Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh. *Colonialism and Modernity*.
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Ann McCarthy

I share historian Ann Curthoy's assessment that *Colonialism and Modernity* will make an excellent intellectual resource, especially on matters postcolonial (back cover). It is a comprehensive and informative work whose focus and perspective are primarily in the areas of postcolonial history and scholarship. But as a comparative work on colonialism and modernity, it has certain shortcomings. This work investigates and critiques colonialism much more successfully than it does modernity. The authors needed to define modernity and other key terms in the text more precisely, and provide more indepth analysis as to the inter-relationships between them. Further, something more was required (although I don't quite know what) regarding the authors' political allegiance to a postcolonial perspective on the events and processes they write about, and how that allegiance shapes their interpretations.

The main objective of *Colonialism and Modernity* is to investigate the inter-related history of two major phenomena that have shaped the contemporary world. Europe is the initial focus, as the birthplace of modernity, and the main driver of colonialism during "recent centuries" (5). The book also sets out to explore anti-colonial movements, and to foster empathy with those whose lives have been adversely affected by colonisation and modernisation. An interdisciplinary work, *Colonialism and Modernity* is intended for students of "world history, international relations, globalisation, comparative literature and cultural studies" (5). In a "big picture" historical narrative in the first section of the work, the authors recount 550 years of history (6). Part II consists of six thematic chapters on subjects such as the ethics of debating colonialism, race, and modern conceptions of time. Included periodically throughout the text are brief asides related to the main

narrative. These include “hot topics” which “address contentious conceptual and theoretical issues” (for example, “The Crisis of Modernity: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism,” 86-9), and also case studies (6). The book declares a postcolonial world to be upon us: “Colonialism officially ended decades ago, and Western power and influence is slowly waning’ (5). Such a conclusion is of particular note in an Australian context (the authors are Sydney-based academics), given the ongoing impact of colonial dispossession upon the lives of many Indigenous Australians, and its influence upon Australian culture as a whole (such as in the History Wars). *Colonialism and Modernity* does not include any reference to the historical or contemporary dynamics of Australian colonialism, but this is consistent with the scope of the text which predominantly does not include settler colonies.

There are four chapters of historical narrative in Part I, with overlapping dates beginning in 1450. The rise of Europe is traced to the first wave of colonialism, dominated by the Portuguese and Spanish, and fuelled by slavery and mercantilism. Industrialisation led to the second wave of European colonialism, with England at the helm. This peaked in the mid-19th century, by which time the global economic system of today was in train, with industrial efficiency having replaced cultural tradition as the main regulator of work. By the early 20th century, Japan and the West ruled over most of the inhabited earth. A crisis hit capitalism in the 20th century, with the First World War and the Depression undermining its effectiveness and morality for many. Resistance came in the form of trade unions, the socialist movement, and independence movements in the colonies themselves. Even in the “imperial nations,” social movements from nudism to women’s suffrage pushed for “a modern future” (71).

In the chapter about times closer to our own, the complexities and contradictions at the heart of the modern world emerge in greater clarity. This greater depth, and the fact that I have lived through some of the history outlined in chapter four make this the most thought-provoking and satisfying part of Part I for me. The authors celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also discuss the ongoing economic disadvantage experienced by many former colonies. The authors bring the history up to the present with descriptions of a post-industrial economic world centred on a group of cities through which capital is distributed and global culture generated (83-4).

Part I is a good read, although the final section gives the impression that it was written in a hurry. But the very ambitiousness of the historical narrative in Part I sets up an expectation which Part II of the text does not meet. It has a similarly impressive breadth, but the analytical framework of the work does not develop and deepen over the course of Part II. The the-

matic chapters would have been aided by stronger conceptual definitions of the key terms involved, and more sustained reflection across each chapter as to the defining features and trends (coherence or lack thereof, tensions, areas of change, etc) within each conceptual field under examination. In Part II the authors' postcolonial interpretation of colonialism and modernity is to the fore, but within a framework which asserts itself as something broader than this.

In the Introduction to *Colonialism and Modernity*, the authors write that they intend the chapters in Part II to fill in the details of the world imperial history in Part I. This suggests that the chosen themes are perceived as self-explanatory extensions of the history, rather than analytical concepts chosen to promote and deepen the work's overall argument. What emerges from Part I is a complex and contradictory set of political and cultural dynamics and circumstances. The main such tension is between, on the one hand, individual human rights, as for example embodied and defended in the UDHR, and, on the other hand, collective cultural traditions seen by many groups in the contemporary world to take precedence over the universal goals and values outlined by organisations such as the UN. The authors convey something of this tension in the final chapter of Part I, and also throughout the work as a whole, but it is not made explicit or foregrounded. As I read Part II, their positioning of the debate in narrow dualistic terms that reflect their commitment to a postcolonial perspective increasingly frustrated me. Much of the debate in Part II seems to centre around a perceived inevitability and one-dimensionality of European imperial aggression, and, on the other side of this teleological divide, the scope for resistance by 'postcolonial' powers. This often overshadowed the content of any given chapter, and made it harder to enjoy and learn from the authors' depth of intellectual knowledge. That many of the work's key theoretical terms of debate are sectioned off from the main text in brief "hot topics" is symptomatic of this analytical shortfall.

The chapter about gender is a case in point. This chapter begins with a brief definition of the term itself, including the identification by feminist and other scholars of gender differences as the product of "historically and culturally specific meanings" rather than natural processes (178). The subjects covered in this chapter include the European romanticisation of the Oriental woman, with references to Edward Said's scholarship in this area (in a section entitled "The European Porno-Tropics"), as well as a section on the violence done to "native" societies by imperial cultures that focused on the betterment of women ("The Question of 'Woman'"). There is also discussion of the violence done to Muslim women by Occidental stereotypes regarding the wearing of the veil or headscarf.

This chapter is a mine of information. It includes, for example, references to the work of scholar Fatima Mernissi, whose reading of Islam and feminism "creates a space for believing women which can be used to challenge the authenticity of repressive law and custom" (191). The authors emphasise the many reasons Muslim women wear the hijab, and stress its "multiple connotations, cultural, social and political" (191). However, I was less convinced by the authors' analysis of the political and moral issues arising in regard to the Indian practice of sati, "the self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre," and the effects of colonialism on this practice (184). The authors write that Europeans misunderstood this practice, exaggerating it as "*the* unanswerably barbarous practice in the litany of condemnation of native customs" (184, italics as in original). They continue, "Colonial bureacrats transformed the practice of sati from a diverse and variable one into one absolutely sanctioned by religious dictates" (184). Little more detail was provided, so I was unsure in what ways early European colonisers misunderstood the practice of sati, and was therefore unable to reassess my own perception of sati as an innately violent and destructive act, no matter what its cultural or religious character. I thought the questions raised by sati in this chapter in relation to "autonomy and modernity" needed more and wider debate than the authors provided (184). The authors go on to refer to the effects of subsequent anti-colonial nationalist resistance to colonial "reforms," in which Indian women were ascribed narrow roles within the private and domestic sphere, but this does not seem to relate specifically to the practice of sati.

Within *Colonialism and Modernity* overall, there are various discussions of what it is to be "modern," and about the relationship between modernity and colonialism. But modernity remains a shadowy force in the overall intellectual economy of the work, despite the breadth of intellectual material cited which provide rich food for thought about the subjects at hand. On the last page of the "Culture" chapter, a question is posed that speaks to dilemmas involved in debates about modernity. In the contemporary world, the authors write, something definitive happens whenever a group is designated as "non-modern" or "pre-modern." Can such a designation "ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?" (155.) This question would have made a great starting point for a discussion about many of the key themes of this book. Tellingly, the conclusion of *Colonialism and Modernity* speaks almost exclusively to the history of colonialism. Overall, this book had me reflecting on how scholars express their political commitments in their works. Something about how this is handled in *Colonialism and Modernity* seems to me to be problematic. For this reason and others discussed above, the impressive wealth of material gathered by the authors

does not add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Melbourne University
a.mccarthy@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au