

Postcolonial

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The postcolonial world has emerged from the ruins of empires. Ruins, those dis-connective objects par excellence, simultaneously separate us from and connect us to an era that is no longer ours. They maintain structures that are incomplete and decayed, having lost most of their original functionality. In ruins, the past survives as a remnant (Parry 2019).

As remnants of a fallen age, ruins remind those who gaze upon them of the frailty of human constructions, however solid they may have appeared at the time. From the Habsburgs to Napoleon and the governors of the British Empire, empire builders were haunted by the fear that they might share the fate of Rome, whose ruins stand as silent testimony to the collapse of a civilisation that once deemed itself eternal (Hell 2009; Hell 2019). Even when rulers did not claim to be the rightful heirs of Rome under the principle of *translatio imperii* (unlike those of the Holy Roman Empire and Moscow, who did), the Roman example still loomed large, serving as both an inspiration and a cautionary tale (Kumar 2012; Brendon 2008).

This also holds true for the European colonial empires, whose justifying narratives and governance structures clearly echoed Rome's legacy (Seed 1995, 179–93; Pagden 1995, 11–28; Burbank and Cooper 2010, 287–330). When, in 1884, Bismarck explained before the Reichstag's Budget Committee his decision to place the Bay of Angra Pequena on the southwest African coast under German state protection, he invoked Cicero by quoting the famous phrase *civis romanus sum* ("I am a Roman citizen"), which was supposed to guarantee safe passage for any Roman citizen within the realm (Andreas 1924, 474). Bismarck argued by analogy that, likewise, any German citizen travelling the world must be protected from infringements of their rights.¹ However, unlike the Roman example, Bismarck wanted private companies operating overseas to bear the costs of their colonial ventures, thereby preventing the establishment of state-led colonies (Wehler 1969). But it soon became apparent that the companies responsible for managing Germany's territories in Africa and the Pacific would fail to establish viable administrations. In response, the German Reich assumed direct control of its so-called protectorates and appointed governors, who effectively acted as proconsuls on behalf of the Kaiser, wielding executive powers over imperial provinces (Kilian 2024). World War I abruptly

¹ British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston made a similar analogy in 1850 regarding the protection of a British subject, David Pacifico (known as Don Pacifico), whose property was damaged during an anti-Semitic riot in Athens. When the Greek authorities refused to compensate him, the British responded by launching a naval blockade of Greece's principal ports (Whitten 1986).

ended Germany's aspirations as a maritime power and led to the dismantling of its land-based empire in Europe, reducing the country to its national heartlands. In conjunction, the collapse of neighbouring continental empires paved the way for the formation of national states across Central and Eastern Europe (Gerwarth 2017; Mazower 2012, 116–88). However, it was only the decolonisation following World War II that, beyond the collapse of individual empires, fundamentally called imperial rule itself into question (Mishra 2012; Jansen and Osterhammel 2017; Thomas 2024). Empire, as a framework for global order, lost its political legitimacy, which does not necessarily mean that it also disappeared as a political reality.

A dis:connective approach to the rise of the postcolonial world from the ruins of global empires – one of the most consequential events in modern history that affected virtually all of humanity – must avoid four interrelated fallacies. In the remainder of this essay, I will outline these fallacies before concluding with a brief discussion on the broader implications of this perspective. First, a dis:connective approach must resist the temptation to narrate the story from its presumed conclusion. Rather than assuming a linear progression from colonial empire to postcolonial nation-state, scholars working within this framework need to focus on historical contingency and detours. The perspective of dis:connectivity requires us to explore how the connections forged by colonialism were contested during decolonisation and, as a result, either dissolved or reconfigured through a dynamic, open-ended process. For the transition from connection to disconnection is never simple or without alternatives. It involves conflicts and complications that lead to detours, as well as surprising twists and turns that require careful investigation. Thus, the worldwide proliferation of the nation-state in response to the crisis of empire as a framework for global order was not the only conceivable outcome of the process known as decolonisation. Alternative paths toward a postimperial world existed, centred not on national sovereignty but on federal integration and reform (Burbank and Cooper 2023; Leanza 2024). The French Union (1946–1958), which extended French citizenship and parliamentary representation to France's African colonies, provides a compelling example of such an attempt to reconfigure imperial connections along federal lines, rather than simply dissolving them (Cooper 2014). Even though this and other efforts at federal transformation ultimately failed – examples include the West Indies Federation (1958–1962), the Central African Federation (1953–1963), the Union of African States (1958–1963) in West Africa, the United Arab Republic (including Syria, 1958–1961), and the Federation of Malaysia with Singapore (1963–1965) – the independent nation-state by no means went unchallenged.

Secondly, decolonisation was not a blind process governed alone by anonymous forces, whether geopolitical or economic. Rather, the actors involved were continuously engaged in reflecting upon the events as they unfolded. This is not to deny the existence of latent structures and dynamics of which individuals were unaware;

however, the dissolution and reconfiguration of global connections during decolonisation were, to a certain degree, contingent upon observers attributing meaning and relevance (see also Baecker 2013). Contemporaries justified their actions and interpreted those of others, narrated stories of the recent past and envisioned future scenarios, while also developing general theories to explain larger, tectonic shifts. The social sciences participated in this collective sense-making process, helping to reimagine a world after empire (Cooper 2004). For instance, in 1960 – the year seventeen African states declared independence – Harvard political scientist Rupert Emerson published his voluminous study *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples*. In this work, Emerson (1960, 354–9) describes the global spread of the nation-state as an unintended consequence of European expansion, while emphasising the inherent limitations and challenges of postcolonial nation-building, particularly in plural societies with no uncontested majority population such as in Nigeria. Karl W. Deutsch (1969), a trained lawyer and political scientist who worked on the committee that helped draft the United Nations Charter in San Francisco in 1945, also repeatedly addressed the question of how humanity can arrive at a new global order. Arguing that the high hopes for transforming colonial empires into federated entities were unfounded, he concluded that ‘[i]f we are to have peace in the world, . . . we will have to seek it for the next 10 or 20 years by methods other than federation.’ (124) Although nation-states had often been depicted ‘as being particularly intolerant’, while federations were believed ‘to be less conducive to prejudice’, (116) this did not change the fact that ‘the nation-state is still the most powerful instrument in the world for getting things done.’ (125) In this vein, social scientists like Emerson and Deutsch helped envision a world in which the liberal nation-state was to become the fundamental unit of political organisation.

Thirdly, while a dis:connective approach underscores the crucial importance of culture and the spread of ideas in understanding institutional change, it must be careful to avoid the fallacy of diffusionism. Rather than depicting a unilateral, linear export of cultural schemes from one site to another, we should trace dynamic interactions across geographical regions and institutional domains, paying special attention to the labour of translation (Latour 1987, 132–44). The adoption of the nation-state model by communities previously under colonial rule was more than a mere emulation of the Western example, as suggested by modernisation theory and, in a less schematic form, by more recent scholarship (Parsons 1971; Meyer et al. 1997; Wimmer and Feinstein 2010). Instead of merely imitating a model established elsewhere, anticolonial nationalism reconfigured and rejuvenated the modern nation-state. For example, it linked the principle of self-determination to an expansive notion of political and economic nondomination in the international sphere (Getachew 2019; Gerits 2023). In tracing the worldwide proliferation of

the nation-state, we must therefore move beyond a diffusionist understanding of global circulation and focus on the creative, unpredictable process of translation. Through the translation of political models and legal norms across regions, a varied global landscape has emerged – one that is anything but flat.

The fourth and final fallacy I term unidirectionality. The breakup of colonial empires during decolonisation has left us with the persistent impression that colonialism was a one-way relationship, exclusively affecting colonised communities while leaving metropolitan societies largely untouched. After all, it is ‘they’, not ‘we’ in the West, who bear the label of postcolonial, along with the burden it entails (Randeria 1999; Chakrabarty 2000). As colonial empires fractured into independent nation-states, rather than transforming into cross-regional federations, a divided historical awareness became further entrenched. This division has led to a highly uneven visibility of the colonial past across different world regions, as maintaining a broad and inclusive memory would have required considerable effort. Countering this lingering misapprehension, a dis:connective approach reveals the bi- and even multidirectional nature of colonialism, impacting all parties involved (Rothberg 2009). However, it is not sufficient to simply call for a broader historical awareness. We must also tackle the analytical challenge of identifying the causal mechanisms that explain how overseas expansion created lasting effects in the metropolises thousands of miles away.²

Two mechanisms that scholars frequently invoke in this field are othering and transfer. While othering pertains to the ways in which notions of the colonised as ‘alien’ and ‘inferior’ helped mould the national identities of the colonisers (Said 2003; orig. 1978), in transfer processes, the colonies served not as projection screens but as testing grounds for military, administrative, and scientific innovations that the metropolises could subsequently adopt (Go 2023). In my research on the German colonial empire, I have identified another mechanism – namely, the mechanism of challenge and response (Leanza 2024, drawing on Toynbee 1947). In this context, the term refers to the institutional reforms by which the metropolises responded to the challenges of colonial governance. This included the expansion and creation of federal agencies, the introduction of new taxes and adjustments to citizenship law, and the involvement of parliament in colonial policy to generate political legitimacy for the costly maintenance of the overseas empire. In this way, the colonies left a lasting imprint on the political system of their metropole – an influence that persisted well into the postcolonial period.

² On causal mechanisms, defined in opposition to covering laws, see Machamer et al. 2000 and Gorski 2013. For the renewed interest in causality and comparison in historical sociology, see also Hoover and Mayrl 2024.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Europe's colonial past, which is fraught with analytical, political, and moral complexities. At a time when ethnonationalism is again on the rise in Europe, reflecting on the subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – aftereffects of colonialism seems more necessary than ever. However, as Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021) cautions, reflecting on this topic alone will not suffice. 'It is not', she explained following German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 2021 opening ceremony of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, 'that Europe has denied its colonial history – that would be too crude. It is instead that Europe has developed a way of telling the story of its colonial history that ultimately seeks to erase that history.' Countering this colonial erasure requires an alternative narrative, one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our postcolonial world. At the same time, it must also be a narrative of disconnectedness so as to explain how the multidirectional character of the colonial relationship has been mistaken as unidirectional. The concept of dis:connectivity enables us to hold these two ideas in tension without resolving their relationship in either direction.

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