

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 25, 2016

Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, Zed Books, 2015, 302 pp., \$18.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781783604197.

In January 2013, Hamid Dabashi, an influential and prolific Iranian-American Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, published a short piece on the Al Jazeera website “playfully” (1) called “Can Non-Europeans Think?” At least by academic standards, it went viral. He had (again) challenged European thought’s self-representation as a pleonasm and objected to the denigration of the rest of the world’s philosophical enterprises to their ancillary adjectival modes: African philosophy, Islamicate philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, Asian philosophy, Native American philosophy, etc. As the recent decades of academic squabbling attest, many philosophers doubt that these modes even count as philosophy; practitioners within those modes for their part are often reduced to the task of demonstrating that what they are doing also counts as an example of that great master pleonasm. D. A. Masolo’s *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*,<sup>1</sup> for example, details the demotion of much early African philosophy to endless pedigree exercises as it was forced to devote its philosophical energies to establishing that it even exists.

With this spirited and refreshing book, comprised chiefly but not exclusively of occasional writings for Al Jazeera, Dabashi re-enters this fray, knowing that he had clearly struck a raw nerve. He argues for a “mode of thinking” no longer grounded in the conditions set by coloniality and postcoloniality in which one’s voice always has to calculate where it fits in relationship to the standard European voice, even if one is rebelling against it. To think in reference to coloniality, even in critiquing and getting beyond it, always assumes that the Western European philosophical subject position and its interests and contexts is not only one’s necessary starting point, but that there is an “explicit or implicit presence of a European interlocutor looking over our shoulder as we write” (2).

Dabashi sheds this duality and endeavors to think otherwise, neither in the terms set by coloniality nor in reaction to it. This book is a “declaration of independence, not just from the condition of postcoloniality, but from the limited and now exhausted epistemics it had historically occasioned” (2). He has “been to much greener pastures” (4), is “geared towards an alternative, repressed, hidden world” (288), “a world whose geography is ours to map” (207), and speaks to a present to which his critic, Slavoj Žižek, can only grasp if “he assimilates it backward into his present” (9). This is not to mystify this hidden and greener world by restricting access exclusively to those who have some kind of magical epistemic

---

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

privilege of belonging to it by birthright. It is, however, to raise the price of admission: to abdicate the ideology that philosophy has a center and that it belongs on a mythical axis connecting Europe to the Greeks. In order to grasp other manifestations of the present, one has to loosen the hold of one's own present. One has to become, to use Nietzsche's felicitous term, *unzeitgemäß*, out of the measure of one's time. One cannot be "stuck" in one's "old ways" (234) and fail to see that events like the Arab Spring are the "renewed ground zero of history" (234). Indeed, as we continue to fight our banal, exhausted, and exasperating academic battles, the "world is giving birth to a new geography" (206).

Dabashi is not interested in accusing European thought of the "punishingly boring" (2-3) charge of Eurocentrism, but rather in finding ways to hear and articulate historically new contexts and horizons of thought—"from the Green Movement in Iran to the Arab Spring, to Indignados in Europe, to Occupy Wall Street in the US, to massive protests in Brazil" (11). We, however, continue, often in subtle and faintly discernible ways, to be frozen in our familiar and generally condescending subject positions, and therefore forgo the possibility of philosophically engaging new events and their participants. "It is long overdue that Europeans exit the certainty of their mythical self-philosophizing and re-enter history. They must come down off their high horses and fat Humvees and stop philosophizing me, and instead kindly consider philosophizing *with* me" (16). Beyond the binary of either capitulation (being "beholden") or reaction (being "hostile"), Dabashi endeavors both to articulate and perform a "thinking outside but adjacent to the mighty received European intellectual traditions, which in and of themselves enable dissent and defiance" (290).

Dabashi performs a manner of thinking that philosophers like Frantz Fanon, unthinkable without his relationship to Sartre and Lacan, but also witness and midwife to new worlds and peoples, first helped enable. His most direct influence and mentor in this respect is the great Edward Said. He takes up his mentor's powerful project and brings it beyond Orientalism's demand that the object, the "they," the other, is always construed as being with or against the European subject. He notes that what Antonio Gramsci, in teasing out the hegemonic interests implicit in the Kantian universal rational subject, discovered "is what in Brooklyn we call chutzpah—to think yourself the center of the universe, a self-assuredness that gives the philosopher that certain panache and authority to think in absolutist and grand narrative terms." This is philosophy's complicity with hegemony and "an imperial frame of reference" (36). In dismissing the self-centered certainty of the European subject, Dabashi also ceases to be its object (the one known by the master knowing subject), and hence the "European knowing subject, to the degree that it is incarcerated within the dead certainties of being 'European'...cannot have a clue who and what we/they are" (23). As the master subject relinquishes its vice grip on thinking and Adorno's negative dialectic is liberated, new "worlds emerge beyond 'the West and the Rest'" (23). In this respect, this book, Dabashi's third for Zed Books, is the final volume in a trilogy devoted to undertaking some "preliminary steps...to alter the texture, disposition, and timbre of our thinking against the grain of that neoliberal ideology that systematically sustains American imperialism and its regional allies and global beneficiaries" (288).<sup>2</sup>

These preliminary steps also require that we call out the old "divide and conquer" (212) techniques by which peoples are divided into master subjects (e.g., the white imperial property owning heterosexual male) and conquered and/or threatening objects (the Racial Other, the Muslim Other, the Leftist Other, the Non-heterosexual Other, the Poor Other,

---

<sup>2</sup> See also: Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012) and Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

etc.). Alas, this perspective also brings into relief the deep-seated privilege of thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas. Despite his constant evocation of ethical alterity, Levinas notoriously dismissed all thought outside Jerusalem or Athens as “exotic” and as “dance.” Although Leah Kalmanson, Frank Garrett, and Sarah Mattice in their provocative edited volume, *Levinas and Asian Thought*,<sup>3</sup> have demonstrated how fruitful Levinas can be when one thinks critically *alongside* him, they too had to take stock of this unsettling dimension of his thought. Dabashi for his part resorts to cheeky irony: “Of course no racism was intended—and no racism was understood, sir. It is simply a pure phenomenological truth that we Asians like to dance a lot and become human only to the degree that [we] are close to the Bible and the Greeks” (257).

Dabashi also takes on thinkers like Kant as emblematic of the source of a subtle residual Orientalism found even in thinkers like Žižek. In so doing, he points to one of the most puzzling elements of Kant’s moral philosophy: although he speaks universally of the demands of the categorical imperative, he nonetheless was extremely stingy about extending membership in the kingdom of ends to Asians—the Chinese and their “grotesque” artworks (258), Native Americans—“little feeling for the beautiful in moral understanding” (258), and, following David Hume, especially to all peoples of African descent—their skin color is a “clear proof” that they are “stupid” (259). I think Dabashi is right neither to dismiss these thinkers altogether as worthless racists nor to write off these sentiments as mere accidents of their characters and not integral features of their philosophical activity. To discard them is to fail to learn from and think alongside of them, but to excuse them is also to be complicit in deep subjective assumptions about who matters as philosophers or even as humans.

In a small aside that I consider quite liberating, Dabashi insists that these new worlds are enhanced by the powerful traditions of Islamicate poetry, including Nazem Hekmet, Mahmoud Darwish, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a point that Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh has made quite powerfully in his recent books, especially *Insurgent, Poet, Mystic, Sectarian: The Four Masks of an Eastern Postmodernism*.<sup>4</sup> For Dabashi, instruction in these poets and others is both how he pays back his debt for what he has learned from thinkers like Heidegger, Derrida, Badiou, and Rancière, and a special invitation to “European” thinkers:

I wish to invite European philosophers to read these poets not through the exoticized lenses of Orientalism or Area Studies, but with the same attitude of critical intimacy that they approach their own philosophers. Thus I wish for them to join me in collapsing the binary between philosophy and poetry, to stand next to me as I show them the poetic philosophy of our poets, teaching them how to reread philosophical poetry from Nietzsche to Blanchot. (24)

In eschewing the duality between colonizer and colonized, master subject and secondary object, center and periphery, civilized and barbarian, even philosophy and art, Dabashi is beginning to stake out new terrains of thought that do not define themselves exclusively in the terms and interests set by European philosophy. In his Foreword, Walter Mignolo points to what he calls the “double bind” of this position:

---

<sup>3</sup> Leah Kalmanson, Frank Garrett, and Sarah Mattice, eds., *Levinas and Asian Thought* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, *Insurgent, Poet, Mystic, Sectarian: The Four Masks of an Eastern Postmodernism* (Albany, NY: State University New York Press, 2016).

And of course, there is no reason why Western philosophers and scholars should be interested in what Dabashi and I are arguing. European philosophers have their concerns; we non-European thinkers have ours. However, we cannot afford not to know Western philosophy. The splendors and miseries of non-European thinkers come from this double bind; and with it comes the epistemic potential of dwelling and thinking in the borders. That is, engaging in border thinking. (xxxiii)

Dabashi's form of "border thinking" de-centers the subject of philosophy in order that philosophy as such can re-enter history. This means that one must refuse the assumptions that create the delusion that when we philosophize well we philosophize for all people and for all times. "These philosophers cannot comprehend the notion of the moment when a thinker might actually not be talking *to* them, but rather be standing right *next to them*, neither under nor over them, nor indeed up *there*" (28). Dabashi's work, however, is not merely a propaedeutic. He puts the power and acuity of an alternate but non-dual subject position powerfully to work in articulating the historical emergence of "a revolt against the politics of despair...sweeping across the Arab and Muslim world" (194). Although his analyses are wide ranging, Dabashi is especially adept at re-assessing Iranian politics from the position of its rising voices of resistance, what he calls "Iran's democratic upsurge" (75). This voice avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of the two official manners of spinning the situation (Iranian orthodoxy and the interests of US foreign policy).

Finally, as the media circus of the US election cycle heats up and the world is treated to the debacle of Trump's racist, misogynist, and xenophobic violence and his sublime stupidity, one might be tempted to mistakenly conclude that US politics have devolved into a spectacle. I would contend that the Trump scandal is only a difference in degree, not kind, and we would do well to learn from Iran's democratic upsurge. On June 12, 2009, nearly 80% of Iranians voted, but when it became obvious that their votes had been stolen, "they poured into the streets—what America should have done in 2000" (85). The rise of the Tea Party and the rotten soil out of which the poisonous flower of Trumpism grows was largely created by decades of political misdirection, disinformation, and fear mongering on the right and lackadaisical bystanding on the left. It is no longer possible—if it ever was—to hold the US out as a beacon of democracy with its "spectacle" of democracy, which, regardless of who wins, authorizes the thinly veiled aggression of the "humanitarian intervention" of US imperial military policy and corporate economic interests as they exert their will on the rest of the world (144). As the Occupy Movement demonstrated, as well as the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, the sham of American democracy is not merely a failure, but an invitation for the whole world to rethink the stakes, direction, and character of democracy. We no longer have to assume that the US is the ideal or that democracy is unimaginable without capitalism. "For the world at large, 'democracy' is now a *tabula rasa*: there is no model, no template, and no blueprint" (147).

Not only is this a critical renewal of our democratic ambitions, but it is also a rejuvenation of philosophical thinking and its many new peoples and worlds.

Jason M. Wirth  
Professor of Philosophy  
Seattle University

© 2016: Jason M. Wirth

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Wirth, Jason M., Review of *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, *SCTIW Review*, August 25, 2016.  
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1196>.

ISSN: 2374-9288