

World makers of the Black Atlantic

Adom Getachew talks to Ashish Ghadiali

In her book *Worldmaking After Empire*, Adom Getachew challenges standard histories of decolonisation, which chart the story of a simple shift from empire to nation.¹ Instead she shows that supporters of decolonisation have always sought to create something much more than nationalisms. They have engaged in a dynamic and rival system of revolutionary worldmaking, seeking an alternative system that could replace the exploitative and hierarchical international system of empire, which is rooted in slavery and genocide. She charts this decolonial project from its roots in the works of Black Atlantic thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James in the 1920s and 1930s; discusses the challenges it faced in the United Nations in the 1940s and 1950s; and looks at the emergence of the New International Economic Order in the 1960s and 1970s.

She identifies the problems that stemmed from the separation and later further divergence of the right of national self-determination and the human rights of the individual as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The subsequent failure to resolve this contradiction undermined the vision of some anti-colonialists, and, as the 1973 global oil crisis took hold of the world economy, this created a political opportunity for the architects of neoliberalism to push back against the gains of the decolonial project and plant the seeds of a new world order. This is the world order that has today brought about devastating levels of global inequality, both within states and across national borders, and has brought our planet to a state of ecological catastrophe.

My sense, while reading this book, was of a twentieth century tradition now ripe to be reclaimed and revived, since, like Du Bois and his generation, we will surely need now to grasp the deep roots of our multiple crises if we are to be free of them and deliver a world to our children that is fit to inherit. It was for this reason that I

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was keen to engage Adom directly in a lengthy interview, to explore the structure of the historical argument that she lays out in her book, but also to uncover the lessons of this period for the anti-imperialist radicals of today.

Ashish Ghadiali: *How did you come to be working on this material?*

Adom Getachew: There are many origins stories I could tell about the book. One is that I grew up on the African continent. I was born in Ethiopia, and grew up there and then in Botswana until about High School time. One thing about that childhood that I remember, especially in Botswana, was that I lived in a community of African expatriates - a kind of Pan-African community of friends. Obviously, at the time I didn't have the language for that, but I had friends who were Zimbabwean and Malawian and Ghanaian. I moved to the United States in 2001, just one month before 11 September, and so my whole time in the United States has been overshadowed by the resurgence of American imperialism. So one part of the motivation for the book is to try to think through that rise of American power in and against the kinds of politics of Pan-Africanism that I had experienced in that earlier moment. That's the biographical story.

From a more intellectual standpoint, I had noticed that a lot of other work on Black internationalism and Pan-Africanism focuses on the early twentieth century, especially the 1920s and 1930s, when there was a proliferation of black internationalist newspapers, organisations, periodicals, literary and cultural forms - and that narrative often ends around World War Two. The inference is that those energies of Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism got absorbed into the creation of nation states.

So I wanted to think about what the afterlives of Pan-Africanism were, in the high point of decolonisation, after the Second World War. How did Pan-Africanism, or at least one version of Pan-Africanism, try to reshape the world?

Related to that was an attempt to make an intervention into how we tell the standard history of decolonisation during that thirty to forty year period after World War Two; we often think of this period as one of a gradual expansion of international society, when formerly colonial states in Asia and Africa and the

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Caribbean gradually got incorporated as sovereign equals of the international order. I wanted to question this story of progressive expansion, and to tell a more complicated story about what empire is: for example that empire had always included forms of subordinated inclusion and internal hierarchy within the international system, and that this was the real target of anticolonial nationalists.

You talk about the importance of three books - Capitalism and Slavery by Eric Williams, The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James and Black Reconstruction by W.E.B. Du Bois - all published in the 1930s and early 1940s.² Is your argument that these three texts serve as a kind of literary forerunner of the decolonial movements that then took shape after the Second World War?

What I focus on, in terms of the interwar period, is the fact that, especially by the 1930s, you begin to see an argument developing around a set of claims about the role of race in structuring the international order. One very specific insight, to do with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and connected to the status of Liberia and Haiti, is the recognition that even when a country is independent and ostensibly a member of the international community it is still subject to various forms of imperial domination.

The three books you mention zoom out from their specific local contexts to give us a historical account of the rise of the racialised world order; they share a story about new world slavery and the transatlantic slave trade as an originary moment of the modern world - that it is out of the experience of the transatlantic slave trade and new world slavery that you get the makings of capitalism and modernity in the west.

Du Bois and James both make the case that the colonial labour regimes of the twentieth century are in many ways marked by persisting structures of slavery. This would generate an argument by the 1940s that colonialism is slavery. These books also tell a story about black self-emancipation: abolition is not the story of humanitarian metropolitan actors, but is the story of the enslaved emancipating themselves. And James, in particular, writes *Black Jacobins*, a history of the Haitian Revolution, as a way of foreshadowing very explicitly what he calls the African Revolution that he thinks is on the horizon.

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So during this period, that's a new paradigm, a new position that's being articulated?

It's hard to claim that any one moment is where an idea emerges for the first time, because you can always see earlier versions, in this case various attempts to articulate the story of slavery as the foundation of the modern world, or to make a general argument that Europe's wealth is dependent on extraction and exploitation in the colonies. There are germs of that argument at least going back to the nineteenth century. I do think, though, that by the 1930s and 1940s, this set of arguments consolidates, especially for the Black Atlantic critics that I am discussing, and it generates a certain way of thinking about what the project of decolonisation should be.

Is that your phrase, Worldmaking?

It's a phrase others have used. But I use it in a specific way, to make the argument that that period of decolonisation wasn't just about the formation of nation states and the project of nation building: it was a time when people really tried to think about how to remake the world, how to transform relations of hierarchy - the legal, political and economic hierarchies that structure the international order. So I discuss one moment of transformation - the emergence of a universal right of self-determination that's enshrined in the UN covenants - and the book also looks at other projects, such as the movement for regional federation and the campaign for a New International Economic Order. These are discussed as projects that were similarly pitched and pegged at the international level, or the level beyond the nation state.

Can you talk me through the precise connections ... how did the literary or cultural contribution you describe come to have impact on the subsequent geopolitical processes of decolonisation that took shape in the years after the Second World War?

One of the interesting things about all the central figures of my book is that they are politicians as well as scholars, so that even as they are engaged in popular mobilisation and anticolonial movements or are in political power as prime ministers

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and presidents, they are still writing about politics and thinking things through. They are - as I guess we would call them now - scholar-activists.

Obviously, it's not only scholarship that facilitates or generates the politics of decolonisation. A number of things make the post-1945 moment an opportunity for anti-colonial politics to really take off. There is growing mass dissent in the colonies. In the late 1930s there were waves of strikes in the Caribbean and on the African continent. And these labour struggles became the occasion, in some cases very directly, for the emergence of nationalist parties - for instance the People's National Party of Jamaica emerges out of the 1938 labour strikes.

So, there is popular struggle on the ground that often begins as labour struggles but very soon is taken up as a kind of nationalist politics. Some of the leaders of decolonisation played a central role in leading those movements. Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, having studied in the United States and then joined George Padmore in London, where in 1945 he organised the Pan-African Congress, went back to Ghana to lead the nationalist movement and eventually became the first prime minister.

Then, as well as popular mobilisation and protest on the ground, there's a global conversation, just as there was after World War One, about what kind of world order should be brought about after another devastating war; and this conversation generated possibilities for intervening and using the international stage to begin to articulate arguments against racial hierarchy and colonialism. One central thread is that colonialism - especially in the black world but not just in the black world - was by now understood as a structure of extracting racialised labour. Racialised labour, clearly, refers to labour that's been deemed to be black, but more importantly it is labour that's subject to forms of extra-economic violence and coercion - historically connected to slavery but persisting long after slavery was formally abolished.

In 1945, the United Nations organisation met in San Francisco to finalise plans for the new UN organisation. A series of anti-colonial critics, including Du Bois, went to San Francisco in an attempt to secure the rights of colonised people within the UN; they were unsuccessful in 1945, but over the next decade and a half they carried on making the argument for the right to self-determination, and there was an important victory in 1960 when UN Resolution 1514, the UN Declaration of the Granting of Independence, was passed. This isn't Du Bois's direct victory, or the victory of those ideas from the interwar period. But you can see in the UN

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documents the ways in which those debates were articulated as the basis of claiming - to justify the reason for - self-determination.

Can you tell me more about the relationship between this right of national self-determination and the arena of universal human rights that was being developed within the UN around this time?

In the founding documents of the UN, self-determination barely exists. It's mentioned twice in the UN Charter of 1945. But it's not named as a right, it's named as a principle, and it's named as a secondary principle that's subordinated to the goal of securing peace among nations. Self-determination, the word itself, does not appear in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948; in fact, as the Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted, Du Bois and the NAACP submitted an appeal to the world which charged the United States with human rights violations.

However, as the number of independent Asian and African states in the General Assembly grew throughout the 1950s, there was an almost annual debate about the right to self-determination being included in the covenants on human rights. Because the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was not a binding document, between 1948 and 1960 there was a series of drafting committees to draw up what would become the legally binding covenants. These are the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The victory in 1960 was a partial one however. For instance, the version of self-determination in the Declaration of the Granting of Independence tied self-determination to territorial integrity and reinforced sovereignty; and this generated a whole set of dilemmas about how the newly won sovereignty of third-world states was going to relate to the individual rights of new post-colonial citizens.

Beginning in the 1960s and certainly by the 1970s, liberal critics were making the argument that human rights were really about guarantees of the individual against the state. This was very different from the way that third-world actors in the 1940s and 1950s had mobilised the language of human rights; they had made it the basis for the case for self-determination, and had made the argument that you needed independence or self-rule to secure human rights.

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Samuel Moyn has written about the real-take off in the 1970s of what we know as the human rights movement - the rise of organisations like Amnesty International and other groups, focusing on human rights violations, and especially in the third world.³ That coincided with the increasing deployment of human rights as a language for critiquing state power; and it also coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, and the deepening of international inequality both within states and among states. This language of human rights was often used as a critique of the newly independent countries.

Can you tell me more about the project of regional federation that emerged as a subsequent stage of this project of worldmaking?

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both in the Caribbean and on the African continent, there were efforts to build regional federations - a West Indies Federation and a United States of Africa. Both of these were attempts to address what anti-colonial nationalists thought was a key dilemma of the postcolonial state. Namely, that the post-colonial state was a small state, often completely economically dependent on the global market and largely reliant on a single crop or a single commodity - such as cocoa in Ghana or bauxite in Jamaica. This made newly independent states subject to the arbitrary powers of the marketplace of the former metropolitan powers in such a way that independence was revealed as a completely meaningless and abstract category - a purely legal fiction - since they couldn't make plans for their political or economic futures.

This is what the imagination of federation was supposed to resolve. The regional federation project was an attempt to ask: can we restructure our relationship with the international order, and especially with international markets, in such a way that we might be able to exercise meaningful independence? The vision was that by creating a larger internal market, you could have a consumer base, a market big enough to be more self-sufficient. But this also required regional economic planning that could restructure these economies so that they were producing the subsistence goods that the now larger internal market would actually need.

Critics of the federations project would always ask how countries within them could trade with each other when all of the Caribbean states produced the same thing - they all produced tropical goods. This is why Eric Williams and Kwame

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Nkrumah both argued for very strong federal states. They felt that with a federal state that was empowered to engage in economic planning, to engage in direct taxation, to be the dominant economic power within the region, you could gradually restructure these economies so that they were a unified market and produced goods that served the interests of the region and helped to enhance independence.

Why do you think the project for regional federations was defeated?

I argue that they were in part defeated because the vision of a highly centralised federal state became a source of a lot of anxiety on the part of other member states. In the African case, Nkrumah's plan for a United States of Africa never really got off the ground. It was very quickly criticised for having a vision that was too ambitious, and was too centralised to accommodate the independence and equality of all states.

Jamaican prime minister Norman Manley, though he was critical of the West Indian Federation (which was inaugurated in 1958), never fully rejected it. However, his domestic opposition, the Jamaican Labour Party, was highly critical of the federation and, in ways very reminiscent of politics around the EU and Brexit, they began to make the argument that regional federation would eventually be a drain on Jamaica, which was the largest member of the federation. As a way of trying to appease this domestic opposition, Manley did two things. He argued for a more minimalist conception of the regional federation, and then he agreed to hold a referendum through which the Jamaican electorate could decide whether or not it wanted to be in the federation. The vote, in 1961, was in favour of exit from the federation, and this led to its collapse.

This coincided with an economic crisis caused by the declining terms of trade, which began in the mid-1960s. The prices of primary goods and raw materials that post-colonial states were selling on the international market were seriously decreasing - they were producing more but getting less for their production, and this generated all sorts of dilemmas. As developmental states, they needed foreign currency to buy the capital goods that they needed for industrialisation and modernisation, so the decline in the value of their exports undermined their capacity to engage in much needed projects of social transformation. This illuminates again, and in stark fashion, the ways in which the post-colonial states remained very dependent on the global market.

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Out of the ashes of this project of regional federation, something new emerged - the campaign for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Can you tell me more about its genesis and the significance?

The New International Economic Order began from the fact of the deep economic inequalities in international trade. Its proponents, which included Michael Manley, prime minister of Jamaica, and Julius Nyerere, president of Tanzania, argued that there was an international division of labour analogous to the division of labour between capital and labour within the metropolitan countries. Nyerere, for instance, used to say that third-world states were the workers of the world, that they ought to form a trade union of the poor countries. It was from this kind of thinking that the New International Economic Order - I call it a welfare world - emerges. The aim was to address these inequalities through reforming trade terms and adopting measures of international redistribution, in a way that mirrored some of the social democratic policies adopted by European countries during the postwar period. But, obviously, the big difference, on the international stage, was that there was no coercive apparatus that could generate the kind of social democracy seen in the thirty years after World War Two in western Europe and the United States.

In the absence of that, they tried to use indirect mechanisms to generate a more equal redistribution on the international stage. These included everything from enabling collective bargaining on prices for commodities through bauxite associations and coffee associations, modelled on OPEC, to schemes of trying to shore up prices for commodity goods. There was commodity financing to make up for shortfalls in the prices that these goods fetched on the market. There was an attempt to assert third-world sovereignty through what's called the permanent sovereignty over natural resources - which gives states the rights of nationalisation, for instance. And finally there was an attempt to make an international body of rules that would regulate multinational corporations and constrain their power on the world stage. These are the features of the NIEO which would emerge in the early 1970s.

They sound great. But it didn't last?

No, the NIEO was also defeated.

What happened?

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Once the crisis of the 1970s, the oil shocks, hit, whatever bargaining power third-world states had accumulated began to wane very rapidly. This is also the moment of the first emergence of the neoliberal vision of the global order - that very explicitly rejected and countered this vision of the NIEO.

The third world coalition also really begins to fray in this period, because it was very clear that all of these states, even though they're talking about themselves as the trade unions of the poor, as the working class, have actually occupied very different positions in the global economy.

For the oil producing countries, the OPEC countries, this was a period of boom, but for most of the third world, which has to buy oil on the world market, this was a huge crisis, especially due to the hikes in food prices that took place on the back of the oil price increases.

As well as the oil producer/oil seller division, there is also a deep division between larger economies in the third world like India and Brazil, and the much smaller economies, like Jamaica. A more critical third-world Marxist would say that the NIEO proposals were better suited to larger countries than smaller countries.

And one final, internal, limit of this NIEO strategy - which goes back to the question of collective state rights versus individual rights - was the idea that the states could be seen as the working class, which of course very much obscures the internal hierarchy of class within each of these countries - this is a period in which many third-world states were actively undermining independent trade union activity and organising.

So, although you acknowledge the active opposition to the NIEO of the neoliberal project, your argument is really that this moment of decolonial internationalism collapsed from within?

When we say that the neoliberals won in the 1970s, I think it's important to note that they were able to exploit internal tensions, the contradictions of the decolonial project, in order to ideologically and discursively undermine that project. So, for example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a US senator and ambassador to the UN, wrote an essay called 'The United States in Opposition', which made the argument that the US should very vocally and actively stand in opposition to the NIEO, and that one

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of the strategies for that opposition should be to exploit the hypocrisy of third-world states: third-world states were making arguments for international equality, and making all these demands on American resources, but look at the forms of hierarchy and authoritarianism that they are engaged in within their own countries ...

So the critique of postcolonial authoritarianism undermined the moral and political purchase of the vision of equality, and I think that's a really important point. There are lessons for the left here, for thinking about organising at the level of the national and the international. The battle of the 1970s took place on the terrain of ideology as well as the geopolitical and material.

Let's talk more about lessons for the left in all of this. I'm thinking particularly about the context of climate breakdown and the devastating legacy of colonialism and slavery, and its deep impact on the resilience of economies and communities in the global south that find themselves on the frontlines of climate breakdown and without the means to mitigate against its worst effects. What can we learn, in the face of this crisis, from this story of the rise and fall of the NIEO?

On the question of climate change, I think this story is an ambivalent one, because the NIEO, and many of these actors more generally, saw development or modernisation as requiring continuous economic growth. They believed that an expanding pie would allow more of the world's people to share in that wealth. So, in the sense of commitment to economic growth as a model or vision of how you might achieve equality, it's not the story that we can continue to tell ourselves. Expanded economic growth has not only fuelled inequality: it has also generated the conditions of climate extinction.

My own view, though, is that, had versions of the NIEO been realised, they would have created the mechanisms and precedents by which we could address a phenomenon like climate change. At least part of the NIEO's vision was the idea of developing institutional mechanisms for the regulation of the global economy. And part of what we are experiencing right now is the absence of any form of institutional mechanisms by which even the conversations about climate change can happen at the level of the international. In that sense, maybe the institutional forms we would have inherited had they been successful might have helped to support and facilitate the kind of interventions we need to make now.

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Perhaps the most important lesson of that period for climate change politics is the ways in which those figures thought about the connection between the domestic and the international. They insisted that we were living in one world, that is unequal and divided, and that the poorest were having to bear the burdens of the richest. This is obviously an analysis that fits very easily into the discussion about climate change. The people who create the greatest emissions don't suffer the burdens of climate catastrophe. Those world makers also insisted that there was no domestic solution to the question of inequality or the question of global economy; that any vision of transformation would have to have a domestic or nation-building component and a worldmaking component - that you have to work at the two levels simultaneously.

I think you said in a recent interview with Jacobin that if this vision, this kind of decolonial internationalism, was to be replicated today, it probably wouldn't happen at the level of nation states. Where is the agency in the world order now that might allow these lessons to be applied?

I think this is the hardest question about the contemporary period. On the one hand, I think there are currently very exciting forms of revived left politics in many parts of the world, and that's one place where it has to start. But it seems to me that the task right now is to think about how you might connect struggles, and how you might actually build bridges of exchange and solidarity that facilitate this way of thinking at both the domestic and the international level. It's really striking to me, as a student of the early twentieth century, that in that period, with much more limited forms of communication and mobility, actors then somehow had a more global perspective.

Do you see any kind of a role for the state in that task of internationalist transformation?

I think it's more dynamic when it's not happening at the state level. In this story I've been telling, these sets of actors, both by choice and by default, had to act through the form of the state. Their version of internationalism, ultimately, is an internationalism of nation states, but I don't imagine that we could limit ourselves to that right now, nor should we.

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In the transition to the UN, there were forms of politics that these actors had been engaged in during the 1940s and 1950s that actually got narrowed by the contours of the state system. But it is very difficult. It feels like the scale of the problem we face and where we are in terms of our capacity on the left just don't seem adequate to the task of transformation. But the challenge is about connecting struggles. I don't think we can forego trying to intervene in the state system, given that we do inhabit a world of nation states. But certainly no form of left internationalism should ever limit itself to that realm.

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Notes

1. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, Princeton University Press 2019.
2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944 by the University of North Carolina Press; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, first published by Secker and Warburg in 1938; and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, 1935.
3. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2012; and *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 2018.