

Global Race Studies Workshop: Racism, Patriotism, and Black Protest, Part I

"Putting Contemporary Protests for Racial Justice in Perspective"

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Tillery Introduction (0:00-0:37)

Greer Presentation (0:40-21:04)

Thanks to Al and Philip for the invitation, what I will share is that I just finished up a book called "What a World Empire: The rise and Fall of Self-determination," that thinks about what anti-colonial nationalists thought what self-determination was in the 20th century. This is kind of a broad reflection on that, and as Al said the title is "A Political theory of Decolonization." From protests such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa, to demands for reparations.

Caribbean, the language of colonization has once again come into political vogue. These struggles around racial equality, representation, and economic justice. Decolonization, which means the transformation of the world into empires in the mid 20th century, is repurposed in these contexts by students and activists, wrestling with the limits of post-colonial transition. South African students, for example, have highlighted the persistence of empires racialized, systemic hierarchies, which manifests in the ongoing crisis of the privatization of higher education. The symbolic consolidation of white supremacy in public statues and memorials, as well as in the Eurocentric curriculum. Now it might be easy to dismiss these or limit these to suggest new phases of campus politics, but within South Africa these movements are part of a broader effort to come to terms with the political and economic policies of the post-apartheid movement. The last country to achieve post-colonial transition in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa is now reckoning with the failure to transform racial hierarchy, the corruption of black political and economic elites, and the limits of the ANC-led transformation. Although these trajectories of post-apartheid politics are distinctive to South Africa, they are also emblematic of a larger post-colonial process that spans from India to Brazil.

Now what's almost in unison with the decolonization as a framework and political struggle in the south, political theorists and other academics have also latched onto the language of decolonization in an effort to decolonize their own field. We have titles like Decolonizing Dialectics, Decolonizing Critical Theory, Decolonizing International Relations, naming only a few examples. Here, decolonization gestures toward a more epistemic project, where scholars are engaged in an effort to overcome the persistently Eurocentric disciplinary formations. So just to give an example of this kind of project, in decolonizing critical theory, Amy Allen, an immanent critique in the third generation of the Frankfurt School's fixture shows how some theorists rely upon a backward-looking history of historical progress, continues to reproduce the ideal of your own American modernity as a normative model. This immanent critique then sets the stage for the reworking of critical theory as a colonial project. While far removed from the struggle of South Africa and elsewhere, Allen's project and others in the same vein similarly come to terms with the limits of decolonization. This is following the likes of Amy Cesaire, Fanon, and others, who understand the projects of decolonization to entail an epistemic project that is concerned with realizing universal humanism, and this decolonizing political theory sends and arise is a strand of that critique and transformation. However, while we can find the roots of both invocations of decolonization and the epistemic context, it is somehow a revival of the anti-colonialism of the 20th century, there is

also an important gap between the two. Rather than tracking the political invocations of decolonization, the intellectual project is far removed from the efforts to come to terms with the limits of post-colonial politics. In large part, the intellectual enterprise understands the process of colonization in its contemporary iteration to be a critique of epistemic imperialism or Eurocentrism, in which overcoming the false and limited universalism of European political thought is prioritized and privileged. It should be noted that this is in part of the reflection of the belated arrival of post-colonial theory.

As a result, the mapping outlined in the work of Edward Said and others, who in the beginning of the 1980s came to frame "Empire" as knowledge power. In the words of David Scott, this theoretical project upped the old idea of colonialism as a structure of material exploitation and profit, an idea of colonialism as a structure of organized authoritative knowledge that operated exclusively to produce this fact of truth about the colonized. In keeping with this project, then, the more recent calls to decolonize political theory are similar engaged in an effort to look at colonial discourse and arrive at a universal universalism. This intellectual project, one that I participated in, has I think radically transformed the way we read and teach the European canon. However, the focus on decolonizing our respective disciplines has I think come at the expense of what the project of decolonization was in its own time. What its limits were, and what it means for us in the contemporary moment, particularly in the postcolonial world. In other words, the admirable and important task of decolonizing political theory has forgone or foreclosed the equally important task of articulating a political theory of decolonization. So, what I want to do today is try to give an account of why this is so, why is it that we decolonize political theory and try to suggest and outline what that might look like and suggest what might be gained from such a project. There are a number of reasons in political theories disciplinary formation that have contributed to the prioritizing of decolonization as a largely epistemic project; the fact that we are a field that reads texts and, or, that is the primary way in which we engage our project. But, instead of tracing the trajectory of this process to disciplinary formations, what I would like to highlight is how the acceptance of a standard account of colonization was in the mid-20th century makes a political theory of decolonization appear unnecessary and un-naturalistic. In other words, the ways in which we have come to narrate the history of anti-colonial pasts and the post-colonial present have bequeathed us, and renders decolonization itself a politically obsolete project. When colonization as a historical moment is mapped in political theory, it works to largely reproduce an account of that period as a transition from empire to nation. In this it is primarily geared to align with the rule, and anti-colonial nationalists are understood as conceptual and institutional appropriators who adopt the language of self-determination and the institutional norm of nation states from the American models. In this appropriation, anti-colonial nationalists are the agents of universalizing the nation-states form and realizing a west alien regime of sovereignty.

And this narrative kind of begins at the moment of decolonization, so in 1960, the Philosopher John Rawls writes on alien rule and the political scientist Edward E. Schattschneider writes on empires compared to a nation. These texts in explaining how alien rule came to be suddenly became illegitimate in the 20th century, both thinkers find their answer in the global diffusion of western ideals. So, they argue that the de-legitimation of alien rule in the 20th century was itself a product of the natural westernization of the world. European imperial expansion argued and fueled the spread of principles like self-determination, democracy and freedom, and made possible anti-colonial nationalist critique of alien rule. Rupert Emerson would say through global conquest that the dominant western powers worked to reshape the world in their own image and thus roused against themselves and nationalism. Which were both the

bitterest enemies of imperialism and perversely its finest fruit. Now key tenets of these early interpretations places emphasis on alien rule than attention to international conditions of empire that identification of decolonization and the globalization of the nation state continue to shape our understanding of the collapse of territorial empires. So contemporary theorists and historians of political thought like David Armitage, Jergen Haberman's, and Cohen reproduce this very narrative. Now on its face, the narrative gives us a compelling story of how we got to the world of nation states we now inhabit, however in a number of ways it is a misleading picture of decolonization that forecloses decolonization as a space of political theorizing. First, characterizing colonization as a process of diffusion in which a gradual westernization took place blunts anti-colonialism radical challenge to the four century long European project of imperial expansion.

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Our fidelity to this narrative of decolonization, whereas a project doomed to be an imitation, deviation and anachronism has meant that decolonization is not the subject of political theory, even as it can be in metaphors for transforming the boundaries of our discipline. But if we forgo this narrative, and take seriously the ambition and scale of decolonization, my wager is that it offers conceptual and political resources to navigate the dilemmas of our postcolonial issues. For those engaged in the project of decolonization, it is not a seamless transition from empire to nation, but a radical rupture. For example, in an implicit response to McMillan's characterization of anticolonial nationalism as merely a wind of change, Nkrumah argued "decolonization was a hurricane of change that is raising to the ground the many bastions of colonialism." From this perspective, independence means much more than being able to fly our own flag, and to play our own national anthem. It becomes a reality only in a revolutionary framework. In my remaining time, I want to highlight a political theory of decolonization that takes seriously this revolutionary ambition. I want to do so by first defining what the problem of empires was for anti-colonial nationalists. Second, recasting anti national colonialism as world making, and finally suggesting how this approach might help us reconsider colonial predicaments. As I note above, the standard account of decolonization takes the view that empire was merely a question of alien rule, which then takes the form of a bilateral relationship between ruler and colony, Britain and Ghana for example. However, black anti-colonial nationalists like Nkrumah, George Padmore, Eric Williams, and Michael Mamby, never considered their account of the empire to be foreign rule. Instead they identified a variety of experiences of dependence and domination that began from the relationship of the colonized and the colonizers, often the district officer and the native subject, to one that scaled outward to encompass the international order. For them, alien rule was a symptom of a much larger structural problem, of unequal integration in the international order, and racialized international hierarchy. For these set of thinkers, empire was not organized in bilateral relationships but was constituted internationally and collaboratively as a European project. For many of them, the kind of exemplary moment, the international organization of empire, was the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, that divided the African Continent between European states. Conceived as unequal members of international society, African territories could be parsed out between empires. This emphasis on unequal integration and racialized hierarchy viewed empire as representative of international law and politics. Such an account of empire also informed their analysis of states like Haiti, Ethiopia and Liberia, which were but subject to various international racialized hierarchy. Through the set of examples, they argue that the expansion of international society includes new states, the kind of formation f nation states that can

only be a partial solution to empire. One could be independent, one could be a member of the League of Nations, all of those things, but still be subject to unequal integration.

So even if direct foreign domination was overcome, the structural constitution of international foreign hierarchy was still intact, and this is the problem. This is the dilemma that they were concerned with. So, armed with this analysis of empire, black anticolonial nationalists did not settle for the universalizing of the nation-state form, and they think it is important to separate what they think they wanted and what they aspired to, versus what they got and what we inhabit in the decolonized world. So instead they sought to remake the international order, and I argue that they should be understood as world makers, rather than solely nation builders. Their world making ambitions sought to overcome international hierarchy and constitute an egalitarian and new international order. So, in the book project, I trace different world making projects, the emergence of a right to self-determination, the effort to create regional federations, and finally the demand for a new economic order. All three of these took the world in the international context, rather than the national setting as their stage. I want to spend some time on the idea of the new economic order to show how the critique of empire as unequal integration prohibits the ambitious effort to remake the world. An essential feature of unequal integration was, according to Manley, and international division of labor, through which large parts of the globe were geared to produce not what they needed for themselves, or exchange for mutual advantage, but rather compelled to be the producers of what others needed. And here of course we have in mind the legacy of the plantation system in the Caribbean. For Manley and others, post-colonial states had a distinctive relationship to the global economy. They produced the raw materials of the global economy, but they had also been produced by the global economy. In other words, states like Jamaica, Trinidad, Ghana, were constituted through their relationship to the global economy.

This raises two kinds of problems for anti-colonial nationalists. First, it meant that the post-colonial state was more responsive to the external world, international institutions, NGO's, trading partners, than to domestic constituencies and had been instructed to be that way. This is precisely what Nkrumah's thesis on anti-colonialism sought to capture. According to Nkrumah, the rulers of the neo-colonial state derived their authority to govern not from the will of the people but from the support they obtained from their neo colonial masters. Second, even if countries escaped the specific manifestation of neocolonialism, their efforts at redistribution and socialism at home would be constantly thwarted by their international dependents and inequality. So, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania would say that all efforts to create redistribution within the post-colonial state, while working to create justice in an international world. In response to this experience of inequality and dependence, anti-colonial nationalists demanded global redistribution. By doing so they transformed sovereign equality, a formal juridical claim, to be the basis of a demand for redistribution of legislative and economic power. In their hands, sovereign equality came to be a claim of an equitable share of the world's wealth. And this is precisely what gets missed when we read decolonization as a universalization of a western regime of sovereignty. So, what they do here is take up the existing language of the international order, the language of sovereign equality, but they subvert and radicalize its meaning, so that sovereign equality is now a claim for material equality. Which is never how the international system imagines sovereign equality to be. I am happy to talk more about this in Q&A, the NIEO of course is an idealized project, and all the world making projects are, in some way unrealized or just projects. So, to theorize decolonization as world making, is to come to terms with the ways that are unrealized, and we might even say a non-event. But doing so offers I think an alternative way to think through the crises and limits of the post-colonial

politics. If the standard view of decolonization takes these crises to the confines of a bad imitation or a congenital flaw of the national project, this alternative theory of decolonization locates the crises in a distinctive and distorted trajectory of the colonized world. Rather than a diagnosis of the post-colonial crisis that persistently views European state forms as universal models of which to compare to the post-colonial state, we might recognize the ways in which it infers from a partial confrontation of the empire that left intact political, economic, and legal impediments. This historical experience of unequal integration, and the persistence of international hierarchy, after the collapse of territorial empires, has to be central to the work of conceptualizing post-colonial politics. A Political Theory of Colonization centers the expansive critique of empire in circulation during the mid-twentieth century that recovers the global ambitions of anti-colonial nationalism and reckons with the failure of anti-colonial world making, is a necessary framework for understanding the renewed political currency of decolonization. When South African students challenged the ANC tuition hikes, or when the Caribbean community sued the European states for reparations, we are witnessing the ways contemporary political actors simultaneously understand the limits of 20th century decolonization and recovering its ambition for a world after empire.