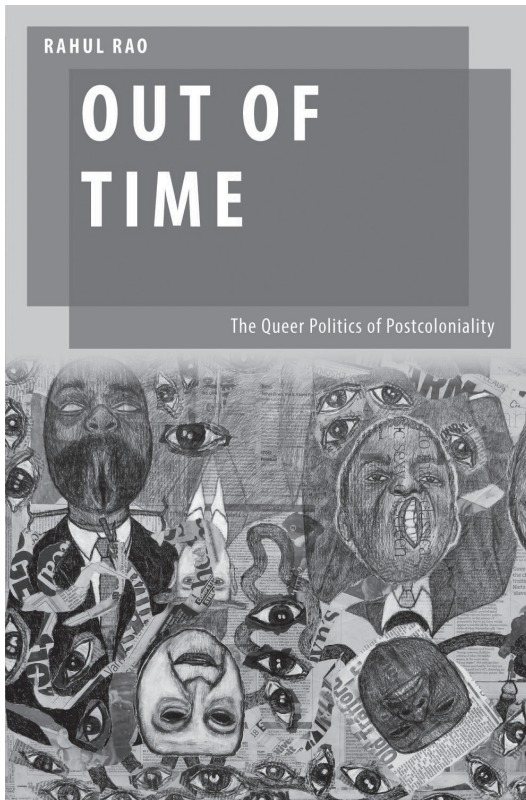


BOOK REVIEWS



Rahul Rao (2020)

Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality

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It was about time! On Rahul Rao's *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*

Those who have been following Rahul Rao's work since his first monograph, *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (OUP, 2010), were looking forward to the publication of his new book. And *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (OUP, 2020) was well worth the wait. Rao's work

is conceptually sophisticated without theoretical deluge, empirically rich yet wary of empiricism, and politically engaged while never assuming that a critique of imperialism might guarantee, on its own, a progressive politics for the postcolony. As such, it embodies the best theoretical and political impulses driving Queer Studies and Postcolonial Studies since their inception, as well as the most illuminating insights emerging from the encounter between the two fields through the past twenty years.

One of Rao's core arguments is that queerness occupies a deeply ambivalent place (and time) in the postcolony, where both state homophobia and movements for LGBTQ+ equality and liberation seem bound to articulate their respective sexual politics on a terrain always already overdetermined by the colonial. Against the ostensibly anticolonial claim that homosexuality is a Western import, often voiced by the postcolonial state as well as reactionary and conservative movements in civil society, it has become almost routine for progressive movements to point out that in fact *homophobia* is Western. Across the former British empire – such as in Uganda and India, which are the contexts covered by Rao's book – this argument has particular traction and rests on solid historical grounds, given the role played by British colonialism in globally disseminating anti-sodomy laws. While Rao sympathises with the tactical dimension of such a response to postcolonial state homophobia, he warns that it might ultimately let the state itself off the hook, insofar as it insists on circumscribing Western imperialism as primarily responsible for contemporary homophobia.

To develop this core argument and its multiple ramifications, *Out of Time* brings together Rao's analyses of Ugandan and Indian sexual politics over the past few years, yet within a stronger temporal framework that was present only implicitly in his previous work. In fact, the reader who was convinced that Rao's main concern was with the spatialisation of sexual politics, now finds out that it might have been about time all along. The first chapter, 'The Location of Homophobia', marks this shift of perspective through a discussion of the local and global debates surrounding the infamous Anti Homosexuality Act in Uganda, first introduced to Parliament in 2009, signed into law by President Yoweri Museveni in 2014, and struck down the same year by the Constitutional Court of Uganda on procedural grounds. The chapter starts by identifying two competing constructions of homophobia as place-bound: homophobia as quintessentially Ugandan and African versus homophobia as Western import. Yet, by deconstructing both constructions, Rao arrives at the conclusion that place *is* time, insofar as spatial formations are precariously stabilised and continuously reconstituted over time and, most importantly, through temporal narratives. Rao shows that queerness

and homophobia, in their capacity to be flexibly articulated to both imperialist and anti-imperialist temporal narratives, help 'Uganda', 'Africa', and the 'West' coalesce as discrete spatial formations in the first place.

Building on this insight, the next two chapters continue unpacking the temporality of postcolonial sexual politics in Uganda by looking at contradictory memory practices at work on both sides of the imperial divide. On the one hand, in 'Re-Membering Mwanga, Mourning the Martyrs', Rao discusses the national-popular cult of the 'Ugandan martyrs', a group of forty-five court pages burned to death between 1885 and 1887 on orders of Muwanga II, the last independent Kabaka (king) of the pre-colonial kingdom of Buganda. According to key historical accounts, the pages were executed because of their refusal to continue engaging in same-sex practices with Muwanga, due to their conversion to Christianity. Thus, Rao is interested in the memory practices that allow this story – in which sodomy figures as a 'native' practice challenged by Western encroachment – to coexist, in popular consciousness, with the opposite, widespread belief that same-sex desire is essentially Western and foreign to Ugandan 'culture'. On the other hand, in 'Spectres of Colonialism', Rao dissects equally contradictory memory practices at work today in the former colonial metropolis. His focus here is not on popular consciousness but on the state, as he addresses debates within the British state over the racial and sexual legacies of colonialism. Rao argues that the state approaches these legacies through disjointed temporal frames: invoking historical distance and even incommensurability against an assumption of full responsibility for slavery, while offering apologies for past forms of state homophobia, including in its colonial forms. These temporal frames, in turn, are underpinned by economic rationalities and racializing logics, so for Rao they require a queer postcolonial materialist analysis that refuses the segregation between the sexual and the racial as much as the one between the material and the cultural.

Such an analysis is fully developed in the last two chapters, which also expand the focus of the book beyond Uganda to include the Indian context. In 'Queer in the Time of Homocapitalism', Rao discusses the 'economic case' for LGBTQ+ rights, explicitly articulated for the first time by the World Bank in a 2014 report on India. This emerging logic – inaugurated by international financial institutions but increasingly embraced by LGBTQ+ movements themselves, both in the Global North and in the South – frames sexual progress as conducive to economic growth and development, going as far as calculating the 'cost' of homophobia and transphobia (for example, by emphasizing the impact of LGBTQ people's higher exposure to HIV/AIDS, violence, or depression on healthcare systems). For Rao, not only does this

rationality problematically subordinate human rights to the imperative of economic growth, but most crucially it obscures the ways in which postcolonial development policy and international financial institutions themselves are fully implicated in the production of homophobia in the Global South today. Returning to the Ugandan context, Rao shows that the actors who have played a central role in mediating a popular reception of homophobic moral panics in the last decade – such as Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches – mushroomed precisely in a context marked by structural adjustment programs, filling a void left by the shrinking state. In this light, the future-oriented promise of LGBTQ+ rights as a path to development – sometimes embraced by activists, according to Rao, as a way out from the stalemate of conflicting interpretations of the colonial past – turns out to be a dead end. As an alternative to this future-oriented yet self-deceiving temporality, the last chapter, ‘The Nation and Its Queers’, recovers the utopian potential of a ‘backward future’ by reading contemporary trans and hijra political struggles in India through the lens of anti-caste revolutionary thought. This utopia is neither abstract nor prescriptive, but the concrete utopia embodied by a queer subjectivity capacious enough to function as a site of articulation for the social and political fragments that proliferate in the postcolonial condition.

This brief overview of the book’s five main chapters shows that *Out of Time* is not invested in identifying *one* temporal framework that would explain the queer politics of postcoloniality. In fact, at first glance, the reader might get the impression that the problematic of temporality remains fragmented and only unevenly incorporated in Rao’s analyses of Ugandan and Indian sexual politics. However, this unevenness is largely programmatic. In the introduction, Rao observes that queer critical work on temporality of the past twenty years – from the anti-futurism of Lee Edelman to the queer utopianism of José E. Muñoz – ironically seems to be driven by a desire to be perfectly timely in its intervention. This desire primarily manifests in the confidence with which queer theorists have proposed different temporal reorientations (backward, anti-futurist, utopian) against what they identify as the hegemonic temporal norm. For Rao, such confidence betrays a vantage point firmly located in the United States whereas a postcolonial broadening of the geopolitical frame lays bare ‘the heterotemporality of the global queer political present’ (p. 17), that is, an uneven and combined temporality fragmented by scattered hegemonies. Thus, while *Out of Time* is organised around the problematic of temporality, one of the book’s sharpest insights is the suggestion that queer critical theories might have overstated the value of temporal reorientation as a form of radical theory and practice. Rao’s foregrounding of the heterotemporality of postcolonial sexual politics gestures

towards a form of concrete universalism by suggesting that queerphobia is best understood – *everywhere* and *always* – through a materialist analysis of its spatial and temporal dispersions, that is, its conjunctural articulations within different social formations.

A second contribution that stands out is Rao's sustained dialogue, throughout the book, with Jasbir Puar's influential work on homonationalism. On the one hand, while the concept of 'homonationalism' was originally developed by Puar in the aftermath of 9/11 to diagnose a then emerging civilisational logic that posits Western sexual progress (including queer freedom) as a barometer of development and legitimate sovereignty, Rao proposes the concept of 'homoromanticism' to capture an increasingly common response to that logic: a 'pinkwashing' of the pre-colonial space-time. As already mentioned, for him, one of the most troubling if unintended consequences of such a response is to frame the West alone as the source of contemporary homophobia while leaving the postcolonial state unchecked. Homonationalism and homoromanticism contradict each other's selective historical claims but operate on a shared civilisational plane, invested as they are in culturalising and 'locating' homophobia in time and space.

On the other hand, Rao also supplements and displaces this civilisational logic by coining the concept of 'homocapitalism'. This conceptual move achieves several goals at once. First, the concept of homocapitalism emphasises that political and financial institutions which increasingly assume the role of civilisational agents of sexual progress are in fact materially implicated in the reproduction of postcolonial homophobia. Thus, it does not simply diagnose the emergence of a civilisational discourse, but it identifies its structural contradictions. Secondly, it exposes the fact that contemporary debates on homonationalism to some extent reproduce the civilisational logic they set out to criticise, insofar as they leave unexamined the role played by capital accumulation – especially in its globalised neoliberal forms – in the reproduction of that logic itself. Finally, Rao argues that from the vantage of the postcolony, homocapitalism might be emerging as a more effective *alternative* to homonationalism:

In drawing on the hegemonic logic of neoliberal reason, [homocapitalism] offers an apparently more consensual strategy of persuasion than homonationalism with its coercive tropes of civilisation and barbarism. The promise of futurity inherent in homocapitalism may prove to be more seductive where the chastisement of homonationalism has not 'yet' succeeded in drawing recalcitrant states into its embrace or, worse, has raised their anti-imperialist shackles (p. 10).

This argument would perhaps deserve further theoretical elaboration, especially because Rao maps 'homonationalism' and 'homocapitalism' onto the relation between coercion and consent – that is, within a refreshing framework rooted in a Gramscian and postcolonial theory of hegemony – yet without engaging with the biopolitical/necropolitical analysis originally proposed by Puar. Nonetheless, his argument is politically convincing and, most importantly, it significantly expands and advances contemporary debates on neoliberal governmentality and global sexual politics.

More generally, *Out of Time* foregrounds the specific terrain of sexual politics while also reinvigorating the critical task of postcolonial theory at large. As the book's title suggests, Rao is interested in postcolonial queer politics as much as in the *queer politics of postcoloniality*. That is, conceptualised as a shape-shifting articulatory device, queerness also functions here as an entry point to understand the postcolonial condition as such. In the introduction, Rao states:

I am interested in the manner in which contemporary struggles over queer freedoms return to the scene of the colonial and in the work that such 'returns' seek to accomplish. I am sceptical of some of these returns, given the manner in which they seem to offer the postcolonial state an alibi for its perpetuation and promulgation of anti-queer laws. If postcolonial critique is to continue to remain meaningful in the contemporary world, it must do more than simply remind us of the enduring legacies of colonialism (p. 9).

This is yet another, timely contribution of *Out of Time*. In a time when calls to 'decolonise' promisingly proliferate in and out of the academy, yet sometimes used and abused to the point of obscuring rather than illuminating the intricate texture of postcolonial and neocolonial social formations, Rao's critical disposition is invaluable. Indeed, what the reader certainly will *not* find in his analyses is a shortcut to social justice.

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