

Book Reviews: Recent approaches to decolonization

Martin Thomas, Bob Moore, and L. J Butler, *The Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial Nation States, 1918-1975* (Hodder Education, London, 2008), 472 pp.

Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and Its Impact: Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2008), 288 pp.

The two books under review attempt to generate a broad explanation of the historical processes that led to the decolonization of the European colonial empires. Consistent with the latest theoretical approaches to the subject, both seek to paint a broad picture that includes both imperial and local points of view, highlighting the relatively neglected role of local actors as agents of change in colonial settings.

The Crises of Empire is a comprehensive study that broadly sketches contemporary theoretical approaches to the subject of decolonization of the European colonial empires. The book provides a coherent comparative overview of the processes that each colonial power and its colonial subjects underwent on their path to decolonization. The volume opens with a clear and broad summary of the evolution of theoretical approaches to the subject of decolonization. The study outlines the development of theories of decolonization over time, beginning with European-centered perspectives that emphasize the process of colonial collapse or gradual withdrawal from the imperialist agenda. It then reviews theories generated in postcolonies in the years following independence. Thus, the book examines "dependency theory" and other theoretical approaches taken by postcolonial intellectuals and activists who have sought explanations for postcolonial underdevelopment through a critical examination of how decolonization unfolded. Finally, *Crises of Empire* reviews postcolonial theories that promoted a more expanded view of both colonialism and decolonization by focusing on the cultural discourses and legacies of colonial empires. Each of the various approaches is examined for its strengths and weaknesses, providing students with a useful tool for organizing a complex and rich body of literature. One oversight of this section, however, is the questionable exclusion of the subaltern studies school from the overview.

The book is structured around three indepth examinations of British, French and Dutch decolonization in Africa, Asia and South America. A fourth part deals with contrasting patterns of decolonization in the Belgian and Portuguese experiences in Africa. The periodization suggested by the authors, which stretches from the end of World War I to the decolonization of the last Portuguese colony in

1975, is conventional and appropriate so long as the processes of decolonization are analyzed from an imperial perspective. Each part of the book, with the exception of the fourth, begins with an examination of the long-term processes of the establishment of imperial rule, followed by an investigation of particular cases of decolonization beginning in the late 1940s.

One of the major objectives of the book is to challenge the common tendency in historiography to distinguish the decolonization of the British colonial empire from the French, Dutch and Portuguese experiences and present it as an exceptional case. According to the authors, this tendency derives from the false perception of British decolonization as "relatively painless or blood-free." To counter this assumption, the authors emphasize the violent struggles in Malaya, Cyprus, Palestine and Kenya as factors which contributed to British policymakers accelerating decolonization in order to avoid further struggles. While this emphasis on casualties among colonial subjects is clearly an important contribution to the history of decolonization, the authors might have provided a more critical explanation for previous perceptions of British decolonization as "relatively painless or blood-free." It is quite possible that this earlier assessment was based on the small number of casualties on the British side as compared to the French, Portuguese or Dutch colonial powers.

The second book under review, *Decolonization and Its Impact*, is a well-written account that aims

to reconcile the imperial explanations of decolonization with a comparative approach based on the understanding of the political and social processes of colonialism and colonial rule, and the ways in which those processes culminated in decolonization (p. 8).

According to Shipway, this should be achieved by "triangulating between 'top-down' and 'grass roots' perspectives, and by comparing the various colonial empires" from the point of view of what the author calls "the colonial state" (p. 8). Further, the colonial state, which is the single administrative unit in each colonial empire, should be regarded as the logical unit of comparison. Given the dissimilarity in size and purpose of the colonial empires, it was these units, the colonial states, that were the prize over which nationalist anti-colonial movements and colonial powers struggled or negotiated. Shipway argues that focusing on colonial states allows us to understand the complexity of the interaction between colonizer and colonized.

The periodization of this study is limited to the late colonial state, that is, the twenty years that followed the end of World War II. The rationale behind this periodization lays in what the author refers to as the "late colonial shift," which accentuated the significant effect of the war on perceptions about the future of the

empire on the part of both colonizers and colonized. The author chooses to focus on several case studies derived from the formal Asian and African empires of Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, where the hypothesis of the late colonial shift can be tested most easily. This excludes the Portuguese decolonization that does not fit into the suggested time frame, as well as the Middle Eastern dependencies that, according to the author, formed a rather different model of imperial overrule.

The first two chapters of the book seek to deconstruct the colonial state by portraying its borders, its political foundation, the different actors (both colonizers and colonized) and their different modes of actions in response to circumstances created in the wake of World War II. Subsequent chapters describe the various patterns of decolonization, both violent and moderate, in the immediate first wave of decolonization following the war. These include the nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia and in the late colonial state in Africa, as well as the “colonial end game” on the eve of independence of the last British and French colonial states.

The importance and contribution of these two studies to existing historiography on the subject of decolonization is clear, as both books provide rich and broad comparative accounts of European colonial powers on the road to decolonization. The main problem with both works, however, is their representation of local, non-European experiences of decolonization, which are significantly less represented.

In these two works, the definition of a successful decolonization process is one that ends either in the transition away from a European presence/influence in a certain geopolitical unit (the colony, or in Shipway’s definition, the colonial state) or in the political emancipation of the nation-state within its postcolonial borders. Yet, this definition excludes all actors who did not struggle to achieve this specific goal. Thus, for former subjects of colonial rule in Asia and Africa who experienced colonialism as a broad range of European influences in their lives, the process of decolonization must be evaluated by the extent to which these influences ceased to exert themselves in a powerful way. Conceptualized in this way, one might argue that decolonization can occur without the actual departure of the colonial power from the entire colonial unit or without national independence. Moreover, the achievement of political independence might not have translated into a full process of decolonization. Yet, in both studies examined here, there is no consideration of these variant types of decolonization.

This overly narrow definition of decolonization will inevitably lead to silences and oversights in the historiography of decolonization, as the following will help to illustrate. One of the most important landmarks in the history of the Portuguese colonialism in Angola was a series of orchestrated massacres committed by the União das Populações de Angola (Union of Angolan Peoples, or UPA) against the Portuguese settler population of the northern region of the Ultramarine province of Angola. The attacks, which claimed the lives of approximately 7,000 residents of the Portuguese *fazendas*, started on March 15, 1961. The Portuguese government

regarded these massacres as one of the *causes* of the *Guerra do Ultramar*, the Portuguese colonial wars. In the period between the beginning of modern Portuguese colonialism in Angola in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the 1961 massacres, the Portuguese presence in northern Angola was largely insignificant, apart from a few short periods during the “pacification” of the region in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The main consequence of the March 15 massacres was brutal retaliatory actions carried out by the Portuguese air force. From March 15, the main consequences of the Portuguese presence (or colonialism) for the various individuals and groups living in that region can be derived from the effects of these retaliatory actions, which caused mass migration of approximately half a million individuals from various groups of the Bakongo people to the newly independent Republic of Congo (Tvedten, 1997:29–36). Throughout the history of the various populations of Africa, migration has been one of the many ways individuals and groups contend with the harsh conditions imposed on them by nature or men (Kopytoff, 1987). Might it be possible to claim, then, that by crossing the Congolese frontier these people were decolonized?

This is merely one example of the types of difficulties arising from an overly narrow consideration of decolonization. It is undoubtedly challenging to attempt to construct a coherent narrative of the historical processes of decolonization that accounts for the different roles of the various actors, mediated by their experiences and rationales. Nonetheless, there is rich potential in adopting a broader, more complex understanding of what decolonization meant from a local perspective, as illustrated in the example of the Bakongo in northern Angola. As long as decolonization is defined in historiography as the creation of postcolonial nation-states or the European departure from its colonial territories, this kind of action and experience by local actors, which does not coincide with “desirable” methods of struggle, will be excluded or only relevant to the general narrative by their influence on the actions of other actors which do fit the accepted pattern.

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