

Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies. Timothy Brennan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780804790543

Timothy Brennan's *Borrowed Light* presents a polemical (re)examination of the genealogy of anti-colonial thought. This relatively banal introduction, however, fails to do justice to the depth of questioning, and more importantly, the relevance of the project Brennan proposes. Brennan examines four critical early-modern and modern thinkers who have directly or indirectly provided foundational support for anti-colonial theory. Brennan reads Vico, Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche in relation to each other and contemporary anti-colonial theory, through the metaphor of "borrowed light," in a nod to the famous frontispiece of Vico's *New Science*, which depicts light from the eye of God being reflected to man, bouncing off a figure of Metaphysics and thence to Homer.

Structurally, Brennan moves in chronological fashion, underlining his argument that anti-colonial ideas have an older genealogy than that which has been constructed in interwar and contemporary anti-colonial theory. Vico is introduced by Brennan as postulating a specifically anti-European approach to global history. Brennan elucidates an understanding of this whereby Europe is decentered, and the resulting universal mode of development provides a foundation for later anti-colonial thought, particularly in Marxism. Vico does hold a particular developmental model of history, but Brennan, for reasons discussed below, finds this to be unproblematic. Despite his recent coming into fashion in anti-colonial theory, Spinoza is quickly discounted as Brennan finds his thought unable to support the edifice constructed by interwar and contemporary theorists.

Hegel, traditionally regarded, not least by Marx himself, as the forerunner of Marxism, is recast in a Vichean mode. Brennan asserts that Hegel must have been aware of Vico, and that

Hegel's universal mode of historical development is thus also not specifically Eurocentric, but rather systemic, and thus a suitable philosophical foundation for anti-colonial thought and action. Brennan follows up with a polemic against Nietzsche, in which, again, he finds that the interwar and contemporary theorists have over-read. In one of Brennan's more radical claims, Nietzsche's angry rhetoric and frequent lashing out at the establishment, far from being necessarily anti-colonial, in fact disguise Nietzsche's adherence to upper-class norms and values. This culminates in a polemic against "French" theory in the interwar period, and the charge that we must take a more delicate examination of the distinctions and interplay between philosophy/theory/history.

Taken together, the analysis of these foundational thinkers, and the tracing of a heretofore unseen genealogy for anti-colonial thought constitute an invaluable resource for students and scholars of colonialism. For those who have not directly engaged with the "primary sources" of theoretical pushback against colonialism (reading Fanon but not Hegel, say), Brennan's subtle and occasionally idiosyncratic treatment of these major philosophical works is a brilliant introduction, insofar as it is precisely his reading against the grain of common postcolonial tradition that allows for a powerful insight into how and why these works were and still could be used in anti-colonial movements. There is a rejuvenating aspect to such a strict adherence to speaking against heavily established modes of reading, and arguably entering into the dense and often stultifying reading that constitutes the "run up" to Marx would be more fruitful with the wind of such polemic at one's back.

This is not to say that colonial historians should or could not take Brennan's analysis without several rather large grains of salt. Perhaps the single largest concern, from the perspective of a colonial historian, is Brennan's work to rehabilitate not just the genealogy of anti-colonial thought, but the thinkers themselves. Brennan notes that Vico decenters Europe: it

is “not the font of government, technology, and culture,” and finds that this “leave[s] little doubt about his [Vico’s] views on the equality of cultures” (25). Hegel receives a similar rescue from charges of being Eurocentric, with the understanding that his developmental model of history is universal, rather than positing a model whereby civilization by necessity emanates from Europe outward. This analysis, however, that universalism rather than philosophical Eurocentrism constitute anti-colonialism in and of themselves, misses the work done in colonial history on Liberal traditions of colonial justification. Works such as Jennifer Pitt’s *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton 2005), or Uday Mehta’s *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago, 1999) both denote a tradition of colonial apology whereby development is in fact viewed as universal, and it is precisely this universality which allows for imperialism to be regarded as ethical. In the view of thinkers such as JS Mill, any society can in fact be developed. It is the development model itself, not the centeredness or uncenteredness, that leads to imperial justification. Brennan does not seem to provide an abstract defense of universalism in any general sense.

This neatly demonstrates the disjunction among colonial historians, intellectual historians, theorists, and philosophers, as well as the related problem of overlapping but distinct canons of sources. Brennan highlights the problem of theorists selectively reading and interpreting philosophical sources, but in so doing, does in large part sustain an established philosophical hierarchy. Colonial thinkers of “lower rank” than the philosophical heavy-hitters are simply left out of the equation, despite that fact that there is a strong case for the Mills being far more influential on British imperialism than Hegel (or Spinoza, or Nietzsche etc. etc.). Traditional Enlightenment Liberals are given little to no space at all, which precludes any true comparison with thinkers who are farther from, or completely outside the Hegel-Marx “pipeline.” This also brings us to the issue of Marx in general. Brennan is, again, not necessarily

tracing the lineage of *all* anti-colonial thought, but rather is presenting a new understanding of the development of Marx's thought through Hegel (and thus Vico), and the usage and development of Marxist tradition up to the interwar period. Consistently mentioned or otherwise, the specter of Marx haunts nearly every page of *Borrowed Light*. It seems reasonable to find that it is from Marx that Brennan gets a certain willingness to grant what appears to the unconvinced to be a priori acceptance of the validity of universalism as such. To elaborate on the exclusion of Liberal thought discussed above, Brennan's focus on thinkers that are seen as part of the Marxist tradition or lexicon does remove important pieces of thought, the importance of which has been determined outside Marxism.

This possible weakness (or at least source of disagreement) in Brennan's analysis, however, is certainly a strong piece of support for his overarching project. Due to the nature of "borrowed light," there is an inherent danger in losing sight of the broader connections and genealogies of the thought discussed by historians. The final refracted glimmers of original thought in later works should not be assumed to be accurate representations of all that came before. Thinkers cannot simply be written off to due to their current unpopularity, or relative obscurity. Further, the trusting of a construction of "theory" from philosophy, or of application of theory by historians, creates a series of possibilities for fatal misses. In colonial or postcolonial studies, there remains a serious problem of secondary, tertiary, quaternary works of "theory," nominally deriving their power from established philosophical traditions, which feed upon each other in seemingly endless cycles of predigested thought. *Borrowed Light* demonstrates the utility and relevance, whether one agrees with the analysis or not, of cutting through that disconnected buildup to give a direct line-of-sight connection between primary philosophical works and contemporary usage.

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