

WORLDMAKING AFTER EMPIRE

Introduction

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AT MIDNIGHT ON MARCH 6, 1957, Kwame Nkrumah took to the stage in Accra to announce the independence of the Gold Coast, renamed Ghana in homage to the ancient West African empire. In his speech, Nkrumah declared that 1957 marked the birth of a new Africa “ready to fight its own battles and show that after all the black man is capable of managing his own affairs.” In his view, the decade-long struggle for Ghanaian independence was only one battle in the broader struggle for African emancipation. “Our independence,” Nkrumah famously maintained, “is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent.”¹ This connection between Ghana’s independence and African emancipation not only looked forward to the formation of new African states but also envisioned national independence as the first step in constituting a Pan-African federation and transforming the international order.

Half a century removed from Ghanaian independence and as we reckon with the failures and limits of the postcolonial state, it is easy to miss the revolutionary implications and global reverberations of that March night in 1957. From our vantage point, the transition from empire to nation in the twentieth century appears inevitable. And while the universalization of the nation-state marked an important triumph over European imperialism, it has also come to represent a political form incapable of realizing the ideals of a democratic, egalitarian, and anti-imperial future. In contrast, for those in the audience in Accra that night and observers across the world, the world historical significance of the first sub-Saharan colony to gain independence was palpable. Within the Black Atlantic world, the independence of the fourth black state after Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia was

especially momentous. Nkrumah's audience that night included Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, A. Philip Randolph, Ralph Bunche, and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell.² The Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore and St. Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis attended as members of Nkrumah's administration, while nationalists from across the continent including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania also participated in the Independence Day celebrations. Barred from traveling to Ghana because the United States had revoked his passport, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a public letter to Nkrumah and the Ghanaian people congratulating them on their hard-won independence and urging the new state to take up the mantle of the Pan-African movement that he had helped to foster since the turn of the twentieth century.³ For these figures, Ghanaian independence, arriving just months after the successful conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott, constituted the beginnings of a struggle for racial equality across the world.

This book studies the global projects of decolonization black Anglophone anticolonial critics and nationalists spearheaded in the three decades after the end of the Second World War. Drawing on the political thought of Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams, I argue that decolonization was a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order. Against the standard view of decolonization as a moment of nation-building in which the anticolonial demand for self-determination culminated in the rejection of alien rule and the formation of nation-states, I recast anticolonial nationalism as *worldmaking*. The central actors of this study reinvented self-determination reaching beyond its association with the nation to insist that the achievement of this ideal required juridical, political, and economic institutions in the international realm that would secure non-domination. Central to this claim was an expansive account of empire that situated alien rule within international structures of unequal integration and racial hierarchy. On this view, empire was a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized. As a result, it required a similarly global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination.

In three different projects—the institutionalization of a right to self-determination at the United Nations, the formation of regional federations, and the demand for a New International Economic Order—anticolonial nationalists sought to overcome the legal and material manifestations of unequal integration and inaugurate a postimperial world. Attending to

these global ambitions of anticolonial nationalism offers opportunities to revisit and rethink the critique of nationalism as parochial and anti-universal. Rather than foreclosing internationalism, the effort to achieve national independence propelled a rethinking of state sovereignty, inspired a far-reaching reconstitution of the postwar international order, and grounded the twentieth century's most ambitious vision of global redistribution. In casting anticolonial nationalists as worldmakers rather than solely nation builders, I illustrate that the age of decolonization anticipated and reconfigured our contemporary questions about international political and economic justice.

In the background of this book's thesis that anticolonial nationalism was a project of worldmaking is the history of European imperialism as itself a world-constituting force that violently inaugurated an unprecedented era of globality. Beginning in 1492, European conquest and colonization coupled with native dispossession and genocide, the forced migration of twelve million African slaves over three centuries, and the circulation of commodities linked the Atlantic world and transformed the conditions of economic and political life in each node of the triangular trade. This first moment of imperial globalization reverberated beyond the Atlantic as European expansion extended to Asia and then Africa, producing new dislocations and transformations.⁴ By the height of imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century, Europe's political and economic entanglements with the rest of the world constituted a novel era of world politics that made it impossible to think domestic politics in isolation from the ever-widening global interactions.⁵ The contradictions and tensions between the nineteenth-century rise of the democratic nation-state within Europe as well as in the settler colonies and the scale and scope of imperial expansion were a central preoccupation of European intellectuals who offered a series of ideological and institutional sutures for the divides between nation and empire.⁶

The first antisystemic worldmaking project emerged in this context with the founding of the International Workingmen's Association in 1864.⁷ Both the *Communist Manifesto* and Karl Marx's *Capital* situated the rise of capitalist production and its creation of a world market in imperial expansion.⁸ "The dawn of the era of capitalist production," Marx argued, was to be found in "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous populations of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins."⁹ Through this violent domination, the European bourgeoisie

sought to create “a world after its own image” and in turn produced the conditions of its own overcoming.¹⁰ In linking together disparate political parties and trade unions against the growing consolidation of an international system of nation-states, the First International envisioned a global emancipation of labor that would remake the world.

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, anti-imperialists of the colonized world radicalized this Marxist critique of empire’s political economy. They argued that Europe’s effort to produce “a world after its own image” through imperial expansion was always a chimera that belied colonial dependencies and inequalities. Imperial integration did not create one world but instead entailed racialized differentiation.¹¹ After the Bolshevik revolution, and working within and beyond the Third International, interwar anti-imperialists mobilized this critique to envision a reordering of the world that transcended imperial inequality and anticipated anti-imperial and often antistatist futures.¹² Operating through transnational networks, internationalists experimented with political forms beyond and below the nation-state. They offered visions of a world after empire that ranged from Marcus Garvey’s transnational black nation organized through the Universal Negro Improvement Association to Padmore’s International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, an arm of the Third International that fashioned black workers as the vanguard of the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.¹³

The worldmakers in this study traveled the circuits of interwar anti-imperial internationalisms. However, they arrived on the political stage at a moment after the fall of the Third International and when the mid-century collapse of empires coincided with the triumph of the nation-state.¹⁴ These conditions set limits on the range of political possibilities for anticolonial worldmaking. However, the emergence of the nation-state as the normative unit of the international order also provided occasion to rethink the conditions in which a system of states might overcome imperial hierarchy and domination. In this context, nationalists argued that in the absence of legal, political, and economic institutions that realized an international principle of nondomination, the domestic politics of postcolonial states were constantly vulnerable to external encroachment and intervention. Worldmaking was thus envisioned as the correlate to nation-building, and self-determination stood at their nexus. In its domestic face, self-determination entailed a democratic politics of postcolonial citizenship through which the postcolonial state secured economic development and redistribution. In its international face, self-determination created the external conditions for this domestic politics by transforming conditions

of international hierarchy that facilitated dependence and domination. This book demonstrates that instead of marking the collapse of internationalism and the closure of alternative conceptions of a world after empire, anticolonial nationalism in the age of decolonization continued to confront the legacies of imperial hierarchy with a demand for the radical reconstitution of the international order.

The Worlds of Pan-Africanism

To understand this history of anticolonial worldmaking, we need to grasp the worlds of Pan-Africanism that the central characters of this study inhabited. As Anglophone Black Atlantic intellectuals, Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams were interlocutors beginning in the interwar period. While I focus on Anglophone thinkers, it should be noted that interwar black internationalism transcended imperial boundaries and gave rise to political collaboration and intellectual exchange between British and French colonial subjects.¹⁵ In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, Francophone figures like Aimé Césaire, Paulette Nardal, and Léopold Senghor had spearheaded much of this collaboration, but the suppression of black intellectuals in Paris, which intensified during the German occupation, significantly eroded Francophone internationalist circles.¹⁶ By 1945, London rather than Paris was at the center of black internationalism. Moreover, the postwar project of a transnational French federation, which occupied figures like Césaire and Senghor, created divergent trajectories of decolonization in the Francophone world.¹⁷

While the Anglophone world emerged as the central site of black internationalism by the end of World War II, anticolonial worldmaking was not limited to the central characters of this book. Broader political formations such as the Bandung Conference and the Non-aligned Movement also advanced the project of constituting a postimperial world order. Organized around the rubrics of Afro-Asian solidarity and the Third World, these formations played a central role in securing a right to self-determination and envisioning a New International Economic Order.¹⁸ But if anticolonial worldmaking captures in this sense a broader set of political solidarities, it took a distinctive trajectory in the Black Atlantic, where imagining a world after empire drew on an anticolonial critique that began from the foundational role of New World slavery in the making of the modern world and traced the ways its legacies were constitutive of racial hierarchy in the international order.

The global legacies of slavery and emancipation were already central to the framing of the first Pan-African Congress, held in 1900, where W.E.B. Du Bois had famously announced, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”¹⁹ In this formulation, he linked the modes of racial domination in postemancipation societies that the Jim Crow color line epitomized with the new era of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century. During the interwar period, a new generation of black internationalists extended Du Bois’s critique. Crisscrossing the Atlantic, this cohort of anticolonial nationalists was deeply influenced by their experiences of travel, education abroad, and encounter with fellow colonial subjects. Through literary, institutional, and political circuits, they offered a rethinking of the history of transatlantic slavery, formulated their critique of empire as enslavement, and articulated early conceptions of anticolonial worldmaking.

Capturing the worldliness of his generation’s political and intellectual formation, Eric Williams retrospectively wrote that the nationalist party he had founded, the People’s National Movement of Trinidad, “is part of the world movement against colonialism . . . [that emerged from] the very colonials who formed part of the university generation of the thirties, who saw the rise of Hitler, the rape of Ethiopia, the trampling of Spanish democracy, and who heard the Oxford Union refuse to fight for King and Country.”²⁰ Born in Trinidad in 1911, Williams had won the island scholarship to study at Oxford University. He received his BA in history in 1935 and completed a dissertation on the economic history of slavery and abolition in 1938. Later published as *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams’s dissertation was inspired by C.L.R. James, who was his secondary school teacher and had also moved to the United Kingdom, where he wrote and published *The Black Jacobins*. The seminal history of the Haitian Revolution explicitly linked the nineteenth-century struggle against slavery in the Americas with the impending anti-imperial revolutions in Africa. Together with Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935), these texts illuminated the constitutive role of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in North Atlantic modernity.

Williams moved from Oxford to Howard University in 1939, where he joined the political science faculty. At the “Negro Oxford,” he participated in debates about the structuring role of white supremacy in the international order with Ralph Bunche, Alain Locke, Rayford Logan, and Merze Tate.²¹ Howard and other black colleges and universities functioned as key nodes in black internationalist networks by supporting the research agendas of scholars like Williams, educating a generation of nationalists, and

connecting African and Caribbean students and intellectuals to an African American public sphere.²² The Nigerian nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe first enrolled at Howard and took courses with Alain Locke, before completing his degree at Lincoln University in 1930.²³ In his first book, *Liberia in World Politics*, Azikiwe extended the explorations of international racial hierarchy pioneered at Howard by examining modes of imperialism that exceeded alien rule.²⁴ When Azikiwe returned to West Africa, he started a number of newspapers in Accra and Lagos that were modeled on African American newspapers and provided a new forum for West African nationalists.

In Accra, Azikiwe met Kwame Nkrumah, at the time a student at the Achimota Teacher's College, and encouraged him to study at Lincoln. Nkrumah followed Azikiwe's path to the United States in 1935, stopping in the United Kingdom to secure a visa. Echoing Williams's reflections on the significance of the 1930s, Nkrumah notes in his autobiography that as he arrived in London, he heard news of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and describes feeling "as if the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally."²⁵ While he did not know it at the time, the 1935 invasion had been a catalyst for black internationalists in London. George Padmore, who resigned from the Third International in 1933, turned toward an explicitly Pan-African politics in this period, while C.L.R. James offered a more radical critique of the League of Nations as a racially hierarchical organization. Together, Padmore and James formed the International African Friends of Abyssinia to organize support for Ethiopia, and later the International African Service Bureau with a broader aim of coordinating Pan-Africanism in the United Kingdom. During this period, Padmore wrote *How Britain Rules Africa* (1936), where he deployed the term "colonial fascism" to describe the British Empire and highlight the limits of European antifascism.²⁶ The following year, he published *Africa and World Peace*, which traced the ways in which imperial competition and rivalry were once again leading to world war.²⁷

By the mid-1930s, black internationalists had rewritten the history of New World slavery and had honed their critique of unequal integration and international racial hierarchy. But at this moment they remained largely undecided about the institutional forms of a postimperial world. The contours of the worldmaking projects described in this study would take shape only over the next decade. Between 1935 and 1945, Nkrumah was in the United States studying at Lincoln and the University of Pennsylvania. These ten years were some of his richest intellectually and politically.²⁸ He participated in African student groups, where he sharpened

his ideas about African unity; was connected with left-leaning political organizations; encountered the writings of Marcus Garvey, which he described as the most influential texts on his political thinking; and joined local branches of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.²⁹ It was in this context that Nkrumah began to articulate a demand for national independence and translated Garvey's black nationalism into a vision of Pan-African federation.

Having moved to the United States to join the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in 1938, James met Nkrumah and facilitated his entry into the black internationalist circles in London with an introduction to Padmore. When Nkrumah arrived in London in 1945, they organized the Fifth Pan-African Congress and began a political and intellectual relationship that lasted until Padmore's death in 1959. At the congress and in their publications over the next decade, they developed an account of decolonization in which national self-determination was the first step toward African union and international federation.³⁰ After Ghana's independence, they hosted the Conference of Independent African States and All People's African Conference in 1958, the first Pan-African gatherings on the continent. Through these meetings of independent African states and liberation movements, they set the groundwork for Pan-African federation and supported a new generation of anticolonial nationalists.

The 1930s university generation, which included Azikiwe, Nkrumah, Padmore, and Williams, shaped the first phase of anticolonial worldmaking in the age of decolonization. They deployed the new histories of slavery to critique empire as a form of enslavement, institutionalized the right to self-determination at the United Nations, achieved national independence, and worked to realize regional federation in Africa and the Caribbean. A second generation of anticolonial worldmakers represented here by Michael Manley and Julius Nyerere responded to the limits of this first moment and articulated a new project of worldmaking. Born in the 1920s, both Manley and Nyerere were too young to travel the black internationalist circuits of the interwar period, and they came of age when the promises of communist internationalism had dissipated.³¹ While they did not share the formative experiences of the 1930s generation, they witnessed and supported the early moments of anticolonial worldmaking. Manley campaigned for Williams's West Indian Federation while a student at the London School of Economics, and Nyerere directly participated in the debates about African union.

When these projects failed, Nyerere and Manley returned to the question of imperialism's hierarchical worldmaking and the distortions it

created in postcolonial societies to reimagine a world after empire. At the center of this second phase of worldmaking was an effort to rethink socialism for these conditions and reestablish economic equality as the central ideal of a postimperial world. In doing so, Manley and Nyerere, educated at the London School of Economics and the University of Edinburgh respectively, drew on Fabian socialism and, in particular, the writings of Harold Laski.³² Interlocutors since their days in the United Kingdom, Manley's and Nyerere's distinctive socialist projects, coupled with their efforts to institutionalize the New International Economic Order, marked the final and most ambitious phase of anticolonial worldmaking.

Organization of the Book

In excavating the projects of anticolonial worldmaking that constituted central episodes of self-determination's rise and fall, this book draws on extensive research in African, West Indian, and European archives. The animating motivation of this recovery is to contribute to a history of the present by rethinking decolonization. Narratives that equate decolonization with the transition from empire to nation-state understand postcolonial state formation as one episode in a recurring and generic set of questions about political founding, constitutionalism, and popular sovereignty. These narratives also constitute the implicit historical backdrop for normative theorists concerned with international economic and political justice. In illuminating the multiplicity of political projects that decolonization entailed, this book attends to the specificity of postcolonial sovereignty and seeks to reorient the questions we ask about international justice. It highlights the ways that the experience of colonial domination and international hierarchy gave distinctive shape to debates about sovereignty and state formation and recenters the enduring legacies of European imperialism in our present.

Distilling the main theoretical interventions from the historical excavation and reconstruction central to this book, chapter 1 sketches a political theory of decolonization that rethinks how anticolonial nationalism posed the problem of empire to expand our sense of its aims and trajectories. Drawing on recent histories of international law as well as the political thought of Black Atlantic worldmakers, I reconceive empire as processes of unequal international integration that took an increasingly racialized form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Confronted with a racialized international order, anticolonial nationalists turned to projects of worldmaking that would secure the conditions of international

nondomination. When we examine the worldmaking aspirations of anticolonial nationalism, we can move beyond the preoccupation with nationalism's illiberalism and parochialism to consider the specificity of the animating questions, aims, and contradictions of anticolonial nationalism. I argue that attention to the specificity of political projects that emerged out of the legacy of imperialism also provides a postcolonial approach to contemporary cosmopolitanism. Drawing on the conceptual and political innovations of anticolonial worldmaking, a postcolonial cosmopolitanism entails a critical diagnosis of the persistence of empire and a normative orientation that retains the anti-imperial aspiration for a domination-free international order.

Chapter 2 examines the institutionalization of empire as unequal integration in the League of Nations. Recasting the Wilsonian moment as a counterrevolutionary episode, I argue that Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts excised the revolutionary implications of the Bolshevik right to self-determination and repurposed the principle to preserve racial hierarchy in the new international organization. In this appropriation, which drew on Edmund Burke's critique of the Jacobins as well as their disavowal of the democratic possibilities entailed in nineteenth-century emancipation, Wilson and Smuts effectively remade self-determination as a racially differentiated principle, which was fully compatible with imperial rule. I chart the implications of their account of self-determination by examining Ethiopia's and Liberia's membership in the international organization. The membership of these two African states is often viewed as an example of the first expansion of international society. However, I argue that rather than protecting their sovereign equality, the inclusion of Ethiopia and Liberia created the conditions of their domination through a burdened and racialized membership where obligations were onerous and rights limited. In setting the stage for the history of anticolonial worldmaking, this chapter establishes the problem of empire as racialized international hierarchy and destabilizes the idea that the universal principle of self-determination had Wilsonian origins.

Chapter 3 moves from the League of Nations to the United Nations, where anticolonial nationalists staged their reinvention of self-determination, transforming a secondary principle included in the United Nation Charter into a human right. Through the political thought of Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and George Padmore, I illustrate that this reinvention drew on a distinctive account of empire as enslavement. In this expansive critique, anticolonial nationalists began with the arbitrary power and exploitation that structured the relationship of the

colonizer and colonized and traced the ways in which this colonial domination reverberated in the international sphere. They framed their answer to this problem of empire as a wholesale transformation of domestic and international politics understood as combined projects of nation-building and worldmaking. The right to self-determination marked the first step of this transformation. Through its guarantees of independence and equality, it secured the formal conditions of international nondomination necessary for the domestic exercise of self-government. The emergence of a right to self-determination is often read as an expansion of an already existing principle in which anticolonial nationalists universalize a Westphalian regime of sovereignty. In contrast to this standard account, I argue that the anticolonial account of self-determination marked a radical break from the Eurocentric model of international society and established nondomination as a central ideal of a postimperial world order. Rather than tether the idea of independent and equal states to the legacy of Westphalia, we should identify this vision of international order with an anti-imperialism that went beyond the demand for the inclusion of new states to imagine an egalitarian world order.

Chapter 4 recovers the largely forgotten projects of regional federation in the West Indies and Africa that anticolonial nationalists pursued alongside their reinvention of self-determination. In returning to the centrality of the federal imaginary to anticolonial nationalists, I demonstrate that alternatives to the nation-state persisted at the height of decolonization. For federalists like Kwame Nkrumah and Eric Williams, freedom from alien rule did not sufficiently guarantee nondomination as powerful states, international organizations, and private actors exploited relations of economic dependence to indirectly secure political compulsion. The postcolonial predicament of *de jure* independence and *de facto* dependence, captured in Nkrumah's thesis of neocolonialism, made domestic self-government vulnerable to external encroachment. I reconstruct how Nkrumah and Williams positioned the United States as a model of postcolonial federation to make the case that regional federations could overcome the postcolonial predicament by creating larger, more diverse domestic markets, organizing collective development plans, ensuring regional redistribution, and providing for regional security. If in the formulation of a right to self-determination nondomination was to be secured by creating juridical defenses against domination, federations secured nondomination by creating new political and economic linkages between postcolonial states, which would gradually erode the relations of dependence and domination that subordinated them in the international sphere. In its federal phase,

anticolonial worldmaking envisioned dispersing and delegating sovereignty beyond the nation-state. I trace the ways that this model of regional federation gave way to forms of functional integration that bolstered the nation-state as critics rejected Nkrumah's and Williams's proposals for centralized federal states. While short-lived, the federal moment in the Black Atlantic draws attention to the ways that a critique of international hierarchy and the effort to secure national self-determination prompted far-reaching institutional experimentation that attended to both the political and economic dimensions of international nondomination.

Chapter 5 analyzes the ways that anticolonial nationalists responded to an intensified postcolonial predicament with their most ambitious project of worldmaking—the New International Economic Order (NIEO). After the failure of regional federation, postcolonial states, which were largely producers of raw materials, experienced a significant decline in their terms of trade that threatened economic development and revealed once more the ways the postcolonial nation-building remained vulnerable to external forces. I illustrate that when confronted with the limits of the development economics Nkrumah and Williams had embraced, Michael Manley and Julius Nyerere articulated a new political economy of self-determination by returning to the ways in which unequal economic integration engendered a distorted postcolonial economy and produced a damaging international division of labor. Analogizing this international division of labor to domestic class politics, they engaged in a distinctive politicization of the global economy that framed postcolonial states as the working class; fashioned Third World solidarity as a form of international class politics; and demanded redistribution on the basis that the global south had in fact produced the wealth of the global north. Drawn from this account of the global economy, the NIEO constituted a welfare world that sought to enhance the bargaining power of postcolonial states, democratize decision-making, and achieve international redistribution. I argue that at the center of this welfare world was a radical recasting of sovereign equality as a demand for an equitable share of the world's wealth. The NIEO envisioned this expansive account of sovereign equality as the economic component of international nondomination. The view that sovereign equality had material implications marked anticolonial nationalists' biggest departure from the postwar international legal order and was quickly rejected and displaced in the neoliberal counterrevolution of the 1970s.

Finally, the epilogue charts the fall of self-determination and illustrates that the collapse of anticolonial worldmaking continues to structure our contemporary moment. Picking up in the immediate aftermath of the

NIEO, I locate self-determination's fall in two developments—the increasingly critical orientation of Western (especially American) intellectuals and politicians toward the right to self-determination as well as the diminution of international institutions like the United Nations where anticolonial nationalists had staged their worldmaking. Together the normative erosion of self-determination and marginalization of the UN set the stage for the resurgence of international hierarchy and a newly unrestrained American imperialism. At the same time, the critical resources of anticolonial nationalism appeared to be exhausted as the institutional form of the postcolonial state fell short of its democratic and egalitarian aspirations and anticolonial worldmaking retreated into a minimalist defense of the state. But while we live in the aftermath of self-determination's fall and no longer inhabit the political and ideological contexts that gave shape to the visions of a domination-free international order that anticolonial worldmakers pursued, the task of building a world after empire remains ours as much as it was theirs.