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Jini Watson & Gary Wilder (eds.). The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.

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Jini Watson & Gary Wilder (eds.). *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.

Is postcolonial theory past its prime? Jini Watson and Gary Wilder, in their edited volume, mark the 1980s and 1990s as the heady days of postcolonial theory. They trace its emergence in 1978 when Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, came out. By the late 1990s, according to the editors, postcolonial studies, had run its course. Watson and Wilder report the turn of the century, with the chronological precision of the year 2000, to be the temporal enclosure of postcoloniality. Yet they hasten to caution that their work is not about postcolonial theory, but the 'postcolonial contemporary.'

Postcolonial theory indicts past narratives of colonialism, imperialism, Euro-American modernity, Enlightenment, and their echo in the sites of decolonization, particularly Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Watson and Wilder, without judging the theory on its grand ambitions, argue that the challenges posed by the present exceed the conventional explanatory tools of postcoloniality. Whatever the validity of the theory in dealing with the past, its ability to grapple with the 'postcolonial contemporary' (i.e., mega political events such as Green Revolution in Iran, the Arab Spring, declining imperial power) is in doubt unless it retools itself. With their presentist 'invention' of the postcolonial contemporary, Watson and Wilder attempt to move beyond the historicism of postcolonial theory, while remaining sympathetic to it. They recognize its productive potential as a continuity of the colonial past in the Global South, but strive to reconfigure its orientation from historicism to presentism.

In addition to their respective rich essay contributions to the volume, Watson and Wilder have elegantly laid out the major debates that postcolonial theory has ignited since its emergence. The introduction of the volume, in this regard, stands out as a theoretically dense, deeply-informed, and well-researched scholarly accomplishment. Watson and Wilder identify three dimensions of postcolonial critique that also provide the basis for their project, which they term the postcolonial contemporary: (a) temporal designation; (b) persistence of the past in the present; and (c) colonial epistemologies. In terms of temporal designation, Watson and Wilder understand 'postcolonial' as a referent of "the period, processes and formations that came into being after the end of colonialism" (p.3). Temporally, they attempt to demystify 'the after' of modern European colonial imperialisms, or of early modern Iberian imperialism or of any colonial, or imperial epoch, order or regime. In terms of the persistent past, they understand it to mean that "the 'after' is overdetermined by the before" (p.3) the way "social formations and subjectivities that follow colonialism are shaped, haunted or suffused by the preceding colonial era, practices, processes, arrangements" (p.3).

This potentially leads to "the repetition or resurgence of older forms of domination,...or to the emergence of new forms that are linked to, enabled by, or resemble those earlier forms (e.g., neocolonialism, nationalism, xenophobia, humanitarianism, etc.)" (p.3). In this sense, Watson and Wilder conclude, it is neither possible nor desirable to delimit the "after" from the "before." In terms of colonial epistemologies, postcolonial theory indexes how colonial assumptions and logics "shaped the Western concepts through which a purportedly universal (social) science claimed to produce knowledge of the (non-Western) world during the colonial epoch or may continue to do so in postcolonial periods that are still structured and haunted by the colonial past" (p.3). "A postcolonial perspective," they sum up, "is therefore one that recognizes, refuses or replaces such colonial forms of thinking and bodies of knowledge" (p. 3). In short, Watson and Wilder's three dimensions of postcolonial critique refer to the formal end of

colonialism, the persistence of the past in the present, and the epistemological implications of the preceding for knowledge production.

Postcolonial theorists have been averse to Euro-American ways of knowing the non-European peoples, places, cultures and histories. These theorists subjected Western epistemologies involving universal modes of knowledge production – rationality, individuality, humanity, freedom, reason, forms of reason (Western/non-Western, History 1/History 2, Christian/Islam, secular/religious, white/black, Enlightenment/indigenous) -- to critical evaluation, scrutiny (even rejection), and “valorized non-European lifeworlds, forms of consciousness, discursive and embodied traditions” (p.12). They affirmed and asserted the “irreducible singularity” and “incommensurable cultural integrity” of non-European peoples, while developing “antifoundationalist critique of cultural essentialism” and “primordial identities.” Watson and Wilder observe that postcolonial theory’s growing emphasis on the “incommensurable singularity” and “cultural alterity” of non-European forms of life marked the gravitational shift. Supporting their claim, they list postcolonial calls for “provincializing Europe” as evidence of the preceding shift in postcolonial theory’s emphasis on the incommensurable singularity and cultural alterity of non-Europeans. While calls for “provincializing Europe” are made to decenter Western reason, rationality and universalism, counter-calls are made to “deprovincialize” the Global South as well.

Watson and Wilder, themselves, make such calls. In their plan to move postcolonial studies beyond its current impasse (over temporal-spatial, center-periphery, tradition-modernity binaries), they propose to “link the indispensable project of provincializing Europe with the equally important task of deprovincializing the Global South” (p. 14). They argue that “deprovincializing the Global South requires us to reject monolithic models and one-dimensional analyses of epochs, regions, and civilizations... It means following the lead of colonized and non-Western historical actors who regularly sought *within* existing social formations resources and allies through which to engage in anti-imperial struggles, craft new norms, enter into new configurations... It means understanding “tradition” in expansive political rather than narrow cultural terms, and expanding our conceptual matrices of the political” (pp.15-16).

These bidirectional demands, however polemical they may sound, provide productive opportunities for Western and non-Western epistemologies to self-appraise their accentuated emphases on universality or particularity as part of knowledge production. Watson and Wilder frame these varying inflections with an important question: “What happens to the assumed territorial analytics of postcolonial studies when we shift configurations of decolonization away from Third World national and regional formations that have generated the most attention in the field (typically, South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean), complicating the presumed binary between peripheral nation-states and the imperial domination of the center?” (p. 21).

This question feeds into the intellectual task that Watson and Wilder set for themselves in their edited volume as to how to revisit the ways that postcolonial scholarship has addressed the three dimensions of postcoloniality in light of the world-historical transformations that have occurred since the founding of the postcolonial project.

They challenge postcolonial theory to engage with the “contemporary conjuncture” by addressing itself to the question of ‘mass democracy in the Global South.’ They do recognize recent interventions in this direction that include “Partha Chatterji’s conceptions of “political society” and “the politics of governed,” James Holston’s reflections on “insurgent citizenship,” Timothy Mitchell’s genealogy of “carbon democracy,” Asef Bayat’s conceptions of “contentious politics” and “social movements” in the Middle East, and Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi’s

reconsideration of the Iranian Revolution through the lens of “political spirituality” (p.19). They proclaim, “Such investigations enlarge postcolonial studies’ more typical focus on center-periphery relations, orienting the field instead toward creative contestations of substantive democracy” (p. 20). In their effort to reorient postcolonial studies, Watson and Wilder argue for it to engage with Latin America, which has long been ignored due to the field’s almost exclusive focus on African and Asian decolonization. In broader terms, they intend to move the field from its historical engagement with culture and cultural interpretations to the expansive terrain of the political to address the challenges posed by the contemporary conjuncture, or what they anticipate as the “postcolonial contemporary.”

Watson and Wilder’s major contribution in their edited volume is reflected in the highlighting of the intersectionality between Marxism and postcolonial critiques. They do not look kindly on the “supposed distance” between the two, and reject it as an unproductive impasse. In a powerfully argued section on *Beyond Marxism versus Postcolonialism* in the volume’s introduction, they fruitfully engage with major figures in the two fields, and their partisan debates that aim at cleaving them apart. A case in point is Vivek Chibber’s charge in his otherwise remarkable work, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013), that postcolonial theory is incompatible with Marxist critiques. Chibber, to the editors, take issue with the particularizing claims of the subaltern studies project against a capitalist universalism. “The latter, he argues, can only be countered by a universalist theorization of liberation rooted in the Enlightenment tradition” (p.16). Watson and Wilder argue that “...broadside like this rehearse the familiar standoffs between universalism and particularism, foundationalism and relativism, reason and tradition, class and race, secularism and faith, European modernity and subaltern subject positions” (p. 16). They attempt to carve out a middle ground between Marxism and postcolonial theory where both meet in a mutually enhancing way, i.e., proposing a shift away from culture to politics of the current conjuncture or the postcolonial contemporary. Almost all of essays in this volume attempt to live up to this ambition. They each engage with the current conjuncture and the problematic of the postcolonial contemporary. “Whether it is Arabic avant-garde literature, South Africa’s unredeemed anti-apartheid struggles, the untimeliness of Grenada’s socialist revolution, or thinking Foucault with Iran, these essays are both indebted to, and move beyond, those concepts of history, race, culture, empire, and capital that postcolonial studies have so forcefully made available to analysis” (p.22). The editors hope that “these essays offer some beginnings for rethinking postcolonial theory for our belated, anticipatory, uneven, and wholly interconnected world” (p.22).

Given their orientation in cultural studies, Watson and Wilder tend to favor postcolonial theory over what it supposedly set out to decenter, especially Marxism that the former indicts as a Eurocentric narrative empty of cultural substance or relevance to the Global South or the sites of decolonization elsewhere. Postcolonial theory’s critique of Marxism is a continuation of its predecessors in critical theory, particularly the Frankfurt School. Like postcolonialists, critical theorists first broke with Marxism and its material (contra cultural) foundation, to found a kind of ‘cultural Marxism.’ The latest of its luminaries, Jurgen Habermas, has just completed his second ‘intellectual migration’ by breaking with the Frankfurt School too. What unites the two, critical theory and postcoloniality, is their return to particularism and their shared zeal to dismantle universalism. Habermas, however, retains his fidelity to the source of Euro-modernity, i.e., Enlightenment thinking. Watson and Wilder, on the other hand, attempt to move postcoloniality onto the terrain of politics, as the contemporary conjuncture or the postcolonial contemporary, in their view, cannot be fully grasped by postcolonial traditional analytics of

culture or cultural interpretations. Is postcolonial theory ready for the anticipated “political turn”? Jini Watson and Gary Wilder have made a compelling case that postcolonial studies will ignore the coming political turn at its own peril (of becoming irrelevant)!

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