

“WORLDMAKING AFTER EMPIRE. THE RISE AND FALL OF SELF-DETERMINATION”

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The book *Worldmaking after Empire – The Rise and Fall of Self-determination*, published in 2019 by Adom Getachew, is based on her dissertation in Political Science and African American Studies. It has received several prizes, among those the Frantz Fanon Prize from the Caribbean Philosophical Association, the ASA Best Book Prize from the African Studies Association and the prize as the ISA Theory Best Book awarded by the Theory Section of the International Studies Association (Getachew, 2020).

With her first book, Getachew invites us to radically rethink what we learned about international order, the struggle for liberty and sovereignty of the colonized and to imagine what could have sprung out of the roots that once grew. Light is shed on the so often neglected global ideas on justice and its practical realization.

Worldmaking after Empire contributes to the tracing of the historical construction of the various processes of decolonization in different regions and proposes a new look at these developments. It emphasizes, in contrast to common narratives, decolonization as an attempt to change the whole international order rather than the simply replacement of colonial empires by new independent nation-states. This attempt, to aim for a whole restructuring of the world order towards one that is free of domination, is what Getachew means as “worldmaking”. The author describes the idea of the book as “contributing to a history of the present by rethinking decolonization” in order to “reorient the questions about international justice” (Getachew, 2019, p. 9).

In doing so, Getachew connects to a discourse on the institutional conditions of decolonization and challenges the understanding that empires were simply and directly followed by nation-states. Rather, she shows that the efforts of the new independent nations went beyond a mere expansion of the existing Westphalian international system of the time and instead aimed at a total renewal in political and economic spheres. As a result, this did not only mean an institutional and political restructuring but also the most ambitious attempt for a global redistribution of wealth in the 20th century. The book delivers an encouraging fresh view as well as a sober evaluation of failure and is therefore a great contribution to the ongoing postcolonial and global justice debates.

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Her thesis is based on theories and insights, especially from African-American Studies, Black Internationalism and more generally speaking, from Political Theory. The material that the study is based on originates from African, West-Indian and European archives. In the book, she focuses on the influence and ambitions of anglophone elites and politicians, like W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Michael Manley, Julius Nyerere and Eric Williams, rather than on mass movements to explain the transformation of the international order in the 20th century.

The book is structured in five chapters following a more or less strict chronological order and starts its in-depth analysis of the decolonization processes in the 1930s. Starting with Political Theory, Getachew proposes to not only imagine Empire as a bilateral relationship between the colonists and their colonies but to conceive it as a structure of unequal integration into the international system and as a form of institutionalized hierarchy. Referring back to Padmore and Du Bois, she explains how the formal independence of the first sovereign black states Ethiopia, Liberia and Haiti did by no means come with real independence; instead, the abolished legal dependence was replaced by economic dependence and new coercion of power in the League of Nations, especially under the influence of Woodrow Wilson. According to the book, the international organization was used to not really support, but also discipline the new members. Their membership is described as burdened and racialized, meaning that the rights connected to it were always conditional for the black states. In this point, she explicitly disagrees with John Rawls' liberal understanding of "burdened societies" as described in his *The Law of People* (Getachew, 2019, pp. 34, 54). In his view, societies are burdened due to internal domestic problems. She criticizes it as limited and wrong as it sees international order as a secondary factor influencing states, when according to her postcolonial perspective, international factors primarily influence states and they are what produces the burden for societies.

In the following, the role of the United Nations as the League's successor is being investigated and it is explained how self-determination was transformed from being a principle of International Relations to an internationally recognized human right. The author here claims that the establishment of a right to self-determination was not only the expansion of the Westphalian principle of sovereignty but that it meant a harsh cut from the Eurocentric idea of international society. According to the author, it rather "established non-domination as a central idea of a post-colonial world order" (Getachew, 2019, p. 11).

Going on, she illustrates the formation of regional federations as alternatives to nation-states as possibilities to organize trade, development and security without exercising domination. One example mentioned is the republican constitution of the young Ghana (1960) which included the possibility to delegate the state's sovereignty in part or in total to a federal agency in order to be secured economically and politically from a renewed alien rule. This possibility is the expression of a long tradition of Pan-Africanism which meant institutionalized guarantees of non-domination expressed in legally and economically fostered sovereignty of the people not within, but beyond nation-states. Historical examples are the West Indian Federation (1958-1962) and the Federation of African Union (1958-1963) which both did not last long and failed after a few years due to internal tensions, but are stressed as important historical experiments by Getachew.

Towards the end of the book, she traces back to the historical sources of the anti-colonial endeavour called the New International Economic Order (NIEO). It is described as "the most ambitious project of anticolonial worldmaking" (Getachew, 2019, p. 144) as it saw the relevance of material realities connected to political and legal sovereignty. According to Getachew, the goals of the NIEO were not disintegration or de-linking of certain states from the international economic order. Instead, the fact of interlinkages was accepted and, based on it, the radical tackling of inequality within and the internationalization of welfarism were the main goal. To reach this, it reformulated economic relations in a Marxist way differentiating countries into the categories of capital-states and work-states or, in the same sense, urban-states and rural-states. The result of this was two versions of the radicalized claims for sovereign equality. The first as being the claim to allow every state to participate in economic decision-making on the United Nations General Assembly. The second one was the claim for redistribution of wealth as the colonial states had also contri-

buted to it through labour and resources but did not profit from it. Finally, Getachew shows how the reaction of former colonial powers was the neoliberal counterrevolution in the 1980s that was accompanied by a corrosion of the United Nations and finally led to the fall of self-determination.

Adom Getachew's book is a vivid and highly relevant contribution to the historicization of decolonization and how we make sense of it today. Embedding regional approaches into the international system is the great attainment which most other publications miss. This book is not about one nation's struggle for real self-determination but sees postcolonial structures as what they are: A global system of racialized hierarchies and differentiation. However, Getachew does not answer the obvious question about how we became so obsessed with the idea that people should organize themselves in nation-states. How would a world formed by large federations look like and could there be something else than empires, nation-states and federations?

In her book, Getachew explicitly portrays and highlights the role of exclusively male Anglophone elites and politicians in the processes of self-determination, leaving out the contributions of mass movements and other democratic forces. Her focus is, at the same time, very broad and almost global, including African countries as well as Caribbean ones and India but also limited as she is mostly leaving aside the Soviet Union and China and exemplifies single other states.

She also keeps rather quiet about the un-democratic and oppressive ambitions of some of the thinkers she refers to. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, the first president of Ghana and inspiration to Martin Luther King, who led his country to independence following a socialist non-violent vision, imagined his new state as a one-party democracy and later created Ghana as a *de facto* dictatorship controlling the press, judges and the Parliament (Darkwa, 2022).

With her book, Getachew is definitely not aiming at new scholars and will not provide what you seek in a critical introduction. Rather, good prior knowledge about the personalities, treaties and conditions is required to easily follow Getachew's opposition to common understandings and explanations about the colonized states and their efforts. Still, it remains an accessible, rare and therefore very important input into an often simplified and one-sided academic discussion. As a reader, you may experience the book as somehow self-contained and original as you will find only a few direct objections against other scholars from the field and it does not position itself in opposition to one specific line of thought or school. This refreshing self-confidence lets the book stand for itself and skips wearying contentions.

With her book, Getachew enables and motivates us to realize that "the task of building a world after empire remains ours as much as it was theirs" (2019, p. 13).

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¹ Primeiro lugar *ex aequo*, do concurso "Livros que contam: descobre um livro e dá-o a conhecer" de 2023 – parceria entre a Biblioteca do CEG-IGOT (ULisboa) e a *Finisterra – Revista Portuguesa de Geografia*, visando estimular a escrita de sínteses de obras científicas, contribuindo para o reforço do conhecimento, da curiosidade e da criatividade dos estudantes do Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território (IGOT-ULisboa) e entidades parceiras.