

Postcolonial Disorders

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Postcolonial Disorders. Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Sarah Pinto, and Byron J. Good, eds. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008; xii + 465 pp.



A seminar entitled “Postcolonialism, Psychiatry, and Lived Experience” carried out in 2000-01 as part of the Harvard Training Program in Culture and Mental Health Services Research gives rise to this thoroughly documented and insightful collection of 15 essays that reflect upon subjectivity from the critical lens of postcolonialism. The book assumes the explicit challenge of examining and building on alternative approaches to three trends in recent anthropological accounts on subjectivity and postcolonialism – trauma theory; poststructuralist writing, which stresses the importance of power in the shaping of subjectivity; and the language of “suffering” as an existential and phenomenological category. If the first of these trends entails the potential risk of advancing universal categories that may be blind to cultural specificities, the last two may be equally damaging by representing the subject as victim.

As an alternative, the authors of this book apply the notion of disorder or pathology as a frame to approach subjectivity in postcolonial studies. Of course, this choice doesn’t go without its own risks – whereas in colonial contexts “pathology” was frequently used to demonstrate the inferior nature of the colonized and to ground demands of intervention, when applied nowadays to indigenous or marginalized people it also often supports demands of intervention. But this danger is substantially capitalized throughout the book, as each of the authors is consistently alert to the problems inherent in this framing and many of them address directly the issue of intervention – by the state, local bureaucracies, health institutions stemming from colonial

structures, or humanitarian international organizations – in shaping subjectivity.

Divided into three parts, the book broadens the notion of postcoloniality by applying it not only to places that have been controlled by foreign nations or cultures, but also to “...relationships [...] between powerful political, economic, and state entities and those that are marginalized” (p. 7). This decision proves most fruitful, as it enables the authors of the essays to explore in varied contexts a core artery of postcolonialism, namely the complex dialectics between a powerful center from which the “self” is defined in contrast to the marginal “others,” dialectics that haunt the present and challenge the “post” in these studies.

In the first part of the book, “Disordered States,” the category of subjectivity is applied to states and supra-state humanitarian organizations, considering them as agents that shape individual lives, often negatively. Of particular interest here are the essays by Begoña Aretxaga and Mariella Pandolfi. Aretxaga analyses the “incomprehensible logic” that lies behind ETA’s political violence against the Basque police in Spain’s Basque country. She argues persuasively that ETA’s extremely violent efforts to alienate the Basque police by predicating its betrayal to their nationalistic cause conceals the anxiety of this organisation towards an increased political autonomy, for such autonomy would threaten ETA’s now united sense of self as colonized people. In “Laboratory of Intervention: The Humanitarian Governance of the Postcommunist Balkan Territories,” Pandolfi draws a vivid portrayal of the humanitarian presence in the Balkans in general, and in Tirana in particular. She provides a fascinating description of how international organizations transform the local landscape into what she calls “a gray space,” which is neither local nor national, through a standard universalizing and apolitical discourse.

The second part of the book, “Subjectivity in the Borderlands,” looks into subjectivity when placed at the margins of both states and policies. Fertile as it usually proves to be, the notion of borders shows how identity is shaped or else deformed in these sites of cultural flux and contradictions. In “Ambivalent Inquiry: Dilemmas of AIDS in the Republic of Congo,” David Eaton places subjectivity in the borderlines constituted by both political and economic crisis and the postcolonial imagery of the outsider. He acutely analyzes how the profound crisis in the Republic of Congo in the years leading to the country’s civil war of 1997 conditioned a response to the spread of AIDS in the country that was marked by silence, denial, and “ruptures in knowledge.” Such analysis yields interesting insights that contrast with the Euro-American “full disclosure” policy, which strains to track the origins of the illness, place responsibility for it, and isolate the contamination. Memories of Congo’s colonial past are reenacted then, engendering discourses of endemic illness (“le pays est malade”) and rising suspicions that the disease was created by the West in order to eliminate “undesirable populations”.

The third and last part of the book, “Madness, Alterity, and Psychiatry,” approaches postcolonial subjectivity through the notions of “other” or “altered” mental states. Jamie Saris’

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essay, “Institutional Persons and Personal Institutions: The Asylum and Marginality in Rural Ireland” is especially thought-provoking for it is eloquent evidence of both the analytical and political potential that stems from considering the margins as a space of creative subversion, as Homi Bhabha and others do. Saris persuasively argues for the need to examine postcolonial experience, as he puts it, “beyond moments of violence” (325). Through a compassionate description of the daily life of a mental patient of a state hospital built as a colonial asylum by the British in Ireland, he shows how this “other”— the “town character”— bears a certain authority as a commentator of the life in town, authority which in turn helps to reproduce a sense of “*communitas*” in the town.

In short, this is a stimulating book that helps open up interesting territories in the areas of subjectivity and postcolonialism, linking, as it does, the social and the psychological through the dynamics stemming from the oppositions order/ disorder, rationality/ pathology. Each and every essay renders persuasive evidence of the ways in which both states and global institutions may reproduce disorder through the political, moral and cognitive orders they engrave in the social sphere and the lives of individuals. Problems of theory and methodology are, therefore, addressed throughout the book focusing on lived experiences, which makes the essays engaging narratives that, as the editors say in their prologue, attempt “to make sense of lives that challenge comprehension” (1). Any reader interested in the study of subjectivity and/ or postcolonialism would find in this book an invaluable resource.

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