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INTRODUCTION

Decolonization and Its Discontents: The Limits of Independence

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Abstract

This special issue seeks to probe the nature of the ostensible transition from 'anticolonial' to 'postcolonial' and its implications, focusing on historical actors who sought to remobilize across multiple political and spatial scales: that is, actors who thought and acted locally and globally. It asks: What discontents did decolonization bring in its wake, and what opportunities persisted for political activism across borders as the world shifted from one of empires to one of (nation-)states? It traces transformations – of imaginaries and networks, of ideas and modes of mobilization – that occurred alongside or because of the formal transfer of power and explores how this transition reshapes the interplay between different scales of decolonization. In other words, how did actors attempt to operate in, and stitch together, international, regional, national, and local spaces in the postcolonial era, and what new limits that they find themselves up against?

Keywords: Decolonization; Independence; Postcolonialism; Discontent

Introduction

Among the enemies of imperialism, 14 December 1960 was ostensibly a date to be celebrated. The passing of UN Resolution 1514, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, seemed to indicate a seismic shift in global politics. "All peoples have the right to self-determination," asserted the declaration, "by virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."[1] Submitted by representatives from, among others, Burma, Cambodia, Cameroon, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Senegal - all states that had only recently attained political independence - the declaration not only affirmed their states' right to exist, unbound by the fetters of empire, but also asserted their equality with each other and with their former imperial masters. Decolonization meant, in principle, full parity and participation in international society, a right that had been denied to peoples under colonialism.[2]

[1] UN Resolution 1514, "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," 14 December 1960, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-granting-independence-colonial-countries-and-peoples (last accessed 17 June 2024).

[2] Erez Manela, "International Society as a Historical Subject," *Diplomatic History* 44 (2020): 184-209.

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In practice, decolonization as "the inalienable right to complete freedom, the exercise of … sovereignty" was neither an even nor universal experience.[3] While postcolonial leaders in Cameroon, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere touted independent statehood as the culmination of decades of anticolonial mobilization, for many individuals and communities, decolonization instead brought in its wake disappointment and disillusion. It reaffirmed persistent inequalities and exclusions or introduced new ones. Local leaders in the former British UN Trust Territory, Southern Cameroons, had mooted the possibility of independence only to be overruled at the UN and forced to choose between joining the Republic of Cameroon or Nigeria. In the Pacific, West Papuans formed a Papuan National Committee and claimed the right to self-determination but instead faced violent integration into the postcolonial Indonesian state. India, too, turned to arms to enforce its territorial claims, annexing the princely state of Hyderabad, invading the former Portuguese colony of Goa, and deploying troops against Naga nationalists in the northeast.[4] For these 'minority' or 'subnational' populations, as they came to be framed by postcolonial state elites, decolonization was an aborted or incomplete process.[5]

To decolonize is to fracture. Decolonization, as one of the key phenomena of twentieth-century history, transformed the international system from one of territorial empires into one of polities that were, or claimed to be, nation-states. Most visibly, on world maps or in the UN General Assembly, the number of represented states expanded from 51 in 1945 to 193 by 2011. But the process of fracturing went beyond the territorial. Decolonization produced cracks in imperial structures built on white supremacy and racial inequality. It also created intellectual, social, and political fissures *within and among* anticolonial movements. Post-independence nation-states necessarily prioritised certain national visions, territorial units, state practices, and international orders over others. Anticolonial coalitions that had brought together actors from across the political spectrum broke down, as some individuals took the governing helm while others were marginalised. This happened within newly independent states as well as across the transnational networks that had been key in globalising local demands for independence and rights.

As much as historians have concurred that decolonization was far more than a 'moment' in time or politics,[6] an implicit temporal rupture of 'before' and 'after' independence continues to inform the literature. While scholars have revealed the multiple worlds of anticolonial activism leading up to and during the early years of decolonization across Asia and Africa,[7] this focus has not adequately persisted in studies of the subsequent decades. In

[3] UN Resolution 1514.

[4] Lydia Walker, *States-in-Waiting: A Global Counternarrative of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Sunil Purushotham, *From Raj to Republic: Sovereignty, Violence, and Democracy in India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[5] On the making of 'minorities,' see Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020); Cindy Ewing, "The 'Fate of Minorities' in the Early Afro-Asian Struggle for Decolonization," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 41, no. 2 (2021): 340-6; Mohammad Shahabuddin, *Minorities and the Making of Postcolonial States in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[6] Martin Thomas, *The End of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024); Jan C. Janssen and Jurgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Martin Thomas et al, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Els Bogaerts and Remco Raben (eds.), *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonization of African and Asian Societies, 1930s-1970s* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[7] Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jennifer Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Feminism and Anti-Imperialism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

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works focusing on the aftermath of independence, state-based national and international histories have frequently dominated, in place of the transnational histories that brought together elites and subalterns and that articulated potential futures that transcended colonially circumscribed borders.[8] Certainly, this was a messy transition, as different visions of regional and international order competed for primacy and the extended chronology of decolonization often blurred the distinctions between state and nonstate actors. But the question remains: how did certain actors (re)mobilize *after* certain forms of decolonization were foreclosed?

Political contestation did not simply stop with the attainment of sovereignty, nor did post-independence elites (much to their dismay) have a monopoly on power or ideas. Unfulfilled anticolonial visions did not disappear with the advent of independence but instead evolved into alternative forms of local, regional, and international mobilization. Activists across the political spectrum continued to seek opportunities to work within - or against - the state. These individuals and parties, communities, and networks emphasised the unfinished nature of decolonization and sought to enact or reroute anti-colonialism(s) to make additional demands about rights, political and social participation, and notions of belonging and sovereignty. Decolonization, in other words, led to new conflicts between different interest groups, as the exclusions that had united anticolonial activists before independence ended for some but not for others.

This special issue joins a growing body of scholarship in seeking to probe the nature of the ostensible transition from 'anticolonial' to 'postcolonial' and its implications. In recent years, a number of scholars have interrogated the ongoing significance of anticolonial thought and action in recent and current politics, in turn examining theories of postcolonialism and their continued utility. They have consequently argued for the need to recognize forms of mobilization that were not purely nation-statist, for example exploring the idea of the 'Third World historical.'[9] They also have pushed back against dominant postindependence narratives, often through a critique of Western-centric narratives and epistemologies. Collectively, these works have demonstrated that anticolonial struggles persisted because decolonization left many facets of politics and society unchanged. As with this special issue, they also show that mobilization occurred both domestically and transnationally.

Notably, however, historians have been late to research postindependence (re)mobilization through the lens of persistent anticolonialism. Of the recent special issues that have looked at such topics, authors have been overwhelmingly political theorists, social scientists, and interdisciplinary area studies specialists. Global and international historians, and even those with regional specialties, have been far less frequent contributors. This special issue, then, seeks to bridge the gap between more theoretical reflections on spaces and

2019); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023); Chris Vaughan, "The politics of regionalism and federation in East Africa, 1958-1964," *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 2 (2019): 519–40.

[8] Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Imaobong Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

[9] Elleni Centime Zeleke and Arash Davari, eds, "Third World Historical," *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (2022). See also Sharad Chari and Samera Esmeir, eds, "The Anticolonial Impulse," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 4, no. 3 (2021); Alina Sajed and Timothy Seidel, eds, "Anticolonial Connectivity and the Politics of Solidarity: Between Home and the World," *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 1 (2023); Alina Sajed and Begüm Adalet, eds, "Empire and Radical International Thought," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 3 (2024).

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ideas of mobilization and socio-political histories of persistent anticolonialism by looking more closely at its lived experiences, moving beyond a focus on political thought. In turn, this special issue also further complicates the idea of the 'Third World,' demonstrating that many marginalized historical actors did not choose the 'Third World' as the key register of global political change, as the politicization of the 'Third World,' itself, often led to the exclusion of minority groups and communities in favour of post-independence elites and governments.[10]

Not only that, but this special issue takes seriously the ways in which many historical actors *did* seek to capture and reshape the nation-state as well as international politics. In other words, it asks: why did the nation-state have such emotional staying power even as, in practice, it remained far from the postcolonial ideal? While recognizing the importance of spaces of solidarity, this special issue centres the people who debated what solidarity required and what its results should be. As such, it takes the lessons of 'new imperial history' and applies them fruitfully to histories of decolonization to better reveal the ways in which histories of mobilization after the transfer of power were just as messy – perhaps even messier – than those of the pre-independence period and that imperial legacies continued in numerous forms.[11]

This special issue emerged from a workshop held in September 2024, and it sits alongside, and in dialogue with, a sister special issue published in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*.[12] While the latter issue interrogates the meaning of 'postcolonial dissent' and looks comparatively at a geographically disparate set of case studies, this special issue focuses on actors who sought to remobilize across multiple political and spatial scales: in other words, actors who thought and acted locally *and* globally. In turn, it asks: What discontents did decolonization bring in its wake? What opportunities persisted for political activism across borders as the world shifted from one of empires to one of (nation-)states? What transformations – of imaginaries and networks, of ideas and modes of mobilization[13] – occurred alongside or because of the formal transfer of power? Finally, how did this transition reshape the interplay between different scales of decolonization – in other words, how did actors attempt to operate in, and stitch together, international, regional, national, and local spaces in the postcolonial era? Collectively, the articles in this special issue point to three different typologies of discontent: frustrations with political decision-making around the transfer of power (within states and in the international system), anger at decolonization's failure to enact social and cultural change, and disillusionment with the fraying bonds of anticolonial solidarity.

Typologies of Discontents

Though it began with great hopes, from the outset decolonization carried within it the seeds of disillusion and discontent. One type of discontent, this special issue reminds us, related to choices made at the point of political independence. Decolonization was a moment of extraordinary plasticity; in many cases, several options for postcolonial arrangements were on the table, and stakeholders were presented with a choice. In such moments of inflection,

[10] On the politicization of the 'Third World,' see Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[11] See Stephen Howe, ed, *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009 ed.).

[12] Elisabeth Leake and Erez Manela, eds, "Decolonization's Discontents: Dissent and Opposition in the Aftermath of Independence," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 45, no. 3 (2025). See also Elisabeth Leake, "Oppositional Politics and Unfinished Decolonization," *American Historical Review* (forthcoming).

[13] Erez Manela and Heather Streets-Salter, eds., *The Anticolonial Transnational: Imaginaries, Mobilities, and Networks in the Struggle against Empire* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Michele Louro et al., *The League against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

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some anticolonial actors had power to shape the options presented to the populace and to guide the choices made, while others did not. Some of these choices were made at the state level - such as decisions to federate or partition. Others, however, took place at the international level, for example, in the form of votes overseen by the United Nations or decisions taken at the International Court of Justice, and involved efforts to reshape international norms for a postcolonial era.

At the International Court of Justice, questions around decolonization coincided with and intersected with issues of global governance, as Pasuth Thothaveesansuk shows us in his study of Wellington Koo. As a Chinese justice on the ICJ, Koo oversaw a number of cases that helped establish norms around postcolonial sovereignty and territoriality. Yet he also was often a dissenting voice in the court, informed by his country's own semi-colonial history and his acute awareness of the power imbalances that had prevented non-Western countries from negotiating with imperial powers as equals. Koo sought to position the ICJ as a key arbiter of decolonization while reinforcing the ideals of liberal internationalism. His dissents reveal alternative decolonizing paths where colonial-era borders were not automatically assumed by postcolonial states but rather could be adjusted based on liberal principles. His views on this question, however, remained in the minority.

Once political decisions were made and the moment of decolonization had passed, the plasticity disappeared, and options that may have been contingently presented and selected hardened into an unalterable set of power relations. In such circumstances, it was not unusual for those who made one choice to wish they had made another, or to wish they had been presented with a different option altogether. One poignant example, presented in Roland Ndille's essay in this issue, is the fate of the British trust territory of Southern Cameroons. Presented with an opportunity to choose, through a UN-managed referendum in 1961, between joining newly independent Nigeria or uniting with now independent Cameroon (former French Cameroon), the population chose the latter on the understanding, Ndille tells us, that the new country's federal structure would afford the Anglophone population of Southern Cameroons significant autonomy vis-a-vis the former colony's Francophone majority. A short-lived attempt, in the run up to the 1961 referendum, to instead become an independent state was quashed by regional opponents and UN politics. As independent Cameroon grew more centralised and some Anglophone Cameroonians came to feel increasingly marginalised in the postcolonial state, regrets emerged about these choices. Since 2017, these postcolonial discontents have fuelled an armed secessionist movement among Anglophone Cameroonians fighting, they claim, for the establishment of the independent state of Ambazonia.

The Southern Cameroonians, at least, had the chance to make a choice. This was not the case for numerous other groups, where demands for self-determination were violently subsumed within postcolonial states. Indeed, one irony of decolonization was that recognizing one claim to self-determination pertaining to a certain territory often necessitated denying other, competing claims for control of that same space. In fact, inasmuch as it often followed the territorial boundaries drawn by colonial empires, decolonization preserved the coercive logic that created those lines in the first place. Thus, the years after 1960 saw numerous groups that were reluctantly subsumed within postcolonial states – now reframed as 'subnational' or 'minority' groups through the process of decolonization – struggling to obtain voice, recognition, and rights in newly configured national, regional, and international contexts. If before decolonization these groups often operated in the same transnational spaces as their current rulers, they now found themselves excluded from the international arena into which the postcolonial ruling elites were invited.

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In this special issue, Emma Kluge tells the story of independence activists from West Papua who struggled against the claims of the postcolonial Indonesian state to incorporate their homeland. This claim followed a colonial logic, since West Papua, like other parts of Indonesia, had been part of the Dutch East Indies. Unlike the rest of Indonesia, which declared its independence in 1945, West Papua remained under Dutch rule until 1962. That year, the Dutch agreed to transfer the region to Indonesian control on the condition that, in 1969, a plebiscite be held that would give the population of West Papua the option of independence. Yet as Kluge notes, it quickly became clear that the Indonesian authorities had no intention of permitting West Papuan self-determination, and West Papuan activists, largely shut out of their homeland, struggled in vain for support at the United Nations. Similarly, Yusra Abdullahi's contribution centres the struggle of the Rwenzururu people in western Uganda both before and after Ugandan independence in 1962. This essay shows how Rwenzururu nationalists laboured on multiple levels – locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally - to find support for independent statehood but got little traction for their demands, passing through stages of hope, disillusion, anger, and, eventually, reluctant resignation.

But exclusion of certain claims for self-determination even as others were recognized was only one mode for decolonization's discontents. No less frustrating to many was that the political independence that it brought often arrested progress toward the social and economic independence that for many anticolonial activists was no less crucial. This, indeed, was more often than not by design. In some cases, the colonial power worked hard to devolve the powers of government to conservative local elites in order to stymie any move toward radical politics. In other cases, elites who may have advocated radical economic agendas when engaged in anticolonial struggle came to see the value of retrenchment once they came into power. Stability, more often than not, came to be seen as an asset rather than a threat. The appeal of revolution, for those in power, declined. For those radical activists who were left outside the centres of postcolonial power, whether by necessity or choice, this new dynamic was a source of constant frustration.

A prime example of this dynamic is offered in Rosalind Parr's essay in this issue, which focuses on the revolutionary career of Aruna Asaf Ali (1909-1996). Ali, a leading figure in the Indian National Congress before 1947, grew increasingly frustrated after independence with the lack of progress toward socialism. As Parr shows, for Ali true freedom meant not simply independence from British rule but also triumph over 'landlords and capitalist elites' in order to advance social and economic equality. Parr traces Ali's postcolonial journey, both within India and internationally, from nationalism to communism as she searched for the right path to carry on the revolution of which political independence was only one part. For Ali, the continued fight for decolonization was simultaneously local and global. While she sought to reshape India's political, economic, and social fabric in the wake of 1947, she insisted that this could not be separated from the worldwide fight against imperialism and capitalism. Decolonization, Ali argued, had not gone far enough.

Finally, another type of discontent that emerges from several of the essays that follow stemmed from the ways in which decolonization sometimes frayed the bonds of solidarity that had previously bound those struggling against colonialism. In the anticolonial era, the struggle against imperialism was often seen as running along the colour line, the fight of "the darker peoples of the world" against rule by Western overlords within a system defined by assumptions of white supremacy.[14] In that context, it was easy to imagine that

[14] The phrase comes from Merze Tate, "The War Aims of World War I and World War II and Their Relation to the Darker Peoples of the World," *Journal of Negro Education* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1943) 521–532. See also Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

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the world's non-white peoples were united in solidarity, and this indeed was a major theme highlighted at the Bandung Conference of 1955.[15] Soon after, however, such solidarity began to fray as newly sovereign governments discovered that their national interests often ran counter to claims of transnational unity. State elites encountered the challenges of embracing multiracial notions of citizenship, while transnational advocates discovered that citing shared histories of oppression was not enough to gain allies in the international arena.

Here, too, Kluge's essay on West Papuan struggles for self-determination is exemplary. Independence activists framed their struggle in racial terms – based on a claim that West Papuans were Black and therefore racially distinct from Indonesians – and used this framing to appeal to newly independent African nations for solidarity with their struggle. As Kluge shows, this effort did get traction among some African delegates at the UN, but not enough to deflect the Indonesian government's insistence on its right to determine the future of West Papua. The theme of fraying solidarities is also central in Andrew Bellisari's essay, where he explores the (ultimately largely failed) efforts of the North Vietnamese communists to first attract African soldiers fighting for the French to desert and then to integrate them into the new Vietnamese society being constructed there. As Bellisari shows, racial stereotypes, cultural misunderstandings, and divergent expectations ultimately meant that few such former soldiers would successfully cross the line to become 'new Vietnamese.' In a theme that runs through many of the papers in this special issue, but which comes through most clearly in Bellisari's, ingrained colonial hierarchies continued to inform notions of citizenship in the aftermath of independence, undermining state claims that decolonization increased equality.

Multiscalar Decolonization

Choices constrained, claims excluded, revolutions interrupted, and solidarities frayed. To understand these different types of discontents and the dissents they engendered – their dynamics, their intersections, and ultimately their limitations – requires historians to adopt an explicitly multiscalar approach. Jumping scale had been a fact of life for many activists in the lead up to independence.[16] During the colonial era, a double exclusion had caused many anticolonial actors to focus operations in the transnational realm. They had been barred from more than limited participation in colonial governance, while at the same time, they also were shut out of the international arena, where only sovereign states could dwell. In turn, while they remained highly attuned to local issues, they moved across borders and joined networks with other like-minded individuals to draw out parallel experiences of oppression and to work towards change within and across colonies. As such, anticolonial activists sought change within their local communities and at the level of the colony or state, but they often also sought to reimagine regions and international relations.

Ending empire and replacing it with something new likewise required enacting change across multiple scales: locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. But *who* could engage in politics at each of these levels - and who could act across them - increasingly came to be regulated by the state. With decolonization, some anticolonial actors gained access to the levers of state power, as well as seats in international fora. Others did not. Thus, state officials and elites focused on economic, political, and social development within state

[15] Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1956). See also Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis, eds., *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2022).

[16] Bérénice Guyot-Réchard and Elisabeth Leake, "Introduction: South Asia Unbound," in *South Asia Unbound: New International Histories of the Subcontinent* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023) 15-36; Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," in *Locating Southeast Asia*, eds. H.G.C. Schulte Nordholdt and R. Raben (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 275-307.

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boundaries, fostering interstate relations regionally and internationally, and engaging in established practices of global governance, such as participating in the United Nations. In turn, they became increasingly wary of potential domestic competitors and transnational movements that could undermine their rule. While some elites faced the temptation to support nonstate actors and autonomy movements beyond their borders, this was tempered by their awareness that their states' own fissiparous elements - ethnic, religious, linguistic, or regional minorities - could be turned against them. Officials used their control of state levers to police what happened within their borders as well as who crossed them. As such, compared to the era of transnational anticolonialism, who had access to change-making across different political scales narrowed.

As these essays show, despite the increasing primacy of the state, actors left discontented conceived of and addressed decolonization as an ongoing political process that was simultaneously local, national, regional, and global. They tried to remedy what they perceived as decolonization's continued shortcomings by mobilising within and across these different scales and fought against a growing consensus that politics had to be state-centric. Across the included papers, we have numerous instances of actors intentionally blurring the line between national and international to offer critiques of postcolonial nation-statehood and worldmaking. This took the form of activism within domestic, regional, and international arenas and, though less frequently, via remaining transnational networks. In other words, these actors were not just focused on creating new or alternative spaces of mobilization; rather, actors thought and acted across multiple spaces, collapsing some and intentionally differentiating between others.

By foregrounding these oppositional visions and activities, rather than centring the (supra)state structures and elites who controlled them, this special issue offers an alternative history of decolonization as continued contestation. Focusing on marginalised individuals and communities, and their perspectives on local, national, regional, and international politics, flips accepted narratives and categories of postcolonial statehood. It brings into question, for example, categories like 'subnational' or 'minority': the actors presented here did not view themselves in these terms. They did not see themselves as exceptional or outlying critics but rather sought to shape new social and political norms at home and abroad. Even as their visions of the postcolonial failed to materialise, they nevertheless informed discourse - within and between states - and promoted alternative visions of sovereignty and cooperation. By foregrounding histories focused on actors, and the ways they could or could not continue to traverse political scales in the wake of decolonization, these articles reveal important antecedents to contemporary social and political movements that cross borders while also drawing attention to the structures that often restrict their success.

The groups and individuals presented here were actors whose political aspirations were disrupted by the exclusions of decolonization. This special issue intentionally draws attention to visions of decolonization that, to date, have failed to materialise. The independent states of West Papua, Rwenzururu, and South Cameroon did not emerge. India failed to embrace communism. North Vietnam struggled to create a multi-ethnic state that integrated former Black colonial subjects. Wellington Koo's liberal internationalist outlook remained in the minority as the ICJ struggled to serve as an arbiter of decolonization. Focusing on these alternative stories recentres obscured voices and perspectives in the historical narrative. Likewise, by placing emphasis on multiscalar acting and thinking, and their limitations, these articles help to reveal the ways in which norms were made across different spaces and barriers were erected by 'international' and 'national' politics.

The essays that follow, taken together, illuminate decolonization as a multiscalar process that reshaped the norms of international society in ways that brought the simultaneous expansion and contraction for political possibility. End of empire offered opportunities

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for new forms of politics but also constrained the range of actors who had access. Those excluded from power nevertheless attempted to mobilise in new ways and leverage new forums to advance their causes. By centring those who dissented against the emerging international norms and arrangements of the postcolonial era, the special issue interrogates the tensions between anticolonial and postcolonial visions of nationhood and shifting opportunities for transnational activism in a milieu increasingly defined by nation-state borders and politics.

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