

Reviews

The Ethnic and the Ethical

Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other

by John Drabinski

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This highly successful study comparing the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to that of a number of influential postcolonial philosophers faces a problem from the outset, namely what might be seen as deep incompatibilities between the two strands of thought. Granted that on a first reading Levinas and the postcolonialists seem to be describing the same thing. The root of Levinas's thought is the subject's encounter with the other: the Levinasian subject is ruptured at the core by the other's difference; challenged in all its assumptions; found to be imperialist, murderous, and voracious; and in this rupture the subject is called to learn from the other, and to be judged by the other. If one looks no further than this, Levinas gives us both a pattern by which to understand colonialism and some foundational tools with which to question it. If, however, one looks only a little further, the neat conflation falls apart. Levinas's other, far from a colonized nation, an ethnicity, or a culture, is a singularity, encountered by the subject as a disincarnate entity which, "stripped of its very form . . . shivers in its nudity" (*Basic* 54), and the ethical responsibility the subject shoulders in the encounter is a result not of any attribute or any history but of something so philosophically thin as almost not to be there: the other's otherness, i.e. the other's not-being-the-subject. In a nutshell, difference is important to Levinas on the plane of the face-to-face rather than politically, and politics has other rules under which it operates, one of which is the assumption of a certain mutuality and homogeneity. On this second reading, then, the two camps divide, such that one could almost put their difference in polar terms, the postcolonial thinkers appearing from Levinas's perspective as ideologues, fighting tired battles

between us and them, and Levinas appearing from their perspective as another Eurocentric thinker describing ethics in the abstract without any awareness of a history of global-political injustice. Levinas's other stripped of attributes is in this reading "blanched" (69) to a familiar whiteness (69).

The first great virtue of Drabinski's book is that he offers what I want to call a third reading. Previously, in addition to some excellent work on postcolonial thought, Drabinski has made significant contributions to our understanding of Levinas's place in the phenomenological tradition, and he knows the thought well. He understands that Levinas distinguishes between ethics and politics, with ethics being the sphere in which I find myself responsible to another human being without even noticing the color of his eyes, let alone his skin; and politics being the realm in which culture, ethnicity, and history re-emerge. Drabinski sees the virtues of this position: that it allows us to speak of cultural or national differences and also of a prior difference between each human being, one that relativizes any collective identification; that it therefore acknowledges that "politics, left to itself, is tyranny" (187); that it suggests a viable pre-politics that is both originary and corrective. And he sees the pitfall of the position: that it separates the question of the ethical from the question of the ethnic, the human being from the realm of history, and thus disallows an understanding of human ethics as connected to personal and historical violence grounded in global economics. Drabinski knows that a reading of Levinas that conflated him with the postcolonialists, such that the colonizing nation found itself commanded by the colonized, or forced into an ethical response to the subaltern, would no longer be Levinas. He therefore puts the camps into dialogue from positions that remain distinct and authentic. And, remarkably, a kind of compatibility gradually emerges in complex ways. Drabinski shows us that, as long as we resist the conflation of the two strands of thought, we can place them in productive conversation with each other.

In general Drabinski stages the dialogue in such a way that Levinas's account dominates phenomenologically while the postcolonialists dominate politically, which means that Levinas can fruitfully push the postcolonialists' analysis of the structure of the subject's experience of the world, while they can fruitfully push him on the results of that structure. In the clearest possible terms, Drabinski's Levinas tends to show the postcolonialists a rupturing ethics that is already there as an underdeveloped axiom of their work, while his postcolonialists help

Levinas draw from his work certain logical extensions, political paths that he sometimes explicitly rejects but need not. Thus Levinas's thought operates as postcolonialism's "unthematized cornerstone," even as the postcolonialists show us a way to "decolonize Levinas" (2).

Drabinski's argument regarding Gayatri Spivak in Chapter Two provides an example of how this works in practice. Drabinski opens by narrowing his focus to epistemology, on which plane a direct correlation between the two thinkers is possible. For Levinas, the other fractures my totalizing gaze, revealing my stance in the world as an intentionalist egomania; for Spivak, the subaltern fractures the encompassing gaze, revealing it as an imperialism. In the work of both thinkers, then, we find an epistemology that is fundamentally relational and also two-fold, where the other/subaltern not only evades theory, but calls theory into question by the very movement of evasion. Moreover, for both thinkers this epistemology spills out immediately into an understanding of language, where Levinas speaks of thematizing speech and Spivak of essentializing speech. For both, this quality of language is unavoidable; it is the manner of all representation. And, for both, the betrayal of relation that is therefore inherent in language pushes toward a call for justice. The way in which this call emerges, however, differs for Levinas and Spivak. To see this, we can begin by postulating, with Levinas, a saying that underlies all speech—a saying that exists at the heart of the said as an openness to the other, already rupturing the speech's theme which is thus revealed as a false coherence, or a violence. We can counter, with Spivak, that to postulate the saying-in-the-said is to offer a dialectic that would ultimately remain monolingual: one language, always already incorporating rupture but precisely because of this also inoculated against rupture. We can then turn back to Levinas for at least a partial acceptance of re-thematization, of using new stories against old ones, violence against violence, to which Spivak responds that one cannot combat an imperialist essentialism with a "nativist continuity" (qtd. in Drabinski 72).

This conversation, I should say, is not quite the way Drabinski lays the matter out: he is much more elegant. I am trying to show as quickly as I can the way Spivak emerges in Drabinski's chapter as adept at blocking every means of escape from the problem of epistemological violence. Seen through her eyes, Levinas's saying-said emerges as a symbiosis: the saying-said is already tantamount to the idea of re-thematizing, or pitting violent said against violent said. Her insistence on a non-speaking,

effectively faceless subaltern, which Drabinski describes as “a cipher who ciphers every theorization of her place” (76) thus goes much further than Levinas does: if he has found the figuration for what cannot be inscribed into a narrative of epistemological violence, she has found the figure itself. And yet the figure is ineffective. And so we turn, finally, back to Levinas, whose lens allows us to see the significance of the moments where Spivak reaches out for a justice that is impossible in her world. Read back through the idea of saying-and-said—in which the saying, before it is caught in a monolingual dialectic, is the impetus of all speech—these moments appear not suddenly, not just as a result of Spivak’s stance, but as its very ground.

As the preceding summary suggests, Drabinski’s book goes much deeper than many shorter studies that have appeared in recent decades criticizing Levinas’s Eurocentrism. The central problem is that while Levinas provides a strong critique of the West as totalizing, he tends to locate the source of that critique within the West, such that the “Greek” thrust of European thinking defines and classifies, imposing ontological and historical order, while the “Hebrew” thrust calls the Greek totalization into question, deontologizing and dehistoricizing, putting questions in the place of definitions. Certainly this is already a somewhat fruitful dynamic: Drabinski draws out the usefulness of the idea that “every ethical subject is a Jewish mother” (36). But it is not as useful as one might think. It is not really the case, for instance, that Levinas saw the Hebrew tradition as un-Western, and therefore that his Greek/Hebrew schema gives us a model of the West and its other which can be extended to the West’s other others. In fact, for Levinas “the Greek and the Hebrew [are] forces at tension, yet also constitutive of a unity of the West and Westernness” (44)—a whole that has already, arguably, subsumed its parts. When Levinas says in an interview that “the Bible and the Greeks present the only serious issues in human life; everything else is dancing” (*Is* 164)—a frankly awful statement no matter what context it is read in—he makes the problem of whole and part perfectly clear. Thus one of the tasks that Drabinski takes on must be to “decolonize” Levinas, that is, to wrench apart his figural West. He does this by questioning the figuration with material, historical experience.

It is probably through his discussion of Edouard Glissant’s theory of “entanglements” that Drabinski offers his most notable contribution to the question of Levinas’s Eurocentrism, and thus his most notable act of

decolonization. In this discussion one of the premises of the book rises to the surface and is given central attention, namely that the West is ruptured not so much by the Bible or a Hebrew cast of thought but by an unthematized history of non-European resource use, and particularly non-European labor. Having expounded on how Levinas's ethical thought rests on entanglements—maternity, fecundity, filiality, ethics—Drabinski reminds us that “though the Greek-Christian and Judaic elements of European culture certainly describe and account for much of what we call ‘Europe,’ there is also the now five-plus centuries-long entanglement of Europe with the Americas—and indeed the globe as such” (160). It has been said by several scholars before Drabinski that since Levinas gives us ground on which to criticize the West, the critique of Levinas' own West can be understood as a Levinasian project. Here, I think, Drabinski comes closer than others to explaining why this is so. It is not only that exploitation is unjust and therefore to be combated. It is that a history of non-European labor is Europe's other-in-the-same.

The question of Europe calls forth much further work in this book, the better part of which—at least as it pertains to Levinas—involves a re-thinking of the ethics/politics distinction, the distinction that allows us to preserve a kind of colorblindness in the ethical realm, where each other human being appears as a singularity without attributes, while allowing questions of ethnicity and culture their due in the political realm. I said earlier that Drabinski maintains that distinction, understanding it as necessary to Levinas's thought. Now I will qualify that statement, for in fact Drabinski does argue, in a limited way, for the distinction's incoherence. This argument is one of several in the book that focus on Levinas alone, analyzing him in his own terms; in this case the topic is the relationship between his two major works. *Totality and Infinity*, Drabinski shows, treats the body extensively, but in ways that often do not connect embodiment to ethics. This is corrected, he argues, in *Otherwise than Being*, which offers us a more embodied ethics (in this way returning to Levinas's early work of the 1930s). And yet, in *Totality and Infinity*, the body has attributes, while in *Otherwise than Being* those attributes are mostly missing. Drabinski argues, I think rightly, that the two books are fundamentally philosophically compatible. Are we therefore not called to see the embodied ethics of *Otherwise than Being* as involving attributes—such as perhaps skin color, or cultural adornment? Granted that one can imagine an abstract maternal, an abstract filial, even an abstract

body. Nevertheless, the body that takes the other's space and eats the other's food, and the body that is vulnerable or starving, that can be hurt or taught—these are bodies with attributes. The argument here is that the need for attributes to specify the subject's obligation to the other—a need that Levinas acknowledges (Drabinski 120)—is not secondary, but built into the structure of human intentionality. Thus, before Derrida shows us that ethics is political—arguing, as Drabinski puts it, that “the command to welcome the widow, orphan, or stranger . . . is already implicated in a political world” (189)—Levinas has shown us, via the interplay between his two major works, that the apparently political is phenomenological (41). This argument may or may not be convincing to students of Levinas, though all of them, I think, will find it compelling. I include it to show how Drabinski works to draw the fissures he finds in Levinas's argument from Levinas himself.

Let me return, in conclusion, to the three readings of Levinas I postulated at the beginning of this review. Enrique Dussel's book *The Underside of Modernity* describes the way Levinas awakened him to the problem of injustice, allowing him to criticize colonial Europe, but also the way in which Levinas's work failed to provide a template for political action. “Levinas,” Dussel writes, “showed us how to formulate the question of the irruption of the Other, but we could still not develop a politics . . . a new Totality. This critical-practical questioning of a new Totality was exactly the question of ‘liberation.’ With this Levinas could not help us” (81–82). What I called the second reading—and this is how most good readers of Levinas read him—would see this as the place where Levinas and the postcolonialist part company: the postcolonialist must think concretely about regimes and must therefore develop models for new political totalities, while Levinas's thought at its best will only allow us to criticize any given totality. Drabinski's reading, i.e., what I called the third reading, does something else. Rather than suggest that Levinas's thought provides such a template, it draws out of the postcolonialists a Levinasian ambivalence about creating a new totality. We have seen this in Spivak, and had a glimpse of how it might also be true of Glissant's entanglements. The climax of this thrust of the book, though, comes in the chapter on Homi Bhabha, where Drabinski teases out what I would call a weak messianism in Bhabha's thought, a concept of futurity that remains undefined, an exile that is not premised on a longing for homeland, and a history that need not circle back to its origins. This thought Drabinski names “Tangiers,”

as in the phrase “next year in Tangiers.” “Bhabha,” he tells us, “thinks diaspora *as* diaspora, rather than assembling a story of return, persistence, and the full, pure presence of the past in acts of memorialization” (117). Jerusalem, in the hands of Levinas and Derrida, may represent a deferral of the end, but Tangiers refuses the desire for an end, and thus represents a continuous disruption, a fruitful anxiety. In Tangiers, “difference finds a geographic site for displacement and a time that never settles” (127).

Drabinski places the other postcolonial thinkers that he takes up—Fanon in particular—into dialogue with Levinas in similarly nuanced ways. He never sacrifices complexity to what remains his main goal and that all of his thinkers: justice in the political world. Along the way there are many analyses of Levinas, some of which arise from Drabinski’s previous work but all of which are rethought here. These include excellent discussions of Levinas’s relation to figures he is often read against such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. But the central excellence of the book lies in the fact that it is the first major study putting Levinas in conversation with postcolonial philosophers in a way that does not simply read one in the terms of the other. I am a student of Levinas who learned a good deal about postcolonial thought in the course of this book. I think it would likely serve as well to inform postcolonialists about Levinas. Drabinski’s analyses are not introductory but, in his hands, familiarity with one strand of thought facilitates understanding of the other. The two strands meet here not as antagonists but as friends.

Works cited

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