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Political Theory, a review of Jane Anna Gordon's
*Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through
Fanon*

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Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 309 pp. \$30.00, paperback.

Jane Anna Gordon's *Creolizing Political Theory* is an ambitious text. Not only does it take up the task of offering rigorous readings of two challenging figures (Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Frantz Fanon), but it also engages in a far-ranging critical intervention in the disciplinary norms of political theory. It is thus both a work of critical hermeneutics directed toward key figures in political thought, and a meta-critique of political theory as such. A key to understanding that

meta-critique is her use of the concept of *creolization*, which is meant to contrast with the more traditional notion of *comparison* (as in "comparative political studies"). Gordon takes herself, in other words, to be articulating, advocating, and modeling a significant shift in the methodology of political theory, one in which "disparate disciplinary and methodological resources are brought together to create unique amalgams better attuned to addressing salient political problems and debates thrown open by the complexity of human institutions of power" (2). The book is, despite the scope of its project, remarkably successful.

"To creolize political theory," Gordon tells us in the introduction, "is to break with identity-oriented conceptions of disciplines and methods, those through which one aims to make oneself and one's work isomorphic with seemingly preexisting conceptions of what a disciplinary community indicates one must be and must not do" (12). Offering a critical appraisal of what she sees as the dominant trend in which disciplines seek to articulate and maintain conditions of *purity* "for the sake of making each academic niche more coherently itself, more rigorous through autonomous differentiation (7)," she prescribes instead a prioritization of the demands of engaged inquiry as opposed to disciplinary norms and standards of purity. Placing the line of inquiry at the forefront, she argues, will require that we draw upon the varied resources of a variety of disciplines and methods in order to adequately pursue the questions that serve as one's driving *telos*. However, she warns us, such processes of creolization should not be understood as ends in themselves, which can result in a naïve leveling of competing methods and perspectives. Rather, creolization will emerge when we place the larger goal of understanding political life above those disciplinary concerns that can "straight-jacket" our efforts (7). So many lines of inquiry emerge only within and through a particular discipline, and consequently serve more to reify disciplinary norms and standards than they do to settle pressing human questions and address real problems. The call for creolization, ultimately, is a call not to eschew or ignore concepts of disciplinary rigor altogether, but rather to break with the habit of seeing those disciplinary norms as a kind of self-justifying (theodician) technique oriented toward the dismissal of all that cannot be captured within it. The book is organized as an effort to demonstrate a moment of creolization within political

theory, and the proof of Gordon's approach will be in the proverbial pudding.

The first chapter, "Delegitimizing Decadent Inquiry," focuses on Rousseau as a kind of methodological revolutionary. Gordon discusses Rousseau's writings not only on politics and the social sciences, but also on musicology. In all of these arenas, she argues, Rousseau positioned himself as a critic of modernity even as he articulated and refined some of its central ideas. Rousseau's corpus not only ranged widely in terms of fields of study, but also in terms of sources and topics. From Chinese and Indian music to the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas, Rousseau "[put] himself outside of his time and place" (24) in his efforts to "[synthesize] domains of life and study that have since splintered into autonomous areas of inquiry" (55). Gordon's overview of Rousseau's methodology concludes that, even "if Rousseau's ideas about human difference did not reflect the possibility of creolization, his methods or approaches to his own inquiries, which were heavily synthetic, surely did" (55), and so we might say that "while he was not himself a creolized thinker, . . . he introduced ideas and orientations into political reflection that invite productive creolization by others" (25).

In the second chapter Gordon turns her attention to Frantz Fanon, arguing that, like Rousseau, Fanon sought "to challenge the ways that reason had been used to advance the singularity of particular models of desirable political arrangements and ways of being human" (63). She traces Fanon's struggles to come to grips with the pathologies of coloniality, offering nuanced readings of both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. Her focus throughout is on Fanon's revelation that the colonial world not only shapes the institutions, languages, and peoples who inhabit it, but also the methods by and through which we study that world, even when our aim is to criticize it. Thus, like Rousseau, Fanon aims to understand the ways and means of unfreedom and alienation, and finds that doing so requires a critical confrontation with "prevailing conceptions of authoritative reason that they demonstrate have been used far more to justify the curbing of human liberty than to aid its deepening or expansion" (91). She concludes the chapter by arguing that, though Fanon pushes beyond Rousseau in certain significant ways, especially

in relation to the latter's understanding of the colonized, both were at heart concerned with very similar problems, thus making a strong case that their creolizing encounter will be a fruitful one.

Affirming that both Rousseau and Fanon sought in their respective work to provide "diagnoses of illegitimate politics" (95), Gordon's third chapter takes up Rousseau's concept of the *general will*, focusing on the problematics of articulating a worthwhile notion of the *general* as such. She describes her understanding of this problem in the following terms: "As opposed to both a reified particularity that would fix its borders as stone and to the search for an absolute, limitless universality, the general seeks within certain bounds to integrate meaningfully abiding differences" (96). To avoid what Rousseau sees as an empty and abstract universal on the one hand, and the competitive *melee* of conflicting individual wills on the other, the general will aims to forge a unity in and through the articulation of shared meanings that make possible the very conceptualization of *group* autonomy. A highlight of this chapter is Gordon's sustained engagement with Rousseau's work on Corsica, exploring the question of "how the island could aim to become a genuinely postcolonial state" (117). She uses this in particular to draw out Rousseau's conception of the formation of a sense of shared purpose and identity among the Corsicans, something that he thought was essential to their success as a nation, and a question that Fanon would later take up in his own writings on *National Consciousness*, which is the subject of Gordon's next chapter.

Like Rousseau's general will, Gordon argues in the fourth chapter, Fanon's conception of national consciousness "seeks out and expresses what different people have in common" (132). Both are efforts to conceptualize the drawing together of disparate political elements into an often fragile, but fundamentally active, unity. There is a significant difference, however, in that the general will focuses on preserving and "maintaining rare conditions and fragile relations under which it first emerged," such that "the stituted" (133). For Fanon, however, national consciousness "takes shape through collaborative struggles first to oust those people and interests fundamentally opposed to the emergence of an indigenous citizenry's will and then to move beyond this to . . . creating institutions that would develop a

nation that had been an appendage to another metropolitan center” (133). For Gordon, national consciousness carries on, in a sense, the project of the general will, but places the alienated, exploited, and colonized in the foreground as the protagonists of this political drama, and understands the task to be always oriented toward a future in “questions of political life could never be settled once and for all,” and she concludes that “Fanon therefore fruitfully historicizes and reworks Rousseau without ever collapsing into what can be read in the latter as moments of conservative nostalgia” (161).

The fifth chapter, along with the conclusion, further elaborates the sense of *creolizing* that Gordon is deploying throughout the text. Beginning with a brief yet erudite account of the use of the term in the *descriptive* mode of creolization often applied to language and culture (she acknowledges that the term has also often been applied to biological mixture, but the linguistic/cultural is her focus here), Gordon emphasizes what she takes to be the core meaning of the term – that diverse linguistic or cultural practices are brought together in a way that produces something importantly new that nevertheless maintains aspects of its constitutive components. She quickly moves to an account of the *prescriptive* mode, which is the major theme of her text, being the call for a creolization of political theory. Here the aim is to bring together diverse elements or subjects of study in ways that neither reify difference nor make appeal to facile universalism. This, in turn, requires that the theorist bracket prior commitments to disciplinary *purity* that close off potential avenues of productive creolizing encounter. Rather than taking canonical figures (*real* political theorists) and either treating them as a complete universe in their own right, or at best as the source of theoretical resources to be productively applied to the *experiences* of the marginalized and oppressed, Gordon’s text stands as a call to treat the canonical and the marginal as equal participants in our effort to articulate and confront the ways and means of freedom and oppression, and given the current state of her discipline, this is a radical move.

Creolizing Political Theory makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on Rousseau and Fanon, all while issuing a call to action in the form of prescriptive *creolization*. There is certainly a great deal more to be said about all three of these individual elements. Rousseau

and Fanon scholars should find the arguments and interpretations offered here challenging and stimulating, though not necessarily fully satisfying, given that they could easily be taken up in book-length studies in their own right. Likewise, the articulation and discussion of *creolizing* is exciting and provocative, but certainly raises as many questions as it answers. For my part, I wonder about the ultimate *telos* of processes of creolization (of theory). Especially if, as Gordon argues, creolization works best when it is *not* our explicit goal (184), then the questions remain both as to what kinds of aims are most conducive to creolizing practices on the one hand, and what long-term success in creolizing political theory would look like on the other. Such lingering questions are, however, to be expected of a text that stands first and foremost as an *inauguration* of a budding movement in political theory. It is not the final word, but rather an opening declaration of a shift in method, and a demonstration of one way in which that method can be practiced. Seen in this light, the book is a remarkable success, and one that I hope will take its place in the vanguard of a new approach to political theory.