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Book review forum

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Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso, 2019; 624 pp. 9781784784126, £25.00 (Hardback)

Mobile resistances: Tracing a genealogy of dissent

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On June 7th, 2020, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was forcibly removed by Black Lives Matter protesters and thrown into Bristol Harbour. As Colston splashed into the murky waters, fierce debates resurfaced over how Britain remembers its colonial past.

Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent is an invaluable companion with which to navigate these turbulent times. Through empirically rich, detailed, and nuanced analysis, Priyamvada Gopal upends the pervasive, and pernicious, argument that the conclusion of the British Empire was due to the benevolence of its rulers. Instead, she forcefully demonstrates how the history of Empire is always ‘also the history of resistance to it’ (Gopal, 2019: 4). Foregrounding the agency of colonial subjects, *Insurgent Empire* explores ‘the possibility that Britain’s enslaved and colonial subjects were not merely victims of this nation’s imperial history and subsequent beneficiaries of its crises of conscience, but rather agents whose resistance not only contributed to their own liberation but also put pressure on and reshaped some British ideas about freedom and who could be free?’ (Gopal, 2019: 5–6).

From the press reports of the 1865 ‘Governor Eyre affair’ in Jamaica, to Parliamentary debates on the 1857 ‘Mutiny’ in India, and the accounts of travellers critical of imperial rule (including Wilfred Blunt’s position on the 1879 ‘Urabi Rebellion’ in Egypt), Gopal details how accounts of resistance travelled within and between colonies, and explores the implications of this back in Britain, arguing that: ‘The emergence of metropolitan dissent on colonial questions alongside liberation struggles in the colonies [...] was a dialogical and, at times, dialectical process in which the lines of influence can be seen to go in both directions’ (Gopal, 2019: 6–7). Therefore, Gopal refutes simplistic causalities between events, and instead traces a complex genealogy of dissent that shaped the culmination of Empire. *Insurgent Empire* is consequently imperative reading on the British Empire, and a valuable companion to work on protest histories which is experiencing a renaissance in Geography (cf. Awcock, 2020; Griffin, 2018; Griffin and McDonagh, 2018). As Gopal traces accounts of resistance in the colonies, a plethora of conceptual questions emerge regarding and identification of resistance, including in archives (Lowe, 2015; Stoler, 2008). What subjects and/or actions become written as ‘resistant’? How do accounts of resistance travel through space and time? Where do resistances land, and what shapes their implications?

Tracing mobile resistances

Throughout *Insurgent Empire*, Gopal highlights the *mobility* of accounts of resistance and demonstrates how this mobility shaped the form of resistance to Empire within Britain. For example, Gopal

recounts how on 11th October 1865, several hundred Jamaicans marched into Morant Bay in protest at the widespread poverty and injustices of colonial rule. After altercations in the town square, the unrest spread throughout the parish, with rebels pillaging settler properties. In response, the island's Governor John Eyre instigated martial law and sent in troops, who proceeded to kill anyone assumed to be associated with the uprising. Hundreds of men, women, and children were killed, more than a thousand properties were burnt to the ground, and George William Gordon, a member of the parish assembly, was convicted and executed.

Reports of the uprising travelled to England, beginning in November 1865 when 'snippets of news about atrocities against whites came off ships arriving from the Caribbean' (Gopal, 2019: 92). These accounts caused widespread division within Britain. National newspapers carried commentaries on the story, printed Gordon's last letter to his wife, and importantly also printed reports from the Jamaican press. Additionally, 'petitions, memorials, speeches, addresses, resolutions, letters, placards, and leaflets' circulated in the metropole condemning the violent suppression of Jamaicans (Gopal, 2019: 87). The *mobility* of these accounts of resistance, and their many material forms, had implications for the representation of the events in Jamaica. Mimi Sheller notes, for example, that the movement of the rebels' documents of counterinsurgency back to Britain, was instrumental in shaping public consciousness of the event, for Jamaican voices were heard back in the metropole (Gopal, 2019).

Gopal terms the anticolonial impact on Europe from the colonies, such as the events in Morant Bay, 'reverse tutelage' and details how resistance travelled from the colonies to Britain, and how this in turn shaped criticism of the colonial project. Following the First World War, the mobility of these accounts of resistance were, Gopal argues, strengthened by the 'presence of strong anticolonial black and Asian voices within the metropole' (2019: 8). She details, for example, the 'reverse tutelage' enabled by the journal *International African Opinion* in the 1930s.¹ This journal 'facilitated the development of an anticolonial counterculture which, while drawing on Marxism, also sought to

identify resources for resistance which were embedded in black colonial experiences' (Gopal, 2019: 332). In doing so, the editors of this instigated an epistemic mobility, explicitly bringing in voices from the colonies as co-producers of knowledge. Via the journals' publication and circulation: 'the arc that could be drawn from the moment of Ethiopia to the conflagrations that swept the British West Indies allowed precisely for the illumination of connections between the construction of pan-African solidarity and a conceptualisation of resistance as necessarily rooted in the everyday struggles of black toilers' (Gopal, 2019: 339). The rewriting of black oppression as black resistance also contributed to the solidarities forged between the working classes, communist groups, and anticolonial resistance movements.

Such criticism was of course neither homogenous nor universal, but Gopal makes visible the influence of colonial subjects in cultivating British opposition to Empire. This narrative is conspicuously absent from much scholarship on the British Empire. For example, while the aforementioned Morant Bay rebellion of 1865 is recognised as a significant moment in the British consciousness of Imperial violence, and as causing an 'internal moral crisis leading to self-correction', Gopal's account forces an alternative reading of the event as she asks 'What happens, though, to the insurgent Jamaican subject who instigates the crisis in the first place?' (2019: 85). How has this event become written into the dangerously mainstream narrative of moral consciousness and the benevolence of Empire? How do accounts of resistance travel in archives?

Genealogies of dissent

Insurgent Empire demonstrates the political potential of tracing the lines of connection between resistances over space, and time. Gopal's scholarship carefully reveals the resistance of colonial subjects, and crucially, how they moved and shaped the workings of Empire back in Britain. In working to trace a history of resistance in the past, Gopal is, however, simultaneously marking a politics of erasure in the present. These historical tracings are important politically, for *Insurgent Empire* can be

read as a genealogy (although Gopal does not term it thus herself). The book forms a history of the how the present came to be. Reading *Insurgent Empire* in conversation with Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) provides further reflection on the temporal mobilities of resistant subjects. For Lowe critically interrogates the colonial archive to unpack how 'race' became a marker of coloniality, noting how this 'unsettles the apparent closure of the liberal politics, society, and culture that establish the universal [...] while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are forgotten' (2015: 7).

There is a political imperative to thinking through how the conditions of what is made possible now, is shaped by the in/actions of the past. Genealogy shatters the illusion of linear temporality, and to bring awareness to those moments where other things might have been, might now be. Lowe reflects upon this though the past conditional temporality, attending to 'what could have been' (2015: 40) is to demonstrate, that the present could have been, and therefore could still be, otherwise. Indeed, as Griffin and McDonagh argue, present protesters are increasingly turning to the past 'to help both inform and justify their actions in the present' (2019: 7). As Gopal highlights how resistance of colonial subjects shaped British dissent, she retraces a line that has been purposefully absent in the established (and establishment's) history of British Empire.

Returning to June 2020, and the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston. Movements against the celebration of Empire are mobilising, and accounts of such resistances are travelling almost instantly and globally via social media. As the Black Lives Matter movement rises, and (some of) the symbols of Empire fall, how do we work to sustain any hopeful trajectory? In the context of the rise of the far right, the slanderous attacks, and death threats that Gopal herself is receiving, how can or should we work to make more progressive futures not just possible, but a reality? Gopal demonstrates that part of the work of the future is to hold onto the presence of the past. That the culmination of the British Empire was not the result of a benevolent conscience of the colonisers, but instead driven by the agency and resistance of colonial subjects themselves.

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Note

1. *International African Opinion* was the journal of the International African Service Bureau, which developed in response to Mussolini invading Ethiopia in 1935, and the labour rebellions in the British West Indies.

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Colonial testimony and the spaces of anticolonial critique

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