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**Review of [Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent]  
by [P. Gopal]**

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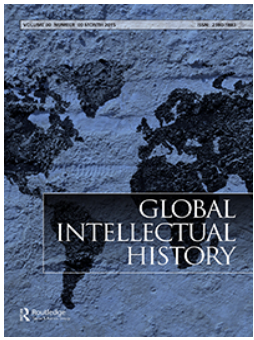
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## Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent

by Priyamvada Gopal, London, Verso Books, 2019, £25, ISBN: 9781784784126

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent**, by Priyamvada Gopal, London, Verso Books, 2019, £25, ISBN: 9781784784126

Anticolonial resistance is as relevant today as it was during the days of the British empire. Britain, after all, is still dealing with the legacy of empire. In fact, what Priyamvada Gopal sets out to show throughout her thrilling study is that anticolonial resistance has never been absent from British public opinion. She does so by turning away from the well-known story of liberal paternalism that centres around how Europeans supposedly taught colonized peoples the ideas on which they subsequently based their claims to freedom and self-determination. Rather than ask how the colonized have been influenced by European enlightenment thought, Gopal asks how they have influenced that Enlightenment thought itself. She researches not how Europe influenced 'the other', but how 'the other' shaped European ideas on freedom and equality.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's historiographical analysis of the Haitian Revolution and its role in western historiography forms an entry point for this reversal of assumptions that forms the central theme of *Insurgent Empire*. Using Trouillot's 'bundles of silences' Gopal wishes to emphasize not just how the West has been influenced by anticolonial resistance, but also how it has consistently denied that influence and has therefore adorned itself with the role of the historiographical centre. As such the book is itself part of a larger moment of decolonization, not of former colonies, but of the metropole itself. It is crucially linked to anticolonial insurgency in the twenty-first century – one of the chapters is meaningfully entitled 'Black Voices Matter', cementing the connection between past and present. Following from a recent surge in writing that tries to redefine decolonization and (global) intellectual history, *Insurgent Empire* is truly global in its scope and stands out because it specifically engages with the entanglement between metropole and colony on an equal basis.

Reflection on this reversed pedagogy is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Already in 1993 did Ali Mazrui, the Kenyan political thinker, articulate a similar idea when he, reflecting on Africa's decolonization, stated that Africa re-humanized Europe. Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe too has made points similar to those Gopal seeks to underline in his *The Invention of Africa*, when he argued that the West had largely invented African systems of thought through Africanist discourse. Mudimbe crucially included responses to this invention by African thinkers to show that there indeed existed a gap between the perception of Africa in the west and on the continent itself. Gopal in a way situates herself as continuing this path of decolonizing knowledge production and importantly distances herself from Post-colonial studies by arguing that historical and cultural resources associated with the Enlightenment are not just European, but theorized in different parts of the world. As a result, 'Eurocentrism' becomes problematic not because it impresses upon the world a European logic, but because it claims Europe as the progenitor for such universal values as 'Emancipation' and 'Liberation'. Gopal argues that colonized and enslaved peoples were not just a Caliban learning Prospero's language, but, in fact, helped shape that language and opened it up to new possibilities. Britain today, as such, 'is itself as much the product of anticolonialism as it is of the imperial project'. The important contribution Gopal makes to the longer project of the decolonization of knowledge and history writing is that she makes the metropole her subject, not as a reflection of some kind of universality, but, conversely, to show its

particularity. In that way *Insurgent Empire* also neatly seems to answer Frederick Cooper's request for a true 'provincialisation of Europe', one that would take Europe seriously.

Gopal starts by analysing several moments of imperial crises, such as the 1857 uprising in India and the Morant Bay rebellion of 1865. She then treats these moments of revolt as texts that travelled to the metropole and traces how they reverberated around British public opinion long after the dust had settled. Her main characters are not well-known liberal public dissenters, but rather a group of intellectuals, writers, politicians and public speakers who came to realize, sometimes slowly, often from the perspective of Marxist anti-capitalism, that the British empire was dependent upon an unjust system of exploitation.

Anticolonial insurgents oftentimes emphasized international solidarity and especially solidarity between workers around the world. The positivist Richard Congreve, for instance, plays a recurring role within *Insurgent Empire* as one of the very first dissenters in Britain who pressed the importance of international solidarity – albeit not in that precise wording. Congreve reacted to the 1857 uprising in India in a surprising fashion, by arguing the uprising showed resistance to the colonial project, leading him to call for immediate withdrawal from India. Moreover, he saw similarities between the condition of the working Englishman and the subject of rule in India, both ruled by the same elite. The theme of solidarity between the English working class and colonized people forms a connecting thread throughout Gopal's work. Although she makes sure not to overestimate the importance of 1857, she does note that some responses in the metropole, such as Congreve's, laid the groundwork for later rejections of liberal paternalism. So too with the Morant Bay Rebellion on 1865. Contrary to earlier studies, Gopal focuses on the connections between the events in Jamaica and responses in Britain. The significance of the uprising lay precisely in those connections as it caused the voices of insurgents, such as George Gordon and Paul Bogle, to be heard in the metropole. As such Gopal explicitly chooses to focus her narrative of the rebellion on the influence of black voices, rather than on parliamentary debate in Britain directed towards the rulers of the Caribbean island. The focal point Gopals wishes to make is that equality was always grasped and shaped by insurgents and never simply 'given' by Britons.

The idea of reversed pedagogy as laid out in the introduction really comes into its own in chapter 3, which deals with the Urabi rebellion of 1882. Here we meet the 'unlikely Anticolonialist' Wilfred Blunt. The point of the chapter and indeed another important theme in the book as a whole is the 'unlearning' of paternalism and the shared humanity and self-realization gained in the process. What made Blunt so unlikely as anticolonial agitator was his position as a landowning conservative breeder of Arabian horses, which was simultaneously the very interest that led him to develop an interest in Islam and Arab culture. Gopal places his realization as an anticolonialist, and indeed his transformation from a conservative to a left-wing figure, as having taken place in the tutelage of Colonel Arabi and the Islamic scholar Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani. Blunt therefore develops a very different outlook on Islam from the average orientalist European so aptly described by Edward Said, choosing to try unmake orientalist myths in Britain rather than enforce them. It is precisely Blunt's transformation under the influence of one the most significant figures in Egypt that makes him so important for Gopal's cause, even if his influence on Britain was, in the end, minimal. His 'initiation into the language of anticolonial resistance' allowed him to see Empire with new eyes, causing him to advocate for the Irish cause as well. A similar initiation into anticolonial language takes place for several other British travelers who left Britain with a least softly paternalist tendencies but returned changed men, convinced of the plight of the victims of Empire.

The unlearning of habits and ways of thinking in the metropole itself forms the basis for the second half of the book. Whereas the first half focuses on outburst of dissatisfaction outside of Britain, the second half concerns itself with a more drawn out critique of empire in its metropole. It takes London's interwar years as central stage and shows how London became the sizzling centre of anticolonial resistance. Famous black intellectuals as George Padmore and C. L. R. James led the movement. Both played a crucial role in shaping anticolonial thought. Especially interesting are the connections and lines Gopal draws between suffragists and feminism in Britain and anticolonial insurgency. Again, the theme of solidarity and a shared humanism underlines these chapters. It was Nancy Cunard who put together an anthology of black voices meant to highlight the heterogeneity contained therein and Sylvia Pankhurst who from 1936 on, after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, launched an anticolonial newspaper, the *New Times and Ethiopia News*. Gopal therefore frees the reader from a white-washed version of suffragette history, as well as showing, once again, how both women, but Cunard especially, were influenced by and learning from such anticolonialists as Claude McKay, Shapurji Saklatvala and George Padmore.

The 1935 invasion of Ethiopia that caused Pankhurst to launch a paper formed a watershed in anti-colonial history. It was described by Nkrumah as a defining moment in his own path towards becoming the first president of Ghana. For diasporans everywhere the Italian invasion of Ethiopia awakened fierce responses because it constituted the fall of the last independent African state at the time. The attendant absence of a response from other European nations marked a reification of all Africans and African states as subjugated and less-than. It therefore signified a cognitive shift in the history of pan-Africanism and anticolonial advocacy. For Gopal the moment provides a narrative shift into the post-war years of political decolonization. She questions and contests the linear history of the League of Nations throughout the latter chapters. It is possible that, as a result, Gopal somewhat underplays the significance of nationalism for African anti-colonial activists. Nationalism in this period provided those vying for independence with a ready framework and it therefore proved an effective method of revolt.

In the endgame of her book Gopal once again focuses on dissent in Britain itself as she highlights the illustrious career of Fenner Brockaway, 'the member for Africa'. Brockaway, who led the Movement for Colonial Freedom, is shown to have been radicalized by insurgencies, most importantly the Mau Mau. Like in the first two chapters, insurgency and rebellion constitute the anticolonial agitation that must eventually end empire and, akin to the Gopal's early twentieth-century travellers, Brockaway's visits to Kenya made him realise the extent of dissatisfaction with British leadership. Gopal also justly highlights the importance of land within the context of Kenya's decolonization and the Mau Mau specifically and for decolonization generally as well. For, as Malcolm X famously proclaimed, land is the basis for all freedom and equality, something which was etched into Brockaway's parliamentary interventions in the 1950s.

Priyamvada Gopal has written a revisionist history that is persuasive, rigorous and embedded in thorough research. The benefit of the book lies largely in the heterogeneity of dissent it showcases. Her point has not been to make anticolonial insurgency in Britain seem bigger than it has been, for despite the countless insurgents that populate the pages of *Insurgent Empire*, there have also been countless celebrators of empire. Gopal's assignment has rather been to show that British intellectual history is endlessly more complicated when it comes to anticolonial radicalism than simple narratives of liberal paternalism might suggest. The history of the metropole and colony cannot be separated and anticolonialism may have been as important to Britain as Empire. Gopal ends her original history by doing

away with the often heard argument that men like Cecil Rhodes and colonial apologists were simply products of their time. As Gopal puts it

dissenters from the imperial status quo, may not have carried the day, but hey were no lone wolves either. [...] These dissenters constitute a lineage that made its presence felt in the post-war period, and remain a part of the genealogy towards which anti-war and anticolonial groups in Britain today can look back.

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