

# Book Reviews

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Jane Pollard, Cheryl McEwan and Alex Hughes (eds) (2011)

*Postcolonial Economies*

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This is a multi-disciplinary collection of papers, organised in the sections Theorising the economic, Postcolonial understandings of the economic, and Postcolonial economies: policy and practice, with a heavy focus on geographers. Five of the nine contributors are geographers, another two are trained economists (Zein-Elabdin and Kaul), and the rest are from law, international development and history; the three editors are also geographers.

This book is likely of little interest to mainstream economists, who reject the notion of economy as discourse. Heterodox economists, on the other hand, will likely find the book a useful read, especially Marxist-trained economists — to a certain extent the book assumes a Marxist intellectual background.

Postcolonialism is used in the book ‘... to refer to a political, anti-colonial sensibility and a suite of theoretical approaches that seek to disrupt and contest hegemonic Western ways of knowing, writing and seeing the world’ (p. 2). It is therefore an ontological and epistemological project. The aim of the book is to broaden the extent to which postcolonial theorising engages with economic concepts and theory. The collected papers together make the arguments that writings which use postcolonial insights to engage with the discipline of economics need to be particular and focused on specific contexts (see in particular the chapters by Larner, Kaul, Lim, McIlwaine and Noxolo); to undermine hegemonic concepts which have been used as if universally-applicable, such as the West, the economy and culture (see in particular the chapters by Chakrabarty, Lee and Sylvester); and to displace dichotomies such as economy/culture=material life/meaning creation (see in particular the chapters by Zein-Elabdin and Kaul). ‘Provincialising Europe’, which is the unearthing of the historical and cultural formation of Western economic concepts and economy, ‘thus becomes an important political project in challenging the hegemony of Western economical theorising by revealing its cultural rootedness and opening up a space for alternative notions of economy’ (p. 7).

The quite extensive introduction is very useful in situating the wide range of debates around postcolonialism and economy, especially economy as theorised within Marxism. Despite a reputation for having engaged mainly with culture, the editors show that in fact economic concepts have been quite extensively addressed by such luminaries in the field as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Thus, the editors suggest, ‘interrogating the relationship between postcolonialism and economic theory is nothing new’ (p. 4). Here I disagree with the editors: despite a couple of mentions of neoliberalism, there in fact is an almost complete absence of postcolonial analysis of mainstream economic theory within both postcolonialism and heterodox economics.

My route to a research interest in postcolonialism and economics is from my training in mainstream economics and my critical analysis of mainstream as well as feminist economics from the perspective of feminist poststructuralist theory. I therefore felt most comfortable with the Zein-Elabdin and Kaul chapters, both of which are concerned with the mainstream's separation of economy from culture. Eiman Zein-Elabdin's chapter 'Postcolonial theory and economics: orthodox and heterodox' (in Section 1) is critical of the way in which postcolonialism has been blind to any economic theorising except that of Marx, and even then, the economic is frequently delimited to notions of capital or dependent peripheries. In such works, 'culture', or the realm of meaning creation, has been treated as a separate realm from that of 'economy', much like the case of the discipline of economics itself, especially in its mainstream variant, neoclassical economics, the dominant perspective of which is to limit culture to the formation of exogenously-determined preferences. In fact, questions of economy are present within the work of such postcolonial luminaries as Said, Spivak and Bhabha. Similarly, questions of postcolonialism have made (rare) appearances in the heterodox economics literature. After surveying this literature, Zein-Elabdin concludes with pointers towards a way forward by theorising the culture-economy link in non-binary terms, within non-Marxist frameworks which limit the link to economy/superstructure, and developing the notion of economic hybridity. Nitasha Kaul's chapter, 'Cultural econo-mixes of the bazaar' (in Section 2), also engages with the problematical dichotomy of culture and economy. She shows that the two competing paradigms of the bazaar — as a mystical or disgusting relic of traditionalism, or as a figure of modernity, the rational market — are both problematic and ignore the way in which the bazaar reveals the contiguity of culture and economy which is erased within dominant economic paradigms. Hence, the bazaar is 'a hybrid space for stories, for theories and for explorations of the nation-state, capitalism, colonialism, globalisation and governmentality' (p. 126).

I also found a number of the other chapters very interesting, reflecting my broader analytical inclinations. In 'Can political economy be postcolonial? A note', Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that political economy's analytical categories, such as land, labour and capital, seem empirically obvious, but are embedded with historically- and geographically-specific embedded histories. Unearthing these histories and translating them in terms of power is an essential element of a postcolonial political economy. Christine Sylvester's chapter 'Development and postcolonial takes on biopolitics and economy' finds ways to access the experience of those peoples who are the focus of development economics. Development economics is unable to access these experiences because it is a science of aggregates and quantitative knowledge. The other chapters were, for me, either so specific and removed from my areas or so bound up in the discipline of geography, that they didn't particularly hold my academic interest, which is not to say that were not insightful, or that others may get a lot more out of them than I did.

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