

The Post-Colonial and the Global

Ed. Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley

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This volume consolidates a set of hitherto scattered arguments that are at the very forefront of contemporary social, political and philosophical thinking. Consolidation, however, does not in this context mean resolution or conclusion. On the contrary, this collection of essays raises as many questions as it seems to answer, and it sparks more debates than those it is able to lay to rest. As such, it is a vital, engaging and dynamic work that, taken as a whole, avoids reductive thinking about complex and evolving affairs, and does justice to the often hotly-contested dialogues that have, of late, characterised research in the fields of postcolonial studies and globalisation theory.

The motivation for this volume, as one of its editors, Revathi Krishnaswamy, points out, was the realisation that there have to date “been few systematic or broad-based attempts to scrutinise the links between postcolonialism and globalisation theory” (2). The key terms here are “systematic” and “broad-based,” for as scholars in the area will immediately recognise, there are several existing studies that link globalisation theory and postcolonial studies in more partisan ways. These studies are the pre-texts that the various authors in this collection argue against, take sides with, excoriate or celebrate: Aijaz Ahmad’s ground-setting polemical assault on schools of thought influenced by “discourse analysis” in *In Theory*; Simon During’s influential efforts to subordinate one term (postcolonialism) to the other (globalisation) in his essays on the subject; and Fredric Jameson’s troubled exposé of the connections between concepts such as globalisation, postmodernism, postcolonialism and the logic of capitalism. What distinguishes this collection from these earlier forays into this comparative field, however, is that in this assemblage, the Marxist-influenced critiques of postcolonial studies and globalisation theory—Timothy Brennan’s contribution, for instance—hold their corner alongside spirited defenders and refiners of postcolonial studies and globalisation theory such as Saskia Sassen in “The Many Scales of the Global” and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in “Cultural Debates in Translation.” This variety means that the reader gets—as Krishnaswamy suggests—a very broad idea of the spectrum of arguments that characterise this field. It also means that the reader becomes privy to some animated—by turns polite, by turns scathing—disputes.

It would be impossible, in a short review, to do justice to the complex

ideas in this rich volume, which touches on definitions of globalisation and post-colonialism, modes of political resistance in the era of globalisation, the role of the arts in global mass culture, and the benefits of elevating “planetarity” over “globality.” It also seems unfair to name names in a substantial collection of essays that will hold different pleasures for different readers. Two interventions in this varied field of debate, however, will suffice to give a flavour of the character and quality of this volume. The first is Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s response to arguments made about multiculturalism by Slavoj Žižek, who does not appear in this volume, though many of his theoretical allies do. Žižek argued notoriously and provocatively in *Plague of Fantasies* that multiculturalism is “the ideal ideological form of global capitalism,” and that this school of thought is indirectly racist because (in Shohat and Stam’s terms) “it operates from an invisible vantage point presumed to be universal from which it can appreciate or depreciate other cultures” (128). Shohat and Stam tackle these arguments unhesitatingly, and in so doing endeavour to hoist Žižek up onto his own hangman’s beam. “Like most critics of multiculturalism,” they say, “Žižek never mentions any actual multicultural work or thinkers who exemplify the trends he is denouncing” (128). This gap means that he is unaware of two critical facts: first, that “radical versions of multiculturalism are deeply aware of the pernicious role of multinational corporations and global capitalism” and secondly, that multicultural theory did initially emerge from a dialogue between “minoritized communities” and “privileged (or unprivileged) academics” (128-9). This latter fact means, in turn, that Žižek’s arguments about multiculturalism are themselves “implicitly racist” because they tacitly deny “agency to people of colour who form part of the multicultural coalition” (129). “It is as if,” Shohat and Stam conclude, “Žižek cannot imagine that people of color actually came up with these ideas. Like the Eurocentrics . . . Žižek seems to think that only white people could have thought them up” (129-30). Such provocative contentions will not put an end to the debate about multiculturalism, but they will certainly enervate it.

A second example of the many engaging and important debates to be found in this volume is harder to locate in any single essay, or indeed any single passage, but is at work in various ways throughout. It concerns the pressing and increasingly more vocal demand that contemporary analysis of postcolonialism and globalisation, if it is to remain relevant, must begin to take more account of religious revivalism and the representation of Islam in the West. The point is persuasively argued by Anouar Majid in his alarmingly apocalyptic essay “The Postcolonial Bubble.” In making his argument, however, Majid suffers the fate of the prophet in the wilderness who makes his proclamation and by his own utterance becomes obsolete. Globalisation theory and post-colonial studies, he argues, suffer from two major lacunae that have made them ill-equipped to deal with contemporary realities: they remove Islam from any serious

discussion, and they give insignificant attention to "the titanic 'clash of civilisations' spectacle being thrust on the world community in the present" (135). Yet even as this point is being made, the volume in which this essay appears works to disprove the assertion, for *The Post-Colonial and the Global* supplies ample evidence of these lacunae being filled in. This contradiction indeed is one of the curious qualities of the collection as a whole: that even as the detractors of globalisation theory and post-colonial studies offer up their powerful critiques of the intellectual and political omissions in these fields of thought, these omissions are being given a vigorous and extensive accounting in the very work—surely a work of postcolonial studies and globalisation theory—in which their essays appear.