
Book Reviews

Postcolonialism and political theory

Nalini Persram (ed.)

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Promoted as an exploration of the intersection of political theory and postcolonialism, this rather ambitious edited volume perhaps says too much of itself, though certain of its chapters live up to its promise. In spite of the Introduction, which provides an accessible account of postcolonial theory as practiced by authors such as Spivak and Bhabha, the volume does not concentrate on what might be considered the Anglophone mainstream of postcolonial theory, but instead on its Latin American and Caribbean variants. One recurring leitmotif is the intersection of postcolonial theory and phenomenology, the call for postcolonialism to redirect its attention from theory to everyday life, for engagement with lived practices of resistance and hybridity, discourses and meanings constructed by the excluded, movements and authors outside the western canon, and a politics of openness and dialogism.

It is divided into three sections that are very distinct in terms of content. The essays contained in the first section deal with the relationship of postcolonial theory to political and normative theories traditionally conceived through a 'history of ideas' lens. Leading Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel's chapter 'Alterity and Modernity' summarizes the works of three Spanish authors – Las Casas, Vitoria and Suárez – whose critiques of Spanish colonialism and genocide in Latin America have largely been lost from accounts of the origins of the Enlightenment. He portrays their calls for recognition of the voice of the other as lying at the origins of political philosophy. Graham Finlay's chapter compares and contrasts Mill and Burke on Empire. Primarily this chapter is a critique of Uday Mehta's influential presentation of Mill as a paternalist, a racist and an economic determinist who refuses to perceive difference. John Savage's chapter explores the relationship between slavery and race and the law in the work of de Tocqueville. Lucian M. Ashworth's chapter on Ibn Khaldun locates this North African Islamic author at the origins of modern statecraft, as the partial creator of the idea of a distinct political world. The question arises, however, of whether originating modern statism and instrumental state rationality are really such a good thing. In placing Ibn Khaldun at the base of what was to become the imperial state form, Ashworth

risks not so much sharing the credit as reapportioning the blame for global disaster. These chapters are solid enough as simple exegeses but their implications for postcolonial theory are rather unclear.

The second section of the book consists of five chapters that move from political theory to postcolonial studies as the main focus of concern, presenting original theoretical contributions mostly from a broadly phenomenological postcolonial perspective. The first of these chapters is probably the weakest. E. San Juan Jr. provides a Marxist hatchet job on postcolonial theory directed especially at Edward Saïd. Mostly taking the form of a roll-call of accusations and anathemas – fetishism, solipsism, ‘romantic anarchism’, ‘neoconservative postmodernism’, ‘eclecticism’, ‘neoliberal’, ‘NATO-inspired’ and so on (pp. 100, 102, 106, 108) – it is built around a reductive core argument which states that by focusing on power/knowledge and textuality, poststructuralism and postcolonialism are unable to deal with real, material issues.

The following two chapters are by leading Africana (African-American, or African diaspora) scholars, Lewis Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon. Their chapters build on their earlier work, which is concerned with creating a distinct Africana canon of authors and to provide an interpretation of these authors’ work as hybrid, phenomenological, anti-systematizing, subjectivist and subaltern (see pp. 121–123). Sadly, this intriguingly subversive epistemological approach is eventually redirected back into the familiar, and politically disappointing, platitudes of radical democracy and ‘real’ universalism (pp. 155–156). This kind of phenomenological approach certainly has great radical potential, but such potential is expressed rather more fully in theories such as Situationism and autonomist Marxism, which take the rejection of transcendence and the emphasis on everyday life to its logical conclusion of anti-systemic resistance.

Joan Scott’s chapter on the controversy over Islamic headscarves in France provides a briefer discussion of many of the issues covered in her book on the topic. Not so much postcolonial theory as poststructural discourse analysis with a Lacanian inflection, this chapter nevertheless provides an argument that is very relevant to the topics of the volume. Scott theorizes the hysteria against headscarves as an acting-out of anxiety over globalization, ‘a gesture of impotence ... a symptom of the failure of French republicanism to respond to difficult and pressing issues’ (p. 175). Finally in this section, Hwa Yol Jung provides an exhilarating ride through the works of Glissant, Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss as he reconstructs a phenomenological and dialogical modality of theorizing. He replaces the overarching universal of Western theory with a lateral universal which is ‘acquired through ethnographic experience and its incessant testing’ of self and other (p. 197). The lateral, horizontal and transversal here replace the transcendent, circular and ‘global’ as figures of interconnection, with hybridity and intermixing as the political outgrowth of an epistemology of openness.



The third and final section consists of three chapters, all ostensibly dealing with indigenous politics. The first piece in the final section, by Alice Feldman, recounts a series of indigenous mobilizations and the rise of the indigenous rights movement from the 1970s onwards, and criticizes postcolonial theory for concentrating too much on European texts and giving scant attention to this movement and its theorists or to the need to seek unfamiliar theoretical resources and to seek the substance of claims (p. 242). This is a very important intervention, pointing to the need to look beyond Western categories in constructing a postcolonial politics, although the contributions of Jung, Dussel and the two Gordons suggest the call to go beyond readings of colonial discourse and Western authors may not be as novel as Feldman suggests.

In 'Doing the Postcolonial Differently', Phillip Darby calls for political theory to be directed to everyday life rather than the canon of theory itself (p. 251). Criticizing a tendency for postcolonial theory to start from and circle back to Western theory (p. 253), he wishes instead to start from the grassroots, from self-assertion and self-help by the excluded (p. 255). Finally, M.I. Franklin provides an empirical study of Polynesian Internet fora. Rather ambitiously subtitled 'Pacific Insights for Cynical Times', what it does is rather more mundane. Although it is revealing regarding how identity is constructed online by some Polynesians, and provides insights into related debates over gender and ethno-national roles, a lot of the content will be familiar to Internet users and scholars of cyberpolitics, and little is added on a theoretical level.

In all, this book is as uneven and discontinuous as can be expected from such collections, but is nevertheless a very worthwhile contribution to an important literature.

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The Liberal Archipelago

Chandran Kukathas

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In his new book, Chandran Kukathas makes two fundamental claims. The first is that justice is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for legitimate authority. The second is that in a pluralistic world, legitimate *political*