

“Decolonization has reemerged as a compelling vision of a better future.”

African Decolonization’s Past and Present Trajectories

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Decolonization is an ongoing liberation project. Colonialism was a vast process of invading spaces, lands, minds—all spheres of the colonized people’s lives. Inevitably, decolonization had to be a similarly vast process of transformation. But the twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles did not deliver decolonization beyond the problematic and limited achievements in the political sphere, where independence was constrained by a hierarchical global power structure. Consequently, a genuinely postcolonial and postracial world was never born. This is why we are witnessing a resurgent and insurgent push for decolonization in the twenty-first century.

The vision of a better future was always central to African decolonization struggles. Colonialism was a system that foreclosed African possibilities. In December 1960, African agitation for decolonization resulted in a paradigm shift: United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514, the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.” National self-determination was no longer just a principle; it was now a universal human right.

At the end of World War I, self-determination had been promoted by US President Woodrow Wilson as a core principle for creating a postwar order. But for Wilson and other Western leaders, it did not apply to non-European parts of the world that were considered unready for self-governing. Thus, for African anticolonial freedom fighters and their allies, the 1960 UN declaration was a major breakthrough in the struggle for decolonization. The right to self-determination for all nations was finally endorsed as a pillar of the international system.

Colonial foreign rule and occupation would now be subject to international scrutiny and condemnation as a violation of human rights. A new UN committee received broad powers to investigate colonial rule and hear petitions from its subjects. This was the context in which 17 African colonies attained independence in 1960, which was hailed as the “year of Africa.”

But recognizing Resolution 1514’s significance for African decolonization does not require placing it within the liberal internationalist framework of a seamless shift from “empire” to “nation.” At one level, decolonization was a world-making process that disrupted the liberal Wilsonian perspective and its central assumption that colonies would have to develop under European tutelage to qualify for self-government. Decolonization struggles directly challenged the international racial hierarchy.

The two overlapping projects of nation-building and world making were at the center of twentieth-century decolonization. For African sovereign statehood and nationhood to be sustainable, the modern global order had to be deimperialized, dehierarchized, and deracialized.

In January 1960, at the All-African Peoples’ Conference in Tunis, anticolonial leaders were so confident of victory that they set 1963 as a deadline for the total decolonization of Africa. The deadline was not randomly chosen; it marked the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln during the US Civil War. Its invocation in Tunis demonstrated how these leaders set decolonization within the context of broader struggles against enslavement. They linked the aim of continental liberation with uprisings in the African diaspora going as far back as the Haitian Revolution and even earlier revolts against slavery.

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Of course, the 1963 deadline for total liberation of Africa would not be met. But that year did witness the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which dedicated itself to the goal of complete decolonization while pursuing gradual continental unity.

PAN-AFRICANISM AND THE CONGO CRISIS

One of the key developments that spoiled the trajectory of African decolonization was the outbreak of the Congo Crisis in 1960. Patrice Lumumba, a committed Pan-Africanist who became the first black prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), set out to build a unitary, modern, and sovereign postcolonial nation-state out of a kaleidoscope of ethnic groups. To that end, he reclaimed the natural resources of the DRC for the indigenous people of the newly independent country. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, what was then called the Congo Free State had been claimed as the private property of King Leopold II of Belgium, who exploited its natural resources (especially rubber) with a violent colonial labor system that reduced the indigenous people to something worse than slavery.

Lumumba's moves to reconstitute the political system and to end this colonial legacy of external control of national resources provoked an array of forces. The DRC became the first independent African state to experience a military intervention against an elected leader. Ethnic secessionist politics, notably in the breakaway southern province of Katanga under Moïse Tshombe, compounded the crisis. On top of this, Belgium, the former colonial power, intervened along with other foreign forces. In January 1961, Lumumba was killed in the first assassination of an African prime minister.

The Congo Crisis not only revealed the fissures beneath Pan-African and nationalist solidarity, but also exposed the dangers of what Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana, in 1965 termed "neocolonialism." The crisis demonstrated the entanglement of African decolonization struggles with global imperial designs. The few independent African states soon divided into "revolutionaries" (the Casablanca Group), "moderates" (the Brazzaville and Monrovia Groups), and "neutrals" over the Congo Crisis. The UN's own problematic and ineffective role in the crisis was symbolized by the

death of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in an airplane crash during a mediation mission to the DRC. All of this dampened the optimism of 1960.

At another level, the Congo Crisis more than any other event made the case for the urgent pursuit of Pan-African unity. Nkrumah had warned that neocolonialism was the greatest threat to the newly independent African states. Ethnic divisions and "tribalism" undermined nation-building projects and rendered them vulnerable to neocolonial forces.

Pan-African unity was seen as a bulwark against neocolonialism and a prerequisite for the total liberation of Africa. It was also promoted as an essential pillar of economic independence and social development. Two books by Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (1963) and *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), offered influential analyses of these complex issues. The Congo Crisis had amply demonstrated the limits of merely seeking the political kingdom in the belief that all other freedoms would be added unto it, in Nkrumah's words.

The other major development that complicated the trajectories of African decolonization was the course taken by the former French colonies. In a 1958 referendum, only Guinea,

led by Ahmed Sékou Touré, voted for independence.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, a prominent intellectual and an important leader in the struggle against French colonial rule who became Senegal's first president in 1960, promoted the idea of transforming the French imperial system into a democratic federation, with former colonies as autonomous members of a transcontinental polity. Senghor did not reduce decolonization to national independence; he had an expansive vision in which decolonization served as an opportunity to remake the world, reconcile the colonizer and the colonized, and attain a common humanity.

France took advantage of this broad conception of decolonization by creating a new system of neocolonial relations known as *Françafrique*, underwritten by a currency, the CFA franc, controlled from Paris and adopted by a number of West and Central African nations. Only now, in 2020, are the former French colonies trying to liberate themselves from monetary neoimperialism by joining the newly established West African

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Monetary Zone and its eco currency, created by the Economic Community of West African States. But France has once again intervened, promising to peg the eco to the euro so as to maintain similar monetary relations with its former colonies.

As the challenges of neocolonialism became central to decolonization struggles, fundamental questions arose concerning the nature of colonialism itself, what decolonization really means, and how political independence, once achieved, could be protected from internal and external threats. The deeper meanings of colonialism and decolonization were captured in Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) and Frantz Fanon's seminal books *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In these works, colonialism was broadly defined as a transhistorical and transnational form of domination with race as its organizing principle, racial capitalism as its economic extractive technology, patriarchy as its social formation, Christianity as its normative spirituality—and modern schools and Westernized universities as its forces for establishing cultural imperialism by invading its targets' mental universe.

Taken together, these colonial interventions amounted to a kind of dismemberment—degrading colonized people to the point of excising them from the human family. This was part of the construction of a pyramidal global power structure that was sustained by the social classification and racial hierarchization of human beings.

MARKETS AND MINDS

The colonial power structure has proved resilient, capable of replicating itself and surviving the dismantling of direct administrative colonialism. It lives on today in the form of global coloniality.

In the 1970s, the Nigerian historian Jacob Ade Ajayi introduced the idea that colonialism was a mere episode in African history. He bracketed colonization chronologically as an episode that can be dated in the West African context as beginning in 1884 at the Berlin Conference and perhaps ending in 1960. By doing so, Ajayi sought to counter imperialist accounts that denied the existence of African history prior to the arrival of white European colonists. He wanted to demonstrate that Africa had a long history both predating and postdating colonialism.

In the same way that Nkrumah spoke of seeking the political kingdom, Ajayi spoke of rolling back the physical presence of empire—that is, direct colonial administration. Both goals seemed to

be reached in 1960, but these celebrated victories proved to be limited if not illusory.

Colonization led to the institutionalization of colonialism, a system of power that radically redefines intersubjective relations based on institutions of domination, repression, and exploitation. It also involves long-lasting epistemic and psychological interventions. This is why Nkrumah coined the concept of neocolonialism, as a way to name the continuation of colonial domination, especially in the domains of the economy and the mind. This enables us to identify a commercial, nonterritorial form of empire that continued to exploit African resources and to maintain domination through debt slavery and other forms of remote control, long after the dismantling of directly administered colonialism.

Colonial empires sought to undercut African liberation movements through new international organizations ranging from the British Commonwealth to the postwar global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. This financial empire introduced structural adjustment programs—external interventions characterized by prescriptions such as deregulation, liberalization, rolling back the state, and cutting social spending and subsidies.

All these prescriptions served to make Africa an open market for further exploitation of its resources, effectively operationalizing neocolonialism. They also laid the foundation for debt slavery, under which a continent desperate for development found itself trapped in an endless cycle of repaying the industrialized countries of Europe and North America, thus participating in and perpetuating its own underdevelopment.

Policy space was lost as the IMF took over. Austerity measures provoked conflicts as the workers and the poor were hardest hit. Nascent African industries could not compete with European and North American multinational companies. Africa entered what became known as the lost decade, lasting from the 1980s into the 1990s.

But what has often been ignored in studies of colonialism and decolonization is the “metaphysical empire,” as defined by the Kenyan intellectual and novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, or the “cognitive empire” described by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The British historian Robert Gildea wrote of “empires of the mind” that continued to wreak havoc on Africa long after the end of “formal” empire.

In his 1986 book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi explained three interrelated techniques of the cognitive/metaphysical empires. The first is to invade the mental universe of their targets and colonize their minds. The second is to detonate a “cultural bomb,” producing various forms of alienation in the colonized people and a loss of confidence in their history, culture, knowledge, names, languages, and even in themselves. The third technique involves removing the hard disk of previous African knowledge and collective memory, and downloading into African minds the software of European replacements. Taken together, these techniques produce epistemological colonization and cultural schizophrenia.

Since this has been a common experience in formerly colonized regions around the world, the members of the Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program in the 1990s and 2000s introduced and popularized the concepts of “coloniality” and “decoloniality.” Coloniality names the transhistorical expansion of colonial domination and the continuation of its effects in the present. As defined by the scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres, decoloniality is expressed in a family of thought that identifies colonialism and coloniality as the creators of the most intractable problems haunting the modern world, especially in those regions that experienced slavery, colonial genocides, physical conquest, and colonization.

Decoloniality is essentially a call for completing the unfinished business of decolonization in the present century. At the center of this vision is the desire to reorder the world and move beyond Euro–North American domination into a new era free of slavery, racism, colonialism, underdevelopment, and capitalist exploitation.

Genuine decolonization has to address the human question. Colonialism denied humanity, belonging, and citizenship to the colonized. Decolonization must restore this denied humanity and deliver sovereign subjectivity to people who were reduced to slaves and colonial subjects.

At the very core of the decolonization project, therefore, is the task of re-humanization and the creation of new forms of life. Since colonialism denied African people history and agency, decolonization needs to turn the colonized into craftsmen and craftswomen—inventive people shaping their own destiny. It must unfold as a remember-

ing project that enables Africans to pick up their dismembered pieces and reconstruct themselves.

HURRICANES OF CHANGE

One can delineate five overlapping phases or trajectories of decolonization. The first, lasting roughly from 1957 to 1965, prompted British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to give a February 1960 speech in Cape Town recognizing that a “wind of change” was blowing across Africa. Nkrumah defined decolonization in a more radical manner as a “hurricane of change” that was “razing to the ground the many bastions of colonialism.” He saw it as a rupture that could open up the world for reordering and remaking. Starting when Ghana attained political independence (the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to do so) in March 1957, this period inspired high hopes and a sense of new possibilities for Africa, despite the eruption of the Congo Crisis in 1960.

There were other setbacks, notably the October 1958 constitutional referendum in French colonial Africa, held to determine whether the inhabitants preferred independence or remaining under French tutelage. Only Guinea voted for independence, an outcome that dampened the spirit of decolonization but did not slow its tempo,

since the referendum could not prevent countries from declaring independence. Ghana, Guinea, and Mali came together to form a Union of West African States, pointing to a future Pan-African political union. This vision was reflected in Ghana's independence constitution, which included a clause stipulating that territorial sovereignty could be modified to open the way for the higher goal of a united Africa.

Strategically speaking, two battlefronts opened: on the continent, African nationalists confronted colonial regimes; in the UN, an Africa Group of ambassadors put forward collective demands. The formation of the OAU in 1963 was a milestone in both decolonization and Pan-Africanism, though it fell short of the radical visions of Nkrumah and others who called for substantive political unification to counter the threats posed by neocolonialism and ethnic divisions. The agreement struck in Addis Ababa was a victory for moderate forces that favored a gradualist approach to Pan-African unity, albeit with a commitment to total decolonization of the continent. But the 1966 overthrow of Nkrumah by

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his own military (in cahoots with the CIA) marked the end of an era, and slowed the momentum of both decolonization and pan-Africanism.

The second phase of decolonization culminated in independence for the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe in 1975. Their anti-colonial armed struggles resulted in a military coup that toppled the regime of António de Oliveira Salazar in Lisbon, which in turn made it impossible for Portugal to maintain its overseas empire. The movements against Portuguese colonialism were distinctive in their radical embrace of Marxism. This indicated that the longer a colonial system resisted decolonization, the more radical the opposition to it grew. Portugal had worked with the brutal white settler regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa in an attempt to militarily defeat the anticolonial forces.

The third phase of decolonization was represented by Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, after fifteen years of armed struggle. By this time, the Soviet Union's power was waning, and the neoliberal world order led by the United States was ascendant. The Chinese-sponsored Zimbabwe African National Union under Robert Mugabe won the 1980 elections, beating Soviet-backed nationalist Joshua Nkomo and his Zimbabwe African People's Union. Faced with extreme white settler resistance to decolonization, both movements had radicalized during their guerrilla struggles, embracing Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideologies.

But in a context of shifting global power relations, the postcolonial government of Zimbabwe adhered to socialism in its rhetoric while in practice taking the capitalist route. By 1990, it had adopted a structural adjustment program of deregulation and privatization that destroyed all of its achievements on the social front. Nonetheless, Mugabe maintained a radical anti-imperialist discourse and embarked on a fast-track compulsory land reform in 2000, ordering forcible transfers of land from white farmers to members of the black majority. This provoked the European Union and United States to impose sanctions; Zimbabwe was rendered a pariah state, and its economy collapsed. Even the military coup that removed Mugabe from power in November 2017 has not allowed Zimbabwe to reenter the international community.

The fourth phase of decolonization brought

independence to Namibia in 1990 and to South Africa in 1994. With the end of the Cold War, democracy and capitalism enjoyed a triumphalist moment in which they appeared to be the only viable ideologies. Radicalism was redefined in terms of being for democracy and human rights. Social movements and civil society groups mushroomed in Africa, promoted as progressive forces by international nongovernmental organizations.

The African National Congress (ANC), the party led by Nelson Mandela, embraced the liberal democratic discourse. The South African liberation struggle was redefined as a campaign for democracy and human rights, rather than for decolonization. The question of whether they could provide a panacea for apartheid and internal colonialism never arose. Whether liberal democracy was even possible without decolonization also remained a moot question.

The milestones that drew global attention were the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, under which the democratic transition was negotiated; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, meant to enable victims and perpetrators to settle differences and build a new unified society (the "rainbow nation"); and the 1996 Constitution, hailed as the world's most democratic charter.

Yet South Africa has remained the most unequal society in the world. The reality of opulence on the white side of the racial divide and abject poverty among the majority of black citizens has raised doubts about the sustainability of the compromise politics of 1994. The legacy of Mandela himself is now questioned. So is the ability of neoliberal democracy to resolve structural inequalities left in place by apartheid colonialism.

RESURGENT AND INSURGENT

South Africa is now the site of a resurgent and insurgent decolonization movement led by students. This is the fifth phase of decolonization. South Africa had experienced the continent's longest anticolonial struggle, dating back to the founding of the ANC in 1912; eventually the country was the last frontier in the fight against the most brutal and violent apartheid colonialism. So it is not surprising that South Africa is now witnessing a renewed push for decolonization.

In the colonial imagination, South Africa was the "little Europe" at the southern tip of the conti-

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ment. (Its name is still a mere geographical expression.) The country has the highest concentration of white people of European descent in Africa. Through the compromise settlement of 1994, the white beneficiaries of apartheid colonialism retained their economic dominance and the ANC ascended to political power—a trade often described as the whites being allowed to keep the jewel in exchange for letting the Africans take the crown. The question that arises is the value of the crown without the jewel.

Mandela predicated his transformative program on the goodwill of the South African people, hoping they all genuinely accepted that apartheid colonialism was a crime against humanity and that they would join him in building a post-apartheid society in which resources would be equally shared. This was the key weakness of Mandela's rainbow nation project: those who benefited from apartheid colonialism took advantage of the compromise, the Truth and Reconciliation process, and the new constitution to retain their economic privileges, leaving the ANC government to preside over an unsustainable liberal democracy with a propertyless black majority.

Today, radical political groups such as the Economic Freedom Fighters and Black First Land First, and student movements like Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall, are sharply critical of Mandela's legacy. While the first two have focused on campaigning for nationalization of key sectors of the economy and land expropriation without compensation, the student activists have forced onto the public agenda a set of issues that require a new phase of decolonization.

The first issue is decommissioning offensive apartheid iconography. The Rhodes Must Fall movement arose in 2015 to demand the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the center of the University of Cape Town's campus. (Rhodes was a mining tycoon and a leading figure in British colonial expansion in southern Africa, serving as prime minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896.) The statue was removed in April 2015.

The second issue is decolonization of knowledge and curricula. This demand addresses the resilience of Eurocentrism in universities and the relegation of indigenous knowledge systems to the academic periphery.

Third is a related concern: the dominance of colonial languages in research, teaching, and learning. Students have demanded greater use of indigenous African languages.

Fourth, students have called for reforming the universities' institutional cultures to root out what they perceive as racist, capitalist, patriarchal, and sexist biases that alienate African students.

Fifth is a demand for more inclusive access to education. As universities became more corporatized, students from poor African family backgrounds found themselves excluded by high tuition fees. The Freedom Charter of 1955 promised free, quality, and relevant education. In 2015 and 2016, students called on the government to honor this liberation promise. The students also campaigned for improved conditions and more secure job status for the lowest-paid black workers on their campuses, such as security guards and cleaners.

What started in South Africa quickly spread to the rest of the world. The University of Oxford became another hotbed of Rhodes Must Fall activism, as students demanded the removal of a Rhodes statue at Oriel College. At University College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies, students questioned why their curriculum was so "white." These movements dovetailed with Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, which arose in response to police killings of unarmed black people. Indigenous people's movements are pushing the decolonization agenda in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

The planetary resurgence and insurgence of decolonization is made possible by a concurrent epistemic break: the knowledge systems that carried the modern world for over five hundred years are showing signs of deep exhaustion. This decline has manifested itself in global environmental and economic crises, in increasing inequalities and exploding social divisions. Such trends have prompted many to question the promises and premises of a modernity that has created numerous problems without solutions.

Decolonization has reemerged as a compelling vision of a better future. Once again, the broader issues of colonialism, capitalism, racism, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy have been pushed onto the public agenda as the incomplete business of an ongoing decolonizing project. At the center of this resurgent and insurgent decolonization is still the complex question of human liberation. Where previous visions of freedom have collapsed, from Marxism and nationalism to neoliberalism, the renewal of decolonization's energies may provide an answer—in Africa and beyond. ■