Nick Nesbitt


The founding assumption behind Nick Nesbitt’s extensive survey of French Antillean writing is that the diverse range of texts he analyzes all possess a “unifying characteristic,” namely their “status as works of critique—as writings, that is, that cry out in insubordination and aversion to the state of their world (above all, that of plantation slavery and colonialism), and seek to articulate the promise that another world is possible” (p. xi). Thus Nesbitt attributes a fundamental unity to the numerous political and intellectual figures he considers, from Toussaint Louverture and the Baron de Vastey through Victor Schoelcher to Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Maryse Condé, and Édouard Glissant. He maintains that each elaborates a “distinctly Caribbean mode of critique” (p. xiii). Although distinctly Caribbean, this mode of critique rests on a “politics of principle” that appeals neither to community nor to ethnic difference but to a universal axiom of “justice as equality” (pp. 14–19). As such, Caribbean critique is understood to be in a symbiotic relationship with what might be termed a “Western” tradition of Critical Theory running from the thinkers of the radical Enlightenment (Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel) to those in a broadly Marxist tradition (Marx himself, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou).

In seeking to establish the validity of this specifically Caribbean mode of critique, Nesbitt engages in some spirited defenses of the legitimacy of political violence in certain specific circumstances, finding support in the work of Immanuel Kant. He argues that Kant defended the legitimacy of revolutionary Jacobinism as a necessary step in the establishment of a democratic state in circumstances where the _ancien régime_ simply refused to recognize workers or slaves as equal human beings at all (pp. 50–59). He extends this model to argue that political violence was thus legitimate in cases such as revolutionary France and Saint-Domingue, French colonial Algeria, or Aristide’s Haiti, where the very existence of democracy was at stake. By contrast, in France’s Antillean possessions, whose black inhabitants enjoyed democratic rights, negotiated, nonviolent solutions were available and hence preferable (pp. xii–xiii). This, in turn, allows Nesbitt to present Césaire’s advocacy in 1946 of departmentalization for the French Antilles as entirely consistent with the violent struggle of the Haitian Revolution or with Fanon’s insistence on the necessity of anticolo-
On one level, this represents a justified rebuttal of all those who claim that any recourse to political violence must inevitably lead to totalitarianism. However, Nesbitt surely risks effacing here the significant political differences between Césaire and Fanon on the question of revolutionary violence. Moreover, his account rests on a rather selective presentation of the facts. Thus he makes no mention of the influence of the French Communist Party’s official line on Césaire’s advocacy of departmentalization, despite the fact that, as a Communist deputy, Césaire was bound to obey that line, a line that, in 1946, was set against more radical or nationalist solutions in France’s colonies. Further, in defending Césaire’s choices here, Nesbitt feels obliged to dismiss Léon Gontran Damas’s opposition to departmentalization by unjustly caricaturing the latter as a producer of “pro-colonial propaganda” (p. 91). When discussing Césaire’s shift, in 1949, to a more critical position on departmentalization (p. 107), Nesbitt also neglects to mention that this coincided with a shift in the Party line toward a more overt, if qualified anti-imperialism. Nesbitt’s desire to maintain the unity and integrity of “Caribbean critique” as an analytical category thus sets in motion a questionable dialectic of absorption and expulsion that sometimes operates on highly partial and tendentious grounds.

On a more positive note, through his trenchant defenses of a radical Enlightenment tradition and the universal principles it mobilizes, Nesbitt distinguishes himself from what both Peter Hallward and Chris Bongie see as the dominant tendency in Francophone postcolonial studies toward a depoliticizing emphasis on the interstitial, the indeterminate, the hybrid, and the singular, alongside a persistent conflation of the cultural or aesthetic with the realm of politics proper. Caribbean Critique bears witness to Nesbitt’s critical engagement with both Hallward’s and Bongie’s work, an engagement that sees him taking on board some of their criticisms of the depoliticizing tendencies in postcolonial theory, while mounting qualified defenses of the value of a politics of culture and identity in certain circumstances (pp. 141, 249). Nesbitt concedes that Hallward’s and Bongie’s criticisms of the allegedly depoliticizing aestheticism of the later Glissant have some validity. He thus distinguishes between that strand of Caribbean critique, epitomized by the late Glissant, that lapses into “a Nietzschean antipolitics of epicurean delight” and those figures, from Vastey to the early Glissant, who elaborate “a Caribbean materialist dialectic” that aims at “the constitution of a militant subject” (pp. 231–32).

The importance of Nesbitt’s book thus rests on its attempts to mediate between postcolonial theory, as conventionally practiced, and the universalist axiomatics advocated by Hallward and Bongie in opposition to that discipline. Inevitably, this attempt raises a series of theoretical, political, and historical questions that would require far more detailed treatment than the limitations
of the current review allow. What is certain is that Nesbitt has made an important and highly original contribution to such debates.

Jeremy F. Lane
Department of French Studies, Nottingham University
Nottingham NG7 2RD, U.K.
jeremy.lane@nottingham.ac.uk

References