

Guillaume Blanc, *Décolonisations. Histoires situées d'Afrique et d'Asie (XIXe-XXIe siècle)*, Paris, Seuil, 2022, 530 p.

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Research on the history of Africa in the time when colonial empires were collapsing has in recent years been expanding rapidly, making any synthesis difficult and necessarily provisional. Guillaume Blanc has provided a comprehensive narrative that reflects the current state of scholarship on different regions of the world, and he brings the threads together in an illuminating way. One virtue of his account is the plural in the title—« décolonisations ». He emphasizes that there was not one pathway out of colonial empire but several, and each had its consequences. At the same time, he is aware that these trajectories were not autonomous and that the decolonizations of some places affected those in others, ultimately transforming colonialism from an ordinary part of the global order at the beginning of the twentieth century into an abnormal and unacceptable situation in the second half of the century. A second virtue is that over half the book is devoted to telling the story of what happened after independence in different parts of Asia and Africa. He gets beyond the widespread tendency to treat decolonization either as the slow but inevitable ascendance of nationalism over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or else as a heroic and victorious tale of political mobilization in the mid-twentieth century. He is able to present a complex and nuanced view of what he calls « une double temporalité : celle de la remise en cause d'un ordre colonial et celle de la fabrique d'un ordre national postcolonial (p. 35) ».

The most thorough coverage—to which Guillaume Blanc returns at different points in the chronology— is of French and British Africa, the Dutch East Indies, British India, and French Indochina, with forays into other colonies of these powers as well as those of Portugal. His relatively brief portrait of colonial rule in these places emphasizes both the violence of colonization and the efforts of colonizing powers—at home and overseas—to make clear the « otherness » of the colonized, justifying the unequal social and political structure intrinsic to the colonial situation. He gives less attention to what some recent research has pointed to without downplaying violence and discrimination, mainly the ability of some colonized people, often at the expense of others, to find niches in the system or to play it for their own advantage. Colonial regimes were far from omnipotent. The typical strategy of governing on the cheap meant that European personnel was spread thin, except in zones of settler farming or mineral extraction. For this reason, colonial violence was most often exemplary, and its demonstrations intended to terrify potential rebels were all the more brutal for this reason. Guillaume Blanc also underplays the extent of dissent and misgivings among European elites about colonial rule, not least the lack of consensus among scientists about the notion of « scientific racism » or about the dehumanizing of colonial



subjects.¹ That the colonial edifice was never as solid as its advocates claimed it to be might help to explain the rapidity with which it came apart beginning in the 1940s—in the case of most of Africa only a half century after it had been put in place.

The core of this book consists of well-contextualized narratives of this coming apart and the forging of a new—national—order by postcolonial elites. Guillaume Blanc traces succinctly the growing activity of anti-colonial political organization during the 1930s and 1940s in Indonesia, Malaya, Vietnam, India, French West Africa, Madagascar, and elsewhere. He makes clear that the sharpest break occurred with World War II and that it occurred in Southeast and South Asia. Japan's chasing of European (and American) colonial governments out of much of Southeast Asia and then its defeat created an opening seized by a declaration of independence in the Dutch East Indies in August 1945 and in Vietnam a couple of weeks later. Neither the Netherlands nor France was able to recolonize those territories. The United States (and the UN) were willing to let Sukarno take over what became Indonesia—recognizing him for the non-communist nationalist that he was—but their equally correct diagnosis that Ho Chi Minh was a communist and not just a nationalist led the United States to support France's actions in Indochina and eventually to make the war in Vietnam its own. He explains how the colonial strategies of divide and rule in South Asia and the ambitions of Muslim and Hindu politicians led both to the triumph of the independence movement and produced the divisions that led to millions of deaths in the India-Pakistan partition at the very moment of anti-colonial triumph. He follows a rather conventional line in blaming the « entêtement des Français à conserver leur empire (p. 159) » for the painful pathway to ending that empire, although some recent scholarship points to a more confused and contradictory pattern of concession, reform, and repression that was intended to retain French power in a form that was not necessarily that of a classic colonial empire.²

Most important is his consistent portrayal of the ways in which the different pathways out of empire ended up in the construction of national states whose boundaries were shaped by both colonization and decolonization, in which identification with the « nation » was cross-cut by other affiliations, networks, and sentiments, and in which elites engaged in zero-sum contests to maintain power within national borders. In one of his most illuminating chapters on pan-Africanism and « tiers-mondisme », Guillaume Blanc makes clear that there were alternative forms of political imagination, focused more on connections across space and cultural difference than on the singularity of national identity (pp. 173-206). He also emphasizes that the struggle against colonialism was also a struggle for social and economic progress, that is for liberation in more than one sense of the word. He takes seriously these alternative visions, and he demonstrates how, in different ways in different contexts, they were shunted aside by elites seeking to eliminate challenges to their rule. He consistently points to the colonial roots of the political and economic malaise in much of the post-colonial world, but he does not shy away from bringing out the responsibility of postcolonial elites.

Indeed, there is an element of tragedy in the way Guillaume Blanc's story unfolds—great efforts of both political imagination and political mobilization that bring about the end of colonial rule, followed by a quest for power by the leaders of the nationally bounded states that emerged from the struggles for decolonization, resulting in many instances of conflict and repression in the postcolonial world. The iconic instance of revolutionary anticolonialism led by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria, led to internal conflict among the victors, civil war, and later conflict between a repressive state and Islamic rebellion. Guillaume Blanc argues that first French policies « ont enfermé l'identité des individus dans une langue et une religion », and later « L'arabité et l'islamité du FLN vont se retourner contre lui ». (p. 272). The triumph of Sukarno in Indonesia was followed by his repression of alternative political organizations and the forcing of a geographically and ethnically diverse population into subjection to a unitary state, ending up in a coup and even more violent repression (pp. 286-92). He discusses at length the tragic post-colonial histories of Cambodia (pp. 338-54) and

¹Tilley Helen (2011), *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press ; Conklin Alice (2013), *In the Museum of Man : Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press.

²Cooper Frederick (2014), *Français et Africains ? Être citoyen au temps de la décolonisation*, trad. C. Jeanmougin, Paris, Payot-Rivages ; Shepard Todd, « Thinking between Metropole and Colony : The French Republic, 'Exceptional Promotion', and the 'Integration' of Algerians, 1955-1962 », in Thomas Martin (ed.) (2012), *The French Colonial Mind, v. I: Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters*, Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 298-323.

Eritrea (pp. 447-59), and the way ethnic divisions fostered by colonial governments led to a zero-sum quest for power and ultimately to genocide in Rwanda (pp. 459-75). He shows at length how the frustrated hopes for building democracy and overcoming religious and ethnic divisions in South Asia ended up in a half-century long conflict in Kashmir, religious repression and governmental paralysis in Pakistan, and a fragile democracy undermined by Hindu nationalism in India (pp. 153-58, 476-90). The myth of anticolonial struggle has been much used by particular rulers or elites to assert power within the independent state, as Guillaume Blanc illustrates for example in the case of Kenya (pp. 238-39). In all these cases, he makes clear the colonial roots of the conflicts and the responsibility of the leaders of the succeeding states. He brings out the ways in which the French government manipulated African leaders—supporting those they favored and undermining those they didn't like—but he also points out that the leaders of the African states in question were also manipulating the French government and were in a certain way « maîtres du jeu » (p. 397).

The books and articles on which this book is based are almost entirely in French, and the density of Guillaume Blanc's narratives of the decolonization of the different components of the British empire is testimony to the engagement in recent years of French researchers beyond the francophone world. To be sure, something is lost through the sparsity of direct reference to anglophone authors. For example, Guillaume Blanc (pp. 221-23) correctly observes that Kwame Nkrumah repressed regional political movements in Ghana, but he could have given a fuller and more nuanced treatment had he referred to Jean Allman's insightful analysis of the ways in which the movement among the Asante deployed the same nationalist imagery as did Nkrumah's own exposition of Ghanaian nationalism and exhibited some of the same cleavages of age and class.³ The reader also misses out on important debates over conceptual issues on how to study decolonization that emerged among scholars of India—the work of Partha Chatterjee and other members of the « Subaltern Studies » school for example. Similarly, the reader misses out on the so-called « Kenya debate », involving both Kenyan and expatriate scholars, which has in a stimulating way brought out the question of whether that country was experiencing capitalist development in the Marxian sense or capitalism in a dependent mode.⁴

In general, the reader might wish for a fuller engagement with the economic side of political economy to complement his analysis of politics. Given how much he has emphasized the co-construction (African-Asian-European) of postcolonial politics, it would have been illuminating to see his interpretation of the ways in which the capitalist world economy constrained alternatives and fostered particular forms of state power.⁵ The plural nature of decolonizations has given transnational corporations and international financial institutions choice about where to invest and where to find cooperative governments, without running into policies of imperial preference or imperial corporations with privileged access to certain places. Some of the most influential leaders of newly independent countries—Nkrumah, Sukarno, Nyerere, Nehru—tried to find mechanisms for collective action among ex-colonial states. For political reasons that Guillaume Blanc ably describes—and for economic reasons he could give more attention to—such attempts at horizontal cooperation could not overcome the vertical realities of economic dependence and political fragmentation. That some decolonized countries fared better economically than others has made working together in a common cause all the more problematic.

The plural in Guillaume Blanc's title is the entry point to an insightful telling of the story of how colonial domination came to an end around the globe and struggles for power continued, within and beyond the formerly colonized states. This telling makes clear how much the nature of global inequality has changed, while much of the world's population still face poverty and subordination within highly unequal structures.

³Allman Jean (1993), *The Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

⁴Excerpts from the writing of the Subaltern Studies school were published in French translation in Diouf Mamadou (ed.) (1999), *L'historiographie indienne en débat : colonialisme, nationalisme et sociétés postcoloniales*, Paris, Karthala. Among Partha Chatterjee's influential books is (1993) *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press. For a retrospective on the « Kenya Debate », see Harbeson John and Holmquist Frank, « The Lessons and Legacies of the 'Kenya Debate' », in Cheeseman Nic, Kanyinga Karuti et Lynch Gabrielle (eds) (2020), *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, Oxford, Oxford Handbooks Online.

⁵An important aspect of political economy questions is what intellectuals from the ex-colonial world had to say about it. It would have been valuable if Guillaume Blanc had taken on the writing of, for example, Samir Amin, the way he discussed the texts of a number of African writers on state politics.

That Guillaume Blanc's book leaves important questions open is a mark of the breadth of his knowledge and the insightfulness of his thinking.

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