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Out of time: The queer politics of postcoloniality

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Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality, by Rahul Rao. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 262pp., ISBN: 9780190865528.

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Rahul Rao's *Out of Time* is an intellectually generous book that offers a unique take on global questions of sexuality, time and postcoloniality. Drawing from a wide range of ethnographic, interview and archival data, it explores queer politics in the afterlives of colonialism in Uganda, India and Britain. The book belongs at the intersection of political theory, queer theory and international relations. However, these classifications do not really do justice to the theoretical and political impulses which animate this ambitious and profoundly fascinating book. Its accessible writing style, depth of engagement and outstanding ability to work with an impressive range of texts (from legal and government records, to poetry, novels and plays), mean that *Out of Time* is likely to appeal to academics, students and activists across the social sciences, particularly those interested in advancing queer and/or postcolonial approaches in their fields.

Rao is a lecturer in politics at SOAS, University of London, and one of the leading figures in the field of 'queer international relations', which seeks to explore how gender and sexuality are constituted in, and constitutive of, global politics. Both *Out of Time* and his previous work (Rao 2014, 2015) make important contributions to this task. Yet what really distinguishes Rao's work from that of his peers is its ability to tell quintessentially human stories within a field often bent on working with abstract categories over empirical ones. *Out of Time* is driven by a similar receptivity to the human experience in its exploration of the temporalities of queer politics in the aftermath of the colonial encounter. In particular, the book explores what it means to live 'out of time', that is, outside or 'out of sync with' the temporal logics of neoliberal capitalism, imperialism and the nation state.

The book begins with a clear introduction (Chapter 1) which outlines the three theoretical threads around which the work unfolds. The first addresses questions of global governmentality in relation to LGBTI rights. The second revisits the notion of intersectionality through a queer anti-imperial lens by drawing on work in queer Marxism and queer of colour critique, including lower-caste Dalit perspectives. The third traces the tensions between empire, queer freedom and decolonisation to offer a dialectic approach to time in the (post)colony that refuses linear narratives of progress. The introduction also provides an overview and problematization of memory and futurity as 'battlegrounds', which helps bring to the fore the politics of time. A brief but helpful reflection on the book's uses of 'queer' and on Rao's own positionality with regards to the field is also provided in the introduction.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 reflect on homophobia and queer progress in Uganda. Chapter 2 offers an account of the "transnational production of homophobia" (p. 71) which seeks to navigate the perils of both 'homonationalist' and 'homoromantic' readings. In the former, homophobia is seen as an expression of Ugandan 'backwardness', whilst in the latter simply the result of 'Western intervention'. Against

both these readings, Rao reads homophobia as a *collaborative* effort between Western actors and African elites involving a bi-directional movement of “people, commodities, money and ideas” (p. 49) between core and periphery. Moreover, tracing how same-sex desire becomes synonym with both anti-imperialism *and* imperialism at different historical junctures in Ugandan history, the chapter convincingly argues in favour of conceptualizing place not as a “discrete, bounded” (p. 47) entity but as dynamic and relational. In so doing the author paves the way for the subsequent two chapters, which take further issue with efforts to locate homophobia and homosexuality in Western terms.

Chapter 3 deconstructs the claim, promoted by some African elites and clergy, that ‘homosexuality is Western’. It does so by drawing from interviews and ethnographic observations recorded over multiple visits at the annual commemorative congregation at Namugongo, on the outskirts of Kampala. This is the site of the founding myth of Ugandan Christianity, where a group of Anglican and Catholic converts were executed on orders of king Mwanga II at the end of the 19th Century. Tracing the role that Mwanga’s homosexuality allegedly played in the executions and his subsequent political downfall, the chapter asks how this national myth can coexist with claims that same-sex desire is alien to Ugandan culture. Moreover, drawing on Muñoz’s (1999) work on ‘disidentification’, the chapter also explores how local queer activists have reclaimed Mwanga as a ‘queer ancestor’. To Rao, this highlights some of well-documented tensions between historical accuracy and political strategy in queer politics, as well as demonstrating “the possibilities for sexual dissidence that exist within practices of intense memorialisation” (p. 78).

Chapter 4 explores the counterclaim, most recently articulated by queer activists, that ‘homophobia is Western’, that is, an outcome of British colonial anti-sodomy laws. To do so Rao takes us to Westminster, where Britain’s responsibility for laws criminalising homosexuality in many parts of the world is being increasingly acknowledged. Whilst Rao does not dismiss this, he argues that recognition of responsibility for homophobia should be read in relation to the relative silence surrounding responsibility for slavery and “the millions enslaved by British colonial capital” (p. 22). To Rao this silence has something to do with the institutional and structural forces which work to separate sexuality and race in contemporary British politics, and through which ‘queerness’ becomes implicitly aligned with ‘whiteness’. Moreover, tracing the temporal politics of atonement, Rao also attributes the silence to an unwillingness to seriously consider the structural dependence of racism and queerphobia, and the effects of slavery on the contemporary unequal distribution of resources between global South and global North.

Whereas the previous three chapters focus on the politics of memory, remembering and the past, Chapters 5 and 6 explore the queer and postcolonial politics of futurity. Chapter 5 explores the promises of upward mobility and growth promoted by ‘global homocapitalism’, an “ideology forged in interaction between elite LGBT activists and technocrats in international financial institutions” (p. 25). Rao first develops the concept in a 2015 paper by the same name to describe why and how leading bastions of global capitalism have “begun to take activist stances to homophobia” (p. 139). In the chapter he further extends his inquiry, taking particular issue with the ways in which such seemingly progressive stances actually “obscure the ways in which global capitalism engenders the forms of material precarity in which homophobic moral

panics flourish” (p. 25). In so doing he implicates global financial institutions into the very homophobia they claim to be against. Moreover, tracing representations of the ‘queer good life’ and of queer people as model capitalist subjects in India, the chapter further reflects on the limits of positing queer inclusion in neoliberal economic terms. The chapter concludes by arguing that the persuasive economic promise of homocapitalism is increasingly replacing the coercive rhetoric of homonationalism (Puar, 2007) as the “weapon of choice wielded by global queer liberalism” (p. 12). It also reflects on what resistance to homocapitalism might look like, a question often overlooked in scholarship on neoliberalism.

Chapter 6 explores the kinds of futures opened up by queer identification with those who have been consigned to ‘backwardness’. Drawing fruitful connections between trans and lower-caste Dalit articulations of backwardness in India, the chapter examines the queer politics of caste and transness with a view “to posing a broader set of questions about how queer/trans/Dalit futures relate to (...) the future of the nation itself” (p. 26). In the chapter Rao also asks how articulations of queer futurity in this chapter differ from those proposed by homocapitalism in the previous. In so doing he offers important insights into how caste and trans struggles intersect, and how these intersections can be productively mobilized to challenge contemporary structures of (neoliberal and Hindu Right) oppression in India.

Weaving together empirically-driven threads without ever losing sight of the bigger picture, the book breaks open stifled conversations about the shape and direction of contemporary queer politics. In particular, the book foregrounds the importance of attending to the ‘frictions’ (Tsing, 2005) between global North and global South in understanding queerphobia and queer freedom. With regards to the latter, queer perspectives have dismissed promises of neoliberal inclusion, inviting us to reject ‘progress’ in favour of a gender/sexual politics in which there is ‘no future’ (Edelman, 2004). Yet, Rao is quick to point out that efforts to pursue these negative temporal (re)orientations have thus far remained anchored in the terrain of the geopolitical West. *Out of Time* demonstrates that if we were to take seriously the “disparate trajectories of queer politics” (p. 18) outside the global North, such “singular reorientations of political temporality” (Ibid) would not only be more difficult, but theoretically and politically unworkable. In so doing Rao returns to the site of the (post)colonial encounter to offer a different kind of story, one which reconstitutes the agency of the (post)colonised (queerphobic and queerfriendly) subject in queer critique.

The book also creatively extends current uses of both ‘queer’ and ‘intersectionality’. In particular, it demonstrates that queerness can and does indeed “mutate in different configurations and fields of power to become a metonym for other categories such as nationality, religiosity, race, class and caste” (p.9). In so doing, it offers a thoughtful and persuasive invitation for scholars to be more curious about the permeability of gender/sexuality as analytical categories of difference and how these may ‘travel’, or fail to do so, in other places, in other times. Ultimately, *Out of Time* is a book which deserves readerships much broader than those most obviously recommended. Indeed, whilst the book might primarily appeal to those organizational scholars interested in queer and/or post- and de- colonial work, it offers ways of (re)thinking ‘power’, ‘difference’ and ‘organization’ which are simply invaluable for the contemporary advancement of the broader field.

For example, the book intends to rethink North/South relations by moving between spatio-temporally dislocated sites, registers or 'scales' (Tsing, 2005) in such a way that does not forego neither specificity nor the applicability of the work beyond the particular case study. Moreover, it points to how neoliberal economic logics are reshaping organizational life, including business and activist organizations, local and transnational actors, but also, more mundanely, everyday life in all its organizational complexity. Finally, it proposes to rethink difference beyond simply pointing to the social constructedness of categories but asking how these become socially meaningful. Aims such as these clearly have wide relevance to organizational research beyond concerns with queer and/or post- and de-colonial work.

At a time in which queer approaches to organization are becoming 'mainstreamed' (Rumens, 2018), *Out of Time* presents us with an unparalleled abundance of original and helpful insights into ways in which these can be taken into new and exciting grounds. The book has thus the potential to steer the field of organization studies against the forcible pull of global North perspectives whilst simultaneously striving for a responsible approach to postcoloniality which eschews homoromantic tropes. It is for these reasons that I wholeheartedly recommend *Out of Time* to all those interested in embarking upon a radical rethinking of the field of organization studies and hope the book might stand out as an excellent and hopeful reminder of the kinds of possibilities that can be instigated by the coming together of dedicated scholarship and thoughtful activism.

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