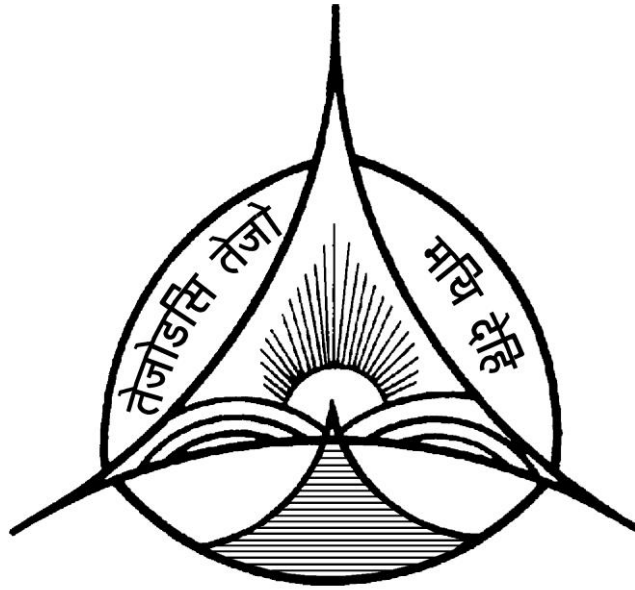


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The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincializing Europe
by Vasant Kaiwar, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, .2014

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This book, steeped as it is in wordy abstractions derived from hyphenated hybridities of poststructural, postmodern and postcolonial discourses, is too discursive and dense to aid clear thinking. Nevertheless, even at the risk of being guilty of gross simplification, I make an attempt to grasp the main points. I am aware that my reading is idiosyncratic and does not do justice to the subtlety of arguments and nuanced conceptual and epistemological discriminations that are packed into this book, but Kaiwar too is 'culpable' in the gross meanings that I have constructed because of his pedantic and unprepossessing style of writing.

What is impressive about the book is the attempt to revive the political economy approach that has gone out of fashion in postcolonial discourse. Even as Kaiwar accepts postcolonial admonitions of facile economic determinism, which is economism, he holds that the political economy approach will have to be included (or imbricated, in postcolonial jargon) in grasping postcolonial scholars' preoccupation with difference, dispersion, hybridity and cultural fragmentation. He appreciates their 'incredulousness towards metanarratives' and their antipathy to totalising theories, including Marxism, but he wants them to take note of the persistence of the metanarrative of capital in their studies. In this connection he approvingly quotes Sartre who regards Marxism as the 'untranscendable philosophy of our time'. Hence, even the best attempts to go beyond Marxism end up in becoming a rediscovery of ideas that are already contained in Marxism.

Kaiwar's problem is that postcolonial studies have led us to the nihilistic future of cultural differences, hybridity and fragmentation that have crushed the hopes of liberation into a brand new future that goes beyond the overhang of colonialism and modernity. He holds that the project of postcolonial studies which stresses genuine liberation and freedom from Eurocentrism has not yet been realised because all contemporary versions of modernity and development are Eurocentric. His quarrel with postcolonial theorists is that they have not correctly understood and adapted Marxism in their studies. Had they understood Marx correctly, they would have realised that persistence of differences, even when they are in the form of beliefs in magic and ritual, are all the consequences of the regime of capital. If a Santhal worker of a steel mill justifies killing a stranger on the ground that his god told him to do so, that should be taken as a sort of 'false consciousness' (my words). He resorts to Gramscian interpretation of hegemony to account for such false consciousness and explains it as a crafty cultural imposition at the behest of capital. He wants postcolonial scholars to give up fetishising primordialities that clutter cultural horizons, and shift focus on eruptions of 'difference' (Derrida's concept) that let the future of freely associating beings in the world come gushing into the present. Unfortunately, the track

record of such eruptions, be it in the form of 'Occupy Wall Street' movements or 'Arab Spring' movements or other such movements, has been dismal.

A major failing of this book is in its inability to at least outline the contours of a society of freely associating beings in the world that lies beyond capitalism. Kaiwar mentions in passing Foucault's support of Khomeini's Islamic movement as a revolutionary instance, but he does not delve much into the feasibility of such a revolution. Actually, there is considerable empirical support to lend credence to the idea that an Islamic revolution is now sweeping the world. It is possible to draw upon Marxism to demonstrate that such a revolution is imminent. Since 1973, when Saudi Arabia nationalised its oil fields, the structure of global economy has altered drastically, if almost imperceptibly. It is well known that the wealth accumulated by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries by producing many more million barrels of oil per day is supporting the propagation of fundamentalist Islamic ideologies all over the world. Fundamentalisms both of the Sunni and Shia varieties of Islam decry westernisation as westoxification, and have seriously questioned and undermined the values of democracy, liberty and equality. These fundamentalist versions consider modernisation as promoting a life of licentiousness and decadence and hold democracy as evil because it challenges the rule of their one and only God. They also consider the discourse of rights of women and of Lesbians, Gays, Transgenders and Bisexuals as sin. The new-found oil wealth of Islamic countries has also directly or indirectly spread the cult of global jihadi terrorism, of which the ISIS is the latest and perhaps its most brutal version.

It is also possible to argue that in this 21st century, Islamic ideology is becoming globally hegemonic. Signs of such hegemony are to be seen both in countries that propagate multiculturalism and accommodate their governance structures to cater to the sensitivities of Muslims, and in those countries that resist incursion of Islamic values and practices in public life. Some of the countries that propagate multiculturalism are devising differentiated law regimes and institutions to make room for the rights of Muslim minorities. The countries that resist Islamism have suffered from jihadi terrorism, leading to a backlash of Islamophobia, which is also working to whip up public sympathy even among the non-believers in favour of Islam. It is interesting that the rise of Islamism is also leading to the restructuring of the economy in accordance with the Shariyat. Islamic banking is attracting considerable funds and has become an important source of investment. Hence, Foucault was not wide off the mark in his comments on Islam. He saw Islam as holding a mirror to a future that goes beyond the regime of capital, which in any case seems to be tottering under its own weight now.

To be fair, even as we concede the world hegemony of Islam, it is doubtful whether it shows the way beyond capitalism. Islamic fundamentalisms have not opposed capitalism as such; they have tried to accommodate them to suit their purposes. Although some fundamentalist versions rave against television, that does not preclude them from supporting the global armaments industry. Hence Kaiwar is justified if he admonishes postcolonial scholars to look even beyond progressive Islamisation of the world. But the problem with Kaiwar is that he does not take Islamisation as seriously as he should have in this work. He is more comfortable slaying secular theoretical demons, especially the subalternists. In particular, his attention is riveted on Dipesh Chakrabarty in both his subaltern and postcolonial avatars. He approves of Chakrabarty abandoning the subaltern project on the ground that while moments of insurrection are suffused

with revolutionary possibilities, they also contain differences and fragments that subvert revolution. He devotes a big chapter on Chakrabarty's ideas on provincialising Europe to disagree with his postcolonial rendering of the resilience of orthodox Bengali values and traditions under the onslaught of westernisation. Instead of viewing the hangovers of traditions as highlighting resistance to westernisation, Kaiwar wants to consider such resistance as the outcome of westernisation, which cries out for a Gramscian theoretical exegesis.

We should expect a book focusing on theoretical issues, especially on the murky area of poststructural, postmodern and postcolonial to be dense with ontological, epistemological and plain conceptual abstractions. Hence, reading such a book takes much strenuous effort. However, by paying some attention to structuring the argument and by offering suitable illustrations and explanations of the more abstract ideas in footnotes, he could have made the book more reader friendly. Some of the chapters in the book exceed 100 pages and there is no attempt made to sew up the arguments in a concluding chapter. In all, the book makes for tedious, labourious reading that cannot entirely be justified by the profundity of its subject matter.