

Zein-Elabdin EO and Charusheela S (eds.) (2004) Postcolonialism meets economics, Routledge, London, ISBN 041528726x

This is a fascinating and timely book, published as part of Routledge's excellent *Economics as Social Theory* series, edited by Tony Lawson. The agenda is bold and, put simply, is to bring "postcolonial scholarship and Economics together for the first time in a broad way that challenges and hopefully enriches them both (p. 1). The critical starting point for this engagement is the inescapable centrality and disciplinary power of economic discourses (note the plural) in shaping debates and public policy about poverty and wealth. The introductory chapter by the editors argues that one of the problems of this disciplinary power is that it is wedded to a discipline which – in its most orthodox variants – assumes the ontological precedence of modern European societies, is "intransigently modernist" (p. 3) and bent on colonising other social science disciplines with its assumptions of equilibrium, stable preferences and maximising behaviour. The editors note Thompson's (1997) observation that while other social sciences are busy examining various 'posts-', Economics' more recent innovations are often prefixed by a 'new'; new growth theory, new institutionalism and so forth, indicative of 're-renewal' rather than 'transformation' (p.3).

This collection, however, moves well beyond critique of orthodox economics. Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1996) critique of the 'disavowal' of the economy in postcolonial critiques, the editors rightly argue that,

theorizing the economic continues to be a point of weakness in much postcolonial scholarship, and engagement with Economics remains minor. Although postcolonial critics often invoke economic forces in their analyses, the theory they draw on is often ill defined, gestural and removed from current scholarship in Economics. (p. 4-5)

For all the sophistication of cultural analysis in many postcolonial writings, the editors argue that many attempts to dissect the economy often rely on dependency theory or world systems theory. In constructing this argument, the editors recognise that engagement with economic arguments, rather than sweeping dismissal, is essential. They describe their project as 'counter-disciplinary' in that they seek theoretically, substantively and at the level of disciplinary organisation to bridge the gap between Economics and Postcolonial Studies. The aim is to develop a non-modernist approach which interrogates essentialist readings of truth, reality and reason but also, crucially, retains a central concern with materiality, domination and subordination, with thorny questions of power.

With collections like this, I am always intrigued to look at the spread of contributors. Just over half of the contributors are women, with most based in US universities (although there are contributors from Canada, Holland and the UK) and, interestingly, no less than eleven of the nineteen contributors are based in Economics departments. Other contributions come from Women's Studies, English, History and Philosophy of Economics, Philosophy, History, Anthropology and Political Science.

The book is divided into four sections, with each chapter designed as an invitation to future work (p. 9). Part I lays the conceptual foundations of the book and features two chapters - by Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela – and two commentaries by Mayhew and Chukwudi Eze. Zein-Elabdin discusses the inescapable westernness of postcoloniality and the erasure of the idea of culture in economics, while Charusheela argues that postcolonial interventions in Economics can provide the basis for addressing the neglect of class and economic domination in contemporary

postcolonial theorising (p. 56). The rest of the book is pitched as opening up spaces for interventions and conversations.

Part II of the book considers economics as a colonial discourse of modernity and includes three core chapters by Robert Dimand (on Nassau Senior's eastern tours), Ulla Grapard (on the gendered, racialised construction of statues at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1878) and Antonio Callari (on economics and the postcolonial other). Again, commentaries revisit and extend the key points raised in the chapters and are thought-provoking pieces. Michael Shapiro, for example, uses postcolonial lenses to move from looking at geopolitics and systems of exchange to open up issues of biopolitics and the relationship between the political and economic eligibility of bodies, arguing the need to explore the growing traffic in bodies, sweat shops and sexual slavery.

The third part of the book explores economics as a contemporary hegemonic discourse. This part opens with Medley and Carroll's fascinating chapter on 'The hungry ghost', which re-tells the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8 through the lenses of Thai and Malaysian women factory workers. This is a tale of the 'ghostly' figures of suffering and labouring that contest hegemonic IMF representations of Asian economic growth. Jennifer Olmstead then revisits feminist economics' discussions of Islam, before Natasha Kaul explores different ways of writing economic theory. Kaul argues that, "The writing of economic theory [in terms of mathematical formalism]... is not so much a theorizing of the 'economic' in its content and evaluations, but rather a second order a priori formalized exercise where the method serves as a grid onto which any content can be mapped" (p. 186). This chapter in particular, and two further commentaries by Barker and Radhakrishnan provides a useful transition into the final part of the book which presents three chapters working towards a 'non-modernist' economic analysis. Karen Graubart contemplates bringing postcolonial theory to Latin American economic history, Serap Kayatekin uses some of Homi Bhabha's work on ambivalence to explore some of the boundaries between Marxian political economy and postcolonial theory (through an analysis of Southern planters sharecropping relations in post-bellum USA) and Colin Danby draws on post Keynesian traditions to argue that a particular post-second world war imaginary of the state has "underwritten theoretical attempts to compartmentalize economy from other spheres of social life" (p. 254). This section concludes with brief commentaries on some of the linguistic and methodological barriers laying in the path of dialogue between postcolonial theory and economic analysis (Ceclia Conrad) and Stephen Gudeman's observations on hybridity, hegemony and heterodoxy as 'a new world'.

In sum, this is a challenging, provocative and, at times, densely-written collection. It is constructed around three tenets of postcolonial thought: that only a very partial (Western) history of human experience has been told, that what is deemed 'knowledge' is culturally bound, and that the realm of the 'economic' has not been subject to the same critical scrutiny as other social science categories like 'culture' (Mayhew, p.59). If this is all that economic geographers, still new to postcolonial theorising, take from this collection then so be it. But there is much, much more food for thought in here. The project of interrogating the genealogy of 'Economics' has been developed on several fronts (for example Mirowski 2002, Mitchell 1998, McCloskey 1998) and now indeed may start to receive greater prominence in Geography (see Castree 2004). This book is a very timely, welcome addition to debate; it is one for economic geographers to dip into, to ponder and then to revisit.

References

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