

Moffat dismisses these interventions as misrecognitions of the challenge posed by spectral figures such as Bhagat Singh. But if pushed too far, refusal to engage with the programmatic and strategic decisions made by individuals and organisations can induce paralysis in rethinking politics in the present. In *The Actuality of Communism* Bruno Bosteels has noted that much of the Left's crisis today stems from its desire to become what Hegel called a 'Beautiful soul', a condition in which the quest for purity results in the inability to actualise itself in History.

Moffat's book at times also seems to be afflicted with such a melancholic attachment to a dead martyr with little patience to engage with critical appraisals of the revolutionary's actions and the ideologies that guided him. After all, heroism and sacrifice can equally be prevalent among fascist elements. This is why an engagement with debates on Singh's ideas and, if I dare say, even criticising aspects of his politics is important if we are to build strategic horizons adequate to the present. Otherwise, we may remain excessively attached to tragedies from the past without doing the necessary analytical labour to make the Left politically operative in today's historical conjuncture.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is the sheer passion with which the provocative thesis is presented. Take the example of the launch event for this book in

Lahore that I attended in April 2019. The city where Bhagat Singh was hanged is now part of Pakistan, a country that refuses to acknowledge his legacy because of his religious denomination. The event was held in the famous Bradlaugh Hall, a meeting place for anti-colonial activists and a site frequented by Bhagat Singh himself. The decrepit colonial building was opened especially for the occasion and was filled by people eager to learn about the forgotten figure. When Moffat read an excerpt from the book, depicting a riveting account of the last moments of the revolutionary's life, there was pin drop silence in the hall. Details of his heroic embracing of death, the mystery of his missing body, and his massive funeral procession conjured up a lost past with a palpable intensity.

The narration vividly evoked images of a different Lahore and in the process opened up possibilities of what the city could be, a conversation that continues among the city's youth interested in Bhagat Singh's ideas. It is a remarkable achievement for a book on afterlives to bring to life a repressed past and play a role in shaping the trajectory of the protagonist's legacy in the city where the most dramatic moments of his life took place. Moffat's book is then not only a challenge to intellectual orthodoxies in History, but is also a political intervention in our possible futures.

Ammar Ali Jan

Decolonisation and deconstruction

Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Postcolonialism*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). 197pp., £24.29 pb. 978 1 35005 395 3

Abdelkebir Khatibi's collection of essays was first published in French in 1983 as *Maghreb Pluriel*. It comprises six essays originally published between (roughly) 1970 and 1982 in various venues. The first three essays of the collection – 'Other-Thought', 'Double Critique' and 'Disoriented Orientalism' – are the best-known, and, as Françoise Lionnet has noted, have long been out of print. From this perspective, the English translation is certainly welcome, if not without its problems. It is not clear, for example, why the editors of Bloomsbury's series 'Suspensions', or perhaps the book's translator, felt the need to add the subtitle 'Writings on Postcolonialism', which

does not appear in the original. Why the need to attach Khatibi to a corpus he never clearly acknowledged in his writings? For two decades after the publication of *Maghreb Pluriel*, critics have lamented that Khatibi was never included alongside the likes of Said, Fanon, Césaire and Memmi in the canon of postcolonial thought. But little justification has been offered as to why that should have been the case – does any intellectual who thinks about and hails from a formerly colonised space need to be part of postcolonial thought?

Although the six essays function as fairly discrete pieces, the common theme that runs through them is



the idea of a plural Maghreb, expressed both as a desire and as a long-existing historical reality suppressed both by hegemonic theological-nationalist and colonial/Orientalist projects. The first pages of the first essay 'Other-Thought' (*autre-pensée*) identify Khatibi's targets for his double critique (one of the core concepts he associates with the idea of decolonisation): 'Western legacy and our very theological, very charismatic, and very patriarchal heritage.' His criticism of the latter revolves around both a critique and a move beyond what he identifies as 'Third World nationalism and dogmatic Marxism', on the one hand, and a presumed unitary Arab/Islamic civilisation, on the other. His concept of *autre-pensée* (other-thought) hinges then on a transcendence of the need for origins (any origins), 'on a nonreturn to the inertia of the foundations of our being.' 'Double critique', arguably his best known essay, engages Ibn Khaldun's thought by showing his misappropriation both by Western and non-Western schools of social theory, but also by contemporary fundamentalisms. The purpose of this engagement, as Khatibi notes, is 'to rethink Maghrebi history both outside the Khaldunian system and against colonial historiography.' It is this intent to demystify pre-colonial nostalgia and colonial historiography that

constitutes one of the strengths of Khatibi's theoretical engagement with colonialism. The critique of colonial historiography is given more space in his third chapter, 'Disoriented Orientalism', where he criticises the work of Jacques Berque, a respected sociologist and Arabist at the Collège de France. If Said, in his *Orientalism*, targets those scholars who exhibit an intellectual and political hostility towards the Orient (by constructing it as a space inferior to the West), Khatibi focuses on those Orientalists who sing the praises of the Orient and romanticise its various dimensions. Such romanticisation is never innocent since it is inextricably bound, in Khatibi's view, with the advancement of 'the pecuniary interests of Western technocracy.'

Khatibi's debt to Derrida and to the latter's ethics of deconstruction and alterity is obvious in both of his core concepts, double critique and other-thought. There is no surprise then that Khatibi's thought consistently promotes an anti-hegemonic (indeed non-hegemonic?) impulse towards encounters with alterity in ways that refuse to reduce the latter to sameness or to universality. However promising this may seem, this, to my mind, is also where the trouble starts with Khatibi's theoretical framework.

What distinguishes Khatibi's thought from Derridean deconstruction is the former's specific attention to colonialism as a historical experience, to decolonisation as both a process and an ongoing aspiration, and to the epistemic violence of Western thought vis-à-vis the colonial world. However, insofar as these elements are consistently subordinated to his general framework of deconstruction, Khatibi's understanding of decolonisation becomes painfully limited. As Winnifred Woodhull remarks in *Transfigurations of the Maghreb*, a 'subversive poetics' evacuates the need for 'work for change in the political field' – in Khatibi's work (and more generally in deconstruction), 'poetic language has come to be associated with an "other" politics radically divorced from social institutions and from material relations of domination.' As he re-iterates both in 'Other-Thought' and in 'Double Critique', the first two chapters of *Plural Maghreb*, Khatibi's idea of decolonisation entails a critique of what, in a different work, he calls the 'saintly trilogy' of the Arab world: 'Zionism, the Arab reaction, and imperialism'. Françoise Lionnet indicates that he condemns this trilogy 'in the name of a rigorous critique of the unhappy consciousness and of the will to power that inhabits all systematic philosophies, making them unable to accommodate irreducible otherness.' While I am sympathetic to the spirit of this statement, which captures very well the core of Khatibi's ethics of deconstruction, there is a troubling equivalence that haunts this deconstructionist project. Neither Khatibi nor Lionnet (nor, I would argue, other scholars working within deconstruction) examine the politics of placing what he calls 'Arab reaction' and imperialism on an equivalent plane, nor for that matter Zionism and 'Arab reaction'. One may agree that most (if not all) 'systematic philosophies' or cosmologies do contain (in various degrees) their own logic of exclusionary hierarchies. However, to place them all on a continuum of violence devoid of historical context and stripped of the heaviness that ties them together as violent encounters and interactions is to flatten them into an indistinguishable list of totalising philosophies.

This is where my problem with Khatibi's deconstruction lies. One may agree that there is a totalising impulse within the 'Arab reaction' (whatever that may mean to Khatibi), or put differently, that there are various gendered, racialised and socio-economic hierarchies

within the Arab world (contemporary or pre-colonial), which have obviously led to a number of exclusions. But to place them all on a level of equivalence assumes that they all exist in a neutral vacuum in which each is guilty *in the same way* of its own violence. Moreover, the perversity of this assumption completely overlooks and erases the weight of structures, more specifically global structures. Are all wills to power really equivalent to each other in a global structural system of Western imperialism and white supremacy? In a 2002 article 'Interrogating Identity', Mustapha Hamil, for example, claims that in Khatibi's deconstruction, 'postcolonial reality requires a double resistance *to all the Occidents and Orients* that alienate and subjugate the postcolonial subject' (emphasis added). But do the Occident and the Orient subjugate the postcolonial subject in the same way? Does a global structure characterised by a clear domination by the Occident not matter, and not re-configure not only the relation between the various Occidents and Orients, but also that between the various Orients and postcolonial subjects? I do not want to imply that internal hierarchies and the violence they have produced are unimportant or always a minor issue alongside the looming violence of colonialism/imperialism. Indeed, in my own work I have engaged critically the national liberation project and discussed both its clear limits and the violence instantiated by the various forms of gendered, racialised and socio-economic forms of oppression that accompanied it. And while Third World nationalism has had both its uncontested limits and shortcomings, Khatibi's deconstruction – as encapsulated by his concepts of 'other-thought' and 'double critique' – is no real alternative. Insofar as he reduces the historical process of decolonisation and national liberation to nothing but *ressentiment*, he then misses the point of both colonial difference and the specific violence of colonialism:

Fanon's call, in its very generosity, was the reaction of the humiliated during the colonial era, which is never done with decolonising itself, and his critique of the West ... was still caught in resentment and in a simplified Hegelianism – in the Sartrean manner. And we are still asking ourselves: Which West are we talking about? Which West opposed to ourselves, in ourselves? Who is 'ourselves' in decolonisation?

To imagine that Fanon's searing description of the colonial horrors of Algeria was a sort of 'simplified Hegel-

ianism' is not simply to misunderstand and misrepresent the specificity of colonial violence, but also to trivialise the struggles, theorisation and mobilisation of anticolonial movements and individual actors and thus to reduce them to a mere reaction to domination. Consider, for example, that Khatibi describes 'the conflict between Europe and the Arabs' as 'being age-old' and thus 'a machine of mutual incomprehension.' Again, a situation of what Fanon clearly described as systematised dehumanisation and brute violence, and which Edward Said characterised as systematic epistemic oppression, is neutralised. In a careful and nuanced engagement with both anticolonial thought and its critics, Branwen Gruffydd-Jones has examined the premises according to which anticolonial thought is seen as trapped in a teleological paradigm beholden to Enlightenment. But contrary to Khatibi (and other critics of Third World nationalism), she sees it as 'embod[ying] an autonomy and singularity which engaged with but went beyond Enlightenment traditions'. Indeed, 'to see the black radical intellectual tradition as operating wholly inside the Western canon, and then to judge its many contributors solely from that angle, is both to miss the tradition's complexity and to negate the tremendous knowledge that this tradition has

postulated *about the nature of the West*.'

To follow Khatibi's logic, the historical and intellectual process of decolonisation is simply a resentful reaction to domination, whereby 'the humiliated' (as he calls them) lash back at their oppressors and are thus forever linked to them through a relation of both violent retribution and (desire for) mimicry. But Gruffydd-Jones and Anthony Bogues indicate a much more complex dynamic, one through which the colonised produce knowledge about the West and about themselves in a manner that brings to the fore the racialised logic of colonial domination, and thus prompts us to re-consider the very nature of Western societies. Indeed, the intertwined logics of racialisation, expropriation and of capital accumulation (which make colonialism a distinct form of oppression and domination) are wholly absent from Khatibi's understanding of both colonialism and decolonisation.

To Khatibi, decolonisation is: 'a third path, neither reason nor unreason as thought by the West as a whole, but a kind of double subversion that, by giving itself the power of speech and action, sets to work in an intractable difference. To be decolonised would be the other name of this other-thought, and decolonisation would be the silent completion of Western metaphysics.'



The double subversion here entails, as mentioned earlier, the subversion of both Western metaphysics and what he calls the Arab-Islamic theological-nationalist project. As Winnifred Woodhull also notes, Khatibi's idea of decolonisation (captured also by his notion of *bi-langue*) is a space open to margins (linguistic, ethnic, gendered, sexual, etc), where binaries co-exist as intractable difference without reaching unity or consensus. I concur with and applaud the spirit in which Khatibi advocates for an ontological plurality and especially for an internal critique of colonised societies that makes visible various erasures, hierarchies and forms of marginality. However, the trouble lies both with his too easy equivalence between colonial violence and internal hierarchies, and with the fact that his approach is, as remarked by several commentators, 'resolutely textualist' (see, for ex-

ample, Mary Ellen Wolf's 1994 essay 'Rethinking the Radical West'). In that sense, I am in complete agreement with Winnifred Woodhull's assessment that Khatibi 'has appropriated deconstruction for third-world peoples, and for reflection on third-world cultural politics.' Ultimately, in Khatibi's oeuvre, politics and decolonisation boil down to what Lionnet calls a 'question of language'. Reading Khatibi in our contemporary of climate change, the rise of far-right, rampant neoliberal capitalism, and migracide (to name but a few issues) – when, perhaps more than ever, we need creative ways of mobilisation, intervention and action – a call for a 'return to philology' as substitute for politics seems rather out of touch with the times.

Alina Sajed

Border crossings

Brigitta Kuster, *Grenze filmen. Eine kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse audiovisueller Produktionen an der Grenze Europas* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018). 344pp., € 29,99, 978 3 83763 981 0

'We did not cross the border, the border crossed us'. So say the migrant activists at the Mexican-US-American border. The categorisation of migration and the individual migrant does not exist apart from the formation of nations and peoples. Within the country of arrival, such categorisation of transborder movement remains a lasting description for those who do not belong and are marked as 'foreign'. Practices of migration are encoded through the patterns of perception of the (national) border. Yet, the border is not solely a matter of the state; through transnational migration the border is also constantly challenged, shifted and re-composed.

In her book *Grenze filmen [Filming Borders]* – unfortunately only published so far in German – Brigitta Kuster shows to what extent a political philosophy of migration may be interlaced with a study of film and cinema, in order to break free from state patterns of migration. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, by Michel de Certeau, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida, *Grenze filmen* is an exuberant book that analyses a range of perspectives on migration to be found in film classics and documentaries, and is interwoven with a vast number of references to digital audio-visual material from tele-

vision, the internet, DVDs, art exhibitions and mobile phone videos.

In the book's analyses of films, an affective practice and tactical narration of migration is explored, culminating with mobile phone video captured by young migrants on the open sea in their attempt to cross the wind-swept Mediterranean together with others. In this way, *Grenze filmen* reformulates theories of migration, along with theories of documentary filmmaking, and points to a paradigm change in our understanding of where the autonomy of migration overlaps with the audio-visual practices of its protagonists. The book is also written with a sound knowledge of various feminist and postcolonial theories of representational critique, as well as cultural studies' analyses of everyday practices.

Understanding the border as both an epistemic and a practical paradox, in de Certeau's terms, it emerges not only as a line of separation, but also, and simultaneously, as one of contact. Without contact on the border there can be no difference, and thus no migration. The pull of the border is always ambivalent. Migrants are not simply excluded foreigners, they are also actors in that they accept a certain subjectivation by the drawing of the border.