



Bernard Waites. *South Asia and Africa After Independence: Post-Colonialism in Historical Perspective.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 456 S.

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B. Waites: South Asia and Africa After Independence

Whatever else postcolonial cultural studies might have contributed to academic understandings of the state of affairs in formerly colonized parts of the globe, it has undoubtedly triggered a wave of sincere efforts by historians to test its central thesis against the empirical record. Bernard Waites' book is a worthy addition to this canon that tests the thesis from the perspective of political economy.

Waites defines post-colonialism as an historical concept. He distinguishes the rather straightforward meaning that rests on the "definite closure of the phenomena (political, economic, ideological) to which the expression refers", from the more provocative sense in which these phenomena continue, through sublation, to have a determining effect despite their "apparent negation" (p. 30-31). Although he acknowledges the ongoing inequality of our times, Waites suggests that explaining this by applying the latter sense of postcoloniality "not only obscures the autonomy of the post-colonial state" but "also deflects attention away from domestic policy failures which had important implications for development." (p. 32)

This book reflects the wisdom of its author's long and diverse scholarly career. Waites, a lecturer in modern history at Britain's Open University, consolidates a wide range of scholarly analysis to paint a broad canvas that is comparative not only between the two major regions noted in the title, but also within them. The result is a useful reference to the economic and political history of wide swaths of the post-colonial world. It is also replete with balanced yet concise summaries of many of the issues that have absorbed many litres of ink in postcolonial

cultural studies. For instance, Waites ably summarizes Africanists' lack of engagement with the ongoing effects of ethnic division in many African states as a function, in part, of their legitimate and historically rooted discomfort with the "grossly distorting assumption that post-colonial conflicts are historically rooted in primordial 'tribal' identities and animosities." (p. 321) Waites' own effort to understand the relative effects of so-called ethnic divisions, political manipulation and economic crisis in Rwanda and Burundi in 1993-94 is one of the most compelling chapters of the book.

Perhaps Waites' most significant contribution is to define a period during which India, Pakistan, and many sub-Saharan states could be said to be post-colonial in a temporally bounded sense. He suggests that the period was one in which "the authority and prestige of national leaders was bound up with their stewardship of economic modernisation and development." (p. 6) For India and Pakistan, he concludes that the post-colonial period extended for twenty-five or thirty years from 1947 until the early or mid-1970s. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, these post-colonial conditions extended for thirty-five to forty years until the mid- to late-1990s. In both cases, he defines the end-point as the onset of civil or regional wars, which permitted politicians definitively to consolidate their authority on grounds other than economic stewardship. India's political economy, characterized by state economic planning, a focus on industrialization led by the public sector, and international non-alignment, was "radically transformed" after the wars with Pakistan in 1966 and again in 1971. (p. 143) Indira Gandhi's dec-

laration of a state of emergency in 1975-77 gave her the tools to break decisively with Nehru's political and economic traditions.

Waites finds similar patterns in Africa. He notes that sub-Saharan Africa's extraordinary number of sovereign states is itself a legacy of colonial rule and acknowledges its profound economic dependence on the world beyond the continent. Nevertheless, he argues, their current political situation "cannot be considered the continuation of an unbroken 'post-colonial' period." (p. 180). For one thing, most have broken decisively with the economic model that he finds to be characteristic of the truly post-colonial period. For another, their political structures and the nature of political allegiance and contestation tend to be more alike than divergent, irrespective of their colonial histories. His comparison of specific pairs of individual states reinforces these observations. He examines Nigeria and Congo-Zaire, both giants in population and geography, and finds a significant degree of political convergence by the 1970s despite very different origins as sovereign states. He then pairs Rwanda and Burundi, adding to the analysis the crucial factor of regional pressures. His final comparison is between Angola and Mozambique, both states that went from Portuguese colonial rule to Marxist regimes and lengthy civil wars. In all of these comparisons, Waites finds the temptations and pressures of sovereignty to be a stronger explanatory factor for post-colonial political and economic events than the nature of a state's colonial heritage. As he notes, "history has gone on all the time in Africa, and to continue characterizing the recent past simply as pos-

terior to the European occupation is misleading and intellectually lazy." (p. 180)

Yet the book's underlying assumption – that one can engage with postcolonial studies by examining the empirical political and economic record of post-colonial states for signs of genuine agency on the part of their leaders – will fail to satisfy many of the proponents of this influential subset of the academy. Waites' analysis of post-colonial Africa takes its leaders at their word, weighing whether the impediments to achieving their stated goal of economic modernization were colonial in origin or resulted from the choices of those leaders. Many postcolonial cultural theorists will simply dismiss this approach as missing the point. They would argue that both the goal of modernization and the yardsticks by which it was measured were inventions of colonial Europe and its Cold War allies. Consequently, one cannot use such measures to evaluate whether the culture – including the political culture – of a state is truly postcolonial. They might also object that Waites takes Europe's late colonial states too much at their word when evaluating their political legacies, and then attributing to African politicians the primary responsibility for succumbing to the lure of authoritarianism, government change by military coup, and other egregious instances of poor governance.

With this book Waites has delivered a densely argued, detailed and often wise riposte to the over-generalizations of postcolonial studies; but it is unlikely to be the last word on the subject, even among historians who should know to be suspicious of anything that smacks of an endless present.

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