
Eleonora Esposito’s study of the political campaign of the People’s Partnership coalition (PP) in Trinidad and Tobago before the 2010 general election is a welcome work. Its primary focus, the examination of political “meaning-making” machinery (p. 4), is a field of study that, while commonplace elsewhere, is absent from the academic repertoire of Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed, the book’s intention is to use the campaign as a “case-study” to address a “blind spot” in academic work on the region, and to propose a theoretical approach—a combination of Critical Discourse Studies, and a Discourse-Historical Approach (CDS and DHA).

A shortcoming in light of this intention (and the subtitle which promises a regional reach) is that the book shows little knowledge of regional history or politics. Its focus is not merely singular, but blinkered; it offers no contrast with the campaign of the PP’s opponents in 2010 (the People’s National Movement, PNM). A reason is given: Esposito was denied access to PNM’s material, but advertisements and recordings of public meetings could have easily provided these.

The absence of necessary information and Geertzian “thick” knowledge recurs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar is the first woman prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and an account of her “rise” is provided, but without the context and history that would focus the narrative. Other regional women leaders are mentioned but not discussed; neither are gender and ethnic politics in Trinidad adequately addressed. The reason for the narrow focus is evidently that Esposito is more interested in road-testing her theoretical model in the Caribbean landscape than examining in depth “Kamla-mania.” About a quarter of the book is devoted to theory. It’s not that the theoretical exposition should have been curtailed; rather, the historical context, so crucial to the DHA, should have been more extensive. This lack of background would be problematic anywhere, but it is especially so in Trinidad and Tobago, as the country’s “Caribbeanness” does not fit into the stereotypical conception of Caribbeanness, which Esposito calls a “Caribbean romance” narrative (p. 142).

The account of the country’s political evolution in Chapter 2 spans two centuries, and concludes: “A detailed historical and socio-political explanation of the topic is largely beyond the scope of this book” (p. 46). But such an explanation is necessary for the book. This chapter races over cultural nationalism, historical ethnic antagonism, and the mythologies of ethnic entitlement. But these elements do not provide a satisfying outline of the society’s journey to the
central event. For example, in examining ethnic politics, Esposito glosses over the PNM’s loss of power in 1995, and the collapse of the UNC in government in 2001 in a few lines. Even a cursory reading of those events might have altered her thesis.

The center of the book, the analysis of the campaign, relies on a close reading of the texts of Persad-Bissessar’s speeches, mapping oral and visual syntax, intertextuality, allusion, and semiotic analysis of the images and video advertisements. The focus is on “reading” the images, and analysis of narrative style, allusions and parallels to local works (like David Rudder’s calypso “The Ganges and the Nile” [p. 131]) and foreign ones (like Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech [p. 154]), and intertextuality with external phenomena such as Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign in the United States. These analyses and conclusions are interesting but unremarkable. The strategies were evident at the time—for example, the similarity of the video of the round table of leaders to the Obama campaign ad featuring him in the Oval Office. More useful would have been an exploration of local nuance, which was inadequate, as in the analysis of the “Do So” campaign.

Given the book’s tenuous grasp of local knowledge, one might conclude that Esposito engaged in her own “Caribbean romance” in assuming that this rudimentary account was adequate. This is in contrast to the many intricate examinations of metropolitan political discourse, from Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media (1988) to Yochai Benkler, Robert Harris, and Hal Roberts’s Network Propaganda: Manipulation Disinformation and Radicalisation in American Politics (2018), and many more.

Nonetheless, Politics, Ethnicity and the Postcolonial Nation succeeds in deploying and proving the CDA/DHA analytic for Caribbean politics and society. Good, but again, not remarkable. Hopefully, regional scholars will be moved to ask themselves why a widely-used analytic had to be brought in a visitor’s suitcase, rather than being deployed from the local academe.

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