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## Review

# Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination

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According to the standard narrative of decolonization, international society expanded to include postcolonial states, and sovereign equality was extended to them. This inclusion narrative prepares the ground for stories of failed states that could not successfully operate on an independent basis and, consequently, provides justification for foreign intervention in postcolonial territories. Nation-building in postcolonial states is thus painted as a naïve project. Taking inspiration from Partha Chatterjee, Adom Getachew rejects the notion that anticolonial nationalism was merely ‘an imitation doomed to failure’ (p. 27). Instead, she immerses herself in the distinct intellectual formations that attended a multiplicity of postcolonial projects. As *Worldmaking after Empire* convincingly displays, the struggle for self-determination took shape as a project not merely of nation-building but of *worldmaking*, in which postcolonial state sovereignty is ultimately not achievable without a parallel reconstruction of international society.

Getachew theorizes empire as ‘a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized’ (p. 2) and as ‘processes of unequal international integration’ (p. 9) that forestalls meaningful self-determination for postcolonial states and peoples. Unequal integration is the formal institutionalization of (racialized) hierarchy in international bodies and a ‘constitutive practice of international law’ (p. 18). Thus membership for postcolonial states in the early League of Nations and the United Nations was predicated on their acceptance of ‘trusteeship’ and recognition as inferior in development and capabilities (pp. 44–45). This new logic of empire in the twentieth century mirrored the second-class citizenship assigned to African Americans in the United States and gave Black Atlantic intellectuals reason to see decolonization not as the globalization of the nation-state but of Jim Crow (p. 21). Moreover, under the guise of ‘equity’ a new imperialism was exercised through economic practices that ironically insisted on preserving equality through the openness of markets while producing unequal



legal status and international standing for postcolonial states deemed fit for 'separate development' on the basis of racial differentiation (p. 48).

*Worldmaking after Empire* moves the reader through the political thought of anticolonial nationalists in three distinct periods: 'the institutionalization of a right to self-determination at the United Nations, the formation of regional federations, and the demand for a New International Economic Order' (p. 2). Throughout the book, Getachew highlights the complexities of agency exercised within asymmetrical power relations. She depicts the dynamic strategies of appropriation and (mis)analogy improvised within a historically specific 'problem-space' (pp. 77, 117).

The first period of worldmaking is characterized by the analogy of empire as enslavement. Nigerian nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe located the paternalism of international 'trusteeship' in the conservative political thought of Edmund Burke, while Ghanaian nationalist Kwame Nkrumah highlighted the material expropriation and exploitation of native labor allowed under this arrangement. American W.E.B. Du Bois and the Trinidadian George Padmore used Marxian frameworks to argue along with Nkrumah that 'colonial labor practices were slavery by another name' (p. 83). The imposition of such arbitrary authority constituted domination. Foreshadowing later difficulties in the struggle for self-determination, Getachew also mentions Nkrumah's deployment of the argument against arbitrary authority in service of eliminating the power of chiefs in Ghana's constitution (pp. 81–84). The malleability of such analogies proved to be advantageous in certain circumstances and problematic in others.

The era culminated with the institutionalization of the right to self-determination at the United Nations. The analogy of empire as enslavement was again used to argue that '[t]he colonized, like the enslaved, experienced a violation of rights of citizenship and personhood that denied them individual human dignity' (p. 89). While anticolonial nationalists had hoped that a 'universal right to self-determination would transcend international hierarchy,' the separation of collective from individual rights placed an ironic strain on strategies for nondomination. Absent global governance, individuals are still dependent on, and subject to, the power of their respective states. The codification of a right to self-determination did not alter international hierarchy, but it made viable secessionist claims for self-determination within states (pp. 100–104). These challenges led to the second major effort of worldmaking – the development of regional federations.

This second period is characterized by the 'surprising' and 'unsettling' appropriation of American federalism by Nkrumah and the Trinidadian nationalist Eric Williams (p. 110, 117). Williams drew from *The Federalist Papers* to motivate the establishment of the West Indian Federation, while Nkrumah's Union of African States was informed by the 'American experience' and the notion 'that independence required union and that federal union was not based on national unity' (p. 115). Nkrumah and Williams framed themselves as 'heirs to the tradition



of 1776,' which may have destabilized claims of American exceptionalism at the international level but also created problems at the domestic level that were overlooked (Williams, as cited in Getachew, p. 112; pp. 117–118). Getachew examines their failure 'to consider the historical coconstitution of empire and federation in the case of the United States' (p. 119). She notes that American imperialism offered a unifying ideology and contributed to economic success. And while federation provided an institutional basis for legal pluralism across states, protections for securing minority rights and diversity were not secured (pp. 119–120). Alternatively, Azikiwe and Jamaican nationalist Norman Manley drew on the United Nations as an exemplar of confederation that might provide the optimal institutional arrangement for realizing freedom from domination (p. 125). As Getachew illustrates, this second era inadvertently shifts towards defending the power of states amidst conflict over the proper regional delegation of power.

The third era was shaped by analogizing decolonization to class struggle in the push for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The notion of 'equity,' first deployed by Jan Smuts to ensure the unequal integration of postcolonial states, was creatively re-deployed by Jamaica's Michael Manley and Tanzanian nationalist Julius Nyerere to argue for the institutionalization of international welfarism (p. 166). The meaning of 'equity' was transfigured to acknowledge the problem of material inequality in differentially developed states. Sovereign equality thus required international welfarism (p. 145). The claim gained leverage by displaying the fact that 'the structural conditions of the global economy persistently transferred the gains of productivity to the global north' (p. 158). As with earlier attempts at worldmaking, however, the proposals for international redistribution of wealth did not account for the domestic redistribution of resources or institutional mechanisms to ensure material equality (p. 168).

Throughout the book, Getachew uses the language of nondomination to great effect. Readers unfamiliar with the various anticolonial projects will still immediately grasp the stakes of economic justice and substantive equality that are foreclosed if we assent to the liberal account of freedom as noninterference associated with Westphalian state sovereignty and the standard inclusion narrative of decolonization. However, as Patchen Markell (2008) has argued, the frame of nondomination is limited. Emphasis on domination as control and arbitrariness of power can lead to the justification of power exercised in limited, rational, or putatively benevolent ways. The example of Nkrumah displacing the authority of Ghanaian chiefs via claims of arbitrariness illustrates what Markell calls usurpation. Usurpation tracks relations of involvement rather than sole control. It is well suited to Getachew's own theorization of empire, but it also shifts our critical attention to the forms of involvement and the complicity of various actors at the domestic and regional levels.

Additionally, the focus on nondomination precludes a thorough interrogation of the other formulation of freedom at work in the book – freedom as independence.



The terms of independence and self-determination are sometimes elided in Getachew's analysis, producing a tension underlying *Worldmaking after Empire* that is most clearly borne-out in the example of Michael Manley and Williams's critique of Nkrumah. Nkrumah's redefinition of independence as freedom from internal and external domination was insufficient, they insisted, because of the embeddedness of the Caribbean in the global economy due to the region's constitutive formation through colonial plantations (pp. 23–24). Integration, in the case of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, no longer appears as a choice. Instead, there is a given condition of embeddedness. As Getachew's analysis suggests, independence as isolation was never a viable option for anticolonial actors.

We would do well to revisit the concept of 'integration' with attention to the quality of embeddedness. As with self-determination in Getachew's brilliantly researched account, the meaning of integration and its practical terms were similarly contested by Black Atlantic intellectuals beginning in the interwar period. 'Race consciousness,' according to Alain Locke, was one tool of integration formulated to resist assimilation into a homogenous nationalism (Locke 1992, ch. 5). Duke Ellington spoke of African Americans as 'something apart, yet an integral part' – a dual-strategy for integration that Daniel Matlin calls 'incorporation' and 'interpolation' (p. 4). Importantly for Locke and others, integration was not a foil for self-determination but rather necessitated a revolution of value that would allow for substantive equality among different cultural and political groups (cf. Locke 1942; Locke 2012, pp. 559–566; Wilder 2015, p. 7).

The aesthetic resources utilized by Ellington and Locke are most reminiscent of the Francophone thinkers highlighted in Gary Wilder's *Freedom Time*. Both Getachew and Wilder reinforce the distinctions between the more statist-Anglophone and the integrationist-Francophone anticolonial projects (pp. 116–117; Wilder, 2015, ch. 1). However, the notion of embeddedness hints at the potential fruitfulness of a comparative study. Additionally, we might theorize what the contours of force ought to be in relationships of embeddedness and *interdependence*. For freedom is not achieved through isolation or alienation but rather through forms of interplay with assertion and responsiveness that have force but are experienced reciprocally.

*Worldmaking after Empire* reminds us of the significance of aesthetic sensibilities for creative action. Getachew's thrilling book encourages us to be attentive to the contingencies that produce opportunities as well as constraints. With generous receptivity and awareness that reaches beyond the scope of the book, we might instigate new projects of egalitarian worldmaking and write our own future.



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