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## Decolonization

Ryan Irwin

University at Albany, State University of New York, [rirwin@albany.edu](mailto:rirwin@albany.edu)

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<title>Decolonization</title>

<byline><first>Ryan</first><last>Irwin</last>

<affl>Assistant Professor</affl>

<affl2>University at Albany-SUNY</affl2></byline>

<p>Decolonization is often defined as the retreat of European colonialism. Coined in an academic encyclopedia in the early 1930s, the term gained traction among politicians and intellectuals after World War II as it became synonymous with the end of European colonial rule. In a strict sense, the phrase refers to the process where an imperial power, having conquered and imposed its will upon a territory, transfers control of that land to a legally sovereign national state.</p>

<h1>Decolonization's Meaning and Legacy</h1>

<p>Decolonization's precise contours and legacy are the subject of considerable debate. Some scholars see the process's origins in the American hemisphere during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but most associate the phrase with events in Asia and Africa between 1945 and 1975. Nationalists of this era took cues from one another<em>more so than their American forebears</em>and their efforts changed the international system, leading to the creation of approximately 195 nation-states, a dramatic expansion of the fifty or so nation-states that existed at the turn of the twentieth century. This transformation changed international politics, but it did not result in the redistribution of power and wealth. In the twenty-first century, scholars variously celebrate decolonization as the harbinger of postcolonial liberation or denounce it as a tool of neocolonial domination.</p>

<p>What accounts for this disagreement, and what does it reveal about twentieth-century decolonization? In part, the problem stems from terminology, which has changed considerably since the 1930s. When decolonization reached its apogee in the mid-twentieth century, social scientists and nationalist politicians shaped the phrase's meaning. Both groups tended to see progress as universal and inevitable, and assumed that economic modernization would spread naturally to colonized peoples if indigenous nation-states replaced European empires. These nation-states, the argument went, would possess distinct personalities, but they would advance together on a shared path of development.</p>

<p>These assumptions came under attack after the 1960s. As the optimism of decolonization faded, postcolonial scholars and statesmen, drawing often upon the writings of Frantz Fanon (1925<en>1961), Edward Said (1935<en>2003), and Walter Rodney (1942<en>1980), among others, turned a critical eye toward nationalism itself, critiquing everything from the institutions that colonialism left behind to the practices that curtailed freedom after independence. These critiques moved hand-in-hand with questions: Was secular nationalism a European invention? Did imperialism require territory or might it take subtler forms? Was liberation possible in a world defined by Western ideas? Each query hinted at anxieties about the end of empire and dissatisfaction with the intellectual tools of midcentury social science.</p>

<p>Beyond terminology, decolonization was complicated by the fact that historical actors had defined the concept differently. Some viewed European power through the prism of global governance. John A. Hobson (1858<en>1940), for instance, who authored influential tomes about modern empire during the early twentieth century, felt that colonialism was distinct from imperialism. He equated the former with European migration and resettlement<em>the supposed engines of American nationalism<em>and viewed the latter as a neologism for war in Asia and

Africa. Although the violence of Europe's "small wars" was innately unjust, he championed reform over liberation, and equated anti-imperialism with the creation of a rule-based international system rooted in peace, prosperity, and common values.

This formula did not impress all of Hobson's contemporaries. Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) argued that colonialism and imperialism were separated by time not violence, and he drew upon the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883) to suggest that both processes grew from the vagaries of capitalism. It was a farce, therefore, to equate decolonization—that is, the retreat of imperialism—with membership in a rule-based community that codified the power of the powerful. Both Hobson and Lenin lamented the West's industrialized militarism, yet they articulated different visions about empire's logic and future. Whereas Hobson saw no alternative to world interdependence and expressed the outlines of what would become liberal internationalism—Lenin embraced revolution and dedicated his life to freeing Russia from industrial capitalism.

Subsequent anti-imperialists struggled to reconcile this tension. India's Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) critiqued aspects of Hobson's thinking, especially his Eurocentrism, but similarly suggested that education and self-empowerment, not anticapitalist revolution, would liberate his countrymen. In his travels around the world, Tagore proselytized a vision of global interdependence where goods and ideas moved across borders, and people—irrespective of their backgrounds—fostered a common, multicultural civilization. China's Sun Yat-Sen (1866-1925), in contrast, fought to overthrow the Qing dynasty because it had failed to control the spread of European technology and trade after the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. Although China was not formally colonized in the nineteenth century, Sun Yat-Sen's supporters saw themselves as the victims of Western exploitation, and pointed to Japan as proof

that a thoroughly modern government, dedicated to economic and political reform, could emancipate and unify the Chinese people. Although Tagore and Sun Yat-Sen were visionaries who similarly rejected the hubris of Europe's civilizing mission, they defined imperial retreat differently, with the former pushing for greater equality in an interdependent age and the latter emphasizing autonomy, so China could pursue an independent path abroad.

## Reform, Revolution, or a Third Way?

By the time academics invented the word *decolonization*, European imperialism was beset differently on several fronts. Within Europe after World War I (1914-1918), reformers saw the League of Nations as an instrument to establish common standards of global governance. The Mandate system, in theory, promised to replace imperial exploitation with universal progress, thereby spreading economic modernity to non-European people while legitimizing the West's centrality to development everywhere. Some colonized people attacked this mindset through the League's petition system, which allowed colonial peoples to document colonial practices, while others mobilized mass movements in the streets. In South Asia, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) organized the peaceful drive for indigenous democracy, lamenting British chauvinism while insisting that Indians become equal partners in a federated world system. Farther north, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) spearheaded a communist revolution among China's northern peasants, drawing inspiration from the Soviet Union and anger from Sun Yat-Sen's successors. The line between formal and informal empire remained murky, as did decolonization's precise meaning. For some, it signified reform and interdependence; for others, it indicated freedom and power.

Regardless, European imperialism buckled after World War II (1939-1945). The ascension of the United States and Soviet Union heralded the birth of a Cold War, which

refracted the debate about decolonization. On one side, Washington tried to walk a tightrope, rebuilding Western Europe and Japan in its image while tentatively promoting the end of Europe's empires in Asia Pacific and the Middle East. American policy makers sought a political order where nation-states traded freely and interacted peacefully, and Washingtonians used security pacts, foreign aid, and UN diplomacy to promote their own multicultural alternative to the civilizing mission. Decolonization challenged this formula profoundly, and as new countries became UN members, it became harder to avoid the critique that the "free world" was nothing more than a rule-based community Washington defined.

Opposite the United States, the Soviet Union remained anticapitalism's lodestar. Despite the devastation wrought by the policies of Joseph Stalin (1878/9-1953) and the wars of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), Moscow had apparently industrialized without Western investment, making it a potent symbol at a time when decolonization appeared increasingly synonymous with UN membership and US money. Encouraged by Stalin, Mao's first act as China's premier was to wage war against the United Nations in Korea. He then launched a series of Stalinist land programs that transformed Chinese society. His actions terrified some, inspired others, and raised the questions: Had the superpowers hijacked the terms of decolonization? Did options exist beyond capitalism and communism?

An answer came at the Asia-Africa Conference of 1955. India, China, and other countries put their differences aside to articulate a "third way" between the United States and Soviet Union. This tentative alliance promoted racial equality and regional trade, and massaged earlier tensions about the proper contours of Europe's retreat. In theory, Asian and African countries would work in lockstep within and beyond the United Nations, taking control of that organization's agenda while renegotiating the terms of world trade. This development created

angst in Washington, nudging some policy makers to confront America's own race problem, and it inflated Moscow's ambitions, leading to overstretch in Latin America and Africa. Europe's statesmen, for their part, responded to this "third way" with bluster<em>invading the Suez region in 1956 while recasting empire as a cooperative enterprise<em>but in the words of Britain's Harold Macmillan (1894<en>1986), a "wind of change" had arrived, which culminated in the creation of dozens of national states in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia Pacific after 1960.</p>

## <h1>The Fragility of Postcolonial Sovereignty</h1>

<p>This transformation was a triumph. Decolonization empowered the fight against racism worldwide, which added urgency to America's own civil rights movement, and it remade politics at the UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice. However, tensions remained. War erupted along the Sino-Indian border in 1962, and the regional trade prophesized in the mid-1950s failed to materialize during the 1960s. Washington's decision to send soldiers into Vietnam, coming on the heels of the United Nations' multilateral (unsuccessful) Congo mission, seemed to confirm the fragility of postcolonial sovereignty, even as antiwar passions distracted from the deeper truth that governments everywhere were struggling to establish their legitimacy after independence. By the mid-1970s, African and Asian nation-states were experiencing déjà vu all over again. They were being subjected regularly to interventions from superpowers, multinational corporations, and international institutions<em>trends that have only accelerated since the end of the Cold War.</p>

<p>Was decolonization a chimera? Some pundits blame disillusionment on indigenous corruption; others point toward neocolonialism. Both sides are equipped with theories and data, yet their debate, which tends to focus on events after the 1960s, elides the fact that these

disagreements were woven into the decolonization process from the very beginning. Depending on one's vantage point, the movement against imperialism was either a campaign to redefine the terms of membership in a rule-based international community or a revolution against the economic and political sinews of that community. The Cold War gave this debate its trajectory<em>neither Washington nor Moscow wanted to perpetuate European rule after the 1940s<em>but this deeper tension is as alive today as it was in the mid-twentieth century, as seen in conversations about inequality, rights, law, and terrorism. Who governs our world and how can they do it better? More than a definition, this *question* is at the heart of decolonization.</p>

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