

## Book review forum

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Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso, 2019.  
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### An insurgent empire of mediators and beyond

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Priyamvada Gopal's *Insurgent Empire* demonstrates that rebellions in the British colonies – from the Indian Mutiny of 1857 to the post-war Mau-Mau crisis of 1953 – contributed effectively to the political and intellectual making of freedom, equality, and ultimately to decolonization and the end of British imperial rule in the twentieth-century. Through the mediation of critical discourses voiced in the public sphere, local revolts against oppressive colonial regimes could change European self-serving constructs of imperialism; they could act subversively upon the fabrication of empire itself. Across the British Empire (in India, Egypt, Kenya, and in many other places not covered by this book) insurgencies were fundamental for the development of liberal modernity and global democracy. Self-emancipation did not rely on imperial benevolence, as some Eurocentric historiography might claim. It was an achievement of a multitude of anti-colonial struggles whose victories were not confined to the colonial terrains and that shaped liberal democracy in Europe and elsewhere. For Gopal, the very experience of fighting colonialism inspired broader struggles for freedom; and such struggles for

freedom had significant autonomy from British liberal ideas. 'Freedom and equality', Gopal insightfully observes, 'were not abstractions derived from Enlightenment – itself hardly a homogeneous intellectual formation – they were real and present aspirations shaped by the condition and experience of subjection and exploitation' (p. 29). Thus, against imperial paternalism, the focus on the local political agency of individuals and movements allows for a non-Eurocentric counter narrative of liberal democracy and freedom. Insurgent actions also created conditions for an international dialogue; they opened up political fields and gave shape to critical public spheres in the imperial metropole, while allowing for the development of wider international resistance networks.

We see many merits in Gopal's well-written and eloquently argued work. A few critical notes, however, are in order. In the following we raise some questions concerning the book's privileged focus on what we see as mediations of resistance; and we conclude with brief comments on the contemporary significance of the volume.

### The insurgent mediators

Gopal's work is a political and intellectual history of anti-colonial resistance that places emphasis on the discourses and actions of educated intellectuals and politicians who intervened on behalf of the actual 'resistors' and protesters – initially a British and metropolitan group that became growingly transnational since the 19th century. Gopal's vivid prose brings to life an insurgent intelligentsia who – especially, though not exclusively, in Europe – channelled the voices, or expressed solidarity with, the local actions of insurgents. It provides a historical portrait of the formation of a public sphere, to

borrow from Jürgen Habermas's well-known term, engaged in the critique of imperialism since the 19th-century. Hence, the book is less concerned with describing the worlds of the many insurgents and rebels in the colonies than it is with describing the public interventions of their self-proclaimed spokespersons. Most of the individuals whose lives are depicted in this book were active mediators between protests and revolt in the colonies and wider audiences and networks of anti-imperial dissidence and Marxist criticism. The historical relevance of these anti-colonial public servants, MPs, writers, journalists, intellectuals, authors, and politicians is measured by their personal strength and commitment as well as by their ability to inscribe colonial struggles into public spheres that became progressively international. Within these networks, their main repertoires of resistance included newspaper articles, pamphlets, public interventions, petitions, memorials, speeches, addresses, resolutions, letters, placards, leaflets, meetings, lobbies, special conferences, debates, marches, poster parades and demonstrations. Thus we see this book as dealing mainly with the written and public mediations that allowed for anti-colonial resistance actions to become amplified within the framework of broader political processes in the public sphere, in Britain and also in Europe.

Gopal's work suggests a British critical public sphere became a crucial medium through which anti-colonial movements channelled their protests and proposals to national governments and even to wider international audiences. The democratic regimes that kept colonial Empires were thus confronted with critical repertoires that denounced their own contradictions. British parliamentary democracy, for instance, in the form of the 'British Empire', was denounced as the main vehicle for the development of 'colonial fascism'. Indisputably, such anti-colonial demands somehow changed political fields where criticism and debate was relatively liberal and uncensored. Yet, perhaps the same situation could hardly have similar consequences in national-imperial dictatorial regimes (such as the Portuguese empire, a dictatorship between the 1930s until 1970s), where the national public sphere was politically controlled and censored.

We take the point that, in some circumstances, the (textual) archives of the anti-colonial mediators critics of imperialism can enable us to retrieve the voices and agency of resisters. However, this should not replace the actual study of resistance practices in their own terms. Under the label of anti-colonial resistance are manifold practices and a variety of objectives and idioms that often cannot be reduced to a thirst for 'freedom' or a to a dualistic 'opposition' to European colonialism. Even the anti-colonial discourse of the critics of empire could fail to consider certain local actions and viewpoints. Therefore, without discounting the inherent worth of this work, we think it is important to remind the value of counterbalancing Gopal's approach with studies that consider oral histories and ethnographies of resistance that understand the actions of resisters outside unidirectional fields of opposition to the European, and beyond an one-dimensional struggle for 'liberation' or 'freedom'. Some protests and revolts could have significant anti-colonial and anti-imperial effects, and/or they could be read as anti-colonial 'texts' by the mediators, as Gopal reveals. However, one should bear in mind also that for many resisters their own actions could express a wider plurality of interests and meanings that the colonial/anti-colonial bipolarity could not capture.

It is also worth pointing out that the focus of *Insurgent Empire* is on a specific kind of local resistance – broad-scale violent revolts and uprisings – and on their impact upon public understandings of colonialism and empire, at home. Yet, as James C. Scott observed, other everyday forms of resistance often occur under subtle and hidden forms – 'hidden transcripts' that the educated mediators would tend not to take as 'texts' to be read and to which they often failed to give voice. Hence we believe the interventions of the mediators and critical discourses perceptively studied by Gopal should not be conflated with the actions of resisters and protesters and with their complex webs of intentionality. The focus on the critics of empire at home, in other terms, should not replace the study of the local repertoires of resistance in their own right.

## Contemporary debates

It is among the merits of *Insurgent Empire* to empirically debunk the vacuous idea that criticizing empire and providing dissident historical accounts of imperialism is ‘anachronistic’, as some conservative nationalist historians claim today. Gopal’s work demonstrates that resistances to injustice, oppression and inequality in colonial contexts offered global platforms for claims to citizenship. In Europe, these fights led to the rise of a growingly significant anti-colonial critical consciousness that ultimately contributed to the collapse of British imperial rule. Thus by meticulously exposing the vivacity of anti-colonial thought, this book is also an important demonstration that ‘imperialism’, even at home, was never a consensual national undertaking. Colonial and racial ideologies coexisted with a lively field of anti-imperial critique and dissent that must be acknowledged – a legacy that critical historians of empire today can re-activate to their own benefit. Gopal’s historical account importantly raises awareness of this legacy. For, we read *Insurgent Empire* also as a book written against imperial ‘myth-making’, it is aimed at intervening in the current political debates about national memory and the representation of the imperial and colonial past in Europe. *Insurgent Empire* is a book about mediators but it is also a medium through which is possible for scholars to be better equipped to engage with contemporary debates. Some of the demands that defined the anti-colonial struggles depicted in this book are far from being accomplished. Independences were conquered but global economic inequalities still shape a very unbalanced world. In the old metropolises, diverse discriminations and ideas of racial superiority echoed colonial conceptions. Imperial and colonial memories are now a field of strong political contention across Europe. Different repertoires and representations are used today to organize the struggles against such discriminations, and the

anti-colonial militancy of the past can provide inspiration to common political struggles that not draw on conceptions of cultural reductionism. If the anti-colonial movements were crucial do ‘civilize the civilizer’, modern political movements inspired by this past must continue struggling for common rights.

*Insurgent Empire* sets the path for comparative exercises of anti-colonial intellectual and political traditions in other imperial settings, beyond the provincial history of the British Empire. Yet, we believe a broader consideration of the history of anti-colonial resistance/s will benefit from widening the analytical focus beyond the liberal ‘public sphere’ and the literary archives of anti-colonial dissident mediators. For, beyond the textual and literary archives of anti-colonialism at home, among the local communities and descendants of resisters, there is still a rich realm of oral archives, concepts, and forms of memory of protest and resistance that scholars of anti-colonialism would do well to take into account. This move will perhaps help to expand the archive of anti-colonial insurgency and dissidence to other historicities of resistance and to other conceptual forms of insurgency that might fall outside the scope of the mediations discussed in this book. This observation, however, should not reduce the worth and strength of *Insurgent Empire*. This is an important contribution, and we believe it will remain a source of inspiration for coming scholarship on resistance and colonialism.

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