary attempt to move beyond the system of international alliances, colonial rivalries, and arms races that encouraged the outbreak of WWI, his view of non-European society remained rooted in the imperial context of early twentieth-century Britain. Colonial peoples had no place within an international system and no right to self-government until the successful application of a civilizational test. Moreover, Woolf’s writings reserved for imperialist powers the ability and right to alter the society of their colonial subjects in accordance with the “sacred trust of civilization” referred to in Mandates and Empire.

Following the inconclusive general election results of December 1923, the Labour Party entered government for the first time. While Labour was only the second largest party in terms of parliamentary seats, the larger Conservative Party proved unable to form a government because of its protectionist trading policies, which Labour and the third placed Liberal
Party opposed. Labour thus formed a minority administration with the acquiescence of the Liberals, who promised not to oppose proposed legislation, but this government fell after just nine months (Thorpe 62). Labour’s precarious hold on power led to few policy reforms save for a limited program to build municipal homes that would replace an increasingly inadequate housing stock for industrial workers (63). It did encourage a review of strategy intended to moderate Labour policies and define the movement as both the defender of worker’s interests and the guarantors of middle-class prosperity through the retention of policies like balanced budgets, low taxation, and trade union restraint, following the loss of power (Thorpe 63, 65). Correspondingly, in regards to the empire, Labour sought to balance a need to protect the rights of colonial subjects and workers with a need to formulate a policy of governance that would present the party as a credible alternative administration.

In 1925, Woolf drafted a memorandum that articulated a policy that would “spring directly from the broad economic, political, and social principles and ideals of Labour” (Woolf, Memo no. 18 1). He did so as one of a number of Labour Party leaders who worked to reform policy towards the empire (Gupta 73-75, 81-86). Both E.D. Morel and Norman Leys, colleagues of Woolf’s on the LPACIQ, had previously condemned policies that allowed colonial authorities to expropriate land at will and reserve for British settlers the most productive farmland (Morel, Memo no. 2; Leys, Memo no., 6). The result, Leys suggested, was to force African workers into wage-labor relationships with British landowners, because this was the only economic activity to guarantee an income following their dispossession from their land (3). Woolf had also written on similar subjects, discussing the unfair competition presented to African workers by migratory Indian labor (Woolf, Memo no. 1).

Woolf’s document attempted to position the Labour Party as the protector of the interests of Britain’s colonial subjects. His 1925 memorandum continued the analysis of the economic benefits investors could gain from imperialism studied in Empire and Commerce in Africa and Mandates and Empire. It condemned British farmers in Kenya, Nyasaland, and Rhodesia for following policies that sought to maximize profits through land appropriation, exhaustive farming practices, the production of goods for export, and reliance upon labor from the vast pool of dispossessed workers (Memo no.18 7-8, 10). Alternatives existed, however. Policies in colonies such as Nigeria preserved land rights and offered assistance to agriculturalists by sharing European methods of crop-growing and sustainable production of goods for export (6-7). The result was the creation of a policy that rested
upon the belief that the “land belongs to the native communities which inhabit it, and that the paramount objective of Government must be to encourage and assist those communities in the beneficial use of the land for their own advantage and profit” (7). Its intent was to encourage the growth of local industry and offered communities relative autonomy through the guarantee of land-rights and profit sharing schemes. By urging a reform of British policy in order to serve the needs of colonial populations, Woolf suggested developing principles of imperial rule that could work in the interests of Africa.

Woolf argued that colonial civil servants should realize their responsibility towards their subjects. He made this point clear as he moved the analytic direction of his policy from a denunciation of British economic practices to the obligations imperial interference in Africa entailed. This required the establishment of policies to “educate the native to take his place as a free man in the economic or political system which the European has imposed upon Africa” (Memo no.18 4-5). Correspondingly, Woolf urged Labour to develop a set of legal rights that would treat land as the property of the local community, protect against expropriation by British settlers and investors, and encourage the development of agricultural communes and cooperatives at the village level (11-12, 14). He also encouraged colonial administrations to participate in the raising and supply of capital machinery, devise policies that would preclude the use of compelled labor, use revenues from taxation to meet local health, education, and infrastructure needs, and make labor contracts responsible to civil rather than criminal law, unlike previous common practice (12-13). The result was that laborers would be able to provide their services to any employer of their choosing and remove compulsion from the economic relationship between landowners and workers (13). Primary education for each child, teacher-training, technical colleges, and a university would develop specifically designed curricula that would encourage those subjects “capable of understanding and controlling the circumstances” imposed by British colonialism (17).

Woolf’s 1925 memorandum served as an exposition of his earlier discussion of the supervisory role needed to guide “non-adult races” towards maturity, examining how to achieve this aim. Critical to his analysis was the identification of African subjects unable to defend their own interests and so incapable of functioning as independent economic actors. Woolf’s study drew upon his earlier approach to international government and examination of the potential benefits gained from administering colonies as a trust, on behalf of Britain’s imperial subjects. The result was to present the need for continued intervention in Africa as necessary for the adoption of policies that
would allow for participation in a “civilisation” and economic capitalist system defined by Europe (Memo no. 18 17). The alteration of African society following its exposure to British social, economic, and political models required corresponding changes in the former’s behavior. As the protector of imperial subjects, it was the duty of Labour to provide the inhabitants of Britain’s foreign possessions with the necessary tools to acquire the forms of knowledge that would “enable them to deal with the new conditions, social, economic, and political, which British rule has introduced” (18). While Woolf questioned capitalism as an imperial practice, he took a much more credulous approach to the idea that Africans should be required to transform their societal structures in order to fit in with British norms.

Woolf’s 1925 proposals depended upon imperialist discursive tools and methods of organizing society. Although he remained critical of empire as a tool of economic exploitation, his memorandum presents him as a figure deeply invested in imperialism as a form of civilizing mission through his focus upon social improvement and moral duty. In one sense, he argued that this was a pragmatic response to the facts of British and European intervention in Africa (Memo no.18 4-5, 17, 18). This should not diminish from Woolf’s initial achievement. He, along with his colleagues on the LPACIQ, did after all demonstrate a need to break with policies of economic exploitation, if only to differentiate the Labour Party from previous practice towards the empire by the Conservative Party. However, his work also left the assumption that Africa should conform to British or European mores unquestioned. The identification of predatory colonial practices served as a base from which Labour could address problems of empire.

Economic exploitation of Africa required an examination of the condition of colonial society that allowed this situation to occur. Through the observation and classification of colonial behavior and practices as backwards, and concurrent discussions of African capability, Woolf and his colleagues created new imperial roles for British knowledge and those expert figures able to apply it to subjects living in Britain’s foreign possessions. The need to either act in a supervisory role towards “non-adult peoples,” or govern colonies as a trust, necessitated both the infantilization of their population and a successful study and diagnosis of the condition of Africa by British colonial experts. Acculturation towards European forms of cultural, economic, political, and social organization served as a test for the potential for self-governance. The alteration of African society was necessary for it to enter the community of nations envisioned by International Government. It required colonial experts like Woolf to share their knowledge with subject
populations, who would gain self-government once they attained a certain level of development.

The Labour Party published Woolf’s policy document as the pamphlet *Labour and the Empire* in 1926, following a failed attempt to circulate the statement as a joint espousal of principles with the French Socialist Party (“Minutes of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Imperial Questions,” November 18 1925). The final draft demonstrated some changes to Woolf’s initial document. The addition of statistical material led to the placement of a greater emphasis upon economic exploitation, although the interests in trusteeship remained clear. The preface applauded the decision of future Labour governments to take responsibility for educating the African masses, noting that the success of imperial administrations and policy depended upon the education of Britain’s colonial subjects (Thomas 2).

Labour began reviewing its colonial policy in 1933, and the LPACIQ handed the task of writing a second statement of principles on empire to Woolf (“Minutes of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Imperial Questions,” February 8, 1933). Labour had had a second spell in power between 1929 and 1931 and, on this occasion, began the process of advancing a colonial policy. The Colonial Development Act (1929) abandoned Labour’s previous adherence to free-trade. Instead, it tied aid to colonial governments to promises to purchase British manufactures and products. This led to condemnation from colonial governments, who grew concerned at the restriction of aid to investment and infrastructure schemes that would also have a perceived benefit for the British (Gupta 134-140). Although no conclusive policy developed regarding India, LPACIQ records indicate constant discussions on political and economic reforms, while the Labour government at least conceded the principle of self-governing Dominion status for the colony. For Africa, a 1930 policy statement reaffirmed Labour’s commitment to the needs and interests of its African subjects, while LPACIQ papers attempted to enact earlier policy recommendations in East Africa (Gupta 186; Leys, *Memo no. 79*).

The drafting process of the 1933 policy paper took place in vastly different circumstances to those of 1925. Rather than planning for government, the party was recovering from the collapse of the Labour administration of 1929-1931 amidst economic crisis. Continued high unemployment and ongoing economic uncertainty led the government to commission the May Report to examine levels of expenditure in the spring of 1931. The report, published in July of that year, revealed a potential budget deficit of one hundred and twenty million pounds sterling, because of the
need to pay unemployment benefits to two and a half million people and declining tax revenues. Unwillingness to examine Keynesian economic solutions, and a desire to maintain balanced budget policies, led Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to solve the crisis by raising taxes and reducing benefits and public sector pay. His Cabinet rejected his proposals, leading to a run on the pound sterling and the eventual withdrawal of the currency from the Gold Standard (Williamson 290-295). MacDonald consequently resigned his position, but remained as Prime Minister of the new National Government coalition at the urging of King George V. While Conservative MPs dominated the new administration, alongside Liberal parliamentarians, the Labour Party split in two over the question of co-operation with the new government (431). The rump Labour Party began to review policy. A 1933 pamphlet, *Socialism and Peace*, attempted to distinguish the party from its colleagues in the National Government. It described how political reform would develop through state structures such as nationalized utilities, steel, banking, and mines (Thorpe 88-89). There remained an interest in moderation. The policy statement also retained some continuity with the past through a desire for balanced budgets and investment in industry to entice middle-class voters (89).

The Labour Party archives contain two memoranda regarding the 1933 policy, the first Woolf’s initial draft and the second a revised document containing the recommended amendments of his colleagues (“Minutes of the Labour Party Advisory Committee,” July 12 1933). Although Woolf worked alongside C.R. Buxton and W. McGregor Ross in the drafting process, he took a leading role in defining policy and was responsible for the collection and dissemination of information through his role as secretary of the LPACIQ (“Minutes of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Imperial Questions,” June 28, 1933). While the 1925 policy focused on Labour’s concern about economic exploitation and aimed to protect colonial populations, the 1933 document concentrated upon the moral responsibility of the party, and the British more generally, to cure the condition of abjection found in Britain’s imperial possessions.

Read together, the 1933 documents suggest a growing awareness that the form of colonial administration, rather than the idea of imperial rule itself, proved problematic. Woolf’s first draft used John Stuart Mill’s suggestion from *Representative Government* that colonial administrations should restrain financial investment in their possessions, and Edmund Burke’s admonition that empire simply provided relief for impoverished aristocrats, to argue that economically driven imperialism obscured how empire could function as an implement to manage societal development (*Memo no. 122* 2). It was the
responsibility of a Labour administration to ensure “the traditional policy of Britain as a colonising power of wholesome influence is not being disregarded” (2). Labour could use this policy to encourage the “social and professional advancement of emergent sections of communities hitherto more backwards than ourselves,” by granting colonial subjects their “claims to social, political, and economic advancement to whatever level they are capable” (2). Woolf contended that governing according to principles such as these would entail the development of civic institutions, legal systems, education, equality of opportunity, and the institution of policies that would encourage “social and economic progress” (2). If Labour sought to use the state to build a Socialist society in Britain, within the empire it presented itself as engaged in statebuilding through the construction of a civil society. Empire was a site upon which policymakers could enact party principles.

British imperialists could grant their subjects the possibility of self-government and, simultaneously, validate their right and duty to intervene in the affairs of others by establishing a civil society in Britain’s colonies. Party policy would lead to a “spring-cleaned” empire, which a Labour administration would develop through reformed practices of colonial government (Memo no. 122). Woolf contended that the colonial empire, particularly Africa and Asia, provided opportunity as a potential laboratory for social reform (4). There was, he stated in the second draft of the policy, “no more promising – and at the same time a more neglected field for the rapid development of socialism,” than Africa and Asia (Memo no. 122A). While the published statement of Labour’s policy withdrew from this position somewhat, it still noted the potential of the colonies as a site for the “application of practical Socialism” (The Colonial Empire 7). The result was to deepen a sense of colonial difference through the development of policies within Britain’s empire that, if successful, could satisfactorily reform the imperial metropole. Yet to retain the colony as a space upon which to enact reform required the maintenance of difference and hierarchy between Britain and its foreign subjects. Labour Party reformers renegotiated this dynamic by defining and identifying imperial abjection.

Despite the lofty rhetoric of Woolf’s initial policy statement, its content remained vague. The second draft replaced Mill and Burke with an attempt to understand how Labour could address the condition of colonial society and achieve a socialist imperial idyll. As Woolf asserted in the executive summary of the second draft, colonial populations should receive the “opportunity to acquire the knowledge and culture, literary and scientific, which have accumulated through the ages and are a world and not a national or racial possession” (Memo no. 122A, 2). While seemingly a Utopian
statement that suggested the boundaries of knowledge were not the sole property of any one nation, Woolf’s vision of development nevertheless identified colonial subjects as a racialized other. The memorandum continued by noting that through technologies such as aeroplanes and radio broadcasts, the “impact of modern ideas is being felt by all Native communities,” for whom education would act as an emollient for the failures of past colonial administrations and Africa’s “previous history” (2, 3). Learning would come to Africa through the products of non-native nations who had developed modern ideas and the tools for their distribution. In the context of the redefinition of colonial policy, Woolf’s arguments offered a specific rhetorical purpose. It aligned Africa’s population with a lack of modernity in the eyes of British reformers. They created a set of circumstances that granted both the right to intervene in the affairs of others and the methods for doing so. The need for education and cultural aid defined the native status of colonial subjects as backwards or non-modern, situating the colonial condition as one that could only be relieved by the transfer of knowledge from Britain.

The perception of Africa as lacking modernity served to justify the attempts of Woolf and the LPACIQ to alter the constitution of colonial society. Woolf appeared to realize the implication of this idea, noting in the first draft of policy, “reform must be imposed” (2). Lack of modernity was a difference that required resolution. In the second memorandum, he outlined his solution; the re-organization of African society would educate colonial subjects in the tools of self-government, establish a series of co-operatives in which British experts would train local administrators in agricultural methods, and encourage a transition from capitalist to socialist enterprise (Memo no. 122A 2). Colonial Africa would reflect British policy aims. Subjects of Britain’s overseas possessions would learn languages “giving access to modern thought,” and receive instruction in medicine, sanitation, government, and civic behavior (11). To construct a new imperial state required that British agricultural experts, economists, and pedagogues function as colonial officials. More critically, it required rejection of traditional cultural and social forms that appeared hopelessly implicated with the condition of Britain’s colonies. It required colonies to reject tradition and think themselves anew.

The redevelopment of Britain’s imperial possessions implied by Woolf’s memorandum accorded to British colonial thinkers and theorists the ability to define and ascribe difference, and so connect this to a clear hierarchy of peoples and nations. This created a subsequent opportunity for colonial experts to assert forms of behavior to which the inhabitants of British
territories should adhere. To give “access to modern thought” required sustained engagement with those considered non-civilized and enforced acculturation to European economic, political, and social standards, as the price of colonial freedom (Memo no. 122A 11). This established a set of criteria to which colonies had to adhere to attain self-government. In doing so, Woolf rendered political autonomy contingent upon British expertise and discounted the use of local methods or knowledge as a means of improvement. Correspondingly, British modernity depended upon its definition of the outsider as abject and lacking in civilization, defined from the perspective of England, to justify continued intervention. The consequence was a relationship dynamic that required constant engagement with a population distinguished by its lack of modernity in order to create a political economy of empire based upon knowledge. By recording difference, as defined by lack of instruction in British modes of social organization, Woolf perpetuated and intensified the racial divide that existed between colony and metropole.

Identifying difference as it related to ideas of modernity proved critical to defining Woolf’s argument. In Civilising Subjects (2002), an examination of missionary activity in the West Indies, Catherine Hall argues that a sense of modernity arises through the relationship the modern individual builds with an outsider (9). This analysis is equally applicable to Woolf. His memoranda served to place colonial subjects outside the boundaries of modernity through their interaction with Europe, which revealed the innate abject condition of their society. By positing a civilized Britain and a set of colonies in need of reform, Woolf advanced a set of ideas that recalled nineteenth-century discussions of moral responsibility and social duty by liberal reformers such as John Stuart Mill, Thomas Macaulay, and missionary movements in the West Indies (Hall 9, 20). This argument possessed two implications. The first defined knowledge as something colonial regions, particularly Africa, lacked. The second presented only those living in non-colonial communities as modern. The result ascribed a sense of difference to Britain’s imperial subjects, based upon the notion of colonial abjection, which justified continued imperial administration and efforts to alter the societal constitution of Britain’s imperial territories. Woolf asserted an argument that attempted to reform imperial policy and peoples by observing deficiencies. The identification of policies that would define a sense of moral responsibility and social duty created an imperial sense of self for British reformers, which functioned by classifying an Other who existed outside civilizational or national boundaries. Africa served as both the negation of
modern enlightened Britain and a foil through which colonial theorists could judge development and progress in both spaces.

The appendix of *The Colonial Empire* (1933), the pamphlet based on Woolf’s memoranda, made clear the implication of civilizational ranking. It used a system of classification to assess the progress of imperial territories towards British defined norms of development, ranking dependencies within the colonial system. First were those with a “European Culture,” like Mediterranean and West Indian territories, who appeared “British in culture, language, religion and industry. No question arises of ‘Natives’” (*The Colonial Empire* 17). Below this rank were those colonies with an “Oriental Culture” such as Ceylon, Malaya, India, and Chinese territories, which demonstrated varying levels of development and readiness for political autonomy, and finally, those “inhabited mainly by peoples of primitive culture” in Africa and the Pacific Islands (17). The pamphlet’s ranking system demanded that colonial subjects cease practice of traditional cultural forms, modes of economic organization, and methods of agriculture to attain European levels of civilization and realize potential for self-government. This rather ahistorical approach ignored either the development of models suitable to regional needs or the fact that West Indian society remade itself as a European culture because the legacy of slavery shattered the communities that created Afro-Caribbean society. Significant, the only recommended reading or source written by a colonial subject was C.L.R. James’ pamphlet *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (1933), printed by Woolf’s publishing house, the Hogarth Press (18). The familiarity of James rendered his argument acceptable. Only by acculturation to British standards could no question of “natives” arise.

Labour’s use of difference extended to the methods by which the party publicly espoused its principles. The cover of *The Colonial Empire* used a set of photographs of Britain’s colonial subjects that were indistinguishable from images used by the Empire Marketing Board to convince the public to buy imperial goods and produce. It depicted Africans as tribespeople in varieties of national or traditional dress, engaged in the assembly of crafts, or harvesting crops from plantation fields. On the one hand, the cover art did indicate Labour’s intent to place Africa at the heart of debates surrounding the future of its colonial policy. On the other, it served to differentiate African subjects from the British people, by stressing their economic function and strangeness to British audiences. By distributing photographs of imperial subjects around the title *The Colonial Empire*, Labour served to distance the British from those over whom they ruled, thereby objectifying their colonial status. The visual image of the inhabitants of Britain’s imperial
territories served to underline for Labour’s colonial experts a British sense of self as a free people able to direct their own interests and, in doing so, grant this ability to others. The individuals depicted on the cover were not those who would be buying the pamphlet. They were the figures on whom the policies it contained were to be enacted.

Woolf’s comments on the cover design remain lost to posterity, but it is possible to hypothesize that he would not have objected to the imagery used. *Quack! Quack!* (1935), a jeremiad written by Woolf on the rise of fascism in Europe, was one of the first mass-market attacks on the transformation of communal psychology required to create the conditions for authoritarian rule. In making his argument, Woolf stated that acceptance of dictatorial regimes required a credulity similar to that expressed by Pacific Islanders towards their gods and rituals, and a concurrent rejection of reason and rationality. He centered his argument around a visual comparison of Mussolini and Hitler to Pacific island gods in order to suggest that the Fascist and Nazi movements remained outside of European norms. Although *Quack! Quack!* has attracted little scholarly study, one academic, Patricia Laurence, suggests that its intent was satirical, to present fascism as a form of irrationality that echoed the recent past that Europe had apparently escaped (134, 140). While this is certainly correct, Laurence does not go far enough in connecting the construction of Woolf’s argument to imperial views of primitivism and racially bounded terms of modernity and development. He may have used the imagery of primitive gods to attack the societal constructs of authoritarian European states, but in doing so, also presumed that colonial subjects, the Pacific Islanders whose deities he borrowed, were similarly incapable of rationality (140). Neither did Woolf engage with Fascism and Nazism as European ideologies. Instead, rationality remained subjective, bound by British determinants of reason. In making this argument, Woolf demonstrated how empire informed societal analyses, by writing a series of assumptions of the civilizing role of imperialism through his intellectual labor and emplaced these onto his cultural interventions. If Nazism, fascism, and imperial society all displayed irrationality, then the facts of European civilization justified intervention into not just European authoritarianism, but the conditions of life in Britain’s colonies as well.

In 1941, the Labour Party again began the process of reviewing policy towards the colonies, in particular Africa. They did so amidst participation in government as part of Churchill’s Wartime Cabinet coalition during World War II (WWII). This granted leading members of the Labour Party experience in Cabinet and administration, particularly regarding the portfolios of Home Affairs, labor issues, and education (Thorpe 105, 107).
The successful pursuit of policies to rebuild wartime Britain and construct post-war society, the suspension of political rivalries, and co-operation with the war effort had the consequence of re-establishing Labour’s credentials as a competent alternative government (Thorpe 109). As in 1925 and 1933, Woolf took a leading role in the development of a new pamphlet and statement of policies regarding imperialism.

After 1933, Labour’s colonial policies reflected a British desire to resolve international unease and continuing economic difficulties created by high unemployment and lowered demand for industrial goods and consumer products. A 1936 pamphlet, Demand for Colonial Territories and Economic Equality, advanced policies of appeasement to the sphere of empire, suggesting that concessions in Africa might forestall the growing assertiveness and territorial demands of Germany and Italy (Gupta 238-241). Labor disturbances in the West Indies led to a search for policies that would develop industry in colonial economies (Callaghan 147). Labour officials began to examine how to establish trade unions that would operate in close co-operation with their British equivalent in order to forestall future unrest and potential nationalist agitation, and hoped to learn from the experience of West Indies and apply these lessons to Africa (Callaghan 148, 150; Green Memo no. 191). As Gupta notes, the aim of Labour policy towards the empire prior to WWII was modest; to ease social and political tensions (273).

Woolf’s initial statement of policy in 1941 was a much more serious document than either the drafts or finalized versions of the 1926 and 1933 pamphlets. It collected the research and conclusions of a series of memoranda on colonial affairs written during the first years of the war as part of the process of planning for postwar Britain. The result was to provide a comprehensive policy that would fully discuss government, administration, and the development of colonial economies and social services (Memo no. 236 1). The approach of the 1941 memorandum towards colonial policy appeared to blend the analysis of the previous two pamphlets and associated memoranda. While the 1941 document expressed a desire to protect colonial peoples from the depredations of international capitalism and finance, it aligned this approach with a desire to educate and relieve the peoples of empire from their subject condition. Whereas the 1933 document sought to define a sense of difference between the British and their colonial subjects, the 1941 draft of policy sought to find a method for relieving this disparity and creating revitalized African communities modeled upon British methods of educational and economic organization.
Woolf began his policy statement where the 1933 pamphlet left off: defining those colonies that appeared ready for self-government, and those that did not. While regions like the West Indies and nations like Ceylon appeared suitable for varying forms of political autonomy, others, like African dependencies, were not. There, from the perspective of the British and “their civilization and their economic system, the inhabitants of these African territories [were] ‘backwards’ and ‘not yet able to stand by themselves’” (Memo no. 236 1). The consequence was the requirement of colonial administration and a concurrent search for policies to meet this need. Woolf’s suggestion was for Labour to adapt the Crown Colony system of rule, already used throughout much of the empire, in which a Governor appointed by the monarch would administer foreign possessions with various levels of involvement from its inhabitants. Although this policy continued pre-existing modes of rule, there was, Woolf noted, “a great deal to be said” for a policy that would afford the opportunity for the gradual transfer of responsibility to the inhabitants of Britain’s possessions while eliding the interests of British settlers, investors, and local elites (2). The result would allow for a policy that would administer imperial territories as a trust for “the native inhabitants,” and situate the primary object of colonial government as the need to “train” those living in colonial territories in the art of self-governance (2).

In some respects, Labour’s policy offered an advance on previous memoranda and policy statements, particularly concerning racial matters. It argued for the need to remap African territory in order to adjust the frontiers of British possessions to account for the needs of physical geography, economic relationships and ethnography and not the requirements of British investors and settlers. Redrawn boundaries would also allow for the practice of co-operative economic policies, federate the provision of social services and transport infrastructure such as railways across colonial territories, and avoid wasteful replication of government activity across small parcels of land (Memo no. 236 3). Woolf’s policy also contained a forceful denunciation of racially based policies of enfranchisement and labor hiring practices (6-7). The consequence of a color bar, he argued, was the deliberate maintenance of colonial subjects in their “subordinate, inferior, and ignorant conditions” (6). Yet despite concern about racial matters, Woolf and his LPACIQ colleagues remained convinced that Africa should conform to an evolutionary sense of progress that would reform their societies to resemble those of Britain.

Correspondingly, the 1941 policy paper developed the allusions drawn by the 1933 memoranda to colonial space providing a laboratory for
experiments in social reform. Woolf had begun developing this idea in the interim period, urging the adoption of co-operative societies for agriculture marketing, credit, selling of consumer products, credit, and housing in colonial possessions in order to promote “socialization” and economic development. British experts, who would train imperial subjects in co-operative practices, would oversee this process, which applied Labour’s economic plans to Britain’s foreign possessions (Memo no. 133). The 1941 document similarly developed an interest in colonial administrators encouraging ‘modern’ forms of social and economic organization to relieve the conditions found in British territories. Woolf envisioned extensive collaboration between colonial peoples and experts. Instruction in co-operative farming, marketing, and distribution techniques, would train colonial subjects in efficient uses of land (Memo no. 236: Continuation no. 1 2). Local government would adopt principles towards agricultural development that would balance the need for subsistence farming with the development of a produce export industry. British experts in nutrition and agriculture would assess the suitability of goods for export and direct the distribution of produce across colonial territories to either maintain nutritional standards or meet these needs (1). While this ensured a more efficacious use of land than that found under the plantation system and export-driven intensive cultivation of Kenya, Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, it failed to loosen the grip of colonial administrators on economic and agricultural practices. The enforcement of British standards and expertise granted agriculturalists neither control of their labor, which had to meet pre-determined needs, nor the ability to apply local knowledge to traditional forms of cultivation. Instead, it left farmers subject to unaccountable and arbitrary efficiencies that remained under threat of constant revision (2).

Woolf suggested that the alteration of economic practices afforded an opportunity to relieve Africa of the conditions colonial reformers believed they saw there, by modifying the behavior of settlers and investors in Britain’s foreign possessions. Oversight of colonial investment in industry offered another opportunity to regulate unrestrained capitalist excess and profit (Memo no. 236: Continuation no. 1 3). Instead, Britain would act as the patron of colonial development. The development of an industrial economy was the responsibility of colonial administrations who would direct investment towards the processing of raw materials and railway infrastructure. State ownership and planning, led by British economic expertise, would prevent capitalist investment in colonial industry and ensure the profits of industry in Britain’s imperial territories accrued to its inhabitants (3). Yet contained within Labour’s desire to relieve abjection was
the potential for further economic exploitation. The establishment of railways connecting raw material deposits to ports and distribution centres also suggested the development of an export economy that would drain Africa of its natural wealth. Although Woolf suggested that colonial subjects should receive accrued profits, colonial policy nevertheless entailed the willful denudation of their natural wealth. At the least, Memo no. 236 suggests that Woolf, and other Labour Party theorists, were attempting to define ways in which they could negotiate the desires of colonial subjects for greater freedom and a need for Britain to retain control of colonial produce and raw materials in order to restructure its post-war economy.

The potential to relieve Africa of its supposed condition indicated to Woolf how it could function as a laboratory for social and economic planning, which would also provide an opportunity to rewrite the British past. In particular, industrial policy would receive the benefit of recent history. Policies would reform agrarian and industrial development to prevent “those evils which accompanied it in Europe” (Memo no. 236: Continuation no. 1 3). This idea had two implications. The first was to suggest that economic policy towards the colonies offered colonial administrators and Labour Party theorists a space on which they could avoid the traumas of the history of industrial development in Britain and correct the mistakes of the past. The second was the presumption of colonial subjects as malleable constructs in the search for the creation of a perfect society. This analysis made it possible to situate Africa as a space on which British administrators and theorists could apply the lessons of the recent past, but also make possible an improved post-war nation through reform. The effect of these implications was to suggest that while the British created history, African colonial subjects were simply objects upon whom history happened.

The final act in relieving difference was to be the training of African inhabitants in the arts of self-governance. Woolf stated that this represented the most significant test of the sincerity of Britain’s pledge to rule Africa as a trust, for it was “upon education that will depend the capacity of Africans in the modern world for economic progress and prosperity, for self-government, and for civilization itself” (Memo no. 236: Continuation 3 1). As with his earlier writings on colonial policy, the rhetorical force of his argument depended upon the association of African colonial subjects as either uncivilized or residing outwith of the bounds of acceptable society and development. This factor created the analytical conditions that could justify British intervention. As the memorandum noted, the real cause of subjugation and inferiority was an inability to cope with the consequences of European encroachment and application of its civilizational norms towards
Africa because of a lack of knowledge and training (1). It was through education, particularly in English rather than vernacular languages, that African subjects could escape their “backward” condition (2). Yet while Woolf’s previous memoranda simply described colonial abjection through an analysis of the divergence between British and African communities, here he presented a method through which Africa could relieve itself of its condition by growing to resemble Britain and those other territories suitably trained in the practice of self-governance.

Pedagogy was to prove critical to the alteration of African society. Here, at last, Woolf could define how colonial subjects gained access to “modern thought” (Memo 122:A 11). British tutors would travel to the colonies following a brief period of instruction and participate in the establishment of teacher-training colleges and programs (Memo no. 236: Continuation 3 2-3). School curricula should be both vocational and include instruction in the liberal arts. These elements taken together would give children “the elements of knowledge which will fit them for understanding and dealing intelligently with the new conditions which western civilization is imposing upon their lives” (2). The extension of secondary education, technical schools, and institutions of higher learning would allow for the development of an Anglicized elite of skilled workers, professionals such as teachers, engineers, healthcare workers, and local government administrators who would oversee the broad mass of the population (2). Woolf’s argument displayed a clear delineation between Britain and its colonial subjects and described their cure through adherence to the educational and cultural norms of the former. The stress on the need to inform students of European cultural habits demonstrated an unwillingness to consider or conceive of traditional art forms and made perceptions of civilizational maturity contingent upon the evolving tastes of British intellectuals and pedagogical practice. Indeed, the nature of Woolf’s policy recommendations made this system necessary. His memorandum argued that the export of culture from Britain to its foreign possessions was a prerequisite for the relief of colonial difference. It was through engagement and education in British and western art forms that Woolf could remove the question of “natives” referred to in The Colonial Empire (17).

While historians have focused upon Labour and the Empire as an explication of anti-colonial rhetoric regarding economic exploitation in Africa (Howe 137), it is instructive to consider what Woolf’s memoranda, and the subsequent published pamphlets, inform historians about the permeation of empire throughout British society and culture. Woolf’s arguments, enshrined in Labour Party policy, require historians to re-examine the influence of
imperialist discourses, particularly regarding forms of moral duty and social improvement, upon the thoughts and writings of supposedly anti-colonialist intellectuals. Considering the work of the LPACIQ as simply a nascent expression of decolonization sentiment in Britain merely writes a Whig Interpretation of History onto the end of empire. Woolf’s work demonstrates an attempt to restructure how empire worked, not an evolving form of anti-colonialism, through changing perceptions of colonial subjects as defined by racialized forms of discourse, which appear through the idea of abjection. Through Woolf’s work for the Labour Party, scholars can begin to understand the porous nature of the boundaries between colonial and anti-colonial thought. In this regard, it is possible to revise assumptions of the work of the LPACIQ. In the interpretation proposed, Woolf and his colleagues sought to intervene in imperial policy to restructure empire as part of a process of political reform. This argument depended upon a form of racialized discourse that perceived colonial society as somehow abject and lacking in civilization. The result of this rhetorical approach was a celebration of British expertise, which used the power of knowledge as a methodology for redefining imperial policies and practices. The arguments of Woolf, and others on the LPACIQ, remained captured by forms of racialized discourse that operated as part of a broader imperial landscape that shaped British society and culture.

Studying Woolf affords an opportunity to dismantle an historiographical assumption that associates left-wing thought with opposition to empire, and right-wing ideology as celebrative of imperialism. In a nation saturated by empire, all cultural and social transactions had imperial implications, no matter whether the ideology that one subscribed to was of the right or the left. Critically, this article makes its argument through an historical figure assumed emblematic of mainstream anti-colonial thought. In the case of Woolf, the stress he placed upon expertise and the ability of the British expert figure to govern African colonies and re-organize their economic, educational, and administrative structures to encourage responsible government, possessed imperial implications. It set one form of knowledge against the other and found the latter wanting. One of the perspectives through which this argument appears most clearly is that of race, particularly as it applies to suppositions about civilization, culture, or modernity. By making colonial freedom or autonomy contingent upon adaptability towards European civilizational norms, figures associated with anti-imperial thought articulated a form of rhetoric imbricated with imperialist themes, thoughts, and assumptions. The consequence was that Woolf and his colleagues
ultimately sought to answer imperial questions, not to question imperialism itself.
Works Cited


