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## Compte rendu de "Decolonization. A Short History"

Bertrand Badie

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## **Jan C. Jansen, Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization. A Short History***

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 252, ISBN: 9781400884889

*Reviewed by Bertrand Badie*

Sciences Po Paris

The topic is attractive: decolonisation is an important parameter of contemporary international relations, but has been rather neglected by scholars of the discipline. However, our current post-bipolar system, emancipated from the East-West cleavage, is probably more dependent on the colonial legacy and decolonisation process than ever. The appearance of such a book is thus both timely and precious: written by two German scholars, teaching in Germany and USA, it comes out as a translation of a first German edition. At a first glance, we wholeheartedly share the main arguments: decolonisation seals the end of a racial hierarchy which played a major (and underestimated) role in past international relations (p1); it marks also the end of a kind of imperial system, even if we have to wary on this point, while imperial orientations are nowadays visible everywhere around the world ; it deeply affected the succeeding international systems, as it was violent, long and extensive (all the continents were concerned). Precisely for all these reasons, the process was not studied enough and decolonisation, as an explaining variable, was much neglected by IR researches.

From this point of view, the book can be considered as helpful in two ways. First, it offers an exact chronology of a very long and complex process, pointing that decolonisation had two “proto-waves”, with America (1770-1820) and then the British dominions, before being completed in the second half of the twentieth century. Second, it suggests some stimulating lines of research, about the main causes of the process (pp. 22ff.), and about the explaining theories which should be mobilised (pp. 29ff.). In addressing the causes, the authors properly point that they are to be found in the domestic transformations of the colonial power, as well as in the local colonial context and the global international system: these three levels of explanation are excellent starting points for a good program of research.

In spite of these qualities, the book seems, in total, rather disappointing. Of course, it does not pretend to offer a final treaty on the topic: however, it does not provide any new information that we were missing before opening it, nor any data on decolonisation. It does not seem to be built on real empirical (or even historical) research. For instance, it would have been useful, even for reinforcing the main arguments, to take into account the itineraries of some of the decolonisation leaders as well as their way of socialisation. It would have explained how anti-colonialist actors could transform themselves into importers of Western models that they discovered, learned and internalised when they studied in the USA (N’Krumah, Azikiwe, ...),

in the United Kingdom (Nehru, Jinnah, Tafawa Belawa...) or in France (Senghor, Cesaire), even when they sat in the Western Parliament (Sekou Toure, Houphouët-Boigny)...

It follows that three critical points are well worth discussing, particularly when we refer to the questions listed in the preface of the book. The first one appears as the most important: can we consider decolonisation as a precursor to nationalism? Is it the last hurdle before nation-building? The theoretical main stream of political science considered take it as granted, while developmentalism made it the corner stone of its theories. This postulate is particularly strong and is even a key argument for those who consider universalism and evolutionism as the real bases of political science: but it is probably where the rubber hits the road. Recent works have clearly shown that emancipating movements coming from colonised countries were oriented against slavery, colonialism and imperialism, but did not have any nationalist substance.<sup>1</sup>

Two major consequences flow from this historical observation. The first one is just glimpsed in the last pages of the book (pp. 150ff.): nation is not the only model promoted by the independence leaders, some of them supporting federalism as a substitute to the nation-building process. But a second consequence is much more important for properly grasping what decolonisation was, and how it finally failed: there was a permanent hiatus between decolonisation and state-building which paved the way to permanent and dramatic political instability. The most uncompromising anticolonial leaders were mainly interested in condemning social and political inequality, but most of them were however keen to participate in the political administration of their countries from the moment that the colonial power respected equal rights of both colonised people and colonisers. Ho Chi Minh even requested in his youth to become a colonial administrator, while the Nigerian leader Nnamdi Azikiwe planned to become a foreign service official in Liberia... The idea of nation was not in mind of these leaders: Nkrumah campaigned for pan-Africanism rather than building a nation in Gold Coast, while the first pan-Africanist congresses, in London, Brussels or Paris filled the room by gathering activists from African, Caribbean, or American black communities. The same is true in Asia, with pan-Asianism or in the Arab World with pan-Arabism, brought by Gamal Abdel Nasser as well as the *Baath* Party. We can say that decolonisation can be then defined as the inability to make the connection between before and after the break. This dysfunction is most probably the main crisis affecting still now our current international system.

The second question refers to the decolonisation strategy as it should have been conceived by the colonial power. The authors sagaciously point out that the process was partly strategic and partly constrained by local pressures and the evolution of the international context: Cold war and bipolarity obviously boosted decolonisation policies. They also rightly stress that postcolonial studies were not able to bring new convincing explanations on these strategies. But they probably underestimate the important networks which had been progressively weaved, even before formal independence, for creating and promoting clientelist relationships between the former colonial power and the new states which were emerging. The efficiency of these new linkages stems from different factors: the socialisation of the new elite that we already mentioned, growing international interdependence which complemented

1 Michael Goebel, *Paris, capitale du tiers monde. Comment est née la révolution anticoloniale (1919–1939)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017. The book offers a wonderful vision on the « pre-decolonization » movement, and then on the real nature of the anticolonial movement.

the globalisation process, the rising role of transnational actors (multinational firms, religious organisations, and particularly new religious movements, NGOs...) who promptly played a mediatory role... For this reason, it seems strange to suggest (p. 150) that former colonial powers were "wary of meddling into the domestic affairs of the new states"... Quite the opposite, this new interfering system is at the core of the decolonisation process and sheds light on its circumstances. It helps also to build up a typology of these processes which is lacking in the book: decolonisation in Ivory Coast, in Algeria, in Angola or in Congo did not have the same aspects as it could not promote the same types of post-colonial clientelisation.

The third question refers to the subsequent cleavages which appeared in the international arena. The authors equate the West-East conflict and the new North-South opposition (p. 140), even if they point the cases of North Korea and Cuba as exceptions, as they were attracted into the Soviet camp. Strangely, South Korea is not mentioned, on the basis of reciprocity, as affiliated to the Western camp, nor South Vietnam, nor the multiple alliances which formalised the Western clientelisation of several decolonised new states, through CENTO, OTASE, ASEAN and a proliferation of military bilateral agreements passed by the United States, France or the United Kingdom... In fact, the attractive capacity of the Western camp and the ability to formalise it was much stronger than it was in the opposite camp!

In fact, the two cleavages were totally different: the first was a moment of World history. Strategically conceived and clearly embodied in an explicit ideological competition, it strongly shaped and structured the international system from 1947 to 1989. Conversely, the second is not strictly speaking able to *structure* the international system: the South is not unified, but is rather fragmented, while no organised military alliances are able to create competing camps. We do not find any kind of frontal oppositions, but, instead of it, a strong evidence of a lack of international integration which results in many kinds of tension, humiliation and frustration. That is to say, the "North-South opposition" comes within a new kind of international system which is quite unprecedented: it stems from a dramatic asymmetry rather than a traditional balance of power. This specific structuration explain the particular aspect of the new violence and the new conflictuality.

Decolonisation is thus a very complex process which totally disturbed the traditional organisation of the international arena. That is why it is frustrating to see only the shell of things. The topic would have deserved a deeper investigation. Even if the book pretended to be a simple introduction to further investigations, we regret that the basic questions were not set up with more attention.