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Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies by Timothy
Brennan (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

☞ Timothy Brennan. *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies*.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. xiii + 280 pp. \$24.95 paper.

The well-known Marxist critic Timothy Brennan explains that the title of his book refers to the eighteenth-century sources of twentieth-century anticolonialism. He claims that anticolonialism “borrowed” its insights from Enlightenment thinkers whose contribution to anticolonialism has never been fully attended to. He states his goal in the first paragraph of his book:

To trace the direct and indirect influences of Giambattista Vico and (as an heir to Vico) G. W. E. Hegel on the historically new anticolonial spirit that arose in the early decades of the twentieth century. Within the intellectual lineage they created, this movement from the eighteenth to the twentieth century saw the development of ideas that, quite unlike the present, expressed their apostasy as humanism rather than anti-humanism, and saw the ability of the humanities to check the claims of the natural sciences as being not just an intellectual matter but a vital political goal.

Brennan pursues this goal across an expansive terrain of Marxist criticism, and those not familiar with its geography risk confusion and disorientation. The book has only four chapters. The first is on Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). The second is on Hegel, while the third focuses on Nietzsche. The fourth, concluding, chapter applies the arguments of the preceding chapters to late twentieth-century philosophical discussions with particular attention to Georges Bataille. These discussions, however, range far afield (very far) from the ostensible subject of the chapter.

Chapter 1, “Vico, Spinoza, and the Imperial Past,” introduces Vico to the reader as a purveyor of almost occult knowledge. Brennan sketches the history of Vico’s influence in a few paragraphs, from his popularity in the

eighteenth-century to his decline into obscurity in the nineteenth followed by his gradual re-emergence in the twentieth, when he became a major influence on Cassirer, Toynbee, Collingwood, and especially Erich Auerbach. After this sketch, Brennan goes on to detail what he thinks are Vico's influences on anticolonialism—which turn out also to be similarities to Marxism. These include a recognition of class struggle, a “nonpresentist form of historicism” that Brennan credits with being the genesis of Marx's historical materialism, and finally the “instruments” for a decentering of European culture (20).

Brennan proceeds to invoke Vico as a forerunner of antiestablishment, antibourgeois, anti-ecclesiastical critique (22–36). This is clearly the Vico of the Left, from Antonio Gramsci to Edward Said. Brennan contrasts Vico's thinking with that of Spinoza, usefully pointing out how Vico presents a more fruitful approach to anticolonial origins than the current wave of neo-Spinozist thinking. Brennan mines Vico's *New Science* for ideas congruent with anticolonialism and found in later Marxist writers. For example, Brennan credits Vico's resistance to treating human subjects as objects of scientific study as having a profound influence on Georges Sorel's critique of violence (23). Brennan goes on to identify three major anticolonial *leit motifs* found in Vico: (a) Vico's account of the origins of civilization gives no priority to any one nation; (b) Vico's theory of independent cultural creation anticipates the anti-diffusion theories of the later twentieth century; and (c) Vico's condemnation of conquest, equating foreign domination with robbery (22–23). Brennan traces these insights throughout Vico's *New Science*, but he ignores the Vico of the Right, lionized by Italian fascism and subsequently seen as an intractable reactionary by a long critical tradition whose most recent contributor was Mark Lilla.

In Chapter 2, Brennan moves to Hegel whom he calls “an heir to Vico” (73). Brennan, first, indicates where Vico stole the march on Hegel, and second, analyzes Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as a proto-anticolonial text. When comparing Vico to Hegel, however, Brennan commits two errors. First, he refers to Vico's concept of a “barbarism of refinement,” when Vico's text clearly calls it a “barbarism of reflection” (75). Vico meant by this term a decay of a *sensus communis* during which even language loses its consensus of meaning. This is certainly more serious than an overcultivation of bourgeois manners. Second, Brennan refers to the “Practic” of the *New Science*,

a kind of application of Vico's principles that Brennan says Vico appended to his fourth (1744) edition of the *New Science* (78). In fact, it was appended to the third (1732) edition and pointedly omitted from the 1744 edition. Such errors make one wonder about Brennan's readings of these and other texts.

After contrasting Hegel with Vico (usually to the latter's advantage), Brennan moves to an analysis of Hegel's work, mainly the *Philosophy of Right*. Before beginning, however, Brennan reasserts his thesis, that contemporary anticolonialism must be seen as continuing a critique that had historical precedents rather than being a "Copernican break" (80). Brennan then lists seven (!) reasons for choosing to study Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: (a) it was the work that exerted the most influence on critics of empire; (b) it brings the impact of the French Revolution to bear on efforts to revive Marxism in the postwar period; (c) more than any other of Hegel's works, it brings daily life into the orbit of philosophical reflection; (d) it considers the "slippage" of the political into the ethical; (e) its consideration of the civic and its material effects makes it a radical work; (f) it contains insights that are commonly ascribed to Marx's revision of Hegel; and (g) it offers an original defense of the state form that is divorced from any particular state (84).

Before explaining these claims, Brennan digresses to assert the impact of Eastern philosophy on Hegel and his milieu, apparently a strategic move to insulate Hegel from charges of Eurocentrism (86–89). After this excursus, Brennan begins the main task of this chapter: to defend Hegel from charges of authoritarianism and to reveal him as a predecessor of anticolonial critique. First, he redefines certain key concepts in Hegel: will, spirit (*Geist*), subject, object, and others. His definitions soften their authoritarian connotations and make the words more amenable to a leftist construal. Then Brennan analyzes in considerable detail Hegel's condemnation of slavery. During this analysis Brennan states that "the parentage of the postcolonial, is, ultimately, a communist one" (99). This remark summarizes Brennan's analysis of why Hegel was shunned by twentieth-century anticolonialism. He explains the Hegel versus Marx dispute in the context of twentieth-century anti-communism. Brennan then critiques the critiques of Hegel made by twentieth-century Marxists and post-structuralists, especially Jameson and Derrida. The point of these critiques is that Marx himself saw the anticolonialism implicit in Hegel more clearly than Marx's twentieth-century interpreters.

After dealing with Hegel's incipient anticolonialism in Chapter 2, Brennan turns to Nietzsche in Chapter 3. He begins by noting the similarities between Nietzsche and Vico: both were preoccupied with philology, especially etymology, and both were interested in imaginatively re-entering more barbaric (but heroic) ages. Then he cites many references to Nietzsche in contemporary anticolonial and postcolonial discourse. These references pay homage to Nietzsche's rejection of nationalism, his supplanting divine providence with the providence of reason, and his rejection of the subject in favor of the body (141). This latter position, according to Brennan, inspired the anticolonialism of Georges Bataille and later Michel Foucault. To maintain this position, however, Brennan must refute the various interpretations of Nietzsche that portray him as apolitical, an aesthete, *à la* Walter Kaufman, or as an aggressive would-be world dominator, as in Carl Schmitt or Wilhelm Carl Becker (144). Brennan responds to these characterizations by claiming that even Nietzsche was a sympathetic follower of Vico and thus an implied critic of colonialism.

Nietzsche, however, supported German imperialism and the Prussian state. Brennan pirouettes around this sticky problem by claiming that Nietzsche opted for a subversion of "old Europe" and saw socialism and democracy as rivals to his subversive enterprise rather than as opponents (170–74). Brennan spends the rest of this chapter reinterpreting Nietzsche's concept of genealogy and Nietzsche's mastery of rhetoric, indicating the verbal traps and ironies that subvert a simple triumphalist interpretation. Nonetheless, Brennan has to conclude that Nietzsche left behind a philosophy of conquest that contradicted the rest of modern German philosophy and has survived without criticism (195).

In Chapter 4, the conclusion, Brennan introduces new material, juxtaposing a litany of philosophers against the tradition he has described: Georges Bataille, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Althusser, Marcuse, and (at considerable length) Norbert Wiener, among others. All this aims to problematize Marxist thinking after the war. Brennan, however, does not draw any specific conclusions from this account, nor does he make any positive claims. Rather, he attaches an appendix that sketches the program he will follow in the second volume of this study.

Brennan's case is difficult to grasp (much less accept) because of the piling up of abstract nouns. Throughout this very frustrating text, the author continuously produces sentences like this:

We are unsure in this passage, read in isolation, whether he takes his stand with a momentary protest against the one-sidedness of mere perception and its impatient (and therefore false) sense that it has achieved an objective stance, or whether he is declaring that the finished process of dialectical negation is itself founded on the suspension of any resolution of opposition, which at this point is held together in a contradictory unity. (111)

While there are many insights in this book, the author's manipulation of second, third, and even fourth order abstraction will challenge even the most adept critical theoretician.

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☞ David Lodge, *Quite a Good Time to Be Born: A Memoir 1935–1975*.
London: Harvill Secker, 2015. 488 pp.

David Lodge is distinctive among British writers in that he did not prioritize the roles of novelist and academic critic. He eventually took early retirement to devote himself more or less full time to the role of novelist—though still engaging in some academic activities—but this memoir stops at 1975, when he was still intent in combining the two roles; indeed, his life as an academic provided a good deal of the material for his fiction so that he has become identified in the mind of many readers with the “campus novel,” though most of his novels do not conform to the genre. In Britain nowadays being a writer is not necessarily a disadvantage to those pursuing an academic career, as “creative writing” can be submitted along with conventional academic material to be assessed as part of research assessment exercises. It is not likely that Lodge would have envied modern academics, for his aim was to keep the two roles separate and he did not at first discuss his fiction writing with academic colleagues.

This “memoir”—it is not clear why Lodge does not call it an autobiography, but one may suspect that commercial considerations are a factor, as “memoir” has become a fashionable genre in recent years—will be of interest to several sets of readers: those interested in the world of academia, especially English departments in Britain and to some extent America; admirers