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Cover Story/Non-Fiction: Identity politics and academia

InpaperMagzine
January 16, 2011 (4 days ago)

Reviewed By Ammara Khan

Identity Politics in India and Europe by Michael Dusche is an effort to reinterpret and reconstruct the discourse on identity politics between Europe and India. Dusche, a German scholar, is a fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

Though many post-colonial writers are charged with inaccessibility, Dusche's important theoretical work, which falls within post-colonial studies, is easy to approach and anything but intimidating. He has made a sincere effort to draw in readers who are not familiar with the discipline in what is otherwise a robustly abstruse discourse of identity politics.

The book is divided into three parts, each part highlighting the discourse on identity politics in a different context. The first part is an account of the historical roots of the problematic relationship between the West and the Muslim world. Although brief, this is probably the most interesting part of the book, giving a fresh and instigating perspective on an otherwise familiar cultural and intellectual discourse.

The second part constitutes an exhaustive theoretical discussion that delineates the phenomenon of modernity with special reference to identity politics. The third part comprises scholarly interviews with leading intellectual figures from India and their take on identity politics.

Interdisciplinary in its scope, the book looks at the politics of difference and its role in discourses on identity. It brings into focus the perspective of the marginalised people, the social minorities whose voices are not heard otherwise. However, the writer's main concern remains the formation of the western and Muslim identities as essentially antithetical to each other.

Dusche shows us how Muslims have always been portrayed as a potentially dangerous group. He traces the origins of these perceptions of antagonism back to the Europe of Latin Christianity and the so-called Muslim world starting from the seventh century: 'Europe formed its western identity first and foremost with the Islamic world as its "cultural" other. To build its own identity around the notion of Latin Christendom, western Europe needed Islam as its own antithesis.'

The perception further developed when Muslims conquerors expanded their dominion to Spain and some areas of Italy and France in seventh and eighth centuries. Islam, says Dusche, was 'portrayed as a hostile alternative to Christianity'. The book offers concrete historical analysis of the key moments in the formation of the perception of Muslims as 'the other' to reveal the identity politics at the heart of East-West discourse.

The main focus of the book is to analyse the role of these perceptions in the relationship between Muslims and the West, says Dusche. He not only gives a radical re-reading of the historical discourse between the two civilisations, but also re-inserts the concept of culture as 'man-made conceptual constructions based on risky generalisations'.

Questioning the stereotypes surrounding Muslims all over the world, Dusche describes the politics of difference that is employed to distance 'the other', to re-assert one's own identity, highlighting the complexity of a globalised world where 'the other' is still treated as a threat.

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The series of interviews conducted by the writer further help bring the critic down from its ivory tower to the land inhabited by the general public speaking simple language. Moreover, the interviews highlight the legacies of the historically rooted relations between the East and West and present a theoretical understanding of the matter with an acute focus on the theoretical concepts of modernity and historical context of the current state of affairs, and critical perception of the two among the leading scholars of India.

Dousche's efforts to extrapolate the cultural perceptions to find identity politics behind history is a notable enrichment of the vast literature on the topic. The question of how different cultures have a mutual existence remains the central focus of the book.



Identity Politics in India and Europe
(SOCIOLOGY)

By Michael Dusche
Sage Publications, India
ISBN 978-81-321-0304-2
375pp. Indian Rs850

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