Comparative Studies in Society and History (2025), 1–26
doi:10.1017/S0010417525100108

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decolonizing Decolonization

Frederick Cooper

Department of History, New York University, New York, USA
Email: fred.cooper@nyu.edu

Abstract

Appeals to "decolonize" now range widely, from decolonizing the university to decolonizing Russia. This article poses the question of what work the concept of decolonization can and cannot do. It underscores how much can be learned about how decolonization came about if one explores the different goals that activists sought in their time. It suggests that if instead of looking for a colonial "legacy," we explore historical trajectories of colonization and decolonization, we can reveal how political, economic, and social structures in both ex-colonies and ex-metropoles were shaped and reshaped over time. Finally, it brings into conversation with the literature on the decolonization of the empires of Western European states more recent scholarship on Russia and the Soviet Union, pointing to different forms of imperial rule and imperial collapse and also to the possibility of "reimperialization," of reconstituting empire in new contexts.

Keywords: decolonization; nationalism; colonialism; empire; Africa; Europe; Russia; postcolonialism; decoloniality

Decolonize the museum, science, the university, the syllabus, the diet, the body, tourism, music, the internet, geoscience, the avant-garde. These are among the appeals one reads today in blogs, journal articles, and conference papers.[1] To decolonize, in such terms, is to eliminate racial, class, gender, and religious hierarchies, to combat discrimination, exploitation, and cultural denigration, and to give full voice to the political ideas and cultural expressions of people who have been subordinated by imperial powers.

Such calls appear to extend an appeal from 1986 by the noted Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o to "decolonize the mind." Ngugi argued that living under colonial rule had produced habits of mind among the colonized that needed to be overcome. Formerly colonized people, he argued, should express themselves in indigenous languages rather

[1]A quick search of Google (21 November 2024) reveals these and other calls to decolonize. Many of them entail serious consideration of power relations. Whether the arguments are helped or confused by the word "decolonize" is less evident.

than those of their colonizers. He himself had decided to write and present works of theater in his natal language, Kikuyu, and had suffered the consequences. Although his English-language novels had criticized elite Kenyans for collaborating with colonizers and later perpetuating colonialism's inequalities, he became the target of government repression only after he started writing in Kikuyu. Ngugi was imprisoned for nearly a year in 1977–1978.[2] Kenya, apparently, had a lot of decolonizing to do.

What is accomplished by extending Ngugi's call to "decolonize" to a wide variety of domains? The term has power as a metaphor for extreme forms of prejudice and oppression.[3] But as an historian who has written, using the word, about decolonization in its most literal sense—the ending of colonial rule over territories that were once part of European empires—I fear that the wide use of the term conceals as much as reveals.[4] Does the call to "decolonize this!" extend or dilute the meaning of decolonization?

Decolonization, along with the Cold War, is a fundamental component of the history of the second half of the twentieth century.[5] A form of political power that had been both widespread and contested for centuries lost its legitimacy and its hold over vast portions of the globe. A world of fifty states and subordinated territories became a world of nearly two hundred states—juridically equal, formally recognizing each other. This process has now received extensive scholarly attention. But if the goal of anti-colonial activists was to eliminate the extremes of global inequality, that objective remains distant. As a report of leading economists concluded, "Global inequalities seem to be as great today as they were at the peak of Western imperialism in the early 20th century."[6]

This article poses the question of what the concept of decolonization can and cannot do, with special regard to the history of former French and British Africa (the prime focus of my own research), but also in reference to the wider world. It emphasizes that much can be learned about how decolonization came about by exploring the different goals that activists sought in their time. If instead of looking for a colonial "legacy," we explore historical trajectories of colonization and decolonization, we can reveal how political, economic, and social structures in both ex-colonies and ex-metropoles were shaped and reshaped over time. Finally, the article extends consideration of decolonization to recent scholarship on Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Calls for "decolonization" have emerged insistently from the space of the former Soviet empire. They draw our attention to both different patterns of imperial collapse and the possibility of "reimperialization," of reconstituting empire in new contexts.

[2]Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986). Ngugi (who died in May 2025) stuck to his arguments. Wachira Kigotho, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o on Language Empires, How to Dismantle Them," *University World News Africa Edition*, 22 Aug. 2024, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240820103148834&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AFNL0461 (accessed 22 Aug. 2024).

[3]Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, 1 (2012): 1–40.

[4]As in my *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and "Decolonizations, Colonizations, and More Decolonizations: The End of Empire in Time and Space," *Journal of World History*, 33, 3 (2022): 491–526.

[5]Martin Thomas, *The End of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Makings of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6]Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, *World Inequality Report 2022* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 5.

Some of the questions that need to be asked about decolonization are structural: what institutions—economic and social as well as political—shaped by colonial rule remained in place after independence? How much were newly independent states constrained by changing global economic structures that cannot be reduced to colonial artefacts? How much room for maneuver did leaders and collectivities in ex-colonial states acquire? Other questions, as Ngugi recognized, are cultural. The pain and humiliation of subordination did not dissipate easily. Europeans transferred some of their stereotypes and prejudices from the overseas "native" to the "immigrant"; in much of the world, literature, the arts, and the social sciences were slow to open their doors to people and ideas from former colonies.

The colonial question has not been consigned to the past. The President of the United States has proposed that his country proclaim sovereignty over Gaza, the Panama Canal, Greenland, and Canada. Whatever comes of these proposals, this fantasy turns "America first" into an assertion of imperial power in an age that had seemingly repudiated it—reimperialization. And it assumes that the wishes and concerns of people who live in the desired spaces do not matter, a central conceit of colonialism.

There is thus good reason why we should now be thinking about colonization and decolonization yet thinking about them carefully. If colonialism is everywhere, it is nowhere. But it is somewhere. We need to be able to make clear both the persistent effects of the colonial past and its dangerous actuality.

In May 2024, the French press had to confront the colonial question when riots—causing weeks of unrest, at least fourteen deaths, and extensive destruction of property—took place in New Caledonia, islands in the Pacific incorporated into the French empire in 1853 and still part of France.[7] With an indigenous population known as Kanaks and a population of old and new settlers from Europe, New Caledonia has for decades witnessed tension between activists seeking independence and those seeking to keep the territory French. Intermediary solutions, positing varying degrees of autonomy from and membership in the French polity, have been proposed. After episodes of violence in the 1980s, a fragile peace had been maintained by negotiations that assured Kanaks that their familial and personal affairs could be regulated in accordance with their customs (as had been the case for African citizens of France under the constitution of 1946) and that their voices would be heard regarding future political status. This equilibrium was thrown off in May 2024 by a proposal from the French government that made sense under classical republican principles: to add to the islands' voting rolls settlers who had been in New Caledonia for ten years. But seen through a colonial lens, the initiative promised to turn a question of negotiations among *communities* into a question of individual voters, violating in the eyes of Kanak leaders political understandings and with the possible effect of drowning Kanaks in a sea of self-consciously European voters, leaving them unprotected from the consequences of a history of colonization, discrimination, and cultural denigration.[8] A year after the riots, over sixty years after France's territories in

[7]New Caledonia, along with islands in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Pacific, and Atlantic, reminds us that France is a political entity with components of different statuses within a polity that is more than a part of Western Europe.

[8]I am grateful to Isabelle Merle for explaining the contrasting perspectives to me. See Marc-Olivier Bherer, interview, "Isabelle Merle, historienne: « Sous la colonisation en Nouvelle-Calédonie, les Kanak ont subi une exploitation sans borne »," *Le Monde*, 2 June 2024; Benoît Trépied, "Nouvelle-Calédonie: « La solution de compromis la plus raisonnable est l'indépendance en partenariat »," *Le Monde*, 8 June 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

North and Sub-Saharan Africa became independent, the Minister of Overseas France finds it necessary to appeal "to end the process of decolonization and always allow for the exercise of the right of self-determination."[9]

Whatever the controversies over applying the word "colonialism" to Israel-Palestine, Israel is clearly a state that colonizes—in the old, Roman sense, that is as an imposed movement of one self-defined people to territories occupied by another.[10] Colonization is brazenly ongoing in the West Bank. At the same time, the Israeli state acts in a manner reminiscent of colonial distinction-making regarding its mixed population. Israeli Arabs, around 20 percent of the population, have some of the rights of citizens and at least some access to excellent medical and university systems, but in daily life they are likely to be treated as citizens of the second zone, subject to intense surveillance and discrimination. Palestinians living in the West Bank lack political rights and are subject to the depredations of settlers and soldiers. Palestinians in Gaza have experienced the utter destruction of their lives and livelihood, on the grounds—typical of the wars of decolonization—that terrorists are harbored in their midst.

Many people see Israel's devastation of Gaza, its attacks on Lebanon, and its actions as occupying power in the West Bank as crimes against humanity, but others —including the past and present governments of the United States—give Israel a free pass that decades ago was taken away from other states that colonize. The past of Jewish people is part of this story, but Palestinians have their past too. In many minds Jewish lives matter and Palestinian lives do not. To make this point is not to say that any opposition to Israeli power also deserves a free pass by being labeled "liberation." The murder by Hamas of twelve hundred Israelis and the taking of hostages on October 7, 2023, was an act of brutality and terror. The leadership of Hamas acts as if neither Israeli nor Palestinian lives matter, exposing the latter to predictable assault and brutally repressing any dissent from the people of Gaza.[11]

I will turn later to what appears to be the most blatant contemporary instance of reimperialization—Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But to point to reimperialization and colonization today is not to project a colonial innocence on the rest of the world. The difficult task is to explore the possibilities that the coming apart of colonial power after 1945 opened up, shut down, or reconfigured without assuming a dichotomy between continuity and change, subordination and independence, colonial and decolonial.

Neocolonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial

As colonial empires fell apart, many scholars were captivated by what they were observing; they saw themselves as part of decolonization. John Lonsdale describes the African Studies community of the 1960s and 1970s as the "Committee of Concerned

[9]Nathalie Guibert, "Le sujet de l'avenir de l'archipel revient dans l'arène nationale," *Le Monde*, 16 May 2025. The minister cited is Manuel Valls.

[10]On the controversy, see Roger Cohen, "Who's a 'Colonizer'? How an Old Word Became a New Weapon," *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2023.

[11]"How Hamas Uses Brutality to Maintain Power," *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2024. For a powerful critique of "selective empathy," with reference to both Gaza and Ukraine, see Francesca Melandri, "L'empathie selective pour les peuples en souffrance est un échec éthique colossal," *Le Monde*, 30 May 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Scholars for a Free Africa."[12] Africanists advocated the eradication of the last vestiges of colonialism but worried that freedom in one sense might not imply freedom in others. A half-century later, many people do not think we have reached a world that could be described as "decolonial."

As someone old enough to have lived through "neocolonial" and "postcolonial" perspectives, I meet the recent advent of the "decolonial" with a certain skepticism. All three concepts bring a welcome focus on the importance of colonization in world history and its effects in the present. Neocolonialism was a militant concept of the immediate independence years, set forth powerfully in the 1965 book by Ghana's first President Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*.[13] As an analytic concept, neocolonialism had the virtue of pointing to the continued exercise of economic power by Western states and corporations and the flaw of positing an answer before clearly posing the question: what did and did not change as former colonies became sovereign actors in international politics?

Postcolonial studies, in contrast, emerged within academia. It reflected scholars' frustration, evident by the late 1970s, with the failure of radical agendas for transforming the colonial. The "post" called attention to time, that the colonial was something people lived through and combated, and which had consequences. A variety of arguments fit under the rubric of postcolonial studies, something its more strident critics did not appreciate.[14] Scholars operating within this framework were at their weakest when they posited an all-embracing "coloniality" followed by a generic "post-colony," at their best in open-ended exploration of social and economic relations, intellectual trends, and political conflicts after the collapse of empires, on both sides of the colonizer-colonized divide. Some scholars looked beyond critique of European oppression to focus on the originality and importance of the thought and action of diverse peoples from colonized territories, from peasants to intellectuals. Others argued that the very categories through which we analyze and criticize colonialism are tainted by the colonizing past of "Western" intellectual traditions.[15] These are important arguments.

The decolonial paradigm originated with scholars of Latin America, who argue that colonialism was intrinsic to the very constitution of "modernity" across the globe and that in Latin America two hundred years after independence the effects of colonialism still shape the exclusions of indigenous people from political life, the continued racialization of society, and the privileging of modes of thought and culture perceived to be European. This school insists that only by looking toward

[12]John Lonsdale, "States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey," *African Studies Review* 24, 2/3 (1981): 139–225, here 143.

[13]Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Nelson, 1965).

[14]The wide range is displayed in Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty, eds., *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). The point of departure of postcolonial studies is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Another impetus for studying colonialism came from the group of scholars of South Asia, Subaltern Studies, whose influence beyond the subcontinent can be seen in the forum in *American Historical Review* 99, 5 (1994): 1475–545.

[15]My own writing on the subject emphasizes the value of engaging postcolonial theories while criticizing specific arguments and general tendencies. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

indigenous forms of discourse can one move toward a decolonial world.[16] Important as its objectives are, the decoloniality approach risks reifying a "coloniality of power" with all-determining effects from 1492 to the present. It leapfrogs over the long history of the struggles and creative efforts of people across Latin America—not least workers and peasants—to confront political, economic, and cultural inequality, struggles that were more than an insurgency valiantly but vainly standing against "modernity/coloniality."[17] At crucial moments, they altered the terms in which power was conceived and executed. Decolonial represents an ethical stance against oppressive power more than an historical argument.

This perspective directly addresses the humiliation and frustration still felt by people in the ex-colonial world.[18] But it does not provide the tools for analysis of how political, economic, and social structures operate, in past and present. It also provides an argument for elites to turn their claim to being the vanguard of decoloniality into a justification for personal power. I will return to these issues.

Decolonization, unlike decoloniality, has the virtue of most process-nouns (-izations) of calling attention to change over time, leaving room for differing chronologies, different narratives, and different consequences. It has the flaw of most process-nouns of suggesting that the phenomenon is self-propelled. What is not clear in either decoloniality or decolonization is what an end point might be. The Senegalese poet-politician Léopold Sédar Senghor wondered over a half-century ago what independence meant "where the interdependence of peoples affirms itself so manifestly."[19]

We live in a world that is both connected and unequal. We need adequate conceptual tools to specify what we confront and how it can be changed. Even the most industrialized and powerful states find their sovereignty compromised by both agreed-upon rules governing international commerce and communications and the threat of multinational corporations to move to states with the lowest rates of taxation and fewest protections for labor and the environment. Some seventy-five years after Senghor's statement, the philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, who grew up in Nigeria and now teaches in the United States, observed: "In fact, no society, whether former colony or not, is anywhere near human emancipation."[20]

Even as they struggled to topple colonial regimes, some anti-colonial leaders worried that independence would create countries too poor, too weak, and in some cases too

[16]Key texts of the decolonial school include Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); and Aníbal Quijano, *Foundational Essays on the Coloniality of Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024). For guidance through the often-confusing mixture of decoloniality, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and related concepts, see Michel Cahen, *Colonialité: Plaidoyer pour la précision d'un concept* (Paris: Karthala, 2024). The collection edited by Mark Thurner, *The First Wave of Decolonization* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019) brings out the complexity of the history of Latin America after the decolonizations of the early nineteenth century.

[17]The latter phrase appears again and again in Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality.*

[18]European elites continue to produce humiliating discourses. A notorious instance is French President Nicholas Sarkozy's speech in Dakar, Senegal, in 2007, in which he told his audience that "the African man hasn't sufficiently entered into history." *Le Monde*, 9 Nov. 2007.

[19]*La Condition Humaine*, 11 Feb. 1948. Interdependence of peoples and of nations was also invoked by such African leaders as the relatively conservative Félix Houphouët-Boigny and the relatively radical Modibo Keita and Sékou Touré. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 238, 260, 285, 315.

[20]Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst, 2022), 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sparsely populated to prosper in an unequal world.[21] It was with this concern in mind that some leaders of ex-colonial states joined in the Afro-Asian Conference of 1955, held in Bandung, in newly independent Indonesia, with the hope that by working together they could counter the range of mechanisms that diminished the sovereignty they were acquiring.[22]

Recognizing the powerful effects of colonization should not lead us to play down the multiple forms of agency of colonized people.[23] Táíwò points out that African intellectuals and political leaders domesticated many practices attributed to their colonizers, selecting what was useful, rejecting what was demeaning, transforming ideas into something that they could claim as their own. In his words, "If decolonising means no more than broadening our horizons of what counts as significant ideas or ways of thinking, many of us are already doing that without the additional fuss of subscribing to a particular ideology."[24]

The goal of African political movements was rarely to restore a pristine Africa devoid of European influence or to reject Africa for the West. Too all-embracing, too abstract a dichotomy between "coloniality" and "indigeneity" reproduces Eurocentrism with the value sign reversed.[25]

The agency of the (formerly) colonized also implies responsibility. We need not engage in a sterile debate between those who blame all the problems of Africa on a colonial legacy and those who find fault in supposed characteristics of Africa. The political economy of Africa is a co-production, and a probing analysis of economic interactions—asymmetrical as they are—is needed.[26] African elites have been in power in most of the continent for over sixty years, a time period as long as that of colonial occupation in much of the continent and in which new generations have come into play.

Some postcolonial regimes devoted far more resources to education and health than their predecessors, but others enhanced their own wealth and power without regard to their countries' citizens. A Sékou Touré or a Robert Mugabe could heroically challenge colonialist and racist power structures and mobilize a wide spectrum of people in their territories and then turn into an authoritarian ruler who imprisoned or killed opponents.[27] Mobutu Sese Seko could advocate indigenous

[21]Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[22]Christopher Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

[23]On ways in which African actions affected the process of colonization, see Camille Lefebvre and M'hamed Oualdi, "Putting the Colonial in Its Place: Interlacing the Histories of Early Colonization in West Africa and the Maghreb," *Annales HSS (English Edition)* 72, 4 (2017): 561–66.

[24]Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation*, 18. Africans educated in colonial mission stations could use literary techniques they learned to write histories of their own communities in their own ways. Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004).

[25]This is also a concern of James Ogude, "Decoloniality and Its Fissures. Whose Decolonial Turn?" *African Studies Review* 67, 4 (2024): 817–36.

[26]Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[27]Such trajectories are captured in Daniel Compagnon, *A Predictable Tragedy: Robert Mugabe and the Collapse of Zimbabwe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); and Ibrahima Baba Kaké, *Sékou Touré: Le héros et le tyran* (Paris: Jeune Afrique, 1987).

"authenticity," symbolized by his own name change (from Joseph Mobutu) and a change in the name of the country (from Congo to Zaire), even while enriching himself and Western corporations, with the connivance of the United States, France, and Belgium. As Achille Mbembe says of the current crop of African military rulers, "In the name of complete decolonization and the enjoyment without impediment of their sovereignty, they affirm that Africa could accept the suppression of civic rights and individual liberties and consider liberal democracy a trap, the Trojan horse of western domination."[28]

The terms decoloniality and decolonization both illuminate and obscure issues that are important historically, politically, and ethically. As Stuart Ward has pointed out, few African activists during the height of anti-colonial mobilization were using the word decolonization.[29] Some activists and intellectuals prefer the term "liberation," emphasizing what people were striving for rather than working against and suggesting the agency of liberators rather than a metahistorical process.[30] That still leaves open the question of the dimensions—social? economic?—of liberation, as well as the possibility that in some cases liberation exchanged a foreign tyrant for an indigenous one.

Ending Colonialism in Africa

What if we turn the imperative "decolonize!" into a question about how colonial empires came to an end? Instead of starting with a known outcome—a world of nation-states—can we examine historical transformations as shaped by actors who could not know how things would turn out? This means opening ourselves to *their* imaginations rather than to what we now think they should have imagined. The empire-to-nation-state narrative has variants: inevitable social forces ("modernization"), top-down (engineered from Paris or London), and bottom-up (the achievement of liberation movements). There may be truth in each of them, and they may not be incompatible historically, even if they suggest opposed political values.[31] But more ideas than these were in play in the 1940s and 1950s.[32] Certainly, nationalism was among them, with a long historical trajectory, in the Americas and India

[28]Achille Mbembe, "Les coups d'Etat en Afrique de l'Ouest ont favorisé un écosystème liberticide," *Le Monde*, 12–13 Jan. 2025.

[29]Stuart Ward, "The European Provenance of Decolonization," *Past and Present* 230 (2016): 227–60. The word "decolonization" had antecedents in Latin America and France going back to the nineteenth century but was popularized in the 1920s by the political theorist of German origin M. J. Bonn, although more as a self-propelled process (the "crumbling of empire") than political action by colonized people (ibid., 236–46).

[30]Elizabeth McMahon, "Liberation," in Gaurav Desai and Adeline Masquelier, eds., *Critical Terms for the Study of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 202–15.

[31]For a penetrating critique of a metropole-centered interpretation of the end of an empire, see Bill Schwarz, "An Unsentimental Education: John Darwin's Empire," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, 1 (2015): 125–44. An example of causation by an abstraction, modernization, is Lachlan McNamee, *Settling for Less: Why States Colonize and Why They Stop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[32]Erez Manela and Heather Streets-Salter, eds., *The Anticolonial Transnational: Imaginaries, Mobilities, and Networks in the Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Michele Louro, Christien Stolte, Heather Streets-Salter, and Sana Tannoury-Karam, eds., *The League against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

for example.[33] Available visions included global communist revolution, with communist parties following the ups and downs of the USSR's flirtation with "bourgeois nationalism." They included pan-movements—pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, pan-African, pan-Asian—often vague on what institutions would govern geographically dispersed nationalities but committed to conceptions of collectivity.[34] Nationalism itself was a protean concept, which whenever focused on a particular nation also provided a basis for different ones: Hyderabad instead of India, Asante instead of Ghana (see below).[35] Some leaders saw in federalism a way to reconcile aspirations to self-determination with the multiplicity of national claims and the need for wider solidarity against imperialism.[36] Although many anti-colonial activists saw themselves as a part of an interconnected struggle against global imperialism, colonial rule collapsed through the overlap of multiple trajectories, not the success of a singular movement. Not only did activists come with different world views, networks, and ideological commitments, but they faced a moving target, a dialectic of resistance and concession by imperial powers in a volatile global context.

Let me illustrate alternatives to the construction of territorially bounded nation-states with two examples. One is based on my own research, the efforts of most political leaders in French Africa to form a federal or confederal structure that would, in principle, transform the hierarchy of colonialism into a relationship of equality.[37] Before World War II, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal helped develop the philosophy of négritude, emphasizing the common cultural cause of people of African descent throughout the world, set alongside other civilizations of equal status —European, Arab-Berber, Chinese, et cetera. Together, he argued, these cultures could shape a globally inclusive humanism. As mobilization against colonial rule escalated after the war, Senghor advocated combining "horizontal" and "vertical" solidarity. Horizontal solidarity linked people of a geographic region or cultural complex—in his case Africa—while vertical solidarity entailed relationships between political entities with unequal resource endowments, notably between France and French Africa. To Senghor, vertical solidarity without horizontal constituted colonialism, while horizontal solidarity without vertical signified unity in poverty. But if Africans exercised horizontal solidarity, making use of the partial citizenship rights they acquired under the French constitution of 1946, they could bring pressure

[33]On Latin America, see Thurner, *First Wave*; and on South Asia, Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Semanti Ghosh, *Different Nationalisms: Bengal 1905–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[34]Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021); John Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Rabaka Reiland, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[35]For differing approaches to nationalism, see the forum in the *American Historical Review* coordinated by Michael Goebel, "Rethinking Nationalism," 127, 2 (2022): 311–71; and Lynn Tesser, *Rethinking the End of Empire: Nationalism, State Formation, and Great Power Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).

[36]Marc Matera, "Pan-Africa, Socialism, and the 'Federal Moment' of Decolonization," in Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare, eds., *Socialism, Internationalism, and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 55–73.

[37]Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on France to redistribute resources—financial, educational, experience with law and democratic governance—and thus change the nature of the relationship.

In practical terms, Senghor argued that the territories of French Africa should each be governed by elected politicians through legislative and executive institutions and come together in a "primary federation" that would also have legislative and executive institutions. This African federation, along with other parts of the former French empire, would join European France in a confederation of equals that would exercise power in specified domains, like defense and foreign policy. Meanwhile, political parties and social movements in French Africa were using their horizontal solidarity to demand not just political voice at all levels but social and economic equality across the French polity: in wages and working conditions, veterans' treatment, women's rights, access to education and medical care, and—not least—freedom of movement across that space, in Europe, the Caribbean, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific.[38]

Political parties in most of Sub-Saharan French Africa advocated variations on this approach. In Cameroon, a radical political party advocated immediate independence and was accordingly repressed.[39] In Algeria, the possibility of a more inclusive imperial formation ran into die-hard opposition from European settlers and metropolitan advocates of "L'Algérie française," setting the stage for violent confrontation.

The great theorist and spokesperson of Algerian independence, Frantz Fanon, put forth a different vision from Senghor's: revolutionary nationalism rejecting association with the colonizer, a nation defined by its mobilization against imperialism. In his recent study of Fanon's life and thought, Adam Shatz nuances the celebratory view of anti-colonial violence that some see in Fanon's text, stressing instead Fanon's basic goal: "The challenge is to create a new universalism, in which Black and white coexist on the basis of equality, recognition, and solidarity."[40] In these terms, Fanon's goal was not poles apart from Senghor's: Senghor sought a universal humanism through recognition of the contribution of different civilizations to a wider whole, Fanon through the tearing down of the colonial edifice, not least through a revolution in the consciousness of the colonized. Senghor, as Fanon charged, tended to essentialize an African civilization, while Fanon had little interest in the particularities of culture and society in Algeria, so much so that he failed to grasp the identitarian and Islamicist turn in the ideology of its anti-colonial movement. As the post-independence histories of Senegal and Algeria revealed, neither imagined path out of empire led to a fully liberated future.[41]

[38]On gender, labor, and veterans' issues, see Pascale Barthélémy, *Sororité et colonialisme: Françaises et Africaines au temps de la guerre froide [1944–1962]* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022); Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*; and Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[39]Meredith Terretta, *Nation of Outlaws, State of Violence: Nationalism, Grassfields Tradition, and State Building in Cameroon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

[40]Adam Shatz, *The Rebel's Clinic: The Revolutionary Lives of Frantz Fanon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), quote on 101; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963[1961]).

[41]Mamadou Diouf, M. C. Diop, and Donal Cruise O'Brien, *La Construction de l'Etat au Sénégal* (Paris: Karthala, 2002); Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

The French government, anxious to avoid a second Algerian War, engaged in a back-and-forth debate with political leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa, and for a time advocated including African territories (including Algeria) in the European Economic Community (EEC) then under consideration. This initiative, also sought by Senghor and other African leaders, went under the name Eurafrica. But France's would-be partners refused to take on what they saw as the burdens of ex-empire. They feared what Senghor most wanted: for African voices to have a place within EEC institutions. When, in 1957, negotiations for founding the EEC relegated France's African territories to the voiceless status of "associate member," the attraction of political affiliation across two continents diminished for both French and African leaders.[42]

African political elites, meanwhile, were becoming more focused on their territorial constituencies as France—hoping to deflect demands for social and economic equality—began in the mid-1950s to devolve real power to individual territories, weakening the incentives for an African federation. African politicians and French officials backed into a form of decolonization as territorial states that neither had sought until the late 1950s.[43] Revolutionary violence à la Fanon and the politics of vertical and horizontal solidarities à la Senghor both played a role in the last stage of French empire.[44]

In her book *Algérie 1962*, Malika Rahal argues that the year of Algeria's independence was a break point between a past in which multiple futures were imagined by different activists and a present in which alternatives became "rapidly obsolete."[45] The Algerian situation was particularly fraught because of the violence of French-Algerian confrontation, the return of many Algerians from detention camps or exile, a terrorist campaign by elements of the French military that refused to accept the independence treaty France had negotiated, and the flight of most European settlers to what remained of France. With power at hand and not just imagined, fighting among factions of the liberation movement erupted. "Revolutionary effervescence" among Algerians became the "institutional order" of a state, with elites maneuvering to control government institutions and other leaders excluded from any political role.[46] For many Algerians, the "emergence of a state born in inter-Algerian violence" was disillusioning. A long-time leader of Algerian nationalist movements, Ferhat Abbas, later gave his book the title "Independence Confiscated."[47] For all the importance of 1962 as a break point, the rupture with France was not complete. The treaty gave France the right to maintain for a time military bases and conduct atomic tests in Algeria's sovereign space. The Algerian

[42]Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), ch. 2: "Eurafrica."

[43]For critiques of this interpretation, see the forum in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 37, 2 (2017); and Merve Fejzula "The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism," *Historical Journal* 64, 2 (2020): 477–500.

[44]Matthew Connelly, A *Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[45]Malika Rahal, *Algérie 1962: Une histoire populaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2022), 350.

[46]Ibid., 416.

[47]Ibid., 358; Ferhat Abbas, *L'Indépendance confisquée, 1962–1978* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), cited in Rahal, *Algérie 1962*, 14. Algeria's increasingly sclerotic political elite continued to base its legitimacy on the revolutionary heritage.

government sought a continued relationship with the EEC even as it established itself as an anti-imperialist vanguard.[48]

Like other new states, Algeria found in international institutions a template for inserting itself into a world of sovereign polities: a seat in the United Nations General Assembly, membership in councils and agencies, exchanges of ambassadors with established states.[49] Other imagined post-imperial polities did not have such a ready-made place. In former British Africa, traditions of decentralized imperial governance set out a more direct path to independence as territorial states than was the case in French Africa. But when Kwame Nkrumah took his Ghana to independence in 1957, he was aware of the limitations of a fragmented continent in an unequal world. He called on African leaders to give up some of their hard-won sovereignty to create a United States of Africa. Unlike Senghor's Eurafrica, Nkrumah's USA broke the connection to the colonizing power. But to his fellow leaders the temptations of national power exceeded the idealistic vision of a united Africa. As Marc Matera points out, some of the most vigorous opponents of European colonialism in the 1950s "viewed the failure to achieve the pan-Africanist dream of continental federation as the tragedy of decolonization."[50]

This brings me to my second example of alternatives claimed and alternatives foreclosed, described in Lydia Walker's study of Nagaland in northeastern India. When India achieved independence in 1947, some leaders among the Naga, led by Angami Zapu Phizo, insisted that Naga constituted a distinct people and merited sovereignty as much as did India. With Indian leaders rejecting not just claims to independence but to autonomy within a federal structure, Naga leaders turned to the international arena. But they received a chilly reception from states that had recently acquired independence and found that the UN "had a vested interest in maintaining the legitimacy and territorial integrity of its new member-states."[51] The nation-state model—one people, one territory, one state—led to an all-or-nothing dilemma: "the Naga people needed to be recognized as sovereign to be recognized at all."[52] Similar demands from once semi-sovereign princely states within the Indian Raj (like Hyderabad) were rejected by India's rulers intent on building a unitary state capable of decisive action.[53] Most tragic was the inability of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to find an alternative to partition, resulting in the split between India and Pakistan and the mass murder of people who found themselves on the wrong side of the partition line in August 1947.

[48]Rahal, *Algérie 1962*, 418; Megan Brown, *The Seventh Member State: Algeria, France, and the European Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022). Algeria's attempt to organize a second Bandung conference in Algiers in 1965 ended in fiasco. Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[49]Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Nicole Eggers, Jessica Lynne Pearson, and Aurora Almada e Santos, eds., *The United Nations and Decolonization* (London: Routledge, 2020); Eva-Maria Muschik, *Building States: The United Nations, Development, and Decolonization, 1945–1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

[50]Matera, "Pan-Africa," 68. The quotation refers specifically to Walter Rodney.

[51]Lydia Walker, *States-in-Waiting: A Counternarrative of Global Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 8.

[52]Ibid., 10.

[53]Sunil Purushotham, *From Raj to Republic: Sovereignty, Violence, and Democracy in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

Although leaders like Nkrumah and Senghor hoped to see structures beyond the individual state, they rejected federalism *within* the state, that is partial autonomy for self-defining national groupings.[54] In a few instances in Africa, regional nationalisms led to unsuccessful secession movements—Biafra/Nigeria and Katanga/Congo in the 1960s—and more rarely successful ones, Eritrea/Ethiopia (1990s) and South Sudan/Sudan (2010s).

Palestinians, Kurds, and Rohingya are among the peoples who have asserted themselves as nations but have been unable to achieve recognition as a state or even as an autonomous element within a federal system. The point is not to say that all claims to national self-determination are equal, but to suggest the need to examine how some nationalisms acquired world-wide recognition and others did not, as well as to underscore the inconsistent history of a world political order based on the supposed correspondence of state and nation.

Some postcolonial states have engaged in colonization themselves, encouraging settlers to move into territories largely inhabited by ethnically distinct peoples—Indonesia in East Timor, Israel in Palestine, India in Kashmir. What is sometimes described in such contexts (or in relation to the United States) as settler colonialism might in these instances be reconfigured as settler nation-statism, with an ideology of ethnic homogenization added to land-grabbing.[55]

On the other side of the national coin are barriers erected against migration in once interconnected regions; "modern citizenship in South and Southeast Asia was built upon the *disavowal of migration*," writes Sunil Amrith. In some African states, the presence of people from neighboring countries, now considered "foreign," has given rise to exclusion and violence.[56]

Mahmood Mamdani imagines a decolonization different from the one that occurred: "This decolonization is not simply independence from outside rule. It is an act of thinking, of imagination. It means dreaming up a political community that undoes the organic link between state and nation that has gelled over the past five centuries." For him, building a community that is not based on the boundary-drawing concepts of tribe, ethnicity, religion, or nationality entails political action—mobilization, debate, compromise.[57] Studying the history of decolonization makes clear that alternatives beyond the nation-state have been imagined and, for a time, acted upon.

After Independence: Decolonizing Perspectives on Africa

Historians studying the period after independence are painting a picture more revealing than one of "incomplete decolonization." African leaders did not lack for

[54]Jean Marie Allman, *The Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Séverine Awenengo Dalberto, *L'idée de la Casamance autonome: Possibles et dettes morales de la situation coloniale au Sénégal* (Paris: Karthala, 2024).

[55]McNamee, *Settling for Less*, provides a useful critique of the settler colonialism paradigm by pointing to tensions between settlers and states, postcolonial as well as colonial. See also Hafsa Kanjwal, *Colonizing Kashmir: State-Building under Indian Occupation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

[56]Sunil Amrith, "Struggles for Citizenship around the Bay of Bengal," in Gyan Prakash, Michael Laffan, and Nikhil Menon, eds., *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 107; Judith Hayem, "From May 2008 to 2011: Xenophobic Violence and National Subjectivity in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, 1 (2013): 77–97.

[57]Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), quote on 334.

ideas or initiative.[58] Programs for "African socialism" espoused by leaders of different stripes reflected an urge to chart paths different from those advocated by either side of the Cold War.[59] The idea of harnessing African traditions of village-level cooperation to develop agricultural production, in Tanzania for example, acquired support from young militants who saw it both as a means of personal advancement and for dynamizing what to them were static rural societies. Visionaries like Julius Nyerere sought to combine socialism with federalism. Understanding the attractions and limitations of such schemes has taken scholars into the interplay of politics at village, regional, national, continental, and global levels.[60] Even the military rulers who overthrew elected governments had their own ideas of what a state should be.[61]

What concerns us here are plausible hypotheses for describing and explaining the political economy of decolonization.[62] Multinational corporations and international financial institutions may have benefitted at least as much from decolonization as they had earlier from colonization. Operating in what was becoming a world of nearly two hundred states, many with dire needs, corporations could choose where to invest, where to seek raw materials or markets, where to avoid. Capital is highly mobile; workers much less so; states not mobile at all. Colonies were freed into a world of rules they had not set: international agreements and institutions protecting property rights and regulating commercial interactions, which were hard to go against because of the weight of the apparatus of international law and ex-colonies' acute need for investment.[63] It was to address the asymmetry of global economic power that the Bandung Conference of 1955 tried to develop cooperative relations among ex-colonial states, that Nkrumah in 1958 proposed creating a United States of Africa, and—nearly twenty years later—a group of seventy-seven states from Asia, Africa, and Latin America called for the development of a New International Economic Order. In all these instances, visionary leaders faced not only the power of capital and wealthy states but the immediate interests of the elites that had acquired power in formerly colonized states.

Although in the 1940s and 1950s trade unions and other social movements had, through strikes and mass protests, put pressure on colonial regimes to improve social conditions, the "freer" market of the postcolonial era encouraged a race to the

[58]Among studies bringing out the ideas of political leaders are Paul Bjerk, *Building a Peaceful Nation: Julius Nyerere and the Establishment of Sovereignty in Tanzania, 1960–1964* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press 2015); and Jeffrey Ahlman, *Kwame Nkrumah: Visions of Liberation* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021).

[59]Hence the plural in the title of Maria-Benedita Basto, Françoise Blum, Pierre Guidi, Héloïse Kiriakou, Martin Mourre, Céline Pauthier, Ophélie Rillon, Alexis Roy, and Elena Vezzadini, eds., *Socialismes en Afrique/Socialisms in Africa* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2021).

[60]Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lewis and Osei-Opare, *Socialism.*

[61]Samuel Fury Childs Daly, *Soldier's Paradise: Militarism in Africa after Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

[62]Cooper, *Africa in the World*; Denis Cogneau, *Un Empire bon marché: Histoire et économie politique de la colonisation française, XIX^{e}–XXI^{e} siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2023); Morten Jerven, *The Wealth and Poverty of African States: Economic Growth, Living Standards and Taxation since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[63]Anne Orford argues that with decolonization, international law and international institutions strengthened property rights and investment to protect capital against the exercise of national sovereignty. *International Law and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21–25, 268, 313.

bottom. Independent Africa states often curtailed the labor movements they had supported when they were directed against the colonial state.[64]

Inheriting a colonial infrastructure focused on draining resources rather than developing interconnections within Africa, ex-colonial states found that the most attractive investments were those that focused on the narrow export channels, the limited areas with the climate and facilities to make export agriculture feasible, and mines that depended on vast areas of impoverished populations to provide cheap labor, all of which tended to exacerbate regional differentiation and foster social tensions. Governing elites, with minimal levers over productive facilities, could gain an advantage by acting as gatekeepers, collecting import-export taxes, distributing foreign aid, making deals for foreign investment.[65]

Gatekeeping provided a means for ruling elites to ensure that potential rivals lacked resources, and some African rulers have proven remarkable for their longevity in power: Félix Houphouët-Boigny thirty-three years, Paul Biya forty-two years, Yoweru Museveni thirty-eight years (the latter two still in power as of this writing). But gatekeeping also encourages contestation over the gate. The flip side of individualized and prolonged power is reversal of regimes, not by elections but by coups and assassinations, a pattern that began in Sub-Saharan Africa in Togo in 1963. Even a regime apparently based on popular revolution could fall into this pattern, as did Algeria in 1965.

There are risks in turning an argument about structural inequality into a determinist vision. There are escapes from colonial strictures and poverty; South Korea is the most obvious example of an ex-colonial territory that has become industrialized, with a well-educated, internationally connected, relatively prosperous population. Similarly, one should be careful about consigning all of Africa to the same impoverished fate. Ghana is not Somalia.

While a substantial literature critical of "development"—as self-conscious state programs to improve the welfare of populations—comes from both ends of the political spectrum and different academic traditions, the impact of such programs deserves careful treatment.[66] In the 1960s and into the 1970s, as now-sovereign governments devoted more resources to health and education, rates of literacy and education in much of Africa jumped upward; infant mortality declined; life expectancy rose.[67] Even if patron-client relations with rich states and corporations were hard to escape, independent states could choose their international patrons, especially in the context of Cold War rivalries.[68]

[64]Bill Freund, "Trade Unions," in Stefano Belluci and Andreas Eckert, eds., *General Labour History of Africa* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2019), 523–52; Claude Rivière, "Lutte ouvrière et phénomène syndical en Guinée," *Cultures et Développement* 7 (1975): 53–83; Omar Guèye, *Mai 1968 au Sénégal. Senghor face aux étudiants et au mouvement syndical* (Paris: Karthala, 2017).

[65]For the gatekeeper state hypothesis, see my *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), as well as a debate over the concept in *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 3, 3 (2018).

[66]For an overview of scholarship on the history of development, see Iris Borowy, Nicholas Ferns, Jack Loveridge, and Corinna Unger, eds., *Perspectives on the History of Global Development* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

[67]Statistics in Cooper, *Africa since 1940*, 131–36, 163–71.

[68]Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, Race, and Citizenship, Ghana–Soviet Relations, 1957–1966," *Journal of West African History* 5, 2 (2019): 85–112; Abou Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

But the world recession of the 1970s put a damper on development initiatives, and as African governments fell into debt, the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions made the cutting of social spending a condition of loans (a policy called structural adjustment), jeopardizing both social gains and future economic prospects.

Development, especially after the 1940s, had been a *colonial* project of France, Great Britain, and Portugal: an effort to preserve colonial rule by reforming it. In the 1950s and 1960s it became a *decolonizing* project: a strategy to manage a transition to independent states while enhancing their links to the capitalist world economy. When international financial institutions in the 1980s pulled back from development initiatives and imposed austerity and structural adjustment on much of Africa, they were in effect saying that decolonization had been accomplished, that independent countries had to swim or sink in the waters of the world economy. These policies were an erasure of history—of the mechanisms, colonization among them, that had produced and were perpetuating global inequality.[69] Development initiatives were later revived, albeit with limited resources from the richer countries. The politics of austerity have come to haunt Europe itself, through calls to roll back welfare measures that European citizens had claimed for themselves. The end of colonial empires figures importantly in the history of twentieth-century political economy, but it has more twists and turns than a story of incomplete decolonization.

If widespread disillusionment with decolonization began with the shortcomings of economic transformation, it soon extended to the realm of culture. The relationship of "Western" and "indigenous" culture, during and after colonization, was more complex than a dualism. Africans created distinct versions of Christianity and Islam. Reckoning with the traumas and social dislocations of colonization led to adaptive and inventive ritual practices and spiritual movements. Some accounts of such practices from the 1950s saw both syncretistic and autonomous cultural and religious practices feeding into a nationalist consciousness, but other work has treated modes of understanding and healing as subjects in themselves.[70]

Did the collapse of empires transform the imperialism of knowledge production? Or did decolonization mean only the welcoming of new personnel into established institutions and paradigms whose claims to universality were rooted in European assertions of mastery of the world—in the physical, biological, and social sciences, in law, in history, in literature and the arts? Could conceptual schemes coming from different cultures acquire a place in international scholarly life or were scientific and cultural interactions inherently Eurocentric? Could Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty asked, be provincialized?[71] Controversies over cultural imperialism have extended into public spaces: over statues of notorious colonizers in Oxford or Cape Town, over

[69]Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[70]Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Tropical Africa* (London: Muller, 1956); Victor Igreja, Béatrice Dias-Lambranca, and Annemiek Richters, " Gamba Spirits, Gender Relations, and Healing in Post-Civil War Gorongosa, Mozambique," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, 2 (2008): 353–71; Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

[71]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

museums in Europe or North America filled with objects looted by colonial expeditions.[72] Such questions have received much attention and deserve more.

The other side of the picture is the extent to which African innovations in literature, music, painting, sculpture, cinema, and other art forms have not only captured the imagination of younger generations in Africa but have influenced cultural life in Europe and North America. African writers have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.[73] Equally important are the limits on this expansive cultural history: the lack of resources of African cultural institutions such as museums and theaters, the lack of finance for art education.

Some scholars from former colonies question the pertinence of the call for epistemological decolonization. Táíwò, as cited above, insists that African intellectuals have been decolonizing without having to label themselves. Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, a scholar of higher education based in South Africa, warns that the decoloniality argument "inadvertently reinforces the very binary that decolonization aims to dismantle—an opposition between "Western" and "non-Western" epistemologies." He worries that calls to decolonize knowledge are largely performative—"a checklist"—and beg the question of how to transform institutions, in Africa, Europe, North America, and elsewhere.[74]

Soulaymane Bachir Diagne offers a way forward in a book entitled (in French) *Universaliser*—to universalize. Instead of using the adjective "universal" to apply a particular canon—notably European—worldwide, he uses the verb to imagine a universal to be built out of many particularities. He rejects indigenizing as well as Europeanizing essentialisms, seeing a world of many creolizations. Translation is at the center of his project, for it accepts cultural difference while stressing interaction.[75]

This perspective goes against the argument Ngugi advanced in 1986. Writing in indigenous languages, as Ngugi advocated, might solidify cultural self-confidence in particular communities but also makes communications within states and across Africa difficult. Few countries have chosen to dethrone European languages in official communication for fear that choosing one African language over another would exacerbate hierarchy and tension among communities. Some observers, like Táíwò, have argued that as Africans use European languages, they appropriate—one might say Africanize—them.[76] Táíwò and Diagne are not just calling for cross-linguistic communication; they see such communication as part of long-term historical

[72]Bénédicte Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, Susanne Meyer-Abich, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[73]These art forms are now the subject of academic literatures by both African and non-African scholars, including Ato Quayson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Daniel Magaziner, *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016); Odile Goerg, *Tropical Dream Palaces: Cinema in Colonial West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Msia Kibona Clark, *Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018); and Karin Barber, *A History of African Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[74]Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, "The Pursuit of Decolonisation Remains 'Deeply' Contested," *University World News Africa Edition*, 20 Feb. 2025, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250218020832868&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AFNL0483 (accessed 20 Feb. 2025). Ogude, in "Decoloniality and Its Fissures," presents similar arguments.

[75]Souleyman Bachir Diagne, *Univeraliser: 'l'humanité par les moyens d'humanité'* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2024). Diagne cites Senghor on the contributions of multiple civilizations to humanity.

[76]Táíwò, *Against Decolonization*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experience.[6] They do not presume equivalence among communicating parties, hence the continued importance of Senghor's notion of conjugating horizontal and vertical solidarities. Asymmetrical relations are still relations.

Such considerations imply that when it comes to debating a question like "gender equality" or "rule of law" the basic issue is not whether an argument is based on "European values" or "African values" but what the arguments actually are and their effects on the humans concerned. Such arguments are political acts, to be met by counterclaims, sustained by resources that are not necessarily equal. For scholars, multiplying the particularities encourages not just openness to different ways of understanding society and history but also the hard work of bringing such ways into relationship with each other, to both deconstruct claims to intellectual domination and construct more inclusive social theory.

Decolonizing European History

For Europe to decolonize itself means, for one, to recognize its colonial roots. Over the last two decades or so, historians have endeavored to show how much societies in different parts of Europe were shaped by colonial connections. They have brought out not just the impact of the colonial past on present-day patterns of racial discrimination and prejudice, but also the influence of once-colonized peoples on popular culture in Europe.[77]

After World War II, intellectuals, social scientists, and political actors in Great Britain and France had to reexamine their assumptions about the relationship of colonized spaces to their own societies. The vain attempt to reform and re-legitimize colonialism entailed reimagining the African or Asian as a person who could be turned into a "modern" being, no longer permanently slotted into the category of primitive, if properly educated and supervised.[78] The colonial officer who knew his natives gave way to the expert in agronomy, industrial relations, law, or public health —an opening to be sure, but one that presumed that expertise came with a European pedigree. To further decolonize these domains of social science would be not only to recognize their origin stories in an imperial Europe but to acknowledge the importance of encounters with other forms of knowledge production.[79]

The transformed colonized person could not be kept overseas. The French Constitution of 1946 and the British Nationality Act of 1948 gave the people of the colonies the right to come to France and Great Britain as rights-bearing citizens. In Britain, the first post-1948 migrants are known as the Windrush generation after the ocean liner that brought hundreds of them from the Caribbean to the UK. The political need to re-legitimize empire was reinforced by an economic need—for labor. There were acute misgivings about the process, but racial prejudice had to accommodate

[77]Valuable studies include Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Berny Sèbe and Matthew G. Stanard, eds., *Decolonising Europe? Popular Responses to the End of Empire* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020).

[78]George Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023); Frederick Cooper, "Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa," *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10 (2004): 9–38.

[79]Historians of science have long been aware of such perspectives in relation science in Islamic and Chinese empires, but the net is now cast wider in Asia and Africa.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasons of state and reasons of economy. Migration from overseas territories grew rapidly in the 1950s. This demographic, social, and legal transformation, intended to stave off or at least control decolonization, reshaped contemporary British and French societies, with a wider impact across Europe. Much of Europe became more multiracial, more multicultural.[80]

The opposite tendency became stronger beginning in the 1960s. When Britain and France—and later Portugal—gave up their attempts to maintain a diverse imperial polity, they could make themselves more national and more European. In the 1960s and 1970s, the British and French governments began to erode the provisions that had allowed inhabitants of its overseas territories to enter their countries as rights-bearing citizens. Right-wing parties made political hay out of distinguishing people who looked like Asians or Africans—whatever their citizenship status—from the true French (*français de souche*) or British person.[81] The openings of the 1950s were closing by the 1970s. The route from colonial racism to anti-immigrant discrimination is thus not a straight line, and it leaves many people with a sense of betrayal.

The idea of a community transcending nationality nevertheless continued to have its attractions in Europe, not with relatively impoverished former colonies but among the more affluent states of Europe. Supranational connection took the form of the European Economic Community in 1958, then the European Union in 1993. There was something Senghorian about European integration, not that European elites would admit it: recognition of distinct nationalities combined with confederal institutions bringing them together. But it was a bounded confederalism, one which enforced barriers to entry—keeping *out* the children of people France, most notably, had once wanted to keep *in*. Europe-oriented politics encouraged, in some quarters, claims to represent "European values" distinguished from something else—Islamic? Russian? Chinese? American?

The European Union goes beyond the nation-state model. Its genesis is not simply a set of nation-states forging integration from scratch, but a story beginning with European states with imperial pedigrees—France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, as well as Luxembourg—trying to remake their relationship as colonial empires were collapsing. The line from empire to EU passes through the thwarted attempt at forging a Eurafrican polity in which African leaders insisted on having a political voice. The separation of sovereignties that decolonization entailed allowed Britain and France to develop their welfare states without having to respond to demands from Africa to extend them to imperial citizens.[82] The EU is now beset by tensions between its innovative supranational institutions and national sentiments in its member states and by conflicts over the place of people of different cultural and

[80]Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Emmanuel Blanchard, *Histoire de l'immigration algérienne en France* (Paris: La Découverete, 2018).

[81]Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration*; Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Sylvain Laurens, "'1974' et la fermeture des frontières: Analyse critique d'une décision érigée en *turning point*," *Politix* 21, 82 (2008): 69–94. The current Minister of the Interior in France, Bruno Retailleau, has referred to French citizens of immigrant background, especially from Africa, as "Français de papier." *Le Monde*, 14 Oct. 2024.

[82]Signe Rehling Larsen, "European Public Law after Empires," *European Law Open* 1 (2022): 6–25.

religious affiliations in a project that had become specifically European. Here is another story of openings and closures in a time of decolonization.

Decolonizing International Order

The word "international" is often given an historical depth it does not merit. It presumes that the units that are interacting are "national," something that only became a general condition with the breakup of colonial empires between the 1950s and 1970s. Until then, much of the nexus of war, alliances, enmities, and cooperation could better be labeled inter-imperial. What came to be called international law was shaped beginning in the nineteenth century via a distinction between "civilized" and "uncivilized" spaces, the former a domain of legally regulated interaction, the latter subject to the arbitrary actions of a civilized power.[83]

Well into the twentieth century, the units of world politics were varied and non-equivalent: empires, national states, colonies, protectorates, kingdoms, emirates, chieftaincies, a self-styled union of national republics (the USSR). For decolonizing territories, the national form was available, underscored by the institutions erected by imperial states, and alternatives were gradually excluded. The making of an "international" world after World War II, Jens Bartelson argues, reproduced the hierarchy of the inter-empire world both within each state and among states, whose actual differentials in military and economic power and influence over regulatory institutions belied the juridical equality of sovereign states.[84] The structures perpetuating inequality were what leaders of ex-colonial states, from Bandung to the New International Economic Order, sought to transform, and what leaders of the wealthy states were able to defend.[85]

Writing about decolonization cannot be separated from other major issues in today's scholarship: the nature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalism, competition among big powers during and after the Cold War, the USSR's rise and fall and China's fall and rise, the impact of international financial institutions, global patterns of migration, the differential impact of climate change, and shifting forms of cultural representation. The challenge is to bring different framings into conversation with each other.[86]

Such approaches permit us to look beyond the taken-for-granted structure of global politics. It may seem banal that poor states appeal to rich ones for something labeled "foreign aid," but the story looks different when one considers that the units involved were not givens but emerged from particular patterns of decolonization. Had Senghor and others got what they wanted—and what French leaders for a time

[83]Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Orford, *International Law.*

[84]Jens Bartelson, *Becoming International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[85]Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*; Burbank and Cooper, *Post-imperial Possibilities*, ch: 3: "Afroasia."

[86]Westad, *Global Cold War*. For an analysis that looks at the relationship between global capitalism and decolonization without collapsing either into the other, see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020). For a case study of capital-state relations in the context of colonization and decolonization, see Emma Park, *Infrastructural Attachments: Austerity, Sovereignty, and Expertise in Kenya* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

claimed to want too, albeit with different goals—the people they represented would have been part of a federal or confederal polity and their leaders would have had a place in French institutions of governance. They would have claimed resources as citizens of France, not as citizens of Senegal asking for aid.

Obtaining sovereignty was a great victory for colonized people. But the form it took implied that responsibility for the welfare of people in each territory rested with its own political leaders, regardless of the history that had shaped their economic and social conditions, regardless of the resources which colonial borders assigned to each territory. Corporate capital might no longer be assured of the backing of colonial armies or courts of law, but multinationals were free to invest or disinvest where conditions suited them. Decolonization implied, in Radhika Mongia's words, "the standardization of inequality structured through the *form of* equivalence."[87] All this now appears as the natural order of things, not as an historical trajectory.

Colonial regimes had naturalized a different kind of order: explicitly hierarchical, racialized, where subjects could be denied rights and exploited at will. The brave new world after empire was riven by a tension between boundedness, affirmed through concepts of sovereignty and national identity, and the movement of people, ideas, cultural practices, commodities, technologies, and capital. States often sought to look beyond their boundedness through the formation of blocs (free world versus communist), attempts at federation and confederation (the failed Eurafrica, the European Union), patron-client relations (American and Soviet "soft power"), and attempts at cooperation among the less affluent states against the asymmetry of the world order. Regulatory mechanisms largely shaped by the major powers, like those of the World Trade Organization, put some economic relationships outside of the control of democratic processes within states. It is too simple to characterize this order on one of its dimensions—international, postcolonial, postnational—when it is unresolved tensions that are fundamental to it. The reimperialization advocated by the current administration in the United States and practiced by Russia calls into question even those aspects of world order that had seemed to have become accepted norms.

Another Decolonization?

The collapse of European colonial empires in Asia and Africa in the decades after World War II left in question the relevance of concepts of empire and colonialism to polities that had not necessarily seen themselves as imperial powers and could indeed lay claim to an anti-colonial agenda—notably the United States, China, and Russia. In recent years, some scholars have called to "decolonize" their histories, not least to own up to the colonial dimensions of their pasts, including subordination of people defined as "other," mass displacements of people, the influx of alien settlers.[88] Here, I

[87]Radhika Mongia, "Historicizing State Sovereignty: Inequality and the Form of Equivalence," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, 2 (2007): 382–411, quote on 410.

[88]Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erika Murat, "Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 771, 27 Apr. 2022, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/time-to-question-russias-imperial-innocence/ (accessed 1 Dec. 2024); Adam Lenton and (anonymous) co-authors, *Decolonizing Russia? Disentangling Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire; A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); and Gina Anne Tamm, "Why Decolonize Chinese History?" special section of *Historical Journal* 67 (2024): 148–97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

will take up the instance where a call to "decolonize Russia" confronts, especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a state politics of reimperialization.

To decolonize Russian history would also be to counter the relative inattention to Russia and the Soviet Union in comparative scholarship on empire.[89] Among specialists in Russian history, however, attention to the imperial nature of Russia's regimes is not new. During the Soviet era, scholars both outside and inside the USSR took up the histories of non-Russian peoples. Soviet historians described the tsarist regime—but not the Soviet Union—as imperial. From the 1950s courageous historians inside the USSR produced studies of Stalinist repression of national groups,[90] as did scholars outside the Communist bloc.

As postcolonial studies flourished in North America and Europe in the 1990s, empire in both tsarist and Soviet variants became a major subject for historians of Russia, both inside and outside formerly Soviet space, often working together.[91] Particularly notable is the journal *Ab Imperio*, founded in 2000 by a team of scholars from Russia with international connections and training. Published at first in Kazan, the journal's goal was not to make "Eastern" and "Western" versions of empire converge, but to illuminate the complex histories, repertoires, and interactions of imperial states and societies.[92]

For some students of Russian empire, the call to "decolonize" was both familiar and bothersome. The sticking point was the term "colonial." As in other empires, Russian (and Soviet) officials ruled different regions differently, and as elsewhere the participation of "native" authorities was essential to sustaining imperial control. But two factors complicate analogies with European colonialism.

One was the multiplicity and mixity of ethnic and religious people both on the territories of Russia's empires[93] and inside the top layers of government. Expansion —much of it violent—extending outward from Moscow, starting from its modest, fourteenth-century beginning as a Mongol principality, brought into the empire hundreds of "peoples" with distinctive languages, religions, and social practices, from Siberia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic and Arctic Sea littorals, east-central Europe, and Ukraine. Since the sixteenth-century conquest of remnant Mongol khanates, the Russian empire has included large numbers of Muslims and significant clusters of Buddhists, Jews, and animists and other pagans, not to mention Christian sects that challenged the Eastern Orthodoxy of the rulers. An

[89]Exceptions include Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, eds., *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

[90]An example is Alexander Nekrich's *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Tragic Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York: Norton, 1978), published in English after Nekrich emigrated from the USSR.

[91]Jane Burbank and David Ransel, eds., *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and A. V. Remnev, eds., *Russia Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

[92]The journal moved to the United States to avoid state interference or censorship and is now published in cooperation with the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies and the College of Arts and Sciences of Miami University (Ohio), https://www.abimperio.net/cgi-bin/aishow.pl?state=portal/journal/history&idlang=1 (accessed 12 Nov. 2024).

[93]Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny use the term in the plural in their recent book, *Russia's Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

enduring component of Russian political culture has been to recognize these different religions and to manage them pragmatically, balancing discipline and tolerance.[94]

A second major element affecting comparisons is the nature of Russian political rule: the empire was an autocracy, ruled by an emperor advised by a circle of dependent individuals. All the people of imperial Russia were subjects, and none of them were rights-bearing citizens. The empire allocated rights and duties as it saw fit, claiming control over property and labor, location and law, expression and bodies. All subjects, not just non-Russians and not just subalterns, were dependent on the emperor's ultimate power to rule and to change the rules.

The interlacing of multi-nationality and autocracy meant that Russian administrators, themselves of different ethnicities, could move selected ethnic or religious groups (Russian and non-Russian) about. One might describe Russia as a "resettlement" empire—one that worked by recognizing ethnic and religious difference and exploiting these differences in multiple campaigns of expansion and control over an enormous space. Colonization—including settlers who displaced indigenous nomads, prisoners in labor camps, unruly religious minorities, peasants invited from abroad to improve agriculture—was a wide-ranging and fundamental Russian strategy, but the colonizers were not all Russian, and they, like the colonized, were vulnerable to the emperor's whims.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian elites, like those in other parts of the world, strove to belong fully to the club of colonial powers.[95] At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian leaders expanded their resettlement policy with campaigns to bring peasants, mostly Russian, into several regions of the empire, displacing indigenous and other residents and nomadic groups, disrupting earlier collaborations with local elites, contributing to a vast rebellion in Turkestan in 1916.

The downfall of the Romanovs, the improvisations of the Provisional Government, and the Bolshevik coup d'état in 1917 led to five years of devastating wars across the empire. Bolshevik leaders both exploited and tried to control nationalist sentiment, and were able, after losses on the western border, to reconfigure the empire once again.

The Bolsheviks created an apparently new form of state. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, formally proclaimed in 1922, was a federation of national republics, each named after its majority ethnic group. The whole was held together by the Communist Party, charged with controlling politics at every level of the composite entity, a structure that gave authority to communists of many ethnicities.[96] In every "national" republic, some nationalities appeared to be ranked higher than others, especially in the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR), that stretched from the Baltic across Siberia and included vast numbers of non-Russian groups. While "native" languages could for the most part be taught, learning Russian was obligatory and essential for advancement in the Soviet system. During the Stalinist period, millions of people were displaced or sent to

[94]Lenton *et al.*, in *Decolonizing Russia?* put this history in the context of debates over the colonialism concept.

[95]Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politis of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), ch. 9: "Empires across Continents: The United States and Russia."

[96]Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

camps, often on the basis of ethnic criteria.[97] Questions of communist elites' "colonial" attitudes toward "our native peoples" are thus pertinent in the Soviet context.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 into fifteen independent states, each again named for one ethnic group, their new leaders faced challenges specific to their multi-ethnic condition. Russian "colonizers" did not exit en masse to the Russian Federation (as happened with Algerian independence from France for example), and Russian language and culture were vital assets to repositioned elites. Nationalists both within the Russian Federation (the descendent of the RSFSR) and in the fourteen new states raised the vital issue of unwinding, or not, economic, political, and cultural connections forged in Soviet times, and tensions between Russians and non-Russians persisted in both the Russian Federation and ex-Soviet states.

Inside the Russian Federation, the state's policy could not be fully national or Orthodox: other ethnic groups and other religions had to be kept inside the polity. The colonial label and comparisons to earlier imperial breakups underscore the hierarchical nature of power arrangements between Moscow and the eighty-five subunits of the federation[98]—among them Tatarstan and Chechnya—but occlude the particularities of a federal structure that both empowers non-Russian leaders and keeps them dependent on the center.[99]

The sovereignty gained by the new states created out of the debris of the USSR mattered. But the degree to which de facto autonomy corresponded to *de jure* independence remained in question. Even in what had been the Soviet Union's "external" empire in Eastern Europe—Poland for instance—the threat of a reassertion of power from Moscow has not disappeared.

One might better call the devolutions of power and/or sovereignty that took place between 1989 and 1991 deimperialization rather than decolonization. But almost no one uses this term, perhaps because a focus on European colonial empire has been so dominant in recent historiography. Russia's takeover of two provinces of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 point in the opposite direction: toward reimperialization.[100] Russian efforts to transplant new people to the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine revives the empire's long-term tactic of resettlement. The Russian leaderships' explicit goal of eradicating Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture, the kidnapping and forced Russification of Ukrainian children, and the mass killings, torture, and rape of

[97]Lenton *et al.*, *Decolonizing Russia?*, 24–25.

[98]Two of these units are Crimea and the city of Sebastopol in Crimea, not recognized as part of Russia by international law. Russia now claims to have integrated four Ukrainian regions.

[99]Egor Lazarev, *State-Building as Lawfare: Custom, Sharia, and State Law in Postwar Chechnya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Helen M. Faller, *Nation, Language, Islam: Tatarstan's Sovereignty Movement* (New York: Central European University Press, 2009); Deniz Dinç, *Tatarstan's Autonomy within Putin's Russia: Minority Elites, Ethnic Mobilization and Sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[100]Jeffrey Mankoff, in *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 273, 275, terms Russia's politics an effort at "making the world safe for empire," a strategy he claims it shares with China, Iran, and Turkey, all of them with "long imperial traditions." In 2022, he saw them acting against the liberal politics of the United States and Western Europe, but Trump's imperial ambitions now align more with other authoritarian, imperial rulers than with a Europe that claims to repudiate its colonial past.

Ukrainian people, bring to mind the extremes of European colonization.[101] But the Russian stated goal in Ukraine is not exploitation of the colonized; it is the eradication of Ukraine as a state and Ukrainians as a distinct people.

One decolonization can hide another. For a leading guru of "decoloniality," Walter Mignolo, the menace facing the world is "re-Westernization"—the efforts of states in North America and Europe to reverse the gains of movements against colonialism and to preserve the capitalist modernity that colonization had shaped. For Mignolo, "Ukraine is a point of no-return in the re-Westernizing effort to contain de-Westernization."[102] The problem, therefore, is the West, not the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022, with the intention of obliterating a sovereign nation. Never mind the mass movements and elections through which Ukraine claimed its independence, never mind Russian bombs targeted at schools, cultural institutions, markets, and apartment buildings. Other proponents of the decolonial approach have taken the opposite tack, seeing Russia's invasion as an imperialist act and insisting on the colonial status of different peoples inside the Russian Federation.[103] Russia's attack on Ukraine shares with Israel's attack on Gaza a conceit that reflects a history of empire and an actuality of colonial thinking: that certain categories of people are acceptable targets for extreme violence by virtue of who they are.[104]

Conclusion

Historians have applied the concept of decolonization to the breakup of European empires in Africa and Asia sixty to eighty years ago, to the liberation of much of South and Central America from Spanish rule two hundred years ago (or the independence of the United States and Haiti even earlier), and to the breakup of the Soviet Union nearly thirty-five years ago. Why is "decolonize!" such a popular term now? A plausible explanation is that this injunction calls attention to the tension between formal structures and the actual operations of power. To some people in Europe and North America, evoking decolonization responds to the question: why, if all people are free and equal, do so many feel marginalized, discriminated against, and unable to act in the world? To people in former colonies, asserting that we still need to

[101]Burbank and Cooper, *Post-imperial Possibilities*, ch. 4: "Eurasia Redux"; Serhii Plokhi, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: Penguin, 2023).

[102]Walter Mignolo, "It Is a Change of Era, No Longer an Era of Changes," *Postcolonial Politics*, 29 Jan. 2023, https://postcolonialpolitics.org/it-is-a-change-of-era-no-longer-the-era-of-change/ (accessed 2 Oct. 2024). "De-Westernization" and "re-Westernization" are also discussed extensively in Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decolonization*. On the different opinions within the decoloniality school as well as a telling critique of Mignolo's contentions, see Cahen, *Colonialité*, 191–205.

[103]"Nothing without Us: An Open Letter from Russia's Indigenous and Decolonial Activists," http://indigenous-russia.com/archives 32373 (accessed 3 Oct. 2024). The Ukrainian Institute has compiled a list of articles in multiple languages on "decolonization," at https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/en-projects/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/ (accessed 24 Nov. 2024). A few activists contend that decolonizing Russia should entail breaking up the Russian Federation, although not necessarily with liberal democracy as the goal. Lenton *et al.*, *Decolonizing Russia*, 59, 78.

[104]Russian and Israeli leaders Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as Hamas leaders, have been accused by the International Court of Justice of crimes against humanity. Their reply has been to attack the court.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525100108 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decolonize responds to the question of why, if our oppressor is gone, are we still poor, powerless in our own countries, and looked down upon in the rest of the world?

The term underscores the continued inequality within and among states in terms of economic opportunity, race, gender, culture, and social status. In pointing to alternative—"indigenous"—conceptions of society, it reflects the salience of political self-identification, a search for an anchor in a context of variable and unequal forms of connectivity.

These are significant, human, tragic questions. But how far does the response "decolonize!" get us? Evoking the colonial emphasizes that powerlessness, poverty, sexism, racism, and cultural denigration are not inherent conditions of humankind but historically constructed, and that their undoing will also take place in time. But if we are to change power relations, we need to understand what they are, in all their complexity. Rulers and oppositions within states act within a matrix of possibilities and constraints, but as they do so, they change that matrix. To study these complexities is to look at the opening and closure of alternatives rather than inevitabilities, to focus more on trajectories than on legacies.

For anti-colonial movements, much of the power of naming the colonial was to bring together multiple struggles, to enable people in one part of the world to draw on the strength of others, to insist that colonialism was both identifiable and vulnerable. It was to say we can get rid of colonialism and get on to something else. We can appreciate the power of this perspective while recognizing its historical limitations. That colonialism ceased to be a legitimate form of political organization reflected a lot of hard, and varied, efforts and sacrifices. As people try to change today's world, they draw on multiple pasts, visions, and ways of situating themselves in society and politics.[105] Should we keep pursuing Senghor's call, made in the heat of struggles against colonial rule, to combine horizontal and vertical solidarities? Can we go further by taking up the challenge of scholars like Diagne and Táíwò, who in different ways call for a politics that keeps the accent on interdependence while recognizing the unequal terms of such interactions in both past and present?

The most important lesson for the future from looking with fresh eyes at the history of decolonization is that it happened. Decolonization in the political sense was one of the most significant transformations in the history of the past century. What was once a distant possibility, with no clear path leading in that direction, became an actuality, reconfiguring what people could imagine and what possibilities and constraints they would face.

Acknowledgments. I am indebted to Jane Burbank for her insight, knowledge, and editorial skill and especially for her help with the section "Another Decolonization." I am grateful to Botakoz Kassymbekova for conversations that also contributed to that section and to many other colleagues whose insights expressed at academic meetings and personal conversations shaped my thinking on the subject of this article.

[105]Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde* (Sète, France: Rot-Bo-Krik, 2023).

Cite this article: Cooper, Frederick 2025. "Decolonizing Decolonization." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1–26, doi:10.1017/S0010417525100108