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Abstract

In addressing the relationship between national and international worldmaking political projects, Adom Getachew's impressive and thought-provoking recent book, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, seeks to move beyond recent debates between those who posit an inevitability thesis about the triumph of the nation-state after 1945, on the one hand, and those who insist on the possibilities of alternative pathways, on the other. The argument is compelling in demonstrating that the transcendence of race hierarchies was integral to arguments and aspirations about meaningful sovereignty. Getachew's central characters were visionaries in terms of imagining possible worlds beyond the nation-state. The book is less convincing in demonstrating that an intractable nationalism and indeed underlying racial thinking were not serious impediments to the achievement of these goals.

Pre-publication text

Overcoming the legacies of colonialism and enduring Eurocentrism and racism remain urgent problems in contemporary postcolonial thought, criticism, and practice. Can these challenges be met in ways that resolve the apparent contradictions between the particular—in the form of nationalism—and the universal, in the sense of a radical, global, antiracist project? The desire to recover histories of anticolonialism that might answer this question lies at the heart of Adom Getachew's impressive and thought-provoking recent book, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*.

Focusing on a group of anglophone, pan-African Black Atlantic intellectuals—comprising, for Getachew's purposes, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, Michael Manley, and Eric Williams, as well as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere—*Worldmaking* explores how these writers, activists, and political leaders were not only engaged in schemes of national independence, but sought a broader transformation of relations between states and peoples. In short, Getachew argues that these worldmaking schemes for national liberation were part of, not contrary to, the search for emancipation at the global level.

In addressing the relationship between national and international worldmaking political projects, Getachew seeks to move beyond recent debates between protagonists positing an inevitability thesis about the triumph of the nation-state after 1945, on the one hand, and on the other those insisting on the possibilities of alternative pathways. Frederick Cooper has been a long-standing, leading advocate of a kind of antiteleological view that seeks to recover the contingency and complexity of debates about alternatives to the nation-state, specifically forms of federal union between the core and periphery of empires, and regional federations of

decolonizing, ex-colonial states.[1] In recent exchanges, Samuel Moyn has argued that the postwar "federal moment"[2] of the 1950s was all well and good, but that historians should focus on why, in the end, the nation-state won out.[3] Richard Drayton puts this more forcefully in his "realist" interpretation, in which he claims that "federalism was almost from its beginning a lie."[4] Getachew's intervention leans toward the openness of Cooper's approach, but it also suggests that these debates may be overly binary, failing to capture the scale, ambition, and subtlety of her pan-Africanist worldmakers, whose projects for independence and sovereignty were predicated on a remaking of global power relations and the racial norms that sustained them.

The foundational argument of the book is that anticolonial worldmaking in the anglophone Black Atlantic took a particular trajectory around the problem of race, which distinguished it from other broader political formations of Afro-Asian solidarity. Taking 1492 as a point of departure, Getachew shows how conquest, dispossession, genocide, and slavery marked the "history of European imperialism as itself a world-constituting force that violently inaugurated an unprecedented era of globality."[5] The abolition of this racialized hierarchy was central to the thinking and political objectives of the pan-Africanists that form the central players in Getachew's narrative. This leads Getachew to a second key observation, that "the history of modern international society was structured by *unequal integration* rather than *merely the exclusion* of non-European peoples," which results in the striking conclusion that the idea of a "universal international society" is of "anti-imperial rather than European provenance" (99, my emphasis).

Confronting the racialized nature of the international order and the immanence of unequal integration meant defying the limitations of independence as nominal sovereign membership of a new international order, the terms of which were still set by the "Great Powers" of the global North. In this respect, post–World War I Wilsonianism should not be seen as simply truncated or hampered by external forces (diplomatic negotiations, fears of instability, revolution potentially unleashed) but repurposed to support this system of unequal integration. It thereby "preserved a structure of racial hierarchy within the league" (40).

The period of UN-framed decolonization after 1945 was both an opening and foreclosing of possibilities. The journey from a self-determination circumscribed by the UN charter's overarching aim of achieving "peaceful and friendly relations among nations" (71) to the 1960 UN Resolution 1514—the "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples"—is framed by Getachew as one of worldmaking progress, albeit with limitations. Drawing upon the language of human rights, the commitments ultimately secured under Resolution 1514 toward territorial integrity and "nondomination" framed as nonintervention constituted "an important victory for anticolonial world makers," but also "one that revealed the tensions and contradictions at the centre of their project" (74).

The use of human rights language had been a key part of the pan-Africanist anticolonial lexicon in the postwar era, opening up the critique of colonialism as a form of enslavement. As Getachew rightly points out, for the anticolonial worldmakers discussed in the book, the right to national self-determination, ultimately privileging collective or group rights, was prior to and necessary for the securing of individual human rights. But in doing so, Getachew points to the ways in which "the right to self-determination went beyond the right to have rights" (97). The bigger project of political independence was to transcend alien rule and restructure international society in ways that secured equal rights and delegitimized the

racialized hierarchy of the colonial order. Any hard-won victory over a right to national self-determination did not automatically make postwar claims to sovereignty meaningful.

In an important sense, this makes the problem of the race hierarchies embedded in both the political and economic international order, as well as the narrow and competitive dimensions of national self-determination, the key problematic for Getachew's worldmakers. Consequently, how Getachew's protagonists both conceptualized and sought to overcome these problems is critical to understanding the importance of her intervention. In this respect, the argument is compelling in demonstrating that the transcendence of race hierarchies was integral to arguments and aspirations about meaningful sovereignty. Getachew's central characters were visionaries in terms of *imagining* possible worlds beyond the nation-state. The argument is less convincing in demonstrating that an intractable nationalism and, indeed, underlying racial thinking were not serious impediments to the achievement of these goals.

Following her discussion of the opportunities and constraints of Resolution 1514, Getachew turns to the pursuit of regional federations in the 1950s, which explicitly reflected the ambition to make decolonization more than the achievement of de jure sovereignty on national lines. The West Indies Federation, with Eric Williams as its leading advocate, and Kwame Nkrumah's plans for a Union of African States drew upon the spirit of 1776 and the subsequent federation as an anticolonial model. Given the British stranglehold on the nascent US economy, the lesson of the declaration was one about not simply representative government but also economic autonomy. American independence did not just foretell the triumph of postcolonial sovereignty. Instead, "it illustrated its precariousness under conditions of international hierarchy" (112).

Nkrumah, in particular, emphasized the need for a united Africa that could secure external autonomy vis-à-vis international and former imperial powers, rather than a federation directed toward managing internal political and economic problems. Getachew proposes that when asked to consider the context of the inward management of diversity and movement of people, Nkrumah suggested that these problems would diminish within a union of African states by "transforming our present boundaries into links instead of barriers." His emphasis is clearly on a strong, externally oriented African political state that could assert and secure collective African rights and entitlements in an international context. Azikiwe, however, sought a regional organization that emphasized nation-state claims to autonomy and nonintervention along the lines of a "miniature United Nations" (135). These arguments were ultimately settled decisively in favor of the latter.

In keeping with the overall argument of *Worldmaking*, Getachew is keen to assert that the ultimate failure of the federal moment was not the result of parochial and competitive nationalism, an explanation that "pits nationalism against internationalism" (110). Yet her own analysis shows that Nkrumah's plans for a Union of African States were resisted by many because of their commitment to greater sovereignty at the national level. Nkrumah noted the irony that even while the old nation-states of Europe were seeking to pool elements of their sovereignty within supranational institutions, the new states of Africa with their "unstable sovereignty" were unwilling to countenance political union. Yet Nkrumah was hardly innocent here. Nkrumah labeled the efforts to achieve federation in East Africa as "a form of balkanisation on a grand scale."[6] Indeed, Nkrumah's opposition to the East African Federation, and what this might reveal about his attitudes to Ghana's leadership role in the process of decolonization, is potentially worthy of further exploration.

At the second Conference of Independent African States, held in Addis Ababa in June 1960, Julius Nyerere spoke at length about the emancipatory possibilities of the East African Federation as a way to transcend the historical pitfalls of the nation-state. He suggested that the British government could no longer refuse demands for Tanganyika's independence, but he still believed it was in the best interests of Tanganyika, as well as of the other territories, to unite into a federation. Nyerere's arguments in favor of federation recognized the economic benefits of "scaling up" and the potential for greater economic autonomy that this afforded, but he also engaged in a more philosophical critique that called into question the normative basis of national political organization.

Speaking at the Addis Ababa conference, a year before Tanganyika gained official independence from Britain, Nyerere made the bold claim that "I, for one would be prepared to postpone the celebration of Tanganyika's independence."[7] The development of "false nationalistic pride, by reference to our virtues in contrast with the evil habits of our neighbours" will weaken the case for unity. "Further, once the four nations [Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar] each have their own representatives at the United Nations, have their own national flag and foreign representatives we shall have established centres of vested interests against unity."[8] Nyerere is quite explicit here that he sees an obvious incompatibility between the various elements of worldmaking: not only is the national, sovereign state in tension with federation, but the United Nations itself would entrench the national imaginary through its symbolism, material culture, and organizational structure.

Getachew quotes Nyerere's view that if nation-states were to be created before federation was achieved, the psychological seductions of the national framework would count as obstacles to the achievement of federation (140). The interesting thing about Nyerere's position is that it explicitly views the kind of international cooperation between nation-states that is central to Getachew's worldmaking as problematic. Nyerere's call is for a deeper transformation of human consciousness, seeking to bypass the world historical process modulated by the nation-state in favor of more cosmopolitan, humanist positions. In Nyerere's view, expressed in the same year that UN resolution 1514 was passed, the particularism that underpinned a national consciousness clearly militated against more universal, worldmaking objectives.

Ultimately Nyerere was probably proved right: his plans for a regional federation were superseded by the nationalist impulse across East Africa, as well as Ghana's own anxieties about the possibility of an overmighty East Africa playing a leadership role within the continent that diminished Ghana's influence. Even so, Nyerere's vision for an East Africa that could bypass the national state, articulated in the "spirit of pan-Africanism" and expressed as late as the Nairobi Declaration on East African Federation of 1963, reminds us that worldmakers spoke from different perspectives and that for some, the tensions between national particularism and worldmaking remained unresolved.

Decolonizing claims to popular sovereignty involved, explicitly or implicitly, a contract between anticolonial elites and national populations about the improvements that independence would bring, in terms of political freedoms as well as social and economic ones. If regional federations were not realizable as a means to achieve this end, there were alternative pathways. From 1964, the New International Economic Order (NIEO)—which forms another major case study in the book—emerged as an organization intended to rebalance the world economy and reframe its terms of reference toward radical international interpretations of welfare. The NIEO "envisioned international nondomination as a radical form of economic and political equality between states that would finally overcome the

economic dependencies that threatened to undermine postcolonial self-government" (144). As Getachew puts it, "For all its limits, the NIEO, situated between the crisis of the developmental-welfare state and anticipating the era of globalization, represented a compelling *vision* of what a just and egalitarian global required" (145–46, my emphasis). In Getachew's reading, the NIEO constituted the most ambitious and radical project of anticolonial worldmaking in this period.

The distinctiveness of these worldmaking projects rests upon not simply a theoretical compatibility between anticolonial nationalism and internationalism, but also practical efforts to enhance national independence through internationalist projects that sought to remake the international order. Insofar as the racialized hierarchies of unequal integration structured both the international political system and the economic one, the need to deliver justice, equality, and development at the national level constituted worldmaking as a necessary project. In this respect, Getachew uses the NIEO example to develop her claim that national independence and international worldmaking were not mutually exclusive.

However, we again find that the results of these endeavors are relatively limited. Getachew points out that the NIEO worldmaking project fell foul of what she calls the "fraying" of "Third World solidarity," in which "the disanalogies between the domestic and international economies became visible" (145). The NIEO demand for an equitable distribution of the world's wealth drew on traditions of Black Marxism, though ultimately rejected the destination of world revolution. In fact, as Getachew rightly acknowledges, "ultimately . . . [NIEO] prescriptions were articulated within the terms of a liberal political economy, a contradiction dependency and world systems theorists, whose critiques had in part inspired the NIEO, immediately recognized" (145).

What we begin to see is that—whether working through the UN, attempts to create regional federations, or new forms of international cooperation such as the NIEO—the underlying structures of the nation-state as the basic unit of political organization and hence international interaction proved to be quite robust. This raises questions about how Getachew frames her distinctions between the national, on the one hand, and worldmaking on the other. Noticeably, she generally prefers the term *international* as opposed to *transnational*, and the book sidesteps a full confrontation with the dominant antinational, anti-essentialist tendencies of the more cosmopolitan, transnational theories of globality. While Getachew's examples of worldmaking should very much be seen as a valuable contribution to the debate about the nature of political freedom in the context of decolonization and postcoloniality, in practice, by continuing to operate within an international framework, the demands of the particular, and specifically the national, seemed demonstrably difficult to overcome, as Nyerere predicted.

To explore this further, we might return to Getachew's selection of pan-Africanist worldmakers and ask how the context might be framed differently. Efforts to secure the rights, protections, and economic benefits denied to African and other black communities by the system of colonial domination bring to mind another pan-Africanist project, that of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Agency (UNIA). Garvey is afforded a few brief references in Getachew's analysis but is clearly excluded from her list of key actors.

Garvey was a provocative and controversial thinker and activist, not simply of the pan-Africanist tradition but arguably foundational within it; and yet, Garvey was also fiercely attacked by his counterparts. His use of racial categories, his emotional appeals to racial

identity, and his willingness to engage with racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan made him anathema to people like Du Bois, for whom Garvey was "the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world."[9] Garvey's ideas have even been appropriated within neo-communitarian, essentialist, and nationalist frames of reference, incorporating a wide spectrum of Afrocentric ideologies, some of which now find common cause with the racist and civilizationalist theories of the political Right.[10] This reminds us that the problem-space of the present continues to be complicated by the re-emergence of new (or recycled) forms of race thinking. The ongoing contradictions between the universal and the particular have led to the making of worlds beyond and within the nation-state that are sometimes antithetical to the hopes and aims of midcentury pan-African thinkers.

The more traditional view of Garvey remains one in which his "black nationalism" was built on conceptions of racial unity and a realist understanding of state sovereignty and power in the international system.[11] However, recent revisionist work has attempted to rescue Garvey from the charge of both a narrow and reductive nationalism, as well as racial essentialism, and to demonstrate, along the worldmaking lines that Getachew pursues, that his ideas about nationalism and sovereign independence were compatible with a global and emancipatory politics. In other words, the UNIA could be seen as germane to Getachew's study.

If the UNIA was an organization that sought to protect rights and secure benefits for black people, it was also supposed to be a political community that could develop a much deeper consciousness of white supremacy on the possibilities of black power. It was premised on the fact that colonialism was itself a form of enslavement and that any kind of global justice meant the racial order of the world had to be recalibrated. Ultimately, the founding of a black sovereign state in Africa was intended to secure nonterritorial citizenship to protect black lives around the world.[12] Garvey's demands for sovereign equality and a black state that could enforce the political, social, and economic rights of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora thus prefigure postwar arguments that move from national independence to securing non-domination at the international level.

Despite recent attempts to reevaluate Garvey as a worldmaker who himself intended to overcome the contradictions between the national and the *transnational* (the term is preferred in this work over *international*), the argument remains unconvincing. Ultimately, the instrumental rationality embedded in Garvey's realist view of international relations meant that, rather than remaking a global order in which racialized conceptions of power were diminished or eradicated, his efforts to constitute an African political community still rested heavily on a racialized worldview. A black sovereign state, which had the ability to defend the rights of black people around the world, would not necessarily remake the nature of the international order rather than simply entrench its underlying principles. Garvey thus reminds us of the fine balance between worldmaking as a form of global emancipation and what might be called the making of worlds for separate but equal nations and races.

But can Garvey's race thinking be set aside as a separate stream of pan-African thinking? Getachew acknowledges Garvey's influence on Padmore and Nkrumah in particular. The latter spent ten years in the United States between 1935 and 1945, during which time he "encountered the writings of Marcus Garvey, which he described as the most influential texts on his political thinking; and joined local branches of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association" (8). Garvey's belief in the value of distinct racial civilizations resonates in Azikiwe's 1934 challenge—from his location in the United States—to what he called the "Negro intellectual" across Africa and the Atlantic to develop a conception of "race

pride and race consciousness."[13] Du Bois's long intellectual and political journey was marked by a profound engagement with the central problem of whether race was essentially a scientific, biological concept or a sociohistorical one, and what this might imply for political action.[14] Despite his fierce criticism, along this journey Du Bois held a number of different positions, which cannot always be distinguished entirely from those expressed by Garvey.

The point here is that the selectiveness of Getachew's cast of thinkers potentially obscures a more complex and interconnected intellectual history in which the antagonisms between the national and international worldmaking registers are less easily reconciled and the legacies of race thinking less easily obscured. As Nkrumah wrote from exile in March 1966, "I believe in internationalism, but internationalism must presuppose Asia for Asians, Africa for Africans, and Europe for Europeans. These peoples in their various areas must see to their own problems. This does not do away with international co-operation and friendship. Nor does it smack of racism or racialism."[15] Here, we are reminded of Nkrumah's insistence that a United Africa should be externally oriented, capable of asserting African power on the international stage, and wonder exactly what the trajectories of Garvey's influence might be in this regard. Either way, there are suggestions that the kind of internationalism as "co-operation" that Nkrumah refers to here still rests upon a framework of distinct national and civilizational groupings, which in turn rely on a substratum of racial categories.

The "road to a universal postimperial world order was," Getachew writes, "in and through rather than over and against the nation" (28). But having placed the problem of racialized hierarchies and unequal integration at the center of her argument, one cannot help but conclude that the ultimate failure of the various worldmaking projects Getachew looks at can be traced to the possibility that national and racial thinking was more pervasive and interwoven within pan-Africanism than the book fully acknowledges. Put differently, meeting Moyn's challenge to Cooper to explain why the nation-state "won out" needs to begin with a fuller recognition of the ideological work that national and racial worldviews continued to perform for midcentury worldmakers.

With this in mind, if the specters of national and racial thinking do indeed haunt the corridors of the pan-Africanist worldmaking project, Getachew's work might have more fully engaged with scholarship that addresses these trajectories and contradictions. Indeed, since Getachew refers throughout her book to the black Atlantic as a space of intellectual and political activity, one might have expected Paul Gilroy's pivotal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* to feature more prominently.[16] This is perhaps more than just an arbitrary omission. Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* offers a complex and nuanced discussion of pan-African intellectual history and its political possibilities, which also explicitly disavows national and racial frameworks and draws attention to the dangers of neoracial thinking and new essentialisms within black political thought and practice, tracing intellectual antecedents back to earlier forms of pan-Africanism. In later work, Gilroy grounds his project of "planetary humanism" in forms of historical and contemporary antiracism that go beyond countering or combating colonial and nationalist racisms, seeking to deconstruct and transcend race thinking in all of its protean manifestations.[17] This involves a commitment to a global project of antiracism in which nationalism and borders are seen as problematic, and this sits uneasily with Getachew's frequent assertion that the nationalist aspirations of her worldmakers was compatible with a progressive agenda.

In making a highly original argument, then, Getachew may tend to overlook other parts of the story that do not quite fit. It is hardly surprising that Getachew's worldmaking projects seem

to be undone by varieties of particularism if the deeper underlying structures of national and racial thinking within her canon of pan-Africanists remain unresolved and largely undisturbed by the analytical framework of internationalism. It is worth considering whether the arguments in *Worldmaking* would have been strengthened by incorporating some of the more radical and dissonant voices such as Garvey's, as well as tackling head-on the greater ambivalence expressed about the pan-African tradition by figures such as Gilroy. These perspectives could be used to test and develop the core findings of this rich and important book, helping us understand the limits and internal contradictions within worldmaking endeavors.

Notes

1.

Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation*. Cf. Cooper, "Routes Out of Empire."

2.

Collins, "Decolonisation and the 'Federal Moment.'"

3.

Moyn, "Fantasies of Federalism."

4.

Drayton, "Federal Utopias," 404.

5.

Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 3. Hereafter cited in the text.

6.

Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, 215.

7.

Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 96.

8.

Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity*, 89.

9.

Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, 44.

10.

Abrahamsen, "Internationalists, Sovereigntists, Nativists," 69.

11.

Moses, *Black Nationalism*.

12.

Jagmohan, "Between Race and Nation," 22.

13.

Azikwe, *Liberia in World Politics*, 350.

14.

Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument."

15.

Milne, *Conakry Years*, 29.

16.

Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.

17.

Gilroy, *Against Race*.