

Introduction

The Anticolonial Impulse

SHARAD CHARI and SAMERA ESMEIR

In 1965, Eqbal Ahmad, a former participant in the Algerian Revolution and chronicler of Third World anticolonial movements, published an essay with the provocative subtitle “How to Tell When the Rebels Have Won.” Ahmad argues in this essay that what escapes the prose of US counterinsurgency in Vietnam is precisely the guerilla movement’s “central objective to confirm, perpetuate and institutionalize the moral isolation of the enemy by providing an alternative to the discredited regime”; “the major task of the movement is not to outfight but to outadminister the government.”¹ The war was already lost because the US reiterated French colonial power by refusing to engage in the political work necessary to build consent: that is “how to tell when the rebels have won.”

We might see in Ahmad’s formulation a Gramscian argument about the decisive importance of the “war of maneuver” or the work of forging the popular political infrastructure necessary to sustain prolonged struggle. But we might also see something else at work, with our present in mind, namely the persistence of colonialisms and hence the significance of exploring what anticolonialism continues to offer today. To some contemporary readers, the very invocation of the anticolonial might seem to be a nostalgic rehashing of an untimely Third Worldism that has lost its political relevance. Certainly, if we consider the dominant statist-nationalist, postcolonial forms that anticolonialism birthed, the foundational arguments made at Bandung in 1955—respect for human rights, the territorial integrity of nations, the equality of races, and so on—are now questionable on multiple counts. It is difficult to resurrect an anticolonialism grounded in these and other elements central to the persistence of imperialism itself. We now have the benefit of more than three

decades of postcolonial theory, which has carefully dissected the various pitfalls of anticolonial nationalism.

Does this, however, mean that nothing more need be said concerning anticolonialism? Does the corpus of postcolonial theory necessarily lead to the historicization of anticolonialism as a thing of the past? Or might this corpus afford a different return to Ahmad's cue to think critically about "alternatives to discredited regimes," in a world bequeathed to us by multiple colonialisms? And if so, then shouldn't the untimely anticolonial continue to command our attention? Ahmad carefully suggests that his sympathies lie not with communism or nationalism as such, and he concludes by first indicting US imperialism, and then backing off apologetically, suggesting that Americans "are naturally sympathetic to peoples' struggles for freedom and justice, and they would like to help if they could." He then offers this parable: "I prefer the term 'maternalism' for American policy in countries like Vietnam, because it reminds me of the story of an elephant who, as she strolled benignly in the jungle, stepped on a mother partridge and killed her. When she noticed the orphaned siblings, tears filled the kind elephant's eyes. 'Ah, I too have maternal instincts,' she said, turning to the orphans, and sat on them."² What critical potentials survive the ongoing catastrophe in this devastating parable? Might we consider what iterations of an anticolonial impulse persist just as imperial "benevolence" persists in our beleaguered time? What might such a project require to push beyond the well-worn frameworks of recuperative Third Worldism? Is anticolonialism a force of the past, significant only in its historical opposition to colonialism? How do the plural itineraries and political possibilities latent in anticolonialism constitute resources for critique, critical theory, and struggle today? And what might we make of the situations in places like Palestine and Kashmir, where anticolonial struggles continue to confront renewed colonial powers?

The articles in this issue offer a variety of possibilities for understanding the enduring need to reconsider the anticolonial impulse. In doing so, the articles point to a persistent anticolonial impulse that remains relevant to contemporary political struggle. The issue confronts canonical figures such as Gandhi and Fanon with the theoretical insights of a range of less well-known anticolonials, including Palestinian and Lebanese revolutionaries, South African critics of ongoing decolonization, and Sufi anti-imperialists from the Indian Ocean. Through this confrontation, attentive to the diversity of concrete historical-political contexts that have animated anticolonial arguments and practices, the issue explores the obstinacy of the anticolonial impulse and the possibilities that it continues to hold for other futures.

Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena approach this question through a reconsideration of attempts to decolonize political theory, arguing for a shift in

focus from Western political thought to what they call the “positive or reconstructive theoretical agenda” in Gandhi’s and Fanon’s anticolonial thought. The anticolonial impulse, in this sense, involves political reformulation that exceeds the critique of Eurocentric political theory to focus instead on postcolonial reanimations of “questions and audiences of anticolonial thought.” By connecting this reconstructive theoretical agenda in anticolonial thought to contemporary postcolonial theory, they reveal sediments of anticolonialism in postcolonial scholarship, but they also track the creative, innovative concepts that postcolonial critics have introduced in their attempts to critically theorize “politics in most of the world.”

Suren Pillay offers a sympathetic reading of Latin American decolonial theory in its travels to various places in Africa, particularly in South Africa, and queries its effectiveness as a response to the legacies of apartheid and colonial education. Attentive to the distinct itineraries of colonialism, as well as the divergent technologies of rule and destruction—of assimilation and of rule through difference—Pillay asks whether decolonial theory is adequate to a South African anticolonial critical perspective that seeks to attend to “the history of difference that survives colonial assimilation.” In Pillay’s account, the anticolonial impulse emerges at the intersection of colonial histories and their aftermaths, including their possible futures. For at issue is “how to decolonize difference without giving up on the importance of difference itself in refashioning political futures.”

Wilson Chacko Jacob argues for a deeper and more capacious historical and genealogical method that might find forms of anticolonial critique not “so securely tethered to the sovereignty of the state.” Jacob reads the life and work of Sufi-in-exile Sayyid Fadl Ibn Alawi and considers his shifting engagements with the sacredness of national sovereignty and his efforts to grapple with Islam and theory, projects that are sometimes legible, and more often not, within the frame of anticolonial thought and critical theory. While Fadl’s life history has little to offer secular sensibilities today, it does reveal “a promise of thinking the human and life anew in relation to nonhumans and nonlife.” For this promise to become intelligible, however, colonial and anticolonial histories must be thought beyond their intimate and passionate binding to states, to allow for other horizons of freedom to unfold.

In his essay on Palestinian anticolonialism, Nasser Abourahme asks: “What is a revolution that neither overthrows a state order nor institutes a lasting one in its place?” Refusing to read the Palestinian Revolution as a failure prescribed by the arc of transcontinental Third Worldism, Abourahme locates an enduring “line of flight” in creative practices of making autonomous territory to forge what he calls the Palestinian camp-commune. In its experimentation with a militant, antistatist autonomy, the anticolonialism of the camp-commune “pushes revolution well beyond its usual preoccupations.” Abourahme’s gesture toward pessoptimism, or optimism in the face of undefeated despair, takes us back to Ahmad’s crucial claim

that if the anticolonial impulse is to mean anything, it has to attend to the refusal to admit defeat in the face of the imperial elephant that sighs in sympathy before ongoing destruction. Decolonization and anticolonial struggle are ongoing imperatives, and Abourahme looks to these imperatives “not as an exercise in nostalgia but as a way of thinking futurity.”

This issue also includes two special sections. The first highlights the work of Lebanese Marxist intellectual Mahdi Amel and in particular his book *Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West?* Published in Arabic in 1986, Amel’s book critically responds to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and in particular to Said’s reading of Karl Marx on “the Eastern Question.” Guest edited by Nadia Bou Ali and Surti Singh, this special section features sections from Amel’s book, translated by Ziad Kiblawi. Accompanying the translation are six commentaries by Kiblawi, Bou Ali, Kolja Lindner, Jamila Mascat, Singh, and Alberto Toscano. These commentaries engage Amel’s work from a range of contemporary perspectives and emphasize the continuing relevance of his critique of *Orientalism*. This foundational text of postcolonial theory took distance from Marx and hence from anticolonial Marxisms. According to Amel, this led to a consequential forgetting of “the question of revolution, and its necessity, as a precondition for humanity’s liberation.” The commentaries published here follow Amel in returning to this question, even when they point to the limits of Amel’s polemical reading. Taken together, the commentaries help us “to recover a Marxism that breaks with ‘a homogenizing and incorporating world historical scheme,’” as Toscano writes, quoting Said against himself. This means revisiting and renewing debates between postcolonial and Marxist critics, but it also means, as Toscano concludes, attending to anticolonial Marxism’s “unreconciled and unfinished legacies.”

Under the “Critical Encounters” heading, a second special section, titled “Legislating Settler Colonialism Today,” contains a roundtable discussion about the Basic Law: Israel—The Nation State of the Jewish People (2018), which the Israeli Supreme Court upheld in July 2021. This Nation-State Law defines “the Land of Israel,” that is, the land of Palestine, as “the historic national home of the Jewish people” to the exclusion of any mention of Palestinians or their rights. Contributions by Honaida Ghanim and Lana Tatour situate this law in the longer legal and political history of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. In Tatour’s argument, the Nation-State Law should be read as part of a broader history of efforts to negotiate “a *liberal* Israeli settler colonialism.” In this sense, the Nation-State Law, like previous lawmaking efforts, attempts to reconcile a desired form of Israeli racial liberalism with settler colonialism. In Ghanim’s account, the Nation-State Law indexes transformations in the Zionist relationship to space, whereby the entire land of Palestine, and in particular the West Bank, including Jerusalem, has become an open empty terrain available for intensified Israeli settlement activity.

The constructed absence of Palestinians from the law and the land anticipates the possibility of their expulsion. The third contribution by Rahul Rao presents a comparative account of the Indian Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, similarly marked by racism and exclusion. In Rao's account, the CAA has much in common with the Nation-State Law. By offering a longer view of the successive changes in Indian citizenship law, Rao reveals a drift toward what he calls a "de jure conception of the Indian state that resonates strongly with the politics of Zionism." Like Tatour and Ghanim, Rao sees in the CAA not an unprecedented moment of racism and exclusion but "an incremental step that is entirely in consonance with the historic trajectory of Indian citizenship law reform."

Finally, the issue features a series of drawings by Isael Maxakali, an Indigenous artist, filmmaker, and community leader based in the village of Aldeia Nova in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. These images remind us that, as Rita Segato writes, in the Latin American context "it is wrong to assume that the Conquest simply ended one day."³ Here and elsewhere, the persistence of conquest and colonization can be seen in processes of ongoing deforestation and despoliation and in the destruction of animal species and forms of life. Yet as Paula Berbert and Roberto Romero note in their text accompanying Isael's drawings, the Tikmũ'ũn people "refuse to say that animals 'have disappeared.' They prefer to say that they 'went away' after the whites destroyed their homes, that is, their forests. But just as they went away, they can return." Isael's drawings thus record not only the traces left by these vanished species, but also their lingering presence, their persistence. Their "impulse animates Isael's work." This, too, is an anticolonial impulse, and Isael's drawings ask us to attend to living beings other than Ahmad's elephant.

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Notes

1. Ahmad, "Revolutionary Warfare," 97.
2. Ahmad, "Revolutionary Warfare," 100.
3. Segato, "Manifesto," 203.

Works Cited

- Ahmad, Eqbal. "Revolutionary Warfare: How to Tell When the Rebels Have Won." *Nation*, August 30, 1965, 95–100.
- Segato, Rita. "A Manifesto in Four Themes," translated by Ramsey McGlazer. *Critical Times* 1, no. 1 (2017): 198–211.