



### Summary

*Contrary to the standard narrative of decolonization that represent colonialism as a bilateral relationship of alien rule between a metropole and a colony, colonization involves unequal integration and racial hierarchy. Although it was argued that during the interwar period, the empire was institutionally flexible without direct foreign rule, it always involved processes of unequal legal, political, and economic integration that produced a hierarchically ordered international society as we have seen, for example, Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia, which were all formally independent and even members of the League of Nations, but subject to various forms of intervention, oversight, and outright occupation.*

*The new notion of empire, called anticolonial worldmaking”—a project of securing an egalitarian world order had had three features—the introduction of a legal right to self-determination, the formation of regional federations in Africa and the Caribbean and finally the inauguration of a New International Economic Order. Based on this notion, the fall of self-determination and the origins of our contemporary international order can be found in the ideological and institutional transformations that began in the 1970s.*

### Worldmaking after Empire

by Professor Adom Getachew

*Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* was conceived in the context of over a decade of a resurgent American imperialism that had abdicated even a rhetorical commitment to international law. I conceive book in the context of the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011 which occurred on the centenary of the first use of air raids during Italy's invasion of Ottoman controlled Libya. Readers will remember that the 2011 bombing was justified by reference to the new international norm of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P). R2P had three elements. The first pillar locates primary responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocity crimes with each individual state. Second, the international community must "encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility and support the United Nations in establishing an early warning capability." Finally, the third pillar called for "collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council" when a state manifestly fails to meet its responsibility to protect.<sup>1</sup> While a novel formulation and an effort to more clearly delineate a legal framework for what was called "humanitarian intervention" in the 1990s, the new principle represented the post-Cold War waning of sovereign equality and non-intervention as central principles of the international order.

Within the field of political theory, this period, especially the late 1990s and early 2000s, saw the emerge of renewed interest in cosmopolitanism in which the normative diminution of sovereign and sovereign equality was viewed as the coming of a post-Westphalia order. While raising important questions about the universality of human rights and about the possibility of recognizing individuals as subject of international law, this field did not directly reckon with these histories of European imperialism and their legacies. Specifically, the story of the post-World War II world that underwrote cosmopolitan political theory was one in which an international order premised on the governing relations between states was gradually transformed to accommodate and protect the rights of individuals. This historical account was deeply tied to European experience of the post war period. It was one that saw cosmopolitanism and internationalism as primarily responses to the crisis of the Holocaust and inter-state war. The problem of the twentieth century was from this view an excessive and constrained state. And the question of cosmopolitan theory is how to create legal and political restraints on the sovereign state.

*Worldmaking* tries to point to a different set of dilemmas of international politics that emerge when we take empire and the struggle against it as the problem of the twentieth century. After all most of the world could not be said to enjoy sovereignty at the close of the Second World War. Moreover, as anti-imperial critics from the African American W. E. B. Du Bois to the Martinican Aimé Césaire had argued even the European story of war





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could not be reduced to the question of inter-state relations or delimited to Europe. Instead, they (along with other critics) developed an account of the colonial origins of the crises of World War II. For Du Bois, “there was no Nazi atrocity of concentration camps, no wholesale maiming and murder” that was not practiced first “against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”<sup>22</sup> For Césaire, “colonial enterprise is to the modern world what Roman imperialism was to the ancient world: the prelude to Disaster and the forerunner of Catastrophe.”<sup>23</sup> Along these lines, the Trinidadian Marxist and advisor to Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore coined the terms “colonial fascism” to describe and analyze British imperial rule across Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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In *Worldmaking*, I begin with the questions what vision of the world emerged when empire is the central preoccupation. This generates a second question of how empire was conceived. Focusing on African, African American, and Caribbean intellectuals and statesmen including Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), Du Bois (United States), Michael Manley (Jamaica), Nkrumah (Ghana), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), and Eric Williams (Trinidad), among others, I chart a distinctive approach to the problem of empire. While a standard narrative of decolonization represent colonialism as a bilateral relationship of alien rule between a metropole and a colony, I reconstruct a wider conception of imperialism, which involves unequal integration and racial hierarchy. Black anticolonial critics in the interwar period argued the empire was institutionally flexible. It did not always take the form of direct foreign

rule, but it always involved processes of unequal legal, political, and economic integration that produced a hierarchically ordered international society. Exemplary of this form of “unequal integration” was examples of independent African and Caribbean states (Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia) which were all formally independent and even members of the League of Nations, but subject to various forms of intervention, oversight, and outright occupation.

To speak of racial hierarchy as a central feature of the international order was not from the perspective of the intellectuals I study limited to the state and experience of the three African and Caribbean states. Instead, it was the story of a global color line the emerged from the history of the transatlantic slave trade. For example, both Du Bois and Padmore, argued that economic exploitation of black labor linked new world slavery and colonialism. According to Padmore, while emancipation in the Americas was thought to have ended “the slave status of the African,” imperial expansion in Africa “forced the Natives into wage-slavery.”<sup>25</sup> New world slavery and colonialism were sequentially and structurally linked. The new imperialism followed on the heels of emancipation and the failure to expand political and economic citizenship to newly freed slaves in the United States and other states in the Americas. The Scramble for Africa globalized the racial hierarchies that emerged in the wake of emancipation. In this regard, W. E. B Du Bois’s oft quoted line “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” was less a metaphor than an analytic taken up during the interwar period by African and Caribbean anticolonial critics to recast the meaning of empire. Out of this recasting emerged an account of empire as enslavement in which the through-line linking New World slavery and the Scramble for Africa was a racialized structure of domination and exploitation.

This conception of empire frames and orients what I call “anticolonial worldmaking”—a project of securing an egalitarian world order. Anticolonial worldmaking had three features—the introduction of a legal right to self-determination, the formation of regional federations in Africa and the Caribbean and finally the



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inauguration of a New International Economic Order.

Broadly *Worldmaking* makes three interventions. First, when frame against the view of empire as enslavement, even the right to self-determination appears in a new light. The right to self-determination is largely viewed as an extension and elaboration of the existing international norms first articulated by Woodrow Wilson then enshrined in the United Nations Charter. As I show however securing the right to self-determination was a protracted process and one that marked a qualitative break the earlier invocation of self-determination, by universalizing independence and equality. Sovereign equality, I argued, was not a European innovation, but a project of Europe's peripheries. Beginning with Latin American states earlier in the twentieth century, the colonized world advanced the claim of international equality. In doing so they also deepened the meaning of international equality. The argued that sovereign equality was not just a claim to equal legal standing, but the grounds for equal decision-making power in international society and the basis for economic redistribution.

The right to self-determination is largely viewed as an extension and elaboration of the existing international norms first articulated by Woodrow Wilson then enshrined in the UN Charter. However, securing the right to self-determination was a protracted process and one that marked a qualitative break the earlier invocation of self-determination, by universalizing independence and equality.

Second, *Worldmaking* reveals the ways in which nation-building and worldmaking were twinned and entangled political projects. For many of the critics I survey nationalism and internationalism had to be

combined. Stated in its strongest terms this was because the international structure of empire had constituted the colonized nations. Especially in the context of the Caribbean, Williams and Manley conceived of the island-states as entirely produced out of imperial domination. From the peopling of the islands, after the extirpation of native peoples, to their entrapment in dependent economic relations, the "national" of the Caribbean was also always the international and imperial. Anticolonial worldmaking emerged, in my view, from a reckoning with the consequences of this extreme form of extraversion. Transformed into an analytic rather than a political program, this insight into the combination of internationalism and nationalism can be the basis of attending more closely to the crisis of the postcolonial political project. That is if nation-building and world-making were twinned and entangled political projects, we cannot assess the failures of the postcolonial states solely in terms of its internal dynamics. In order attunement to the specificity of postcolonial state formation is a central element of any effort to understand the political and economic crises that marked the "fall of self-determination."

Finally, this history of anticolonial worldmaking suggests that we might pinpoint a different origins story for certain elements of American imperialism in the post Cold War period. Specifically, it suggests that American defection from international law can be located to this moment of anticolonial worldmaking. While in 1945 the UN was a quintessentially American creation that sought to institutionalize a liberal international order, thirty years after its founding American policymakers and statesmen were confronted with an international organization that anticolonial nationalists had transformed into an arena for the politics of decolonization. In the 1960s, as postcolonial states deployed the new right to self-determination to challenge the remnants of alien rule, and in particular the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the gulf and conflict between anticolonial nationalists' refashioning of the UN as a site of "postcolonial revolution" and the United States' view of the international organization as "a forum of cooperation, collective security, and American-centered consensus" was clear.<sup>6</sup> Given the backlash against this anticolonial appropriation, and the loosening of the Cold



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War's restraints, what gradually followed was an American deflection from post-war international institutions. Rather than reclaim international institutions, American policymakers embraced "a new sovereigntism" that rejected the incorporation of international norms and advocated military intervention without international authorization.<sup>7</sup>

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From this perspective, the fall of self-determination and the origins of our contemporary international order can be found in the ideological and institutional transformations that began in the 1970s. There is much more work to do to recover and reconstruct the wide-ranging ambitions and utopian visions of a world after empire. In doing so, our aim should not be to simply regurgitate the visions of an earlier moments, but instead to use these as flashpoints that might recast our present.

Our contemporary world with global climate crisis, the resurgence of new forms of authoritarianism and civil wars will require different analytic perspectives. While for instance it is important to maintain a critique of imperialism, it should be combined with a robust anti-authoritarianism that refuses to shield the worst abuses of postcolonial states under the guise of sovereign equality. Moreover, where anticolonial worldmakers still held onto to the postcolonial state as the agent of international and domestic transformation, formations

like the Movement for Black Lives in the United States and the anti-police brutality movement #EndSARS in Nigeria are giving voice to a deep critique of the state. If in these ways, anticolonial worldmaking appears out of sync with our times, it should also be remembered that it inaugurated a critique of global inequality that remains with us in the demand for reparations, calls to cancel postcolonial debt, and the critique of the unequal burdens of climate change.

*(Endnotes)*

- 1 UN General Assembly. (2005), *2005 World Summit Outcome: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/60/1*, [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_60\\_1.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf). See also Adom Getachew, "The Limits of Sovereignty as Responsibility," *Constellations* 26 (June 2019): 225–240
- 2 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Colonies and Moral Responsibility" (1946), in *Du Bois's International Thought*, ed. Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitt (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
- 3 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 74.
- 4 George Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa* George Padmore (London: Wishart Books, 1936).
- 5 Padmore, *How Britain Rules Africa*, 386.
- 6 Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132.
- 7 Asli Bâli and Aziz Rana, "Constitutionalism and the American Imperial Imagination," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85 (March 2018): 257–92

**About the Author**

Professor Adom Getachew is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Virginia in 2009 and her Ph.D. at Yale University in 2015. She is a political theorist with research interests in the history of political thought, theories of race and empire, and postcolonial political theory. Her work focuses on the intellectual and political histories of Africa and the Caribbean. Her first book, "Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination", reconstructs an account of self-determination offered in the political thought of Black Atlantic anticolonial nationalists during the height of decolonization in the twentieth century. Professor Getachew has published in many academic journals and has received several international awards.



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

### Imagining A Common Horizon for Humanity and the Planet

The world is passing through an extremely troubled period in its history, with a seemingly new challenge encountered at every turn. Serious economic, social, cultural, environmental and political crises at a global level are exacerbated by those being felt in individual countries. The challenges we are facing take a variety of forms, from financial collapses to climate change, from international terrorism to regional conflicts, and from the refugee problem to xenophobia.

All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

Only through conscious, patient and collective effort can we overcome the problems of humanity. Now is the time for dignified people from the different cultures and geographies of the world to come together in solidarity. It is time to speak with full respect of human dignity, setting aside the importance we place in our individual identities. An alliance of people who see truth and justice as the major pillars of our kind, will be able to open the door to a new era of solidarity for humanity. A dignified future is possible. We believe that Turkey holds a special, if not privileged, position, based on its geographical, historical and cultural characteristics, and can serve as a host to this joint effort of humanity.

Our goal within the scope of this project is to bring together the leading thinkers of the world, to create an international intellectual platform that draws its strength from human dignity, and that aims to build for the future of humanity and the planet with a holistic synergy with a view to offering humanity a common horizon. As Cappadocia University, our vision in this regard is to provide an academic platform from where esteemed intellectuals from around the world can share their visions for a common future of humanity and our planet, and to comment on the challenges and opportunities they envisage.

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