Review of Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire*

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European imperial expansion, Eric Hobsbawm noted, made all history henceforth global history. This is the central premise behind Adom Getachew's brilliant first book, *Worldmaking after Empire.* Early on in the introduction to the book, she notes, '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'.[1] The way she translates this seemingly straightforward historical claim into a methodological commitment that structures her work is what makes this book a standout contribution to recent scholarship. It is easier, relatively speaking, to write a book that makes an argument on terms already laid out. It is far more difficult to devise a methodological framework that itself intervenes in the debate the book seeks to address. That is, rethinking not just what the answer is, but how one must set out to answer it.

That debate (to put it simplistically) is regarding how to afford non-western or anti-imperial political thought the same centrality and significance that has traditionally been afforded to western traditions of thought. If the non-Europeans were overwhelmingly subjects rather than agents of imperial globalisation, how could we portray them as authors of global political thought? If the Europeans made the imperial world through their material and discursive domination, how could those on the wrong side of that domination produce concepts that can lay a claim to 'world-making', rather than simply

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1. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

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adapting or negating the conceptual world that was made for them? To put it another way, how could imperial subjects move beyond the persistent dichotomy of derivativeness or provincial indigeneity to be taken seriously as thinkers of something like the 'global'?

Responding to these challenges, Getachew's methodological approach has three inter-related elements. First, she frames empire as not simply alien rule but as 'international structures of unequal integration'.[2] That is, not a singular fact to be overcome with formal independence, but a global structure of variously related domination to be navigated. Second, she ties together seemingly distinctive thinkers, traditions, and locus of political visions through their common subjecthood to and struggle against this imperial structure and its evolving forms: from transatlantic slavery to post- imperial capitalism. The tradition of thought those struggles produced standing not in isolationist autonomy but rather emerging through a 'creative and combative relationship' with the terms of Western thought.[3] Third, building up from that a story of 'antisystemic world making project'. One that stands as a coherent global political concept where these imperial subjects are not passive recipients but active agents of another form of world making that challenges the familiar world making of the empire. While they might have been 'conscripts of modernity' – to use David Scott's influential terminology – that did not necessarily make them non-sovereign actors bound to their historical contingency.[4] Rather, they actively rose to the challenge, informed by their imperial inheritance, of turning the empire on its head so to speak.

Taken together, these methodological elements suggest an argumentative structure of their own. If modern European empire was a world making project, the political and ideological horizon of the struggle against it could not be sufficiently understood or appreciated within the framework of various historically contingent visions of national autonomy. Against the world that the empire made, the anti-imperialists had to imagine a world of their own. The story of decolonisation could not be sufficiently narrated along an antagonistic axis of disparate territorial autonomy against the global imperium. Rather, decolonisation in its fullest sense, Getachew suggests, has to be explored as the possibility of a truly non-imperial world order.

While this might sound like an attractive conclusion to reach, it is a difficult task to pull off methodologically. Precisely because so many of the struggles against empire, while united by the singularity of the system of oppression, were conducted in distinctive historical, linguistic, and ideological terrains – spanning three different continents and several decades. Organising even a part of it within a common narrative thread requires the labour of sifting through those distinctive contexts and analytically deriving from them unifying thematic coordinates. Many works of global history of political thought lean on the cross national dialogues between key actors as the threads that hold the narrative together. Getachew goes beyond that to attempt something that is far more ambitious. Getting her hands dirty, so to speak, with questions of political economy and transnational historical developments to construct a narrative that flows on its own

2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 77.
4. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

terms from the transatlantic slavery to the New Economic Order, from the Caribbean to West Africa. An image of emancipatory internationalism derived not from contingent and disparate dialogues across national boundaries, but from the structural logic of imperial domination and the struggle against it. Beyond the deserved praise for the considerable rigour and dexterity in constructing that narrative framework, what is really notable about that effort is the instructive example it sets for the discipline of history of political thought regarding the kind of interdisciplinary scaffolding that is required to truly do justice to the archives of decolonisation. In the following parts of the article I will turn to some of the substantive claims the book makes. But far more than the sum total of those arguments, what makes this book such a valuable scholarly contribution is Getachew's ability to both carefully envision and rigorously execute this methodological commitment.

Beyond the Nation State

Political theory always had an uneasy relationship with the nation state form. In his seminal book on the topic, Benedict Anderson famously lamented that the nationalism has produced 'no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes, or Webers'.[5] Anderson's formulation was not entirely accurate (both Weberians and Marxists might beg to disagree, to begin with), but for much of its disciplinary life up until the 1980s, political theory did not afford nationalism the kind of sustained analytical attention that it afforded to similarly influential modern conceptions such as democracy, rights, or the state. The immediate context for Anderson's own work, as he made clear in the introduction, was the national liberation movement in the decolonising world whose anti-imperial struggle was fought (against former imperialism) and sustained (against the informal variant) most commonly under the banner of nationalism. It is this political phenomenon, the cohabitation of decolonisation and the nation-state form which brought the question of nationalism to the attention of political theorists. It would be the postcolonial scholars who would make the nation an object of their attention. Partha Chatterjee's influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* would argue for an understanding of postcolonial nationalism not as a derivative of 19th century European variants but in its specific historicity.[6] Chatterjee's work, however, does not end on an optimistic note about the conjoined phrase national liberation – that is, in the possibility of the former political/ideological formation to truly realise the promise of the latter. Chatterjee, like most Third World scholars of his generation, was reacting to the exhaustion of the decolonising nationalist projects in his homeland. These Third World scholars' immediate points of departure were the voluminous literatures of what would be called 'nationalist historiography' – immensely influential in the domestic contexts of the Third World countries, if less so in the Western academia – that had imagined the nation as the exemplary space of both autonomy from colonial past and construction of a developed postcolonial future.

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 5.
6. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

This strand of literature marked the exhaustion of the seemingly emancipatory promise of the nationalist project amongst the intellectuals in the Third World – slowly dissipated amongst Western academia.

With the end of the Cold War, and advent of the more contemporary version of globalisation, this internal perspective gave way to a more global one; this time generated in the Western academy itself. In the context of an unchallenged hegemony of a liberal economic and institutional order under the imperial umbrella of the United States, the nation state increasingly seemed not only a site of unrealised promise, but a relic of the past. In political theory, this was reflected in the influential scholarly project of global justice that sought to expand John Rawls's more spatially limited theoretical framework of justice to a global scale.[7] It was also the conjecture (as Samuel Moyn argues) that saw the advent and prominence of Human Rights both as a practice and an object of scholarship.[8]

If the global justice and human rights scholarship sought to transcend the normative claim of the nation state to organise political life, the European Union (at that moment) looked like a promising path of institutionalising political life at a supra-national level. The continent where nationalism was invented, now sought to create a robust federal system above (or beyond, depending upon one's metaphorical preferences) the nation. Unlike most regional federations that had existed primarily as diplomatic units, the EU challenged certain fundamental aspects of national sovereignty – like currency and borders. The theoretical promise of the EU lay not only in its inventiveness, but also in its explicit promise to overcome what had made nationalism a problematic concept for Western scholars for much of 20th century – its all too frequent association with belligerence and xenophobia.

If the EU was the proximate historical context for the renewed interest in federations as a political space, historians soon rightfully pointed to non-European conceptions of federations that predated the European attempt, during the transition from empires to nation state. The two most influential works in this vein were Frederick Cooper's *Citizenship Between Empire and Nations* and Gary Wilder's *Freedom Time.*[9] Both Cooper and Wilder took as their object of analysis the attempt of certain actors in the Francophone African colonies – Leopold Senghor, Mamadou Dia and others – to imagine a post-imperial French federation that would include both the metropole and its West African colonies (especially Senegal) within a common institutional framework. Cooper and Wilder's works were the two most well-known embodiments of a wider attempt by historians to revise the until recently dominant notion that decolonisation simply meant a transition from empire to nation states.

This is the literature that Getachew's work is most directly in conversation with. It however does not simply engage with it through a simple expansion of archives

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7. Charles Beitz, "Justice and International Relations," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 4, (1975)4: 360–89.

8. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010).

9. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nations: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), and Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015).

(Anglophone Africa and Caribbean as opposed to Europe or Francophone Africa). Getachew does it in a way that addresses some of the major criticisms of the strains mentioned above. The literature inspired by the EU, like the EU's own self-image, focused on the supposedly hazardous historical legacies of nation states – wars, exclusions, suppression of minorities, protectionism etc. The goal was to overcome these tendencies by generating a supra national regime of rights and (partial) citizenship, and create an institutional architecture for inter-national cooperation. It was the exemplary – if regionally limited – version of (to use a shorthand Getachew does in the book) 'liberal universalism' against the particularisation that is inherent in nationalism. What often got left behind in such visions is the element of collective struggle for making and shaping a political world. This gets refracted in a contention over the meaning of the word democracy, and its institutional form. Often expressed in the much debated phrase 'democratic deficit' with regards to the EU. This is where the word 'making' in Getachew's title becomes significant. The reconstruction of internationalism that she offers in the book is unambivalently tied to that collective struggle. National sovereignty here is not a binary antagonist to be dismissed on normative grounds, but rather an initial but insufficient step towards true postcolonial emancipation that required an international political project to fulfil its potential. For the protagonists of her story, meaningful emancipation from imperial domination required a rethinking of the coordinates of relevant political space. It is a story of universalism, that goes 'through rather than over and against' the nations. Creating a wider space of solidarity that the common history of struggle had made available. Not only does this make us reconsider some of our understanding of decolonisation (a point to which I will return later), it marshals the archives of decolonisation to help reshape our understandings of 'internationalism'.

These arguments would also resonate against some of the criticisms faced by Cooper and Wilder's work. Many have pointed to the exceptionality and regional specificity of the story they narrate. After all, contemporaneous to the timeline of their story, another French colony (not to say anything of the British ones) Algeria was engaged in an explicitly nationalist struggle that had a far greater resonance in the Third World. But the question of regional particularity really gestures towards a far more significant issue – debated across the colonial world during the interwar years with regards to various systems like dominions, commonwealth, or mandates – as to whether postimperial federalism of the type Cooper and Wilder describe was just another way of reconfiguring rather than ending the empire. If struggles for decolonisation were about claiming autonomy from the empire, whether post-imperial federal configurations were ways of limiting the kind of independent self-making projects a fullest sense of such an autonomy would require. This was Frantz Fanon's contemporaneous critique of Senghor. While Cooper and Wilder studies therefore broaden the conceptual archive of federation beyond Europe, questions regarding the ambiguous relationship of federations to historically instantiated projects of decolonisation remained.

Getachew's work, on the other hand, clearly enunciates how the project of internationalism was intimately linked to a more consequential break from the imperial past than nation states could achieve. Here she reconstructs a relatively novel (at least for political theory) argument that only through a co-operative structure could former imperial subjects gain genuine economic autonomy. Decolonisation, while providing de jure

political sovereignty did not necessarily translate into economic independence from a world of global economic network overwhelmingly dominated by former imperial states. Self-determination, for the various anti-colonial thinkers, meant not just the ability for political self-governance, but economic self-reliance. Soon after formal decolonisation, dependency theorists and world-systems theorists would both describe empires in economic as well as the familiar politico-institutional terms; and argue that the formal demise of the latter did not translate to the diminished power of the former. Drawing on the legacy of these thinkers, Getachew shows how the spatial coordinates of decolonisation had to be rethought beyond the given borders that empires had bestowed on their postcolonial subjects. Internationalism or supra-nationalism was not thought of as constraints on nations or reconfigurations of empire, they were attempts to create a space that could bridge the national level of formal independence and the international level of continued economic dominance. It is in this dialectic that these projects of certain transatlantic actors could be considered as truly world making.

Unlike the earlier literature, Getachew is writing at a time when the prestige of both the US led liberal international order and the EU project, which provided the historical context for those earlier works, are under considerable strain. The easy confidence with which many in the last few decades could dismiss the nation state as a regressive anachronism is no longer afforded to us. Over the last decade, nationalism have regained a prominence in political vocabulary, primarily through the promise of autonomy and economic prosperity. Instead of a normative dismissal of the nation form, Getachew's work rises to the critical challenge of this moment by carefully engaging in the limits of precisely those promises – of sovereignty and autonomy – and to the extent they can be realised within the nation state. Consequently offering a portrait of supra-national politics that is not triumphal but hesitantly creative in its hope of realizing the unfulfillable promises of national liberation.

Decolonisation and its Tragedies

This is the substantive outcome of Getachew's methodological promise that the national and the international cannot be viewed in isolation. Although she does not frame it this explicitly, her argument, taken at its most ambitious, is that is that the empire-to-nation narrative is not just a historically inaccurate description, but rather that it is conceptually insufficient to contain the horizon of possibility of decolonisation. That true national independence could only be achieved through internationalist projects. We have to go beyond (instead of simply rise above) the preconfigured spatial coordinates of the nation, to appreciate decolonisation for its world making possibilities. My reason for framing the book in this way is to set up a conversation that I believe is at the heart of how we analyse decolonisation both as a historical and an ideational process.

For many prominent thinkers of decolonisation the primary question was what would count as a truly emancipatory movement against colonial rule that could then be the basis of crafting a postcolonial future. This included M.K. Gandhi in India and Frantz Fanon in Algeria, arguably the two best-known anti-colonial thinkers. In their widely different ways, both Gandhi and Fanon imagined decolonisation as essentially a remaking of the social order in the colonies. The claim was that colonialism was not only an international

system of hierarchy, but a distinctive form of rule that produced an unjust and unequal social condition within the colonies. The struggle for emancipation from that colonial past, they argued, would require a specific – and revolutionary – social transformation. The nature of that transformation, and indeed the usage of the term revolution, was contested. But its significance was asserted by various actors of the global anticolonial movements and carried forth by various strains of that collective struggle. The relationship between the revolutionary transformation at home and the structure of domination within which that home is situated cannot be fully demarcated. As mentioned, Getachew's contribution is to rethink the dimension of what home and the world (to appropriate the title of Rabindranath Tagore's novel on the anticolonial movement in Bengal) meant for anticolonial actors. However, when one presses on that relationship certain questions emerge. What specifically was the position of the protagonists of Getachew's story (especially those who held political power like Nkrumah or Nyerere) with regards to social transformation? Or rather, to frame the question in a way that shifts it from specific actors to the analytical framework itself: what was the relationship between transforming the social condition at home and transforming the world order?

Neither Fanon nor Gandhi (justifiably, given the geographic locations) feature in Getachew's work. But these questions animated both the Indian and the Algerian struggles. In one version of the debate, the internal dimension of social revolution was necessary for any effective anti-imperial project to get off the ground. In the competing version, securing the external – global – dimension of autonomy was necessary to carry out any meaningful social transformation in the post-colony. With the necessary caveat that the debate was never conducted along such a simple binary axis, the question remained as to whether one could engage in a world making project without first engendering a revolutionary transformation. Amongst the first generation of postcolonial actors, the spectre of colonial continuity haunted the home as much as it did the world. One possible answer to Getachew's intervention in this debate lies in her specific focus on the Black Atlantic. Slavery and forced displacement that was the historical legacy there, made the boundaries between home and away particularly porous, and shared transnational language of solidarity more readily available. The Caribbean especially – as Getachew shows in her discussion of Michael Manley[10] – represented an exemplary space where everyone (apart from the white minority) were children of labour – either slave or indentured – brought forcefully to its shores by the empire. Unlike Algeria or India, there was no precolonial great past to talk about. The colonial present was already a site of a rupture infused with a radical postcolonial futurity. Furthermore, for the same reason there was a less entrenched and potent internal social hierarchy than one would see in South Asia or North Africa. While linked to the Black Atlantic, the case of Ghana and Nkrumah lacks similar exemplarity – especially in the context of British indirect rule. Here one wonders to what extent the innovative visions of federalism were driven by a popular mobilisation, or were instead envisioned as the necessary condition for the emergence of a postcolonial citizenship?

This debate becomes especially significant when Getachew turns, as all contemporary scholars of decolonisation must, to the issue of the eventual limits of the project. David Scott influentially argued that all contemporary histories of decolonisation must be

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10. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 155–6.

written in the register of tragedy.[11] Getachew does not share Scott's sceptical sensibilities towards the transformative potentials of decolonisation. If anything, the book seeks to recover the world making possibilities described in its pages with a very acute sense of their resonance for today's world. But the internal logic of her story – bracketed between the periods of formal imperialism and neoliberal globalisation – leads her to address the question of not just the rise but also the fall (in her own words)[12] of the world making project of decolonisation. The analysis of the fall she provides are nuanced and various, often conjectural to the specific project that is being described. But there is a unifying thread to those explications: the abandonment of the expansive and ambitious internationalist vision for a narrower defense of national sovereignty, which went along with an authoritarian tendency that conflated dissent with anti-nationalism. With the 'moral and political purchase' of decolonisation 'hollowed out', the project of anti-imperial world making could not resist the emergence of the neoliberal globalisation project, which called forth a different kind of integration of nation states on terms dictated (often quite literally) once again by the metropole. Unlike some scholars who would have been content to recover a powerful emancipatory vision despite its failure, Getachew's explanation for the failure actually ends up supporting the reason for the book itself – resuscitating the conceptual potency of an unequal imperial world order not just to understand the past, but to critique our present. In the opening chapter of the book, she explicitly contrasts her project to a prominent strain in the literature that put the blame on the current miseries of the Third World on the various domestic failures of its leadership or lack of necessary 'sociological condition'. That reading, as Getachew correctly demonstrates throughout the book, unsustainably isolates the domestic from the international as her protagonists themselves understood. The failures of postcolonial nation building project, she convincingly argues, cannot be understood in isolation from the failure of a new post-imperial world to be built to sustain them.

However, the dialectics of the domestic and the international could be understood on another register: the failure of a meaningful social revolution in the post-colony to sustain a post-imperial world making project – especially given how arduous it was meant to be. This was the view one could argue that Fanon and Gandhi were enunciating, along with various other postcolonial actors especially on the left. Getachew's brief discussion of Samir Amin's critique of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) actually dovetails with this view.[13] The non-revolutionary nature of the NIEO that Amin identifies, could be viewed as a product of the insufficient revolutionary energy arising from within the Third World. Unsurprisingly (in his view) further strengthening the indigenous sources of social power within the Third World countries, substituting the class conflict within to a distributional conflict on the international plane.[14] This logic of argument, in political economic terms, questions the class basis of the postcolonial transformation – for example, the continued power wielded by large landlords, commodity

11.   David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
12.   Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 180.
13.   Ibid., 168.
14.   Ibid.

producers, or indigenous capitalists; and their inability to and disinterest in being effective agents of a global anti-imperial struggle.

But since this is ultimately a book of political theory (although one that is extraordinarily fluent in its usage of political economy), let me reframe the question that position generates in explicitly political theoretical terms. What was the relationship of the indigenous forms of non-domination – often the product of colonial rule – vis a vis the international visions of non-domination that this book reconstructs? Or, on a different register, was a moment of genuine popular sovereignty within the postcolonial space – either national or federal – necessary for challenging the informal persistence of imperial economic sovereignty at the global level? One should acknowledge that the question might just as well be reversed, and the relationship is not strictly sequential. But going beyond the dichotomy of either or, taking those questions seriously on the terms of this book could raise the following question: What would a genuine popular sovereignty – based on not just procedural but rather world making creative aspects of democracy – look like for an internationalist project? That is, who should be the proper constituent agents for making a post-imperial world? I would readily admit that this is a question that does not have a simple, or even sufficient, answer ready at hand. But Getachew's ambitious work pushes us to take that question seriously. In the book, she often frames decolonisation as a revolution (with its own attended counter-revolutions). The important contribution of the book is to make us think of the international as the proper staging ground for that revolution in its most ambitious form. But, revolutions require revolutionaries. In light of the absorbing vision of world making the book presents, we who live in the wake of its passing are compelled to reflect on the yet unsettled identity of the world makers after empire.

Funding