

# H-Net Reviews

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**Vasant Kaiwar, Sucheta Mazumdar, eds.** *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003. viii + 354 pp. \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3011-0; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3046-2.



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The publication of this book is timely for those seeking to understand what it means to be modern, as well as those trying to place the project of Al-Qaeda and the “War against Terror” in context. This volume consists of an excellent introduction by the editors and nine case studies based on archival research and fieldwork, which collectively illustrate that the course and outcome of capitalist modernization has not been the same everywhere. Contrary to the belief from around the eighteenth century that society was “modernising,” and that this meant that human knowledge, wisdom, prosperity, and contentment were simultaneously growing, these case studies intimate that modernity is marked by heterogeneity and contradictions.

The genesis of the book lay in events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the long struggle against apartheid, the breakdown of modernization projects from the 1970s, and the imposition of structural adjustment policies during the 1980s, which resulted in the editors, together with other academics and policymakers, seeking to develop a comparative perspective regarding the forces shaping the contemporary world. Kaiwar and Mazumdar, inspired by their conviction that a comparative approach was required to make sense of the problems of the “Third World,” founded and co-edited *South Asia Bulletin* in 1981, and then renamed it the *Journal of Comparative*

*Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* in 1993. Earlier versions of some of these essays appeared in these journals but have been considerably revised and updated.

The studies in this volume focus on the construction of race, Orientalism, and nationalism, both during the encounter with colonial expansion in the nineteenth century as well as the post-Communist age of globalization. Separately and together, these constructions, they argue, have been central to the particularization of modernity. From the mid-nineteenth century, academic disciplines like philology, anthropology, and sociology produced “scientific” categories and theories that reduced disparate phenomena to a few universal truths. Race mapped the coordinates of a world of visible and measurable difference; Orientalism was a powerful autonomous ideology positing culturally separate but mutually constituting worlds; Nationalism was the great abstraction that incorporated previously autonomous projects. Race, nation, and Orient divided “us” from “them” and provided a glue that brought certain peoples together, while excluding others.

These divisive categories did not fade with decolonization. Cultural and political identities were not imposed by colonial powers on malleable colonial subjects. Colonial identities emerged through both appropriation and resistance to European ideas by colonials, became in-

digenized over time, and acquired a “local” patina. This collection of essays challenges the notion that the spread of modernity has resulted in people becoming uniformly cosmopolitan and that the world is moving towards a single culture. While modernity is an inevitable condition of the age of globalization, its impact and distinctive characteristics vary according to the location of individuals in the global division of labor. Despite the spread of education and industrialization, race, Orient, and nation continue to be reworked in different ways according to one’s class and geographic position. Differences remain salient and the identities of race, Orient, and nation remain central to the efforts by many individuals to create a sense of belonging in the face of the ruptures caused by the spread of global capitalism.

The chapters by Vasant Kaiwar, Andrew Barnes, Mohamed Tavakoli-Targhi, A. R. Venkatchalaphy, and Michael O. West focus on how race, Orientalism, and nation were deployed during the colonial and immediate postcolonial period. Kaiwar argues that racialism and Orientalism were products of the crisis of confidence among sections of the European aristocracy and bourgeoisie, as well as an expression of the economic and epistemic power of Europeans. During the twentieth century these categories were appropriated by the colonized as they sought parity with Europeans, and were used to construct new hierarchies within the project of decolonization. This included, for example, resignifying socioeconomic and ascriptive differences such as the racialization of caste and spatialization (north-south, Aryan/insider-Muslim/outsider). In India these categories created the foundational myths of Indian nationalism and remain a central element of bourgeois culture.

Tavakoli-Targhi shows that, historically, Orientalism resulted from discussion between Indo-Iranian and European scholars, but that this partnership was neglected and deliberately forgotten during the nineteenth century as Orientalism came into the sphere of racism, and became a discourse of the marginalization of the “Orient.” The post-colonial period has witnessed further amnesia regarding Indo-Iranian collaboration, resulting in the rival derision of scholarship and aptitude. In this way, the racism of the colonizers is being recaptured among the subalterns. Together with the chapter by Barnes on the use of the Aryan myth to work out “collaborative” relations between British colonizers and the indigenous elites of northern Nigeria, these chapters show that the features of cultural and identity politics were not simply imposed by Europeans. There was active embracing of, and

resistance to, European ideas, as well as the conscious participation by colonial subjects in the construction of aspects of Orientalism and racialized knowledge during the emergence of colonial modernisms. These ideas eventually became indigenized and the consequences remain with us. Venkatchalaphy shows that just as Indian nationalism appropriated the Aryan myth of continuous linguistic and cultural antiquity to articulate a position of moral parity with the colonizers, Tamil discourse invented a Dravidian particularism in relation to Aryan universalism through the establishment of the antiquity of Tamil and the fusion of race, territory, and language in Tamil-Dravidian discourse. West’s chapter underlines the importance of the fusion of race and territory in counterhegemonic discourse among Africans in British Central Africa as they responded to the challenges of white and Asian settlers. The fragile position of Indian settlers after independence underscores the constant tension between the civic-universal and ethnic-particular in nationalist movements.

The essays by Neville Alexander, Mino Moallem, and Sucheta Mazumdar focus on post-1945, postcolonial identity politics and nationalism. This period was marked by the establishment of nation-states, and emergence of new forms of local identity politics which cannot be examined without taking cognizance of the larger social, political, and economic factors that shaped the colonial period. Alexander focuses on South African society undergoing irreversible change. While change has provided its people with an ideal opportunity to challenge the all-pervasive identities and boundaries of race, class, and ethnicity which had shaped relations under apartheid, the post-apartheid period has been marked by a failure to transform politics in a way that creates national unity while recognizing diversity, and building a new society free of xenophobia. The post-apartheid perpetuation of race, class, and ethnic identity politics, including xenophobia against refugees from neighboring countries, highlight the perpetuation of the politics of subalternity. The global categories of race, Orientalism, and nationalism, which were necessary in modernizing cultural and political projects and questioning the dominance of the West, remain central to the development of local particularisms.

Moallem and Mazumdar, in their respective essays, show that changes in the post-1945 world, such as the revolution in communication technologies and the media as well as the emergence of a single imperialist power, the United States, to replace the multiple colonialisms of the pre-1945 period, have contributed to the sharp juxtapo-

sition of rich and poor countries, and the virtual collapse of alternatives. Moallem examines Ayatollah Khomeini's attempt to construct a social order in Iran that rejected capitalism and consumerism. Khomeini exploited mass discontent with the Shah as he sought to construct a national renewal around elements of Islamic theology and a reified version of Iranian culture and history. Aspects of the new regime, such as the veiling of women, were part of what Moallem regards as the construction of a new Islamic ethnicity. However, the opposition that this provoked, within and outside Iran, and the ambivalent achievements of Khomeini's revolution point to the limitations of alternative modernities to the challenges posed by global capitalism.

The post-colonial period has also been marked by the transnationalization and consumption of religious and cultural symbols, which is evident in the identity crises of Hindu immigrants in the United States who endure a double alienation, physically from the country of their birth and culturally from their adopted country. According to Mazumdar, Hindu migrants selectively use the discourses of race, Orientalism, and nationalism to place themselves on par with "whites" in the United States, while simultaneously raising themselves above other "people of color" such as Hispanics and Afro-Americans. This strategy was bolstered by the visits of "apostles of purity," who advocated political commitment in accordance with the right-wing agenda of Hindu nationalism in India. Together with the temples, summer camps, and programs of organizations like the Hindu Student Council, they are peddling a version of Hindu India that has its origins in an idyllic Vedic past, is the product of Orientalist reconstruction, an erasure of the complexities of Indian history, and a product of right-wing Hindu mythology. This is radically at odds with the evolving cultural fusions in the United States, and with both popular anti-communalism and the secularist worldview of significant sections of the intelligentsia in India.

The concluding essay by Kaiwar and Mazumdar argues that the world's people have, over time and for various agendas, been categorized into races, cultures, nations, and civilizations which, while seemingly fixed categories of identification, are, in fact, highly flexible, and continually appropriated, reinterpreted, and resisted in local terms. The categories of race, Orient, and nation have been "endowed with immense range, great longevity, and continued vitality," and are regularly appropriated by national and regional projects for identity and cultural politics. The myths of racialism, Orientalism, and nationalism constituted a notable component of

the anti-colonial struggle, and remain central to identity politics in the postcolonial world.

Taken together, these studies emphasize the importance of history, unfolding over time and space, but also in showing the various moments in which such categories are mobilized for particular political and cultural projects. They question the notion that there is only one way of being modern. The uneven impact of global capitalism has resulted in differing assessments of the nature of economic development, political community, and cultural hegemony. Much of the tension of the contemporary period is due to the attempt of individuals to impose order by adopting an alternative path in the absence of "fixed signposts," the breakdown of community, the psychic isolation of individuals, class polarization, and spiritual emptiness of modern western societies. Hindutva and Islamic fundamentalism can be viewed as attempts to modernize without destroying the older social and economic systems, which capitalism requires. Like Marxism, these alternative ideologies are anti-western but modern because they see history as a prelude to a new world.

Collectively, this volume questions the notion that modernity is a single condition, that it is uniform everywhere, and that only one way of life is best for everyone. Scientific progress has not automatically led to a more organized society, nor have human values been converging. The twentieth century was witness to the greatest advances in science but also the most number of wars and genocides, and the greatest tyranny, thus challenging the idea that scientific progress will lead to convergence in other aspects of life.

This collection of impressive essays shows the various ways in which old divisive categories continue to re-emerge in different contexts and in different ways. This raises the question of whether there is, or can be, a common humanity or whether there are just humans pursuing conflicting ends. Should we continue to hold on to the idea of a common modernity and peaceful evolution? Is unity a false hope? How do we resolve the dialectical tension between universalism and particularism? Is conflict inevitable and should we learn to live with? The advance of scientific knowledge, after all, has not ushered in an era of reason, and a convergence of politics. The present conflict involving Al-Qaeda should be seen less as the result of a "clash of civilizations" and more as one with roots in global economic, political, and cultural crises, produced by new forms of globalization. Even when Al-Qaeda has been defeated, new types of terror, not necessarily religious in nature, are very likely

to emerge because of rising human numbers, a bigger disparity between the rich and the poor, greater competition for natural resources, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction which, it should be remembered, are due to scientific advances. There is no consensus or certainty regarding the end result of "modernity," and instead of seeking to impose or create a utopian world lit-

tered with liberal democratic regimes in which the countries are linked in free trade, and in which the people live in peace and harmony, we might be better served by accepting that there will be differences among people and states, and that it would be more helpful to make every effort to achieve toleration and peaceful coexistence, even while differences remain.

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