

The politics of postcolonialism: Empire, nation and resistance by Rumina Sethi (2011).

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The expansive but still marginal field of postcolonial studies may be counted as one of the critical intellectual legacies of twentieth century decolonization movements and antiimperialist politics. Rumina Sethi's small book, *The Politics of Postcolonialism*, undertakes to remind postcolonial critics of these roots and in doing so persuade scholars in the field to "recover voices of dissent and resistance" otherwise "lost in the sweeping wave of corporatization" as well as undertake "empirical investigations" of exploitation, impoverishment, migration that result from the "oppressive systems of the world hierarchy." (p. 113) The dragon the book seeks to slay, Sethi lures from its lair in this way: "We are facing a peculiar impasse today: in order to ensure the success of protest and political action, the enemy has to be identified. While this might be possible in the real world, the enemy has been obscured in high academia. Academic postcolonialism has obfuscated globalization with the misty discourse of a lexicon which seems to promise freedom" (114) but, as Sethi argues, which fails to deliver. With high academia thus removed from the real world (where in fact it has been in free fall in recent years), the five chapters of the *Politics of Postcolonialism* rehearses a show trial between Marxism and postcolonial studies in which scholars interested in working through both theoretical problematics will recognize the familiar misty discourse of a tired contest but will not find many new provocations let alone insights.

The first chapter sets up the key terminological distinctions —between "postcolonialism", "postcolonial studies" and "postcolonial theory"— upon which the argument of the book turns. Sethi reserves the term "postcolonialism" to stand for a condition of living, a practice, a political belief or set of political beliefs that come into effect in a situation of oppression or marginalization, and that can help counter that oppression through protest, resistance and activism. " (p. 6) But things soon become muddled by the further qualification that the politics of postcolonialism are not only those of activist resistance as this definition initially posits but of comprador opportunism as well. Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, "underpinned as it is by 'postcolonial theory', is a discipline that was set up to examine the literature of political protest and resistance among people of the third world, but which has come to represent university curricula abounding in issues of hybridity and multiculturalism as these are taught in elite institutions of the world." (p. 6) On the scaffold of such evaluations, the chapter goes on to castigate postcolonial studies and postcolonial theory "for developing rightwing tendencies and severing links with what was taken to be their responsibility following decolonization struggles – namely, to maintain an adequate historical representation of the condition of the formerly oppressed and support the creation of an equitable, anti-eurocentric world through public-spirited debate rather than textual obscurantism." (p.8) The chapter the predictably laments the influence of "textualist" French poststructural theory on the field but tangles this with the more serious issue of "western academic imperialism": "The 'original' postcolonial theorists like Spivak and Bhabha are now considered to have been 'appropriated' by the global economy and judged inauthentic in terms of the problems they purport to represent as they have moved westward; those who are left behind then claim to be the 'genuine' practitioners." (9) Such judgements would seem to accord with Sethi's claim that postcolonial studies has lost touch with its roots in the decolonization and anti-imperialist struggles of the first half of the twentieth century but the chapter offers no account of how the writers mentioned

occasionally throughout the book such as Fanon, Nkrumah, Gandhi, Césaire, Cabral, Senghor might be important for us today. Instead, the chapter introduces two threads that run through the subsequent chapters of the book. The first involves the Marxist theoretical legacy a caricature of which is set up as a foil to postcolonial studies. The second is Sethi's key argument regarding the importance of nationalism and the nation-state as the political ground of resistance to neoliberal globalization: "The importance of the nation and of historical agency, which alone could answer back to the ongoing eurocentrism of rapid capital expansion and neocolonialism, was emphasized by the Marxists even as postcolonial theorists disavowed such factors." (21) In doing so, Sethi distances her anti-globalization position from Hardt and Negri's theorization of an alterglobalization politics.

Chapters two and three then take on political struggles against neoliberal globalization. The second chapter argues for the endurance of the nation-state under conditions of globalization both as the institutional framework through which neoliberal reforms and structural adjustments (privatization and commodification programs, austerity measures, currency devaluations, etc.) are pursued as well as the primary site of historical resistance and agency. Indeed, Sethi goes as far as to argue that "in the present scenario of the decolonized world, nation-states should assume even more power, particularly if they can support local struggles against the excesses of global capital." (55) This is a big if which the book's concluding prescription underplays, especially since many of the examples of subaltern struggles outlined in chapter three involve people fighting pitched battles against their own state. The examples discussed—from the Zapatistas, and Bolivia's water wars to Narmada Bachao Andolan via Seattle, Quebec City and the anti-GM food sovereignty movement—are by now very familiar in the critical globalization literature and their treatment here does not offer any new perspectives on them. While chapter two concedes that in contemporary political confrontations between the global and the local "the two terms still retain their old meanings and yet get mixed up with the kind of politics for which we do not, as yet, have a nomenclature" (p. 31) and chapter three allows that "protests against globalization have largely succeeded as a result of being both nameless and faceless" (p. 73), it then remains a puzzle why chapter three concludes by insisting that we understand the Zapatistas to be a national liberation movement or that new struggles against globalized capital should conform to a statist identitarian nationalism. As perplexing is Sethi's response to feminist critiques of nationalism's historical cooptation by the patriarchal state: "Traditional gender roles need not always be seen as stultifying; they may, in fact, have room for effective politicization outside the overused rubric of nationalism." (p. 77) Well, they may but then again, they may not. Then what? Chapter four sets out to present a critical interrogation of postcolonial studies as this has become institutionalized at U.S. universities. But the first issue addressed is the question of whether or not the U.S. can be described a postcolonial society. According to the conventional definition, it can be and may be so in some ways even under Sethi's definition of postcolonialism. Sethi, however, argues that the US is better tagged with "the position of the colonizer rather than the colonized" and the injustices and oppressions of American society mean that "'racism' rather than 'postcolonialism' is still the more appropriate term in the context of the United States" (p. 91) Since no other explanation is offered, the connection between this taxonomic issue and that of the institutionalization of postcolonial studies at US universities presumably has to do with how the history of the European colonization of Turtle Island is taught. The chapter therefore undertakes a lengthy discussion of the ideologies of American exceptionalism, manifest destiny and the "structures of denial" said to inform traditional curricula of American studies programs before arriving at its central indictment: "As postcolonial studies becomes increasingly linked with immigration, race and ethnicity in the US, and with a host of other initiatives all over the

world, it runs the risk of playing into the hands of a liberal multiculturalism that obfuscates even the significance of ‘race’ and becomes a ‘new universalism of the sort it was established to critique’. (pp 88-89) The remedy prescribed then involves the critique of US “transnational capitalism and the corporatization of every aspect of culture so that post-colonialism and transnationalism become easily distinguishable.” (109) The fifth and final chapter reiterates the main line of the book’s argument that “the only way to ensure that resistance remains possible lies in urgently reviving the nation-state. Alongside that, in the present context, it will involve the intellectual exercise of transforming postcolonial studies so that it becomes capable of incorporating resistance against postmodernism’s unsettling tendencies.” (p. 122) While she concedes that “the nation-state is a very problematic category and nationalism a lop-sided homogeneous discourse propped up by a popular bourgeois ideology” (p. 123) Sethi remains committed to this statist vision despite her list of conditions before this vision may be realized: a democratic global government —“a fully empowered representative interstate organization”— able to “support the grassroots activities of non-governmental organizations so that they can withstand the sweeping powers of the TNCs” and meet the needs of “labour unions at the transnational level” (p. 123). But at this point, we have left nationalism and the nation-state system far behind.

It is not at all unusual for a book to conclude by raising more questions than it answers but in the case of *The Politics of Postcolonialism* the questions are so fundamental and elementary that it seems we have moved nowhere through the arc of its argument. The case it makes for the theoretical and political significance of the nation-state is nothing new. Saskia Sassen’s historical study *Territory, Authority and Rights* argued the issue with enough compelling erudition to have dispelled all euphoric fantasies of a new borderless world that some of the early literature on globalization indulged in. Few serious scholars of globalization would do so now. The historical contingency that human history should have taken this curious turn that the world’s population would come to be ruled through a global system of nation-states is not something that can simply be undone and will continue to have various consequences regardless of whether global flows of various kinds gather head or wane in the future. No doubt there are some postcolonialists whose frames of reference still run from Said to Bhabha and leave it at that, despite the critiques of Dirlik and many others. But postcolonial studies scholars working in other disciplines from history, sociology, anthropology, social geography as well as a wide range of disciplines in the humanities will be puzzled by the book’s narrow focus on literary studies and find its terms of reference therefore useless. And postcolonialists with research located in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Canada, Australia will be annoyed but not surprised to have their insights and arguments simply ignored. Given Sethi’s alleged Marxist theoretical and political commitments, one would expect the matter of crisis and contradiction to be key turning points of argument and the challenges of theorizing the intersections of class politics at all scales from the global to the local to be a central concern but Marxism here seems to be assimilated to an undertheorized if not nostalgic nationalism. Far from being outdated, as Sethi sometimes assumes, Marxism remains an “unsurpassable horizon” (Sartre) for understanding the crises and inequalities of our times. And given the trajectories of globalization, what might be called the “postcolonial turn” in the Marxist theoretical tradition itself is certainly one of the most important intellectual projects of our era. *The Politics of Postcolonialism* does not meet this challenge but is dead on target on one score —the right is everywhere ascendent, including the universities— even if the path toward a critical response offered here has been well travelled.

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