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Book Review: The Challenge of Eurocentrism: Global Perspectives, Policy, and Prospects

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given the left's limited financial resources, strategic choices need to be made, and we should do better in anticipating how crises will unfold and how best to intervene.

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The Challenge of Eurocentrism: Global Perspectives, Policy, and Prospects

Rajani Kannepalli Kanth; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 259pp., hardback.
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The Challenge of Eurocentrism comprises a rich selection of papers prepared for political economist and social anthropologist Rajani Kannepalli Kanth's *festschrift*. Following the publication of his manifesto-esque monograph, *Against Eurocentrism* in 2005, Kanth and his contributors add another brick to the burgeoning body of the critique of Eurocentrism in social sciences with this collection. Containing eleven chapters, a succinct review of *Against Eurocentrism* by Nick Hostettler and a provocative introduction and postface by Kanth himself, the book is tightly organized around conceptually divergent interpretations of Eurocentrism and the critique thereof in equally manifold themes. Given that most contributors to the volume engage with either one aspect of the whole phenomenon or put forward diverse, and at times incommensurable, expositions of the manifestations of Eurocentric material and knowledge production, I will provide a thematic review rather than following a linear sequence of each chapter's individual contribution.

Following a brief but informative foreword by Ali A. Mazrui, Nick Hostettler's sympathetically critical review of *Against Eurocentrism* contextualizes Kanth's oeuvre and simultaneously projects a pivotal analytical prism with which the rest of the book can be scrutinized. Hostettler's discussion excels at reversing Kanth's own weapons of critique in *Against Eurocentrism* and problematizes the latter's call for the dismissal of the pillars of "Euro-modernism" for the recovery of "the great, anthropic, universal harmonics of the essential, planetary and extra-planetary, lustrating, *sympathy of life* that connects us all" (Kanth 2005: 154).¹ The picture drawn by Kanth is an overwhelmingly

1. Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are taken from the text.

nostalgic one that harks back to a pre-industrial, undefiled sphere of social and economic activity, yet it is also defined by a certain degree of utopian realism as he places women and children as “*the Fundamental, Constituent, Anthropic Units*” (5) of his moral economy. From the Kantian “Universal History” to neoclassical development theories, Kanth diligently lambastes the universalization of the European social, political, and economic experience; yet as Hostettler effectively argues, his own “*Convivial Impulses*” (248) are vulnerable to the same temptations: “Kanth’s premodernist humanism is also universalist, essentialist, reductivist, and expressivist . . . He falls into the expressivist, ahistorical, trap of reading contemporary culture back into nature by misconstruing the sociological and natural bases of modern gender distinctions” (xxx). What makes Hostettler’s intervention so striking and grievously important is not only the accuracy of its diagnosis, but the extent to which it relates to and is echoed by many other contributions in the book. If Kanth has gazed too long into the abyss of Eurocentric modernism, he surely has not been alone in his entrapment.

Broadly, there are three main intertwined conduits with which the critique of Eurocentrism is advanced in each chapter. These can be briefly categorized as:

1. Erasure of the contributions of the “non-West” to the global social, economic, and political history.
2. Universalization of European history and the acceptance of the associated path-dependence as a normative trajectory.
3. Generalization of this trajectory on the basis of a “European miracle” discourse which is utilized to invisibilize the role and effect of colonialism and imperialism in global history.

The first theme is unpacked in a number of extremely compelling accounts that deal with a broad range of topics covering history of science, mathematics, economics, and global history. Arun Bala and George Gheverghese Joseph correspondingly underline the impact of the “non-Western” advances in the development of modern science and mathematics. Both authors provide vitriolic deconstructions of the naturalization of the notions of progress and rationality with the Western civilization by highlighting how a plethora of breakthroughs in “modern” science originated in “pre-modern” world, unsurprisingly also in “non-Western” civilizations. John M. Hobson further enriches the discussion by restating the significance of the diffusion of Eastern “resource portfolios” (Hobson 2004) to Europe in the construction of the economic and legal foundations of the early modern European polities (228).

While the case for the re-integration of “the rest” in global history is made successfully, critique of the universalization of the European experience represents a far more serious challenge. Here the contradictions of and tensions in the attempts to devise “non-Eurocentric” alternatives to hegemonic knowledge production become manifest. Mathew Forstater recognizes a similar tendency that Nick Hostettler has drawn attention to in Kanth’s framework by lamenting that “even our criticisms of Eurocentrism have remained stuck within that worldview, as have our attempts to craft alternatives” (74). This does not necessarily mean that there is an immanent predisposition in non-Eurocentric critique to withdraw back to the familiar *weltanschauung* of European modernity when alternative imaginations fail. However, there are certain conceptual lacunae that critically threaten the viability and desirability of non-Eurocentric projects envisioned by some authors. Illustrative of this is Ravi Batra’s “challenge to the Eurocentric view [in economics]” which effectively equates poverty with corruption. Batra takes aim at “Eurocentric economists” who have failed at identifying “official corruption” as the “one fundamental cause of poverty” (46). The provided definition of corruption, however, is rather broad and includes “any policy that makes the rich richer while hurting the poor and the middle class” (47). What Batra omits in his discussion is a more substantial analysis of the structural factors engendered by global capitalism—compulsion to accumulate, ever-increasing commodification of different spheres of human activity, and natural resources—that perpetuate and expand the scope of pov-

erty. Regrettably, for Batra capitalism simply becomes the elephant in the room and non-Eurocentric alternatives are sought within the limited space provided by the established political system which bizarrely leads the author to welcome the emergence of a “revolutionary movement [that] has taken shape under the leadership of a charismatic leader, Barack Obama” (57).

A more persuasive critique of neoclassical economics is offered by Firat Demir and Fadhel Kaboub. Demir and Kaboub set out by offering a simple but cogent formulation of Eurocentrism where the phenomenon is identified as “the presumption that Western European (and North American) social standards and values (which are assumed to be unique to Europe) are the only accepted means for evaluating the performance of other societies” (78). Tracing the historical constitution of the Middle Eastern political and economic system, the authors effectively challenge the capitalist development discourse and its latest reincarnation in the form of neoliberalism. This overall critique, however, also drives the authors to miss a substantial engagement with Marxism on the basis of Marx’s own supposed Eurocentrism (80–82). Instead of entering a dialogue with Marxist economics and international political economy *vis-à-vis* the development of peripheral capitalist economies, Demir and Kaboub take an unproductive shortcut by attempting to frame the whole theory of Marx as Eurocentric, hence undermining its conceptual and empirical legitimacy. Yet this *a priori* rejection is not sustainable since both Marx’s late writings and the recent scholarship on Marx’s late works (see Anderson 2010; Brown 2010; Lindner 2010) provide ample evidence to negate such blanket charges of Eurocentrism. Theory and practice of capitalist development along the lines of European modernization is further problematized by Rajesh Bhattacharya, Amit Basole, and Kho Tung-Yi. Bhattacharya and Basole advance the most rigorous critique of capitalism in the book by revealing the extent to which capitalist development, built on the social and economic degradation of colonialism, has impoverished India. Tung-Yi, on the other hand, offers a brilliant critique of the recent surge in the use of “cultural particularities” as an explanatory variable in international political economy and turns “Weber’s formulation” upside down by reasserting that “it was the very success of East Asia in a changing global economic landscape that granted it a ‘voice’ to assert its concerns of ‘cultural identity,’ allowing therefore, East Asian expressions of difference, uniqueness, and autonomy” (138).

A potential risk that implicitly surfaces in various critiques of Eurocentrism is the substitution of variants of Western essentialisms with those of other cultures/regions. Despite Kanth’s earlier warning that “the rejection of *Eurocentrism* . . . is not intended to supplant it with an equally strident *Asia-centrism*” (Kanth 2005: 9), this is, indeed, the image Mazrui unintentionally creates in his discussion of the processes of “hegemonisation” and “homogenisation” which he convincingly sets out as the scions of contemporary globalization. Mazrui’s framework is based on a reciprocal essentialization that counterposes the “Westernisation of the world” with the “Islamisation of the Western world” (153), hence the critique of a Euro-American hegemony amplified through globalization becomes a zero-sum game fought between hermetically sealed civilizations, all of which are bounded by a self-referential set of cultural values. Mazrui identifies a certain level of incompatibility between Western values and practice but also adds a caveat that “the cultural difference between Western culture and Islamic culture may not be as wide as often assumed” (162; also Malhotra on p. 193). Yet the reader, in the last instance, is left wondering whether the analysis aims merely to dethrone the Anglo-American hegemony or to contribute to a more substantial rethinking of the way in which these supposedly entirely different civilizations have developed through an inherent interconnectedness (*cf.* Pasha 2006: 71–73). A final comment should be made regarding the lack of “feminine” voices Kanth himself strives to promote in the book. Despite Kanth’s loudly audible and commendable clarion call for a “feminist” reconsideration of social and material (re)production, the book does not include a single female contributor.

Contravening the multiplex forms of Eurocentric knowledge production, international relations, and political economy should not necessarily mean limiting ourselves to carefully

demarcated area or case studies that remain negligent to the commonalities in and linkages between different historical and social processes, nor should it lead us to a total rejection of macro level theorizing for the fear of universalizing (read: homogenizing) a single set of political, economic, and cultural factors. Between the rock of European exceptionalism and a hard place of postmodern “ephemerality, fragmentation [and] discontinuity” (Harvey 1990: 44), there are still avenues in which the blueprints of a radical re-imagination of non-geo/autocentric social sciences can be outlined. It is the most explicit weakness of this book that both the extant and potential interaction between the two most significant candidates for such a project—historical materialism and postcolonialism—are wholly disregarded on the basis of an outright dismissal of a “modernist” incarnation of Marxism.

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Zimbabwe takes back its land

Joseph Hanlon, Jeannette Manjengwa, and Teresa Smart; Sterling, VA.: Kumarian Press. 2013, 256 pages, paperback \$26.95

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Perhaps nowhere more than in the case of post-independence Zimbabwe has the land reform issue in Africa created controversy. Initially, and justifiably, this controversy arose because of the brutality, double-dealing, broken promises, lies, and corruption associated with both sides to the land reform process: the Mugabe regime and the international donor community, particularly the UK government. The new book by Joseph Hanlon, Jeanette Manjengwa and Teresa Smart, *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land*, takes as its starting point this land reform process, before venturing boldly into dismissing the often ideologically-driven, and sometimes simply racist, myths that quickly arose concerning the ability of the black community to efficiently farm and manage land