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FOREWORD

The Late Colonial State Revisited

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Abstract

The idea of a 'late colonial state' has been surprisingly durable. It is also the case that the meaning and significance of decolonisation – indeed our understanding of when it took place and how long it lasted – has been widened and deepened. We no longer tend to think of it as a purely political let alone constitutional event, but as a much broader shift in the relations between the 'colonial world' and its (former) masters and as having many more dimensions: economic, cultural, demographic among them. Needless to say, we are no closer to an agreed explanation than we were twenty-five or fifty years ago: the primacy of nationalist resistance, or of metropolitan politics or of geopolitical change still have their adherents even if it was the ricochet effect of all three on each other that offers the most plausible analysis. However, regardless of which account is favoured it seems clear that the nature of the 'end game' of the colonial state is the best place in which to search for answers. The late colonial state still has work to do.

Keywords: decolonisation; colonial State; British colonialism; end of Empire; late colonialism

The idea of a 'late colonial state' has been surprisingly durable. The first version of this article was published some twenty-four years ago in what seems like a different era in the scholarship on colonialism. Of course, interest in the colonial state has hardly disappeared in the meantime, even if it has been overshadowed at times by preoccupation with other aspects of colonialism. It is also the case that the meaning and significance of decolonisation – indeed our understanding of when it took place and how long it lasted – has been widened and deepened. We no longer tend to think of it as a purely political let alone constitutional event but as a much broader shift in the relations between the 'colonial world' and its (former) masters and as having many more dimensions: economic, cultural, demographic among them.[1] Yet it must remain true that the demolition or dismantling of the key control mechanism through which external authority was imposed on a colonial society was a central aspect of the end of the 'colonial world order', and the reasons behind that dismantling and its timing must still command scholarly attention. Needless to say, we are no closer to an agreed explanation than we were twenty-five or fifty years ago: the primacy of nationalist resistance, or of metropolitan politics, or of geopolitical change still have their adherents even if it was the ricochet effect of all three on each other that offers the most plausible analysis.[2] However, regardless of which account is favoured it seems clear

[1] Argued in John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: the Retreat from Empire in the Post-war World* (Basingstoke, 1988).
[2] As suggested in John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: the Historical Debate* (Oxford, 1991).

that the nature of the 'end game' of the colonial state is the best place in which to search for answers. The *late* colonial state still has work to do.

Perhaps the starting point is to remind ourselves how the colonial state is usually depicted. Typically, it is seen as a bundle of districts 'sellotaped' together for administrative convenience (or reflecting the limits of an agreed partition) with minimal attention to ethnic and cultural unities and differences. It thus lacked any cultural coherence. Secondly, it was for the most part a lightly-governed 'shallow' state, chiefly because its very narrow tax base precluded an extensive or penetrating administrative apparatus and its European officialdom was disproportionately costly. Thirdly, it tended to be both decentralised (because centralisation was too expensive) and authoritarian with minimal representative institutions or none at all. Fourthly, its main activity, beyond maintaining minimal order was to mobilise labour by imposing hut or poll taxes, or by forms of labour conscription for tasks like roadbuilding. Fifthly, although vague statements about a self-governing future were occasionally mouthed, in reality the prospects of that – let alone of sovereign independence – were seen as almost infinitely remote, so remote, in fact, as to have no influence at all upon the actual political life of the colony. Finally, the colonial state existed in a geopolitical 'deep freeze'. That is to say that its 'liberation' was not and could not be an issue in international politics, and it was effectively closed off from contact with any external influence except that of its imperial metropole.[3]

Of course, this stereotype is largely drawn from the experience of sub-Saharan Africa. In reality, the colonial state before 1939 displayed an enormous variety of forms. Even if we confine ourselves to the British Empire the variations were remarkable. There were to begin with at least 100 different jurisdictions under British paramountcy – leaving aside the some 600 Indian princely states. At the top of the constitutional tree were the 'white dominions', still owing allegiance to the British crown, although free from administrative interference from London. There was a 'semi-dominion', Southern Rhodesia, whose internal autonomy was hedged about by imperial oversight over 'native policy'. There were 'mandates' for which London was technically answerable to the League of Nations, a minimal constraint. There were condominia: the most important was the 'Anglo-Egyptian Sudan', ruled in practice by British officials. There was a company state in British North Borneo. There were numerous 'protectorates' whose constitutional form was usually indistinguishable from the crown colony. The largest category was the 'crown colony'. Its formal characteristic was that even where there were representative institutions, the executive in the form of the governor and his advisers enjoyed an 'official majority' in the representative body (where there was one) and could overrule local opinion if necessary. Nevertheless, even crown colonies displayed a remarkable diversity. In some, there was no local representation; in others (more typically) a body of nominated representatives, chosen to reflect different interests and regions. More rarely they were accompanied on the 'legislative council' by elected members on a restricted franchise. Thus in the British West Indies alone there were at least three different forms of governance: in the Bahamas, Bermuda, and Barbados, a form of representative government in which the elected assembly (on a narrow franchise) enjoyed wide powers including over finance; in Jamaica and British Guiana (Guyana) 'semi-representative' government in which the elected members (drawn from a small electorate) shared power with the executive; and so-called 'pure crown colony government' which applied to all the rest.[4] In every colony, however, there was a mass of local practice, often

[3] An excellent survey can be found in Heather J. Sharkey, 'The African Colonial State' in John Parker and Richard Reid (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* (Oxford, 2013).

[4] See the detailed account in Hume Wrong, *Government of the West Indies* (Oxford, 1923).

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dating from the time of conquest or settlement, that was carefully observed to avoid controversy.[5] For what was true of the West Indies was equally true elsewhere: colonial society and its politics inevitably reflected the particular patterns of ethnicity and ethnic relations (especially the presence or otherwise of European settlers), the stage of economic development and cultural variations such as religious allegiance and levels of literacy. It was hardly to be expected that political life in Aden or British Somaliland would have much in common with that in Sri Lanka, Bechuanaland or Trinidad.

And then there was India, a colony *sui generis* but an influential model to both rulers and ruled. India was one empire but two systems: directly-ruled 'British India', and 'Princely India', ruled by local dynasts but under the watchful eye of a British 'Resident'. The eleven provinces of British India (twelve until the separation of Burma in 1937) varied hugely in population size and contained within them wide differences in language, culture and religious allegiance, as well as different patterns of landownership and revenue collection. Almost everywhere British rule encountered educated articulate local elites whose cooperation was required, and who had extracted limited forms of local representation before 1914. Moreover, quite unlike other directly-ruled colonies, the colonial Government of India conducted its own foreign policy in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Nepal and the Tibetan borderlands, and took a close interest in the emigration of Indians to East Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, the Indian Government had its own army, almost as big as Britain's, made available (on terms) for imperial purposes. Other colonial governors might tremble at a rebuke from London: the Viceroy of India, typically a British politician of the second eleven, was practically irremovable – unless, like Lord Curzon, he threatened resignation once too often.

So, what distinguished the *late* colonial state from its earlier varieties? Perhaps seven criteria suggest themselves. We might apply the simplest of rules and reply: chronology. Late colonial states were those that staggered on after the moment when the viability of colonial empires could no longer be taken for granted or was in obvious freefall. But when was that date? It was once forcefully argued that 1918 was the turning point. The new principle of self-determination enshrined in the League of Nations, the Bolshevik revolution and the surge of nationalist movements in the aftermath of war signalled that colonial empires were on the ropes. However, some old empires survived by deploying new tactics and new ones were born and the British Empire after 1918 was larger than ever before. 1945 seems much more promising. But strangely, across much of Britain's tropical empire, colonial rule was infused with much greater energy and much more resources than before 1939. Was the late colonial state a *dynamic* departure from its older slothful form?

A second possibility is to apply the criterion of staged institutional development. We can recognise 'lateness' in the extent to which a colonial territory had been endowed with increasing doses of political representation. The wider the franchise, the larger the electorate, the more extensive the powers delegated to local elected politicians, the weaker the ties that held the colony to its metropole – or so we might argue. The colony had entered a phase when it was *too late* to restore imperial authority. The late colonial state was thus one visibly slipping out of control and moving ineluctably towards independence. However, as we will see in a moment, plausible as it seems, institutional progression is an unreliable guide to 'lateness,' if lateness means proximity to independence.

Thirdly, we might simplify matters and say once the *promise* of independence (or self-government) has been given, the colony slips inevitably into a state of lateness. Its politics

[5] For an impression of the diversity, the best introduction is F. Madden (ed.) *Select Documents on the Constitutional History of the British Empire*, V: *The Dependent Empire and Ireland 1840-1900* (Westport CT, 1991); and F. Madden (ed.) *Select Documents on the Constitutional History of the British Empire and Commonwealth*, VII: *The Dependent Empire 1900-1948* (Westport CT, 1994).

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and administrative machinery are now predicated on a gradual (or perhaps speedy) advance towards the termination of external authority, and, partly in consequence, a vast new range of issues, hitherto deemed irrelevant or beyond the remit of colonial governance, force their way onto the political agenda. Lateness is signalled by this seismic change in the *scope* of politics. Perhaps.

Fourthly, we might switch our focus to the behaviour and characteristics of the colonial state. Is it a change in its character that betrays its lateness if only in retrospect? The 'early' colonial state (here we fall back on the African stereotype) was a 'conquest' state. It struggled to assert its authority against local resistance, usually with very inadequate means and with primitive communications at best. Success was survival, or the enforcement of a patchy and inequitable colonial pax. Out of this was born the necessity of decentralisation and the bargains with local 'big men' later rationalised as 'indirect rule'. Only where white settlement was projected, as in Kenya and the Rhodesias, was the colonial state propelled into more intervention – if only to seize land for the whites – and only there did the tiny battalions of white immigrants enlarge its exiguous strength 'on the ground'. In the interwar years, hammered by depression, and forced into retrenchment, the colonial state becomes a 'night watchman'. As critics like W. M. Macmillan lamented, the lofty ideal of bringing 'moral and material progress' (coincidentally the title of the Government of India's annual reports) to benighted Africans, the philosophical warrant for colonial rule, had been tacitly abandoned.[6] But after 1945, there is a dramatic reversal. The colonial state becomes hyperactive. Its manpower grows (as do the number of white settlers). It intervenes and interferes, regulates and controls, as if in a hurry – which it was. The question is: towards what was it hurrying, or did it think it was hurrying?

Fifthly, we might see lateness in the deliberate building of a more *unified* state to replace the old decentralised versions with their patchwork of jurisdictions, customs and practices, inimical to effective rule. One symptom of this was the enthusiasm for the federations that proliferated across the British Empire and the French empire in Africa. Another was the ending of the old distinction between the governance of the coastal 'colony' and the inland 'protectorate' to be found in the case of the Gold Coast (not one but two inland jurisdictions), Sierra Leone, and Gambia. At a more local level, it might aim at binding systems of local consultation more closely to an administrative spine to achieve greater uniformity in administrative practice. Here too the colonial state seems to have thrown off its sloth and become energised – but to what end?

Sixthly, and not unrelated perhaps, we might see the late colonial state as driven by a new economic agenda. Where older versions were too weak or too indifferent to give serious attention to mining the resources of the colonial territory, lateness meant a new emphasis upon both economic development and exploitation – the extraction of commodities that could be paid for at a level below world prices and explicitly to shore up the trade and currency of the metropole. In this scenario, the colonial state had become 'developmental'. But whether development had infected the state with a fatal disease so that lateness was the prelude to mortality is rather less clear.

Finally, we might speculate that the least attractive symptom of lateness was a recourse to repression, that if anything marked out the late colonial state from its predecessors it was the deployment of a much larger apparatus of coercive control. Thus, the late colonial state was – on this argument – both better armed and more violent.[7] It could impose 'emergency powers' that drastically limited civil rights and conferred immunity on its security forces

[6] See William Miller Macmillan, *Africa Emergent: A Survey of Social, Political, and Economic Trends in British* Africa (London, Penguin Books, 1938).

[7] For a recent argument along these lines, Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (London, 2022).

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in the suppression of political opposition. And in a variety of settings far beyond Africa it did just that. However, was colonial rule really more prone to violence in its later or last phases than earlier? And was it the case that *typically* it enjoyed an extensive armoury of surveillance and repression?

As this discussion implies, there are objections to all or most of these definitions. Simple chronology is perhaps the least satisfactory. It tells us nothing about the way in which colonialisms' functions (might) have changed or how it was experienced by the subject populations. It is compatible with a wide variety of state behaviours and offers no template for comparison. Even if we could agree upon a common date on which the British Empire had become defunct – c.1960 might be the least contentious choice – several colonies including the giant colony of India became independent well before then, some remained under colonial rule long afterwards, and a few are colonies still. There is also the difficulty that we have avoided thus far of how to characterise two awkward categories: the colony by consent (Gibraltar and the Falklands and perhaps even pre-1997 Hong Kong are cases in point); and those territories where – as in the Persian Gulf – British *influence* was paramount until the late 1960s or after. Two other awkward cases stretch the limits of chronology and also our definition of the colonial state. There are, after all, good grounds on which to apply the term to (Southern) Rhodesia and to the Union, later Republic, of South Africa.

A certain stage of institutional development seems at first sight more promising. Once a substantial degree of representative government has been conceded, perhaps with elected ministers in charge of certain portfolios, then the nature of the colonial state has certainly changed. The agents of the colonial power must now 'play politics' if they are to preserve their authority. They must pay attention to arcane topics they could once afford to forget: the careful delineation of constituencies and represented groups; the efficiency of the government's propaganda machine; the precise terms of the constitutional instruments (in the British case often an 'Order in Council', less often a statute) and the scope they offered for executive power; the conditions in which they could invoke emergency powers. In short, they had to exchange the exercise of power for what was more like a 'war of manoeuvre'.

It would be easy to say that once forced into the political ring, the colonial state's days were inevitably numbered. Nonetheless, we should hesitate. The case of India – for all the growth of Congress nationalism in the interwar years – offered a salutary lesson. The *Raj* had conceded the principle of elected representation before 1914, but had arranged the constituencies to restrict the voice of 'uncooperative' opinion. It went much further in 1919, granting elected ministers wide powers over the internal administration of the provinces of British India, although not finance or security. A powerful mass campaign of 'non-cooperation' under Gandhi failed to demolish this system, partly because many Indian politicians saw social, sectional, or religious advantages in working it. Indeed, there were many signs that the more that local opinion was mobilised by *elective* politics, the more difficult it would be to insist on the primacy of the struggle for independence over the pursuit of more immediate material objectives. And the more likely it was that local opinion would splinter along lines of class, caste, religion, or ethnicity. Even the huge concession of full 'responsible government' (i.e. elected ministerial control) in the provinces in 1937 struck many leading figures in the Indian National Congress as more likely to derail the achievement of independence than advance it by encouraging the divergence in provincial interests and priorities.[8] In short, colonial politicians could find that under the new rules of the game they were forced to play each other not the old enemy, while the colonial power became the referee with an endless supply of red cards to wield if an essential imperial interest were threatened.

[8] This was why Jawaharlal Nehru denounced the 1935 reforms as a 'charter for slavery' and sought unsuccessfully to persuade other Congress leaders to boycott the 1937 elections.

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Just how limited the role of constitutional status can be in predicting the realities of the colonial condition can be seen from the (perhaps extreme) case of Egypt. Before 1914 Egypt had been technically a province of the Ottoman Empire. Its hereditary viceroy, the khedive, had enjoyed autonomy in practice since the 1820s. Notoriously, in 1882, it was subjected to a 'temporary occupation' by Britain, imposed officially until a bankrupt Egyptian government could reorder its finances and resume payments to its foreign bondholders. In reality, the British grip on its administration had tightened even while a diplomatic fiction of Egyptian autonomy was maintained, and Lord Cromer – formally a mere 'consul-general' – exerted authority behind a veil of benign 'advice'. At the outbreak of the First World War, the formal allegiance of the khedive and his ministers to the Ottoman sultan became an embarrassment: Egypt was summarily declared a British protectorate and the khedive replaced by a pliant relative, carefully renamed as 'sultan'. But after the violent uprising in 1919, and two years of 'non-cooperation' by pasha politicians, London conceded Egyptian 'independence'. With strings. Egypt's foreign policy had to conform to British requirements; and the Suez Canal was out of bounds to Egyptian ministers. To make sure these rules were observed, a British garrison was stationed in the centre of Cairo, a stone's throw from the royal palace. As late as 1935, the British High Commissioner made clear to the sultan now 'king' that appointing an unfriendly government would mean an early termination of his reign in favour of a more cooperative candidate. 'J'accepte', said the king.[9] It's not hard to imagine that in different geopolitical circumstances, the realities of African independence might have been similar.

Perhaps we might be on stronger ground if we view the late colonial state as being characteristically a 'bigger state'. That is a state that took on more functions, especially in the sphere of social policy, education, health and economic development. That would mean much more intervention at the local level, a closer engagement with local rulers and elites, and more interference to ensure that policies of 'improvement' would not be stymied by 'conservative' resistance. In practice, that meant an attempt to rally 'forward-looking' allies in the localities, whose support and cooperation were essential to government's projects. Indeed, in colonial India British rule had long been much more interventionist than in sub-Saharan Africa, building irrigation canals, regulating landownership, promoting cooperatives and other initiatives. This phenomenon has been familiar to historians of Africa ever since our understanding of the post-1945 landscape was transformed by the concept of the 'second colonial occupation'.[10] The newly energised colonial state, with the help of metropolitan funding, deployed armies of agronomists, veterinarians, and other experts in economic development to shake rural Africa out of its 'lethargy' and stimulate its production of commodities in a world of shortages. To make this work, as the model might predict, required a second transformation of local government to liberate rural populations from the 'dead hand' of indirect rule. Together these twin innovations confronted a range of vested interests and alarmed rural cultivators fearful of departure from a familiar technology and suspicious of the motives behind this burst of colonial energy. Furthermore, that it coincided with a period of pressure on living standards, and government control over the market price of export produce, reinforced the impression of a regime that had become – for all its fine words – more oppressive than before.

In retrospect we can see that the political corollary of this bigger state was a mobilisation of rural opinion and increasing hostility to colonial authority. And we might draw the conclusion that 'bigness' led inexorably to 'lateness' – in the sense that the colonial

[9] Sir Percy Lampson's Diary, 18 April 1935, Killearn Collection, Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford.

[10] Originally set out in D. A. Low and John Lonsdale, 'Introduction: towards the new order 1945-1963' in D. A. Low and Alison Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa*, Vol III, (Oxford, 1976), 12-16.

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state had locked itself in the last chance saloon. But once again we might hesitate since there was nothing *inevitable* about the equation. In India, British officialdom between the wars was confident that widening the role of the state, drawing more local participants into its projects, and attending to the needs of the less privileged (not least women and some Muslims) would have two important effects. Firstly, it would mobilise groups who would challenge existing local elites (and their all-India allies in the Congress) and take advantage of widening representation to do so. Secondly, as the distribution of scarce resources became the key battleground in local and provincial politics, the appeal of independence tomorrow or the day after would recede. Indeed, by handing over local government incrementally to Indian politicians, and retreating to the high ground of defence and external economic relations, the *Raj* would become practically invisible to most Indians, largely irrelevant to everyday politics. Of course, we know that did not happen in India or Africa. However, it is interesting to ask why.

A large part of the motive behind the bigger colonial state was to make the colonial economy more efficient and productive – an *imperial* interest as much as a colonial one. The same can be said of the drive to unify and consolidate colonial states, a drive that grew much stronger in Africa after 1945. We might argue that in doing so colonial regimes inadvertently made themselves much more vulnerable to demands for liberation and independence. By advertising the role of central authority, they emphasised the need for local discontents to fuse their grievances in an onslaught on the high command of the colony, and in a demand for self-rule. Secondly, they (unwittingly?) lent credibility to the claim that the colony was more than a 'bundle of districts' and was instead a 'nation in waiting', the legitimate successor to an illegitimate *imperium.* It seems plausible, then, to see the push towards more administratively cohesive states as the intended or unintended prelude to attainment of independence which followed soon after. Indeed, in the artful depiction of British colonial policy as a staged, deliberate, advance towards sovereign independence – the product of Harold Macmillan's rich imagination – it could be claimed as a forward-thinking recognition of the needs of a modern nation. However, many 'late' (i.e., post-1945) colonial states in British Africa seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. In the Gold Coast/Ghana, the British toyed late in the day with a federal structure. They thought about something similar in Kenya and hoped to pull all three East African territories into a vast East African Federation. The implicit intention was to moderate any tendency towards 'extreme' post-independence nationalisms, by removing key aspects of government to a higher level remote from local pressures and more amenable to external (British) influence. And in central Africa, three colonial states were 'consolidated' into a white ruled federation where political advance by Africans was expected to be regulated by its white minority – an ambition not finally demolished until after 1960. For Africans in Central Africa the 'late' colonial state, far from holding out the prospect of early majority rule and independence, threatened the indefinite extension of a 'liberated' white settler colonialism.

Finally, we should return to the suggestion that the late colonial state was better armed and more violent than its predecessors. It is certainly true that in variety of locations it deployed a range of emergency powers first made available in 1939 and engaged in forceful campaigns to suppress opposition – campaigns disfigured by atrocities on both sides. It can be argued that British (and by extension other) colonialisms had always been characterised by the ready use of violence – although the same might be said of all forms of state, colonial, non-colonial or post-colonial. And because it was authoritarian in nature colonial rule relied upon both collaboration and coercion – or perhaps collaboration reinforced by the threat of coercion. But the image of a colonial state that was always able to overawe its subject population by its physical power is misleading. In Malaya, Kenya, British Guiana, Cyprus and later Aden, its hand was heavy but only because it received massive reinforcement

from Britain's huge post-war army in the only period of peacetime conscription in modern British history. Elsewhere, the security forces available to governors were usually small and ill-equipped.[11] It was precisely their vulnerability to mass demonstrations, let alone open resistance, that accelerated London's decision to concede independence as soon as successor regimes could be assembled.[12]

Perhaps what really characterised the late colonial state was the mismatch between its ambitions and its strength. The attempt to transform colonial societies, even in the limited ways that colonial policy envisaged, was always likely to demand much greater resources than were available. The ramshackle under-engined regimes of the inter-war years could not be turned overnight into vanguards of modernity. And they certainly lacked the reserves of force and terror that Stalin had deployed in the forced industrialisation of the Soviet Union. But 'lateness' really resided in three other conditions that we have neglected thus far.

The first of these is the extent to which the colonial state had lost, arguably before 1939 in some places, certainly after 1945 in most, the crucial protection of international isolation. Of course that had never been complete. It had almost always been possible for outside influences, including hostile ideologies, to slip into colonial territories despite the best efforts of police and censors. However, except for brief moments of excitement, like the 'Wilsonian moment' of 1919, the subject status of colonial Africa had not become an international issue. The Soviet Union's endorsement of anti-imperialism alarmed British officials in India but had little impact in sub-Saharan Africa in the inter-war years. After 1936, the Axis powers might denounce the unfairness of the global 'share-out'. But until Japan's invasion of Southeast Asia, they appeared even more ardent colonisers than the old colonial powers. Famously, all that was to change after 1945, with the charter of the United Nations, and a new global rhetoric of sovereignty, self-determination and human rights to which the colonial powers, with Britain in the lead, had signed up. In this new era of globalism, the colonial state could no longer remain secluded from international diplomacy, off-limits to all but its masters.

This change was hugely reinforced by the near simultaneous outbreak of the Cold War. As East and West grappled for material and ideological advantage, the colonial world was both a tempting prize and a vast zone of weakness for the old colonial powers. At the very moment when the colonial state had embarked upon its risk-laden venture into socio-economic upheaval, it thus became a prime target for external subversion – or so it was feared.[13] To policymakers in the West, especially in Washington, the threat of communism could only be met by the counterforce of nationalism. If offered power by a liberal West nationalist movements would reject communism in favour of the material benefits the West could bestow. For Britain, which still aspired to be a global power exerting influence around the world, the political cost of being seen to repress colonial nationalist movements, as well as the physical cost of trying to do so, had become unaffordable.

The late colonial state was thus one beset by these complex and sometimes conflicting pressures over which it had almost no control. The secret of its survival, perhaps most obvious in the case of India, had been above all the freedom to manage its local politics. Colonial rulers usually understood that they had to observe certain golden rules to avoid serious

[11] The standard garrison of the Nyasaland Protectorate (Colonial Malawi) soon to be in the eye of the storm, was one battalion of the King's African Rifles and the police force, both overwhelmingly composed of Africans.

[12] 'Over everything broods the threat of Mau Mau', the Colonial Secretary told his Cabinet colleagues in February 1962, insisting that there could be no delay in Kenyan independence. Cited in John Darwin, *The Empire Project* (Cambridge, 2009), 625.

[13] UK Public Record Office, F[oreign] O[ffice] 371/137970, Note by Foreign Office 'the Next Ten Years in Africa: talks with the Americans', 12 October 1959.

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trouble – or the unwelcome intervention of the metropolitan government. They recognised instinctively that colonial regimes had quite different priorities from their faraway masters in London, whose understanding they disparaged and not without reason - (Colonial Office officials rarely served in or visited colonies). Far from regarding themselves as mere agents of the imperial centre, they were aware that a conflict of interests was always at hand, if only because metropolitan politics was prey to gusts of enthusiasm or the influence of lobbies. Benign neglect by London was thus the optimum climate in which to manage local opinion and make adjustments to head off any serious discontent. One golden rule above all was to avoid engaging in forms of interference that might ignite a *general* discontent, or threaten the interests of local elites.

After 1945, however, this was exactly what they were commanded to do in a climate of economic emergency. Bit by bit their discretion was cut down by metropolitan demands. Where rebellion broke out, and they had to be salvaged by imperial troops, the political agenda was set in London. It was already the case that the ideological needs of the Cold War required them to promise new constitutions designed in London not locally and over which they had far less influence than the Government of India had enjoyed over successive reform acts between the wars. As the Cold War hotted up, and the political consequences of the second colonial occupation made themselves felt, London grew ever more nervous until its nerve snapped completely after 1960. By this point colonial regimes had indeed become mere agents of the metropolitan will.

The late colonial state, in short, was one that had lost its autonomy and any freedom of political manoeuvre. It could no longer find new allies, punish its enemies, or deal out rewards without sanction from above by policymakers contemptuous of local expertise and driven by strategic or geostrategic objectives far above the paygrade of colonial officials. It was this more than anything else that defined their 'lateness'.

What should we add to this story? What has been sketched above are the political bare bones. As other contributions in this issue will show, there is much more to be said about the complexion of the colonial state in its last kaleidoscopic incarnation. The story above is a British story. How different was it from the experience of other colonial powers, not least Portugal whose empire outlasted its much grander peers? The international setting and its pressures, briefly described here, were bound to have somewhat different effects in different places depending on their proximity to the shifting zones of Cold War confrontation. Some colonies had much greater strategic significance than others (Aden was a paramount example). The late colonial state also found itself grappling with environmental and demographic pressures, potentially sources of widespread rural unrest whether left unheeded or subjected to forceful intervention. Its efforts to improve public health, including mental health, might throw an interesting light on its social priorities. The same could be said for its education policies, including those aimed at training a graduate elite. Across much of British colonial Africa, the years after 1945 saw the rapid development of new agricultural and mineral economies, and new transport links as the lorry arrived to extend the reach of a skeletal railway system. In the mines, in the docks and on the railways, African labour expanded and with it trades unionism, placing new demands on the colonial state. The late colonial political economy was thus drastically different – at least in some places – from its pre-1939 configuration. How far had that destabilised a colonial state that had grown up on a very different economic base? Perhaps, more to the point, what impact had the changed conditions of the post-war world, and the expansion of its commitments, had on its revenues and tax base? Had its room for manoeuvre in the conciliation of local interests been widened or narrowed?

Lastly, we might explore, and perhaps comparatively, the laws and legal framework with which the colonial state entered its final furlong. Did the colonial state acquire a major new superstructure of law and regulation? At what point, if ever, did the new language of

human rights appear in its lexicon? One of the most striking features of the Devlin Report on the Nyasaland Emergency in 1959 was its implicit assumption that the rough and ready methods of colonial policing were no more acceptable in a colony than they would have been at home in Britain.[14] To most colonial officials, one might surmise, this was a staggering reversal of an unspoken axiom of colonial governance. But is that true? Had the post-war contingent in the Colonial Service brought with it a more 'universalistic' and less racist understanding of how administrative power should be exerted?

A final footnote. How far and for how long, we might ask, did the late colonial state live on in its post-independence successor-state.[15] How powerful was its influence on the post-colony? That is not to suggest that the new ruling elite lacked the power to change rules and institutions they disliked. Or, contrary to a recent and implausible claim, that contemporary oppressions in successor states can be laid at the door of former colonial rulers, as if sixty years was too short to revise colonial laws. A more subtle case can be made that those who prospered under late colonialism were often well-placed to thrive in the new regime. But that, perhaps, is another story.

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[14] Hence the Report's notorious statement that Nyasaland had become a 'police state', a term of abuse hitherto reserved for totalitarian regimes and a far cry from the self-image of colonial rule officially propagated in Britain.

[15] A subtle analysis of post-colonial Africa's condition is John Lonsdale, 'Have tropical Africa's nationalisms continued imperialism's world revolution by other means?' *Nations and Nationalism* 21, 4 (2015), 609–29.

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