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*Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the
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Park (Review)

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Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830 by Peter K.J. Park (Review)

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Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830. By Peter K.J. Park. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 237. \$80.00. ISBN 978-1438446417.

In spite of its broad title, which could refer to a colorful study of orientalism or a damning indictment of “Eurocentric” modes of thought in the familiar ethico-political mode, Peter K.J. Park’s study of “racism in the formation of the philosophical canon” focuses narrowly on the ideological mechanisms that defined a dynamic of acknowledgement and exclusion of Asia among philosophers and historians of philosophy in the period between Kant and Hegel. These 150 pages of text with images (not counting 65 pages of notes and bibliography) are rich in textual detail and historical context. Park argues that, in spite of other differences, Kant, Hegel, and many historians of philosophy in between were decisively shaped by a racialized philosophical anthropology that has its roots in the notoriously racist work of Christoph Meiners. The inclusion of Meiners here is the least surprising element of the book. More informative in Park’s careful considerations (and lengthy summaries) of writers who include or exclude Indian or Chinese thought from what they define as philosophy is the manner in which the philosophical principles of these writers do *not* connect with the criterion of inclusion or exclusion of Asia. Both idealist and empiricist, eclectic and systematic philosophers find reasons to downplay, degrade, or exclude the idea that the origins of philosophy lie in the East, in the philosophies and religions of Persia, India, and China. Africa unfortunately remains an afterthought except in occasional references to Egypt.

At least in the index, Park uses the expression “racist feedback loop” to describe the influence Meiners had on Kant in the former’s distinction between “Caucasian” and “Mongoloid” and the change in Meiners’s terminology after Kant’s phenotypic distinction by color, when Meiners recodes this distinction “white” and “dark.” Park makes a case for Hegel’s racist motivations inasmuch as he links Hegel to the distinction drawn in Meiners and Kant between Germanic peoples (meaning Western and Northern European) and others, including Slavs, Asians, and Africans. The history of these distinctions is important because implicit in Park’s argument is the notion that only this history of philosophical (and pseudo-philosophical) influence and polemic can account for the spread of this racism, not qualities of systems. Nonetheless, Park claims in Chapter 1 that a “combination of *a priori* construction and racial Eurocentrism would become enduring features of modern histories of philosophy starting from the era of Kant’s *Critiques*” (29). Chapter 2 discusses at great length the origins of the comparative history of philosophy in the work of the erudite Napoleonic administrator Joseph-Marie de Gérando, who in Chapter 4 is grouped among the exclusionary party. De Gérando’s approach is not *a priori* but *a posteriori*: broadly observational and comparative. Nonetheless, his classification of Asian thought as a collection of opinions not at the level of European knowledge only ratifies the positions taken in Germany by the Göttingen Historical School, where the fields of universal and world

history were defined in a context that was also dismissive of older accounts of Asian origins and influence. While Friedrich Schlegel saw India as the probable origin of much Western thought (Chapter 3), Meiners's influence extended to the Kantian historical mainstream, in the figures of Dietrich Tiedemann and Johann Gottlieb Buhle as well as Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann. Chapter 4 examines Meiners and the Göttingen Historical School as creating the template for this exclusion, building on the post-Kantian historiography that coordinated philosophy and its history by writing that history around the emergence of Kantianism. In the fifth chapter, the pendulum swings again (at least in this exposition) toward the inclusion of Africa (generally as Egypt) and Asia in the work of Rixner and Ast, also working in the legacy of what Park terms "absolute Idealism" (any *a priori* method, neither empiricist nor eclectic), who compare forms and structures in a sort of systematic genealogy.

Since both idealist and eclectic historians of philosophy vary on the Eastern origins of philosophy, Park sees Meiners's influence as the determining factor on Kant as well as on Hegel (Chapter 6), who read him in *Gymnasium* and was interested in Asian thought in spite of excluding it from the development of philosophy. The ambivalence of method in these cultural constructions culminates, in Park's seventh and final chapter, in a strange polemic against Hegel by the "neo-Pietist" August Tholuck, who wants to show that Hegel's philosophy is a version of pantheism, as many Asian schools of philosophy or religion were held to be. More impressive is Hegel's verve in turning the tables on his opponent, which also implied that he had to distance himself from Indian and Chinese thought even though it remained a strong interest of his until his death.

The brief conclusion sums up the charges and returns to the idea that personally and collectively held racist convictions, transmitted as knowledge, define racial whiteness and exclude Asia and Africa from philosophy. The racial taxonomies that Meiners, Kant, Tennemann, and Hegel devise are in the end stronger than the received opinion about the influence of the Orient (Park refers repeatedly to "Oriental" thought and culture) and the rapidly expanding body of scholarship on Asian language and culture around 1800.

While the progression of this story is sometimes difficult to follow, Park takes pains to provide lengthy exposition of personalities and positions, contrasts arguments with a great deal of nuance, and sheds light on the weak spots and deficiencies of a crucial moment in Western philosophy. This book will be of interest to students of racism and exclusion in the German tradition as well as to specialists in the era around 1800 who wish to scrutinize connections usually sublimated by philosophical arguments. Park's patient elucidation of tangled connections and production of minimal but crucial differences makes this a fruitful study in ideological dynamics in which history is both the culprit and the victor.

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