Anticolonialism

By J. Daniel Elam | December 17, 2017

Anticolonialism in the twentieth and twenty-first century refers to two interconnected concepts: a historical event and a critical analytic. As a historical event, anticolonialism means the struggle against imperial rule in colonized countries, mostly during the first half of the twentieth century. As a philosophical movement and critical analytic, anticolonialism is the under-acknowledged predecessor to postcolonial theory. In addition to agitating for national independence and postcolonial nationalism, anticolonial thinkers and activists debated the necessity of political solidarity as well as international cooperation – from Afro-Asian Solidarity to the Non-Aligned Movement (both of which were debated, together, at the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, Indonesia). Consequently, the history of anticolonialism as a theoretical *and* political practice illuminates an historical and analytical trajectory between the colonized world, the Third World, and the contemporary Global South.

Although anticolonial critique has come from across the world (and from within British, French, and Spanish Empires),[1] this entry will focus on anticolonial agitation and philosophy from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These regions were highly active in anticolonial political organizing in the twentieth century and continue to form the bulk of the theoretical material on the complicated (and often unfinished) transition from occupation to freedom. Secondly, although anticolonialism — as a concept, practice, and philosophy — existed well in advance of 1900, this brief essay focuses on the forms of anticolonialism that have had the most sustained impact in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Anticolonialism as a historical event took many different forms across the world. South Asian anticolonial movements are generally considered to have taken place from the 1920s to 1947, the year in which India and Pakistan gained independence, although much anticolonial writing during this period references earlier moments, such as the 1857 Indian Mutiny.[2] M.K. Gandhi's anticolonial movement most famously employed tactics of non-violent resistance (*ahimsa*) against British Rule in India (see especially Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* [1909]). Gandhi's methods were in direct contrast to other forms of anticolonial agitation in South Asia, namely revolutionary anticolonialism and nationalist anticolonialism. Revolutionary anticolonialism, especially in Punjab and Bengal, sometimes employed strategies of violent revolt against the colonial regime. It was deemed "terrorism" by the British Raj; however, the preferred description, "revolutionary," signals its affiliation with previous democratic and socialist revolutions, especially the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Bhagat Singh was a well-known adversary of Gandhi and a champion for revolutionary anticolonial agitation. Because Gandhi thought seriously about violence and revolutionary anticolonialists thought seriously about non-violence, "violence" is not necessarily a clean axis along which to separate these movements. Rather, they were often in conversation (if disagreement) with one another. Nationalist anticolonialism relied on a variety of different tactics but its focus was on defining the nation as an ethnically, religiously, or politically homogenous unit. In the context of

British India, this includes most notably V.D. Savarkar's xenophobic *Hindutva* (1923) movement, which argued that true anticolonialism would rid the pure Hindu Indian nation of its two alleged "invaders": Muslims, as well as the British.

Anticolonialism in anglophone Africa — which includes countries that are today Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa — is generally considered to have taken place from the 1920s to the 1960s, with movements rapidly gaining strength in the years following World War II and Indian Independence. They were also motivated by black U.S. thought (including the work of Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois, among others) as well as from Caribbean/black diasporic thought (C.LR. James, George Padmore, and others).[3] Anglophone African anticolonialism was also inspired by successful anticolonial resistance in Ethiopia, where Ethiopians under Haile Selassie largely defeated Italy's attempt at colonizing the country in 1935-1936. Communist anticolonialism refers to the influence of black British and American communist organizations on anglophone African anticolonialists, especially Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and Julius Nyerere (opens in a new tab). Communism, in different variations, was popular across Africa, and included urban and rural revitalization programs, attempts at wealth redistribution, and the implementation of welfare state bureaucracies. African communism differed in many respects from its Russian and Chinese counterparts, especially after the 1950s. Many of the communist anticolonial thinkers urged pan-Africanism as a tactic for anticolonial solidarity, urging cross-Africa cooperation in the face of colonial rule. In Kenya, the Mau Mau Revolution (1952-1960) was a violent uprising for national independence led largely by Kikuyu people; the British responded with a substantially more violent campaign against Kenyans. In South Africa, anticolonial agitation has a more complicated trajectory beginning at the end of the nineteenth century with the Boer War (1899-1902) and developing into resistance against Apartheid (1948-1991). Key figures here include Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, and members of the African National Congress (ANC).[4] Such thinkers trace their inspiration back to Nongqawuse, a Xhosa woman who famously (if disastrously) prophesied the end of colonial rule during the 1857-1858 southern African famine.[5]

French-ruled Africa — which includes countries that are now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal, Mali, and Cameroon — faced much different problems than that of British-ruled Africa. Where the British believed themselves to oversee a collection of semi-autonomous dominions, the French believed every part of their empire to be a part of mainland France itself. The resulting French policies were founded on theoretical equality but pragmatically relied on forced assimilation of African people into a "French civilization." While much anticolonial agitation against France demanded equality (*equalité*), other anticolonial agitators critiqued this value as blindly European and demanded a return to African forms of life, justice, and inclusion. A majority of anticolonial activity took place in Paris rather than in the colonies.[6] Consequently, the most immediately vibrant forms of anticolonial philosophy (discussed below) emerged out of francophone African anticolonialism. There are notable exceptions to this metropolitan movement. In 1954, Algerians founded the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and announced war against French occupation until 1962. The FLN relied largely on guerilla tactics for its anticolonial struggle and, despite having Frantz Fanon as its spokesperson, did not consider itself to be an intellectually or ideologically driven movement. It did have as its social mission a vaguely communist interest in land redistribution and agrarian reform. Morocco, which had been occupied by the French and the

Spanish after 1912, gained independence in 1952. In 1970, the Polisario Front, made up of Sahrawi people in what is today Western Sahara, demanded independence from Spain in the Green Revolution, only to be annexed by Morocco.

In Latin America, anticolonial struggles date back much further than the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the early twentieth century witnessed the resurgence of anticolonialism in the form of protests, armed coups, and other movements. Because formal colonization by the Spanish and Portuguese had ended in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these new and revived anticolonial struggles sought to define colonialism as cultural and economic dependency — where issues of economy, culture, and politics are determined by exterior forces — rather than straightforward occupation. Much anticolonial activism in Latin America centers around a critique of global capitalism. It therefore focuses on economic and cultural self-dependency rather than national independence. Emiliano Zapata's 1910 revolution in Mexico inaugurates this tradition. Marxism took hold across Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s, with the founding of various Communist Parties in the wake of the Russian Revolution. The Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, inspired by the writings of Trotsky, Lenin, and Gramsci, as well as writings by Gandhi, Irish revolutionaries, and Mao, was one of the most influential Marxist critics to emerge in this period.[7] A few decades later, after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro envisioned a "tricontinental" world, made up of Latin America, Africa, and colonial Asia that could stand in solidarity against forces from the economic and military powers of the Global North. Tricontinentalism, in turn, would lay the groundwork for what would become the "Global South" in the wake of the Cold War.

Anticolonial philosophy — or anticolonialism as a theoretical and analytic tool — generally argues for the benefits of ending colonial rule, but not without complication. Many anticolonial philosophers engaged with European philosophy not because of its intellectual strength, but to reveal the contradictions between Europe's optimistic vision for itself and the horrors of its colonial project. Anticolonial thinkers, moreover, often debated the necessary aesthetic forms that should accompany (or inspire) political activism.

Although described in its pragmatic forms above, Gandhi's theory of nonviolence was an esoteric and complicated re-working of classical Hindu texts, especially the *Bhagavad Gita* (Desai, ed., 1946). As a theory, Gandhi's nonviolence and the nation it would eventually engender are concerned with "experiments," in Gandhi's words (Gandhi, 1929). Gandhi has been recently recuperated as a philosopher and political theorist in South Asian studies.[8] His critics, meanwhile, developed robust ideas for the possibilities of violence, revolution, and forms of cosmopolitanism — particularly in response to Gandhi's insistent return to autonomous villages as the unit of political life. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit ("untouchable") activist, argued that Gandhi's anticolonialism would not prevent the subsequent "colonialism" by upper-caste Hindus of lower-caste Hindus and Muslims (Ambedkar 1936). M.A. Jinnah, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, meanwhile, tried to re-envision the form of the nation-state so that it could be based in the protection of rights-bearing minorities rather than geographically located.

In anglophone Africa, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere (opens in a new tab) shared a biographical history of academic training in addition to their shared concern with pan-Africanism. Their anticolonial philosophies reflect an engagement with transatlantic philosophy and anthropology. Kenyatta's dissertation, *Facing Mt. Kenya* (1938), is both an

anthropological account of the Gikuyu people and an anticolonial argument for the end of British occupation. Anticolonial theory and postcolonial theory have gone hand-in-hand in anglophone Africa, and anticolonialism is the name given to the struggles against the lingering effects of colonial rule. In the 1970s, literary critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o, together with Taban Lo Liyong and Henry Onwuor-Anyumba, proposed the abolition of the English department at the University of Nairobi as a way to "decolonize the mind" (1972). Ngugi in particular argued that colonialism continues to work long after the end of formal colonial rule, especially aesthetically and psychologically. In another vein, Kwame Nkrumah's complex *Neo-Colonialism* (1965) is an argument against the continued economic dependency of independent Ghana on the economic powers of the Global North. Such economic dependency, Nkrumah argued, is made possible by the evacuation of resources during colonial rule in order to create a sustained debt, dependency, and poverty in the Global South.

In francophone Africa, anticolonial thinkers debated the merits of *créolité*, *méstissage*, and *négritude*. Créolité and méstissage refer to practices — aesthetic, political, and social — of hybridity in the wake of French colonial rule. Négritude, on the other hand, often referred to self-consciously nostalgic return to pre-colonial practices. Négritude was not naïve about the pre-colonial past, but rather thought seriously about the ways in which the pre-colonial was indelibly shaped by the effects of colonial rule.[9] Frantz Fanon, the most famous of the French anticolonial theorists, was well versed in psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology. His writings concerning violence remain some of the most influential anticolonial philosophical works in print. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), for instance, Fanon considers the merits and harms of violent response to colonial rule, which is itself always violent, at both psychological and physical levels. Although physical violence will likely result in national independence (and therefore might be necessary), Fanon argues, it will only replace European leaders with African leaders rather than abolish hierarchy and the "nervous conditions" that colonialism creates. Rather, Fanon argues that the Third World must "endeavor to create a new man" that will refuse to replicate European injustices with new faces, and, instead, envision alternative ethics, politics, and aesthetic protocols for a more egalitarian world.[10]

The most common trait that anticolonial philosophies share, despite their differences, is a concern with the world after colonialism. Sometimes this included a vision of the independent nation, but more often than not anticolonialism was concerned with the world that decolonized nations were to inherit collectively. Anticolonialism was both a practice of national independence as well as a way of imagining a properly postcolonial world beyond one's own national borders. Like the strongest strains of postcolonial theory, anticolonial philosophy was self-consciously rooted in a particular time and place but took as its object of analysis huge questions of history, literature, and the entire world. It was therefore both particularist and universalist at the same time, and, unlike its European philosophical counterparts, was well aware of this contradiction. From this paradox, however, anticolonial thinkers productively thought not only about the world after colonial rule, but the world after the end of colonialist authoritarianism that has lasted well beyond formal national independence.

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[1] Most famously, European anticolonial critiques include Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552); Karl Marx's *The Indian War of Independence* (1858); Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism* (1917); E.M. Forster's *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1936), and Jean-Paul Sartre's celebrity endorsement/preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Two other bodies of thought are worth noting, though they do not appear in this short essay: writings by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), especially in the 1920s and 1930s and writings by anti-imperial activists in Japanese-occupied Korea in the 1910s and 1920s. These activists thought seriously about anticolonial revolution, but did not remain as central to the twentieth-century Global South in the aftermath of the British and French Empires. Finally, it is worth noting the importance of Mao Zedong's and Chinese communism on anticolonial thought, though the contours of these interactions are beyond the scope of this essay.

[2] The Indian Mutiny (or Sepoy Mutiny), a series of scattered revolts across North India in 1857, is widely considered the first Indian war of independence from the British. It had the opposite effect, unfortunately: in 1858, the Queen Victoria declared herself the Empress of

India in place of the British East India Company, which had previously occupied large parts of South Asia.

[3] See, for example: James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938); Garvey's writings for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s and 1930s; and Du Bois's writings for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1920s, most notably in its periodical, *The Crisis.* After his departure from the NAACP, Du Bois would continue to publish nonfiction and fiction about the global Black experience. Oxford University Press has published a comprehensive collection of his published works, and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst has digitized most of his unpublished works and essays.

[4] The best collection of materials related to South African anti-apartheid activism remains Gail M. Gerhart and Clive L. Glaser's six-volume *From Protest to Challenge* (1972-2010).

[5] For more on Nongqawuse, and her afterlives, see Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (2009).

[6] See, most notably, Michael Goebel's *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (2015).

[7] Some of Mariátegui's writings have been collected in Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, eds., *José Carlos Mariátegui: An Anthology* (2011).

[8] See, most vibrantly, Anthony Parel's edited edition of *Hind Swaraj* (2006); Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (2006); Faisal Devji's *Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (2012); Isabel Hofmeyr's *Gandhi's Printing Press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (2014); and Ajay Skaria's *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (2017), as well as the special issue of *Public Culture* on "Itineraries of Self-Rule," edited by Ritu Birla and Faisal Devji (2011).

[9] See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (2015), as well as the collected works and poetry of Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire's collected writings (most notably *Return to my Native Land* [1939]).

[10] A number of mostly sympathetic European philosophers responded to Fanon's work, including Jean-Paul Sartre (in a famous introduction for its French publication) and Hannah Arendt in *Crises of the Republic* (1972). Homi Bhabha's introduction to the 2004 English edition of *The Wretched of the Earth* situates these critiques as well as offers one of the most vibrant readings of the book to date.

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