

Decolonization reconsidered: Rebirths, continuities and erasures

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The year 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of what was widely proclaimed the “Year of Africa,” when seventeen former colonies in Africa received their independence from European colonial rule. This benchmark has presented scholars with an important opportunity to reflect upon and reexamine the processes that led up to decolonization, and to reassess their long-term significance for both former colonies and former colonial powers. The recent engagement with the history and significance of decolonization stands in stark contrast to studies conducted shortly following the establishment of independent nation-states in former colonies, and it reveals the major paradigm shifts that have taken place in postcolonial studies over the last thirty years. Just as our conceptualization of colonialism has been broadened and deepened, so too has our current approach to decolonization reflected a reconsideration of the nature, timing and significance of what decolonization was and is, as well as a new appreciation for the limits and failures of decolonization as a process across time and place. This special issue of *Hagar* is devoted to recent innovations and trends in the study of decolonization from a broad range of geographical, historical and theoretical perspectives.

Perhaps ironically, the passage of time since the end of colonial rule has seen the development of new perspectives that have in fact complicated rather than clarified our understanding of decolonization. Until the 1970s, the notion of decolonization signified a rather straightforward process for most scholars and researchers, a progression characterized by the formal end of colonial rule and the establishment of an independent state in a territory previously ruled by a European colonial power. This process began at different points in various colonial settings, but it is often agreed that the ultimate demise of European colonial empires was set in motion by the end of World War II and culminated in a succession of declarations of independence throughout Asia, the Middle East and Africa over the course of twenty years. Thus, one could mark the day, and even the hour, that decolonization took place in former colonies, and at the same time, clearly identify those places where decolonization had not yet occurred. Charts such as the one below (Table 1) signified the clarity with which researchers conceptualized the notion of decolonization.

Table 1. Decolonized states: Dates of independence

Year	Decolonized state	Colonial power	Comments
1922	Egypt	Britain	Until the Young Officers Revolution in 1952, Britain continued to rule Egypt informally. In 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and put an end to the British presence in Egypt.
1932	Iraq	Britain	
1946	The Philippines	US	
	Syria and Lebanon	France	
	Jordan	Britain	
1947	India and Pakistan	Britain	Following the partition of India, until then under British rule, into two states. Eastern Pakistan gained independence in 1971 as Bangladesh.
1948	Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Israel	Britain	
1949	Indonesia	The Netherlands	In 1945, Indonesia proclaimed its independence unilaterally, and this declaration is today recognized by the Netherlands.
1951	Libya	Italy; UN after WWII	
1952	Eritrea	Italy until 1941; Britain until 1952	Part of Ethiopia until 1993.
1954	Vietnam (divided into South and North), Laos, Cambodia	France	The three comprised French Indochina until independence. Vietnam included three territories: Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina
1956	Sudan	Britain and Egypt	
	Tunisia	France	

Year	Decolonized state	Colonial power	Comments
	Morocco	France and Spain	
1957	Gold Coast (Ghana), Malaya	Britain	In 1963, Malaya was united with Singapore, Sarawak and Northern Borneo to create the Malaysia Federation
1958	French Guinea (Guinea-Conakry)	France	Belonged to the Federation of French West Africa and chose to become independent in the referendum of 1958.
1960	Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, French Sudan (Mali), Dahomey (Benin), Upper Volta (Burkina-Faso)	France	Part of French West Africa
	Chad, Gabon, Ubangi-Chari (Central African Republic), French Congo (Congo Brazzaville)		Part of French Equatorial Africa
	Togo, Cameroon		French mandates since World War I
	Madagascar, Cyprus	Britain	
	Nigeria	Italy and Britain	
	Somalia, Belgian Congo (later Zaire; today the Democratic Republic of Congo)	Belgium	

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1961	Sierra Leone, Tanganika	Britain	Tanganika was united with Zanzibar in 1964 and became Tanzania.
1962	Algeria	France	
	Uganda, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica	Britain	
	Western Samoa	New Zealand	
	Rwanda, Urundi (Burundi)	Belgium	
1963	Kenya, Singapore	Britain	Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, it became an independent state.
1964	Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Malta	Britain	
1965	The Maldives, the Gambia	Britain	
1966	Bechuanaland (Botswana), Barbados, British Guiana, Basutoland (Lesotho)	Britain	
1967	Aden (Southern Yemen)	Britain	United with Northern Yemen in 1990.
1968	Swaziland, Mauritius	Britain	
	Spanish Guinea (Equatorial Guinea)	Spain	

Year	Decolonized state	Colonial power	Comments
1970	Fiji, Tonga	Britain	
1971	Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, United Arab Emirates	Britain	The UAE includes seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah.
1973	The Bahamas	Britain	
1974	Granada	Britain	
1975	Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea (Guinea Bissau), Cape Verde, Sao Tomé and Príncipe	Portugal	
	Papua New Guinea	Australia	
	Dutch Guiana (Surinam)	The Netherlands	
	Comoro Islands	France	Except the island of Mayotte, whose inhabitants chose to stay under French rule.
	Spanish Sahara	Spain	Was divided between Mauritania and Morocco. Morocco conquered the Mauritanian part in 1979 after Mauritania evacuated the territory unilaterally.
1976	Seychel	Britain	
1977	French Somalia (Djibuti)	France	
1978	Dominica, Solomon Islands, Ellice Islands (Tuvalu)	Britain	
1979	St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Britain	

Year	Decolonized state	Colonial power	Comments
1980	Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)	Britain until 1965; white minority rule until 1980	
1981	British Honduras (Belize), Antigua and Barbuda	Britain	
1983	Saint Kitts and Nevis	Britain	
1984	Brunei	Britain	
1990	Namibia	South Africa	
	Marshall Islands, Micronesia	UN	Under Japanese rule until the end of World War II
1994	End of apartheid rule in South Africa		
1997	Hong Kong	Britain	Transferred to Chinese rule at the end of a 99-year lease agreement.
2002	East Timor	UN	A Portuguese colony until 1975, then under Indonesian rule until 1999.

The conceptualization of decolonization as a process culminating in the formation of independent nation-states has resulted in a convergence between nationalist histories and the histories of decolonization. Thus, histories of decolonization largely adhere to the teleological trajectories of histories of westernized elites as the spearheads of nationalist struggles to overthrow colonial rule. Even in those instances when this narrative has been expanded to include the contributions of working classes and peasants in the history of nation-building in colonial settings, the effort to uncover historical roots to new nation-states has blinded us from gaining alternative perspectives on what decolonization signified and engendered for everyday Asians and Africans. Frederick Cooper claims that the difficulty in writing a contoured history of decolonization is that “we know the end of the story” (1996:6). Looking back from the present, historians have privileged processes of nation-building as the main theme of decolonization and have thus overlooked or marginalized the significance of new possibilities born in this era of transition. Left behind are the other possible routes and outcomes—cultural, political and economic alliances not corresponding to the physical or conceptual borders of postcolonial nation-states.

The first cracks in this edifice of understanding came by the mid-1960s, when economic downturns, political instability and violence led many postcolonial intellectuals to question the extent to which political independence had actually paved the way to a reorganization of power structures and to economic inequalities that had characterized colonial exploitation for centuries beforehand. Dependency theorists claimed that rampant underdevelopment in the Third World resulted from the inability of countries on the periphery of the global economy to access capital and technology to develop domestic economies and break their dependence on foreign capital and markets; thus, they remained locked in colonial relations of subservience and exploitation. In addition, power elites in postcolonial settings remained politically and culturally dependent upon former colonial rulers and continued to derive their own economic and political power from these relationships. These alliances between elites were often maintained at the expense of the vast majority of former colonial subjects, who remained disempowered and marginalized long after the demise of colonial rule. Thus, the disappointments and disillusionment with independence generated processes of questioning that have continued to the present, challenging the extent to which decolonization has taken place at all in former European colonies.

With the perspective of several decades since the dismantling of the European empires, we can no longer easily assume that independence was born out of decolonization, and we are faced with a growing set of questions about how we should conceptualize decolonization as both a political and historical process. Within the framework of this special issue and the authors’ contributions to follow, we aim to revisit the notion of decolonization by a consideration of fresh perspectives, alternative interpretations and innovative methodologies.

Experiences of decolonization were and remain as varied as colonial experiences themselves, and any formulation of decolonization as a process or ideology must acknowledge a diversity of cultures, viewpoints and strategies. Thus, if we begin with the most basic question, “What is decolonization?”, we are immediately confronted with a multiplicity of responses reflecting the variety of political, economic, cultural and social settings that were once contested sites of colonialism and resistance. Of course, even within each local struggle for the end of colonial rule, several visions of decolonization often coexisted and competed for majority support. We can get a sense of the distinctiveness of each perspective on decolonization by a brief review of two of its most prominent articulators, Mahatma Gandhi and Franz Fanon. A comparison of the settings and circumstances within which each emerged, British India and French Algeria, gives us a clear sense of the vast dissimilarities between colonial contexts. With regard to decolonization, it will be seen, Gandhi and Fanon prescribe to starkly different programs. Yet, while these two intellectuals remind us that at no point in time was there a consensus on what was meant by decolonization, a reconsideration of their writings evokes an important commonality between the two, namely that decolonization was conceived of as much more than a simple transfer of power.

In his first political text, *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1921, Gandhi includes a conversation with an imaginary reader. At one point the reader asks Gandhi how Britain could rule India for so long. Gandhi replies that Britain managed to rule India only because the Indians allowed it to do so, much the same as an alcoholic who blames the vendor for his addiction to alcohol. Gandhi explains that chasing the vendor away in order to solve this person’s problem is useless, as another vendor will soon arrive to take his place. In other words, decolonization is accomplished not at the moment the colonizer is expelled, but rather when the colonized decide that they can do without their ruler, when they stop their addiction to dependence on the colonizer. In light of this view, it is not surprising that on the day India gained its independence, Gandhi fasted and mourned. He saw no reason to celebrate while millions of Muslims and Hindus were being killed during the partition of India.

Although Fanon shares Gandhi’s notion that the mere transfer of power is not the essence of decolonization, he does see the (violent) expulsion of the colonizer as the key tool for liberation from the colonial condition. Fanon goes so far as to mock African leaders who negotiated with the colonizer to achieve independence, and in his well-known *The Wretched of the Earth*, he famously quotes Gabon’s new President Mba: “Gabon is independent, but between Gabon and France nothing has changed; everything goes on as before” (Fanon, 1963:53). As a psychiatrist, Fanon sees decolonization as a political process that must be preceded by a psychological one. The main problem of the colonized, maintains Fanon, is their internalization of colonial classifications that negate their humanity. The only way for the colonized to

regain their manhood and achieve true liberation is to reject the colonial gaze and reconstruct an alternative image of themselves.

While both Gandhi and Fanon see decolonization primarily as an internal process that has to take place within the minds of the colonized, they greatly differ on the strategies to be employed to achieve this end. Fanon believes that only violence can release the colonized and turn them again into “men,” while Gandhi advocates *ahimsa* as a way of action—resisting without the use of force. In his total rejection of the use of violence, Gandhi’s suggested methods for achieving liberation are far more complex and require tremendous patience and restraint. Ultimately, Gandhi’s route to decolonization was much longer than the one Fanon formulated.¹

These notions of decolonization, as presented by Gandhi and Fanon, thus complicate our conceptualization of the term, as well as any efforts we might make to evaluate the process in any time or place. If decolonization is not simply a transfer of power and a hoisting of a new flag, then when does it taken place? How should it be accomplished? When is it actually completed? Both Fanon and Gandhi insist that decolonization is a process that undermines colonial categories and assumptions, and yet the cultural and ideological foundations of European imperialism have reached far beyond those regions under direct colonial rule. Thus, questions of where decolonization has taken place must be directed to a broader geographical scope than that which is depicted in maps of former colonial empires.

But in broadening the scope of who is the subject of decolonization, our interest should not only relate to former subjects of colonialism, in its broadest definition, but also to former colonizers. Just as recent studies of colonialism emphasize the manufacturing of hybrid, creole subjectivities and the locking of both the colonized and colonizers in mutually dependent relationships, so too must the study of decolonization be conceptualized and examined as a process that impacts former colonizers just as it impacts the formerly colonized. Thus, the study of decolonization must include a consideration of how European powers and citizens came to see themselves in this process, and how decolonization has engendered changes in Europeans politics, cultures and societies.

In seeking out the former colonizer’s perspective on decolonization, we must also remain open to a vast diversity of subjectivities. Just as decolonization differed from colonial setting to setting, so too did the significance and experience of decolonization shift with the varying perspectives of colonizers themselves. This argument is articulated by Albert Memmi, in his work *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, first published in 1957 in the midst of the Algerian War. According to Memmi, there are in fact several prototypes of colonizers. There are those who accept colonialism, seeing it as their destiny to enjoy the benefits of others’ exploitation. But there are also colonizers who reject colonialism in principle, acknowledging the injustices of the system. Among this group, there are those who nevertheless support the perpetuation of the system from which they reap many

benefits. And finally, there are those who reject colonialism and subsequently “cross the lines,” rejecting their own people and taking the side of the colonized. Memmi does not spare his criticism from this type of colonizer either, arguing that such a colonizer inevitably accepts or ignores the actions and values among the colonized that he would never have accepted among his own people, thus calling his moral stance into question (Memmi, 1967:19–76).

Memmi’s analysis of different types of colonizers reminds us that decolonization ultimately had a highly varied impact within societies of former colonizers, determined by the degree to which European governments and peoples identified with the enterprise of colonialism and the ideologies at its foundation. Indeed, there were those who did not have direct vested interests in the colonies but still thought of empire as part of their national identity. But just as we deepen our understanding of how decolonization has reshaped identities, cultures and values in European societies, we are also often reminded that decolonization is in fact an incomplete or unfulfilled process, as can be seen in current political and cultural struggles surrounding questions of integration and belonging of immigrants from former colonies into European societies today.

What becomes clear from an examination of recent renderings of decolonization, whether drawn from the perspective of the formerly colonized or the former colonizers, is a sense of ambiguity. Across time and space, multiple and conflicting processes of disengagement have yielded unsettled and contested experiences of autonomy. But while processes of decolonization have produced much complexity and uncertainty, they have also engaged in unequivocal acts of exclusion and erasure. Decolonization is not only marked by rebirth and continuity, but also by invalidation. The transfer of power in former colonial settings was often accompanied by the marginalization or silencing of solidarities, identities and networks that did not correspond to postcolonial borders. Scholars have recently brought the unrealized alternatives to decolonization to the foreground of research agendas, and we now have a better sense of the missed opportunities and failed propositions emerging in the process of decolonization,² or those who were not part of the process at all. While many of the political, cultural and economic possibilities that emerged in the anti-colonial imaginaries became irrelevant or even oppositional within the new borders of nation-states, a full understanding of decolonization must nonetheless consider the refuted schemes of this historical moment and the long-term consequences to their rejection.

In the contributions that follow, the authors highlight and explore many of these new perspectives on decolonization. And while this special issue confirms that the reconsideration of decolonization is fully under way, it also points the way toward new directions of research that can guide us in an ongoing effort to unravel the complexities of decolonization, past and present.

NOTES

¹ On Gandhi's philosophy concerning non-violence and *ahimsa*, see Kripalani (1958:85–107).

² See, for example, Branch (2007).

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