Review Essay

Colonial pasts, racial capitalism, and coloniality

Contemporary Political Theory (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00534-5>

Colonialism in Global Perspective

Kris Manjapra

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, xv +273 pp., ISBN 9781108560580

Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico

Rocío Zambrana

Duke University Press, Durham, 2021, xii + 264 pp., ISBN: 9781478011835

Colonial pasts exercise a strong hold on the present. As the two works under review attest, colonialism's impact ought to be understood through enduring and ongoing colonial processes rather than simply an inherited legacy with lingering consequences. Kris Manjapra's *Colonialism in Global Perspective* lays out an entangled global history of colonialism, identifying racial capitalism as the driving force of the violent processes that continue to fundamentally structure our world. Rocío Zambrana's *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* focuses on Puerto Rico to investigate how debt reinscribes social hierarchies imposed through a long history of colonial violence.

The scope of *Colonialism in Global Perspective* is as expansive as its title implies. Manjapra's stated ambition is 'to provide a critical description of the different and interlocking aspects of colonial power, including the ongoing resistances to it, that inform the global history of our present' (p. xiii). Manjapra makes no claim to comprehensiveness and instead takes a thematic and episodic approach to his subject, making for a thoroughly engaging historical survey. *Colonialism in Global Perspective* draws attention to the ties that bind distinct colonial experiences in what Manjapra calls a 'parallactic' reading of history that endeavours to 'trace relations among interlocking histories that are formed through each other, but are not the same' (p. 7). This enables a treatment of distinct colonial experiences that are at once rigorously particularized but not isolated from broader, global processes. Manjapra's concern with tracing lost, unrecognized, or unrealized connections and solidarities makes for a somewhat wistful reading of history—what he calls, following Lisa Lowe, a history of 'what could have been' (p. 14).

The book is divided into two parts and spans nine chapters. Part one, ‘Interlocking Colonial Histories’, investigates the processes of invasion, enslavement, settlement, and trade that shaped the world over the past five centuries. Part two, ‘Elementary Aspects of Colonial Power’, takes a more sociological approach, looking at the mechanisms of colonial power and the forms of knowledge it produced. While *Colonialism in Global Perspective* foregrounds a thematic organization, there is an implicit chronological arc here, with the chapters slowly (and discontinuously) inching closer to the present. The work’s meandering approach defies easy summary, and Manjapra’s short chapters, typically divided into sub-sections of only a page or two, are packed with detail. For instance, the first half of the book addresses topics as varied as the experiences of Chinese indentured labourers in Cuba, the petitions of dispossessed Wampanoag communities to the Massachusetts court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the career of Jan Niesen, a slave trader of mixed African and European descent who rose to prominence in Accra in the late 1790s. The second part is equally expansive, touching on the experiences of Vietnamese youth like Ho Chi Minh in French colonial schools, the construction of the Panama Canal, and contemporary American drone warfare, among much else.

Manjapra makes his point about colonial relationality through many kinds of examples, and sometimes through references to the careers of colonizers themselves. This is the case with Karl Helfferich, a Deutsche Bank executive and colonial administrator who managed Ottoman debt repayment to German banks and later played a notorious role in the financial administration of Germany’s East African colonies (p. 176). We are also told of Leonard Wray, a Scottish-Jamaican plantation owner in Sri Lanka, who in 1848 called for a mass movement of Chinese indentured labour to the Caribbean to displace formally emancipated Black labour (p. 117). These examples highlight the interlocking and relational nature of colonial power, bringing together processes of dispossession, exploitation, and genocide across the world. One of the most interesting features of Manjapra’s narrative is a focus on the ports and naval networks that enabled such colonial entanglements. This is true not only of the chapter, ‘Port’ (one of the book’s best), but informs the analysis throughout.

Bolstering its engaging style, *Colonialism in Global Perspective* is interspersed with images of the material culture of colonialism and anticolonial resistance. Manjapra’s ruminations on these images are particularly effective in illustrating the relational dimension of these histories. One of the most striking examples is a liturgical robe commissioned by Spanish missionaries in eighteenth-century Manila and woven by Chinese artisans. As Manjapra puts it, ‘histories of Tagalog shipbuilding and dock labor, Chinese artisan labor, and Indigenous American enslaved mining labor condense into its embroidery’ (p. 39). Other images speak more directly to the resistance and solidarities of the colonized—both real and imagined—as is the case with an engraving crafted by an unnamed Chinese

labourer in Guyana. The artwork shows Chinese and Indian workers in a variety of scenes at a plantation manor, capturing the duress of plantation life but also depicting escape, imagination, and perseverance. As Manjapra observes in a line that could sum up his own book rather well: ‘the scene is one of oppression, but also of survival’ (p. 122).

Colonialism in Global Perspective studiously avoids getting lost in the weeds of scholastic debates in favour of a commendably engaging and accessible style. The apparent trade-off of such an approach, however, is that even key concepts can remain vexingly underdeveloped. To take one noteworthy example, Manjapra frames his book as a study of ‘racial capitalism’, a concept developed in the Black Radical Tradition which draws attention to racism’s infrastructural role in capitalism. In a formulation that recurs frequently throughout the book, Manjapra defines capitalism as a process through which ‘the mercantile principle of profit-making penetrated deeper and deeper into the realm of human and ecological life’ (p. 7). And yet, while Manjapra describes the development of capitalism as a quantitative process – i.e. more mercantilism – he does not consider it as qualitative transformation, leaving the important question of what makes racial capitalism specifically *capitalist* undeveloped. In a footnote distancing himself from Marxist ‘transition debates’, Manjapra aligns his work with an eclectic set of authors (including David Graeber, Cedric Robinson, and Kenneth Pomeranz) who ‘situate the rise of capitalism in the friction of colonial encounters and contestations’ (p. 226, n. 15). And yet we are also told that ‘racial capitalism did not arise after this new form of colonialism began—it was its animating spirit’ (p. 8). But if racial capitalism was the ‘animating spirit’ of these encounters from the outset, how does it then arise from their frictions? Manjapra’s framing does not allow for a thorough account of how racial capitalism developed through colonial encounters, as its presence is assumed from the beginning. Rich debates concerning capitalism’s relationship to colonialism, especially in the anticolonial Marxist tradition, are, overall, sidestepped rather than engaged.

Colonialism in Global Perspective is, nonetheless, a rich and provocative account of the world colonialism made. Because of its sheer range, the book must necessarily sacrifice a certain depth of engagement for breadth. And while some readers will certainly find themselves wishing for more at various points, it is ultimately difficult to fault Manjapra on this score. With its accessible style, incisive analysis, and broad scope, the pedagogical value of *Colonialism in Global Perspective* is undeniable, and it is easy to imagine the book serving an effective role in an undergraduate seminar. The book’s emphasis on relation and solidarity will also surely prove edifying and inspiring in the classroom and beyond. Indeed, *Colonialism in Global Perspective* is particularly deserving of (and likely to find) a wide readership outside the academy.

In contrast to Manjapra’s wide-ranging ‘global history’, Rocío Zambrana’s *Colonial Debts* has a more focused geographic, temporal, and thematic remit,

namely Puerto Rico's indebted subjugation to American and international capital. As Zambrana makes clear, this contemporary indebted status is the result of colonial histories reasserting themselves in the present, and her problem is thus one of breaking and interrupting this pattern, reversing debts, and finally 'turning the present into the past' (p. 14). *Colonial Debts* has a clear sense of political immediacy. Written in the wake of Hurricane Maria's devastating impact and the 2019 mass demonstrations that toppled governor Ricardo (Ricky) Rosselló, *Colonial Debts* is indelibly informed by the powerful feminist organizing and theorizing that played a critical role in these protests.

Zambrana draws heavily on Aníbal Quijano's (2000) influential theorization of 'coloniality', by which he means a model of power and mode of social organization that grew out of a racialized division of labor rooted in European colonialism and global capital. The concept of coloniality helps Zambrana distinguish between colonialism as 'juridico-political control' (p. 9) and coloniality as enduring hierarchies imposed and reinforced by colonial rule. In this sense, Zambrana's critique does not hinge on the island's legal status as an American territory but on the social impact of debt in Puerto Rico. The contemporary neoliberal debt regime is but the latest phase in coloniality's *long durée* through which 'race/gender/class hierarchies are deepened, intensified, posited anew' (p. 10). In this context, as she succinctly puts it, 'debt functions as a form of coloniality' (p. 10). While coloniality is often read as a heterodox and diffuse account of colonialism's impact, Zambrana helpfully reminds us that a 'critique of political economy [is] central to Quijano's work' (p. 43). His is a critique in which race features as 'the central technology through which capitalism is articulated and installed in conquest, colonialism, and independence as well as updated and reinstalled ongoingly' (p. 37).

To further ground this reading of coloniality, *Colonial Debts* stages an inspired dialogue between Quijano's concept of coloniality and Saidiya Hartman's notion of 'the afterlife of slavery'. While Zambrana is quick to clarify that she does not want to draw any simplistic equation between the U.S. context of Hartman's project and Puerto Rico, the turn to Hartman helps Zambrana highlight the salience of antiblackness and the 'afterlife of slavery' in Puerto Rico.

The book's first two chapters are primarily diagnostic. Chapter one, 'Neoliberal Coloniality', begins with a critique of Maurizio Lazzarato's writings on neoliberal subjectivity, which center on the abstract, masculine figure of the 'indebted man'. Departing from Lazzarato, Zambrana draws on Argentinian feminists Véronica Gago, Luci Cavellero, and Rita Segato, bringing their feminist critique of debt into dialogue with the modernity/coloniality problematic to insist that indebted subjectivity is 'not universalizable' (p. 32). Through a reading of Ariadna Godreau-Aubert, Zambrana argues that colonial debts place a distinctive and exacerbated burden on women, the poor, and the racialized and that this burden works to reproduce coloniality. As she puts it, 'debt lands [on indebted populations] not merely exacerbating a history of racial/gender violence ... It reinscribes it,

actualizes or updates it, rearticulates its differences and intensities' (p. 40). The second chapter 'Colonial Exceptionality', challenges the application of an 'analytics of exceptionality' to the colony, drawing on a broad range of thinkers to clarify that Puerto Rico exhibits 'a state of emergency that is not the exception but the rule' (p. 55). Zambrana argues that colonial indebtedness already structures life in the colony as an attritive grind of 'slow death'. Emergency and catastrophe landed long before Maria did.

Chapter three, 'Historical Reckoning', marks a pivot from the diagnostic register and focuses on how activists can challenge the 'social logic of debt'. In particular, Zambrana explores how the 'strictures of debt' can be reversed, from a financial debt owed by the colonized to banks and financiers to a historical debt owed *to* the colonized. A truly subversive reversal of debt, Zambrana argues, promises not only to 'invert who is creditor and who is debtor' (p. 85) but also '[affirms] dismantling the political economy that sustains the colonial condition through an ongoing coloniality' (p. 85). The chapter contains interesting discussions of Karl Marx and David Graeber, offers a fascinating gloss of debates over the call for a citizen's audit of the island's debt, and concludes by discussing demonstrations organized by La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción against the island's prominent banks.

The fourth chapter, 'Subversive Interruption', focuses on 'aesthetic/epistemic' (p. 18) acts of protest and refusal. The chapter includes especially compelling discussions of the 2010–2011 student strike at the University of Puerto Rico, drawing on Guillermo Rebollo-Gil's reading of the strike and Mabel Rodríguez-Centeno's concept of *vagancia queer* (queer laziness) – notable here for its opposition to neoliberal discourses of productivity. The chapter also considers a feminist demonstration at the Cathedral of San Juan during the 2019 protests. Zambrana considers these examples as powerful articulations of 'hopeful failure': *vagancia queer* embraces a 'failure' to meet the norms of a neoliberal work ethic, while 'failed' protests still pose an effective public challenge to the logic of neoliberal debt and austerity. The conclusion moves from these aesthetic-political provocations to consider how debt might be practically reversed. To these ends, Zambrana considers the politics of land rescue/occupation in Puerto Rico and, drawing on Frantz Fanon, makes a case for reparations as a reversal of debt. The book concludes with a pithy meditation on pessimism and hope.

Where Manjapra breezes past theoretical debates to an occasionally frustrating degree, Zambrana's analysis, occasionally, can feel bogged down by extended textual digression, especially in its opening chapters. Chapter two, for instance, unfolds through discerning readings of José Atilés-Osiora, Charles Venator-Santiago, Miriam Muñoz-Varela, Anarya Santory-Jorge, Marisol LeBrón, Lauren Berlant, Yarimar Bonilla, and Christina Sharpe. Zambrana is an erudite and generous reader of the thinkers she surveys. But it is precisely due to her serious engagement with all of them that it can be difficult to keep track of Zambrana's

own intervention. The book is at its most lively – and its political stakes clearest – in the later chapters, which give more breathing room to Zambrana’s analysis.

Colonial Debts is a penetrating philosophical reflection on how debt has been theorized by other scholars, especially Puerto Rican scholar-activists. Readers looking for a more accessible polemic may want to turn to some of the texts that Zambrana engages so thoughtfully. Still, *Colonial Debts* undertakes invaluable conceptual work and offers much insight on how debt can be resisted and transformed. Zambrana’s reflections are sure to be of interest to anti-debt activists in Puerto Rico and beyond. *Colonial Debts* will also prove a vital resource for those interested in critical theories of debt, especially as debt relates to colonial dynamics. Zambrana develops the concept of ‘neoliberal coloniality’ in a very promising direction and bridges important dialogues such as between Quijano and Hartman or between the broader literatures on coloniality, feminism (especially Puerto Rican feminism), and neoliberalism.

Both works under review here effectively drive home an important point: colonialism/coloniality not only lives on in formal subjugation but also persists as a structuring principle of the global economy and is alive in the routine operation of banking, finance, and debt. An adequate understanding of contemporary (and historical) anticolonialist and anticapitalist politics demands resistance to any framing that would separate the two. *Colonial Debts* and *Colonialism in Global Perspective* are instructive in this regard, and both Manjappa and Zambrana share a commitment to understanding colonialism in relational terms, emphasizing points of connection, but without collapsing different experiences into each other. This can be a difficult line to walk, but both works are powerful testaments to the value of doing so.

Reference

- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America (M. Ennis, Trans.). *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1(3): 533–580.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Christopher Balcom
York University, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada
cdbalcom@gmail.com