Patrick Chabal, The End of Conceit. Western Rationality after Postcolonialism


Reviewed by Barry Hindess
Australian National University

This is a disappointing book but, at first sight, it looks as if it should be an important one. The back cover carries glowing endorsements from David Scott and Peter Burke and it does not take long for readers to realise that ‘conceit’ in the title refers to the sense of Western superiority over the rest of humanity. Normally, I would welcome anything that threatens to undermine this particular conceit, just as I would welcome serious discussion of two assumptions that, carefully handled, as they usually are in this book, can offer insightful results. Both figure prominently in the text: first, that massive immigration from the former colonies into Western Europe and the USA has subverted conventional understandings of the distinction between West and non-West; and second, that our policies and views depend on our theories. The second enables Chabal to argue that if there are problems with our views and policies then our theories must be reconsidered. Unfortunately, these assumptions require more critical examination than Chabal always provides. I comment on these two assumptions before turning to Chabal’s attempt to undermine the Western conceit his title identifies.

First, the claim that population movement has undermined conventional views of the distinction between the West and the non-West depends on a questionable understanding of what these conventional views are. One might see the West as a dangerously powerful, privileged or wealthy subsection of the human population or as a collection of states, most of them in Western Europe and North America, and the greater part of their populations or, yet again, as a more or less integrated set of institutions – the IMF, World Bank, European Central Bank, etc. – that rules over most of humanity, including the populations of North America and Europe. Alternatively, one might see the concept of ‘the West’ as one of the more unfortunate legacies of Cold War divisions between the West and the East and of even earlier divisions within Europe, or finally as a rhetorical counterpoint to a dubious concept of the East dissected so effectively by Edward Said. Chabal is by no means alone in both using and failing to explicate the concept of ‘the West’. Many of us, including this reviewer, do the same.

A glance at the table of contents suggest that the difference between the West and the rest is addressed in two short sections of Chapter Two, ‘Identities’, ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Who are ‘the others’?’ but these headings are misleading. The contrast
here between ‘We’ and the ‘others’ suggests that the others are simply different from us, while the former section tells us that “we in the West think of ourselves as self-standing, autonomous and rational individuals, who have chosen the ways in which we live socially together...” (p. 119) If ‘we’ are those who think of themselves as ‘self-standing ...’, then ‘The others’ must be those who do not think of themselves as self-standing .... Yet, it is surely misleading to suggest that the differences between the West and the remainder of humanity can be captured in any single dichotomy.

Second, the proposition that our attitudes and policies depend upon theories is likely to be disputed by few social scientists today. Chabal interprets this as implying that “our difficulty in rethinking who we are is less the product of our blinkered, racist or xenophobic nature than of our inability to find the ideas, concepts and theories that would help make sense of what we are witnessing and living through.” (p. 132) If there are difficulties here, they are less to do with the ambiguities of ‘we’, ‘our’ and other such terms – does ‘we’ mean ‘we in the West’ or is it simply a rhetorical figure referring to Chabal and his sympathetic readers – and uncontentious commonplaces regarding the theory-dependence of observation and action than with the work required to identify the theories concerned in specific cases. The theories that underlie policies and popular attitudes – towards, say, immigration control, overseas aid and the illegal invasion of other states – will not always coincide. Moreover, some of us in the West, who are neither policy-makers nor uncritical supporters of popular attitudes will be aware of more, and more sophisticated, theories than have ever crossed the minds of most policy makers. Chabal’s reluctance to name and shame the guilty theories is a great disappointment to at least one reader. Chabal’s discussion focuses less on what many of us would identify as theories than on concepts – ‘the individual’, ‘rationality’, ‘secularism’, ‘human rights’ and ‘sovereignty’ in particular – that, in his view, need to be reconsidered. We might easily add ‘development’, ‘globalisation’ – a term Chabal treats as relatively unproblematic – ‘modern’ and ‘modernisation’ to this list.

A final set of problems is signalled in the opening sentence of the book’s Preface: “This book is a personal essay, a reflection on the world in which we live”. Yet Chabal does not clarify what he means by using the term ‘personal’ in this context? Are we to understand it in contrast to ‘impersonal’, ‘professional’ or ‘serious academic’?

This is not a trivial issue. To this reviewer and I suspect to many other readers, most of what we publish will be personal, the main exceptions being things written in an administrative or reporting Capacity. Chabal clearly has something else in mind since his book is neither an administrative tract nor is it a report on a series of meetings. Chabal is best known for his work on Angola and on Lusophone Africa more generally, and for his reflections on the uses of the concept of culture in comparative analysis.

The End of Conceit marks a radical departure from Chabal’s normal academic work. This, I suspect, is what he has in mind by calling the book a ‘personal essay’ and a ‘reflection’. As such, it marks a departure from boring academic conventions regarding, for example, referencing and careful definition of terms. There are references, of course, but most of these identify, not a debate but a single author publication intended to illustrate or exemplify a point in the text rather than to explicate contentious issues. One could argue that too many notes might deter non-academic readers but Chabal goes too far in the other direction, setting a poor example to students and younger academics.
A related concern is that many important terms are not explicated. One looks in vain for an account of the diverse understandings of ‘postcolonialism’, of the fact that ‘postcolonial’ is at least as important a category in the humanities (literary studies, in particular) as it is in the social sciences. What Chabal understands by ‘postcolonialism’ is not clearly specified although it is one of the central terms in the book’s title. Instead we find “what I mean by the postcolonial burden of history is the impact in the West of the legacy of the imperial past” (p. 14) and, a page or so later, a reference to the essence of the postcolonial project: “to redeem non-Western culture and attack the foundations of the West’s claim to superiority.” (p. 15) Given these clues, it is not hard to get a rough sense of how Chabal views postcolonialism. Even so, it is worth noting that the phrase ‘legacy of the imperial past’ covers a variety of contemporary conditions, not all of which have been subject to postcolonial critique. English readers might recall that the expansion of Liverpool in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was largely a function of its role in the slave trade. The imposing public buildings that today make up Liverpool city centre are a part of the legacy of Britain’s imperial past that have rarely been subject to postcolonial examination. And again, the suggestion that non-Western cultures were in need of redemption — in whose eyes? — seems to betray a distinctly Western perspective. The theme of redemption comes up again, in another form, a few lines after the second quotation above: “the West today is expiating the crimes of the centuries of violence and exploitation that marked the expansion of Europe, slavery, imperialism and colonial rule. Accepting the full cruelty of that history and trying to work out how best to make it good has led to a great deal of soul-searching ...” (p. 16) That there was soul-searching in some quarters is undeniable but it would be good to know where exactly and amongst whom this ‘great deal of soul-searching’ took place. Perhaps it could be found in the work of a few intellectuals and in sections of European Labour movements but, even so, to describe it as ‘a great deal’ is surely an exaggeration.