

“... but some are more equal than others“, no more! Decolonizing German Political Sciences

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Abstract:

The volume “Postcolonial Political Science”, edited by Aram Ziai, Professor for Development and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kassel, is the first collection to assemble a huge variety of innovative postcolonial interventions in the discipline of German political sciences. Besides its programmatic perspective, theoretical and empirical research is well-balanced in this collection of essays by German-speaking postcolonial scholars. Following postcolonial interventions in German sociology, history, and cultural sciences, this edition now introduces the task of decolonizing German political sciences.

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In 2016, basic assumptions about our Western liberal democracies were deeply challenged: from media echoes on the sexual assaults in Cologne, where many aggressors were less equal than others, until the election of Donald Trump, who promised to make America greater for some than for others. The social classification mechanisms and intersubjective order enabling these arguments have one root in the colonial past and persist in the postcolonial present of our political system. Revealing such “double standards” as “a result of unreflected colonial patterns of thinking” (p. 17) is a central aim of the present volume.

Its departure point is a critique of “the core of colonial thinking” in political science, where equal rights for everyone are denied because “the Others” are not as rational as the European Self, but rather “backward, underdeveloped and uncivilized” (p. 13). This disciplinary focus was taken because, according to the editor, postcolonial perspectives “allow a hitherto unknown look at topics, which is enriched by the focus on colonial continuities and the already mentioned double standards” (p. 17/18). Cross-thinking political sciences and postcolonial studies allows one to see “complementary deficits” (p. 26) leading to the fact that “the innovative theoretical approaches of postcolonial studies would benefit from a closer combination with systematic, empirical research in political science as much as the mentioned subareas of political sciences” (p. 42). To answer the question of colonial continuities in political sciences, Aram Ziai offers an interesting and compact research program through postcolonial concepts like orientalism, othering, or the provincialization of Europe (p. 37-42).

The collection is divided into political theory, gender and women studies, internal political affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, international politics, and political systems. The first section makes a highly valuable contribution of thinking political theory while focusing on the contribution of the Haitian revolution to modernity and to a more universal human rights discourse (Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui), the contributions of Frantz Fanon’s work to political inquiry, like gender, racism and postcolonial transformation (Ina Kerner), and finally the proposal of a “postcolonially expanded notion of violence within political science” (p. 96) by Claudia Brunner.

Gender and women's studies have been a key focus of postcolonial research and hence produced a large postcolonial feminist canon. Following these voices, Christine M. Kalpeer, Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel and Christine Löw give insights to their research on human and women's rights, the genocide and transitional justice in Ruanda, and women's land rights in India. Concertedly, they argue to "include (feminist-) postcolonial approaches more prominently in researching and teaching political sciences" (p. 125).

The next section exemplifies and does justice to the imperative of postcolonial analysis on contemporary Germany. In this way, politically timely topics are addressed through a potent postcolonial critique of the history and present of immigration policy, discourse, and jurisdiction (Kien Nghi Ha), and by an ambitious discussion of the difficult conjunction of racism, coloniality, and antisemitism (Floris Biskamp). Bilgin Ayata provides a solid and empathic postcolonial re-reading of the racist murders conducted by the "National Socialist Underground" in Germany between 2000 and 2006. By rearticulating Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work on the silencing of the Haitian revolution in historiography, Bilgin Ayata manages to disentangle the murderous coloniality and racism implied in political, legal, and public spheres in Germany.

In return, international politics have been defied more constantly by postcolonial critiques. While Franziska Müller recapitulates some of these debates and proposes fruitful decolonial research strategies and desiderata, Bettina Engels, Chandra-Milena Danielzik and Daniel Bendix provide empirically based and informative postcolonial studies in international politics. Finally, the last and biggest section of the volume presents a series of postcolonial analysis of political systems by looking at state formations, resistance, and democracy from the Andes over Ghana to Afghanistan and India. While Shalini Randeria diagnoses the postcolonial state with the concept of a "cunning state [...], that tries to overcome the Eurocentrism of the binary distinction between weak and strong states" (p. 297/298), Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Carolina Tamayo Rojas argue similarly for the possibility of weathering simplistic views on indigenous resistance to state formations through a postcolonial lens. Complementing this debate, Tanja Ernst, Joshua Kwesi Aikins, and Mechthild Exo not only convincingly outline the Eurocentric pitfalls in the analysis of postcolonial (and post-war) democracies, but also unearth paths towards decolonial alternatives in organizing the polis and the common.

Conclusively, all the present essays manage to fulfill the collection's aim of exposing the Eurocentric double standard in the political sciences and claim convincingly, that postcolonial theory is a definitive surplus within this disciplinary field. However, if the reader is already familiar with the fact that post- and decolonial perspectives are irreversibly relevant, the echo of this argument throughout the book is slightly repetitive. Although the method question is mentioned here and there, a special treatment of post- and decolonial reflections on the discipline's methodological toolkit would have been helpful. Finally, an open question remains, if the volume's aim is to "apply" postcolonial perspective within political sciences or rather if it joins other post- and decolonial critiques in arguing for un-disciplinizing the social sciences in general.

Aside from this difficulty, the catch phrase of “a much-needed volume” applies. Not only because of the obvious fact that it is the first German-speaking volume to think through political sciences from a post- and decolonial perspective, but also because current political trends force the critical social scientist to understand postcolonial inequalities and racist continuities in times of crisis. Besides the better-known postcolonial works in political theory and international politics, particularly the section on the German political landscape is an inspiration for these sorts of local interventions. The volume also attracts due attention thanks to its well mixed composition of both senior and younger, female and male scholars. It continues ongoing international post- and decolonial debates in German language as well as it provides innovative and creative empirical and theoretical insights. With this collection, there can hardly be any doubt that postcolonial political science is an urgent and pressing field of research and that its decolonization is on the way.