

Decolonization and the Half-Lives of Empires

ROBERT VITALIS

Weighing in at 2 pounds, 13 ounces, the 350 dense pages of text and 180 pages of even denser endnotes in Martin Thomas's *The End of Empires and a World Remade* demanded a commitment on this reviewer's part. I read it on my iPad while keeping a second, hard-bound copy opened for easier access to the five to ten notes per page. It is worth it, although possibly tough going if you don't already know the subject.

Thomas is a leading scholar of French colonial history and has produced a formidable work of synthesis. That is, he weaves together results of his own ongoing archival investigations with the findings of an enormous collection of specialists with fresh takes on the protracted independence struggles across Asia and Africa. In Thomas's view, decolonization "signifies the biggest reconfiguration of world politics ever seen." Readers might contemplate that claim while thinking about the last books they read about the transformative impact of the Cold War or the building of the US-led rules-based international order, or about neoliberalism or globalization. Thomas is right. Decolonization has not been given its due.

As with the very best big studies of this kind, Thomas balances the details of how formal colonial control ended—involving European administrators in some cases and large settler colonies in others—with three big claims about what the many discrete investigations reveal. I am not going to try and summarize the book's fifteen chapters, which cover enormous ground: questions of law, late and none-too-great efforts at addressing the neglected welfare of subject populations, human rights campaigns, counterinsurgencies, partitions, forced displacements, efforts at collective reforms

of the not quite so open rules-based order, and the vulnerability of civilians to the technologies of mass destruction as colonial rule gave way to score-settling autocracies of one type or another. There are a lot of moving parts to the story Thomas tells.

One of the big claims of the book, as you might surmise from the above list, is that while there may have occasionally been peaceful handovers of power, violence predominated, and decolonization "occasioned many of the longest wars of the twentieth century." Sure, the superpowers repeatedly intervened in decolonizing Asia and Africa as well as Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. Martin, though, underscores how, viewed from Beijing, Damascus, Jakarta, Saigon, or Algiers, the idea that an era of cataclysmic violence began in 1939 and ended in 1945 is a fantasy.

A second fantasy is the idea that, after World War II, the Europeans had determined to give up their imperial possessions. In fact, postwar governments assumed that the colonial order could be reformed and that the resources of these far-flung places were critical to European recovery. The upsurge of violence by "those fighting to end empire and those fighting to keep it" was the all-too-predictable result. "It was well into the 1950s before the idea of decolonization gathered momentum as part of a wider reevaluation of Europe's overseas fortunes," Thomas writes. It peaked "as a global cause somewhere between 1959 and 1974," when collective efforts to negotiate reforms in trade, technology, and investment policies, known as the New International Economic Order, ended in failure.

The second big claim that Thomas makes—for me, an even more provocative one—is about decolonization and globalization: the integration of commodity and financial markets, the increasing migration of peoples, and the interanimations of ideas. For one thing, decolonization itself was

The End of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization
Martin Thomas
(Princeton University Press, 2024)

ROBERT VITALIS is an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book is *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

“one globally connected process” with consequences not just for the many peoples subject to alien rule, but also for relations across the First, Second, and Third Worlds (as they were called back then). Decolonization, though, was also globalization’s “handmaiden” or “servant,” Thomas says. Formerly colonized societies were ultimately unable to prevail against the neocolonialism of Western interventionist powers and a rules-based order that favors “rich-world corporations and investors.”

PERIPHERAL POWER

I hadn’t previously read the brilliant work of historical synthesis by A. G. Hopkins that inspired Thomas’s account of decolonization’s global entanglements, *American Empire: A Global History*, published in 2018. Hopkins wrote the book in response to the rush after 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq to identify, define, deny, cheerlead for, or denounce the alleged new US “global empire,” “quasi-empire,” “virtual empire,” or “super-empire.” It is an account of what he calls the “postcolonial globalization” that followed the decolonization of America’s own territorial (insular) empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific in close parallel to the European cases. The United States isn’t an empire any longer, and it exercises its power today in a world that has become hostile to both imperialism and empire.

For Hopkins, as well as for many other observers both then and now, the rise of the mid-twentieth-century developmentalist states, including South Korea, Taiwan, Argentina, and Brazil, and the successful efforts at industry-building across the so-called periphery, which relied on the support of international institutions, foreign aid, and private foreign investment, represented real change. Radical theories of dependency and neocolonialism were stood on their heads, as Hopkins makes plain. “The ‘classic’ exchange of colonial raw materials for basic goods has ceased to dominate world trade.”

The “rich-world” manufacturing plants and finance firms that Thomas refers to today include many domiciled in formerly “colonized” South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, India, Malaysia, China, and elsewhere. Thomas knows this to be the case, remarking, “Numerous former dependencies . . . have become powerful global actors.”

Yet he chooses to double down on those old and discredited theories of dependency and neocolonialism. They are not likely to prove any more useful to middle-income developing countries, let alone the poorest ones, during the current moment of global uncertainty and “polycrisis.” Further, export dependency in Latin America and elsewhere today entails entanglement with China rather than the United States.

Thomas’s third claim is that “breaking with colonialism” turns out to have been “messier, more attenuated and less final than independence ceremonies suggested.” True, for sure. This claim differs from the earlier and innovative arguments about the violence of decolonization and its entanglement with globalization. It is one that others made, even as those ceremonies were just getting underway.

Ghana’s president and one of the Third World’s most visible leaders, Kwame Nkrumah, was warning that “colonialism and imperialism may come to us yet in a different guise” years before the publication in 1965 of his book *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage*

*Are the world’s poor even now
caught in a trap set a half-century
or more ago?*

of Imperialism. He may have even believed it, although back then his fiercest critics on the left dismissed it as a “smoke screen.” One of the books I admire from decolonization’s heyday, political scientist Rupert Emerson’s *From*

Empire to Nation (1960), was frank about the continued existence of an unequal international order, but emphasized this as way of challenging what Hopkins calls the era’s “utopian visions,” which “raised expectations that exceeded pragmatic possibilities.”

I wish that Thomas had provided readers with a wider range of views represented in the fractious meetings, such as the 1955 Bandung conference, and in organizations like the Non-Aligned Movement, where a Third World came briefly into its own. Leading dissidents, including Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Lebanese Foreign Minister Charles Malik, and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, to name a few, used such forums to challenge the continuing obsession with colonialism, defend the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, attack the imperialism of the Soviet Union, China, and Egypt, argue for increasing Western investment in the newly independent countries, and oppose the disastrous turn toward socialism, the expropriation of private property,

and the expulsion of long-established “foreign” communities.

Were the half-lives of the European empires tolerably short, or are the world’s poor even now caught in a trap set a half-century or more ago? Martin equivocates. As I noted, he says that decolonization transformed our world. Many economists, political scientists, and sociologists made the same claim while testing and ultimately rejecting the stark accounts of neocolonial

dependency and underdevelopment that characterized radical thought of the era. Those studies are no longer read, apparently. Martin gives the final word to “postcolonial theorists” who argue for decolonization’s impossibly long half-life in our “patterns of our thought, speech, and behavior.” The strength of this book, however, is in what the author has to show us about the past, rather than what he believes about the present. ■