

**Colonialism's Ends:
Field Theory and the Contraction of the Imperial Repertoire of Power**

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ABSTRACT

This essay asks why colonialism ended in the mid-twentieth century, effectively excising formal imperialism from the repertoire of global power. Most studies related to this question address why older empires fell and nation-states emerged. This essay instead asks: why did great powers *not* colonize or recolonize territory in the mid-twentieth century and afterwards? Using the Anglo-French assault on the Suez Canal in 1956, including the reactions of the United States to it, as an exemplary event, the essay argues that the relational approach embedded in the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu offers a useful lens for arriving at an explanation. It shows that as colonialism generated anticolonial responses in the colonial world – or what Bourdieu would call the “challengers” offering a new “heterodoxy”, the global political field was altered, changing the “rules of the game” by turning anticolonial nationalism into a potentially new form of capital. This in turn constrained the European empires and the United States. As part of their struggle to maintain their dominant positions in the field, they were forced to reconsider their strategies of rule and so adopted a stance of promoting anticolonial nationalism. With the new changed field brought on by the agency of anticolonial nationalists, colonialism had become a liability rather than a source of strength.

In 1881, the revolt of Arabi Pasha in Egypt against the Khedive struck fear into the officials of the European empires. Both the British and French had maintained a presence in the region; a presence that, for the British especially, was vital for controlling the Suez Canal. Ahmed Arabi resented this foreign influence over the Suez, and so led an uprising of some 60,000 strong. Prime Minister Gladstone in London had to act: not only was control over the Suez vital for Britain, his colleagues and friends had significant financial investments in the region. No surprise he declared the Egyptian “crisis” to be “the great question of British interest.”¹ The result was a British-led assault that subdued the revolt and, ultimately, paved the way for a sustained colonial occupation, as Britain declared Egypt to be a formal protectorate. According to Robinson and Gallagher’s classic interpretation, this marked the beginnings of Britain’s further colonial annexations in Africa, such as Nigeria in 1884, Somaliland in 1887, East Africa and Rhodesia in 1888, Nyasaland in 1889, and Uganda in 1890. The colonial scramble for Africa was in no small part prompted, or at least portended, by the occupation of Egypt in 1881.

Fast forward to 1956, when yet another crisis in Egypt unfolded. This time, too, the Suez Canal was at stake. In July, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced plans to nationalize the Suez Canal Company, a British-French enterprise that had been initially founded to operate the Canal after its construction in 1869. Egypt had already achieved its official independence in 1922, but the Suez Canal Company still controlled the Canal and they were protected by British troops. The nationalization by Nasser, like the revolt of Arabi Pasha in 1881, compelled officials in London to act. But this time, the outcome was different. Though the Canal was visited by the hand of British military power, the military assault did not end up as a colonial occupation. Nor did it spearhead other colonial annexations. Instead, the British cut and ran, leaving Egypt still officially independent.

The contrast between 1881 and 1956 evinces a profound transformation in the global field in the twentieth century: the end of colonial empire, and the related unwillingness of great powers to colonize foreign land. For centuries colonial empires had dominated the globe but today formal colonies or dependencies can scarcely be found. True, *empires* are not necessarily over – depending upon how we define the word.

¹ Gladstone quoted in Hyam (1999), p. 40

We can still see *informal* empires – empires by which a state exerts power or influence over a string of nominally independent but nonetheless subordinate or client states. We also see temporary occupations by powerful states and the United Nations over weaker countries. But formal empire? It is done. Even when there are temporary occupations, they are *temporary* – efforts in short-term nation building that might leave behind, at most, a military base or two. This is the contrast between what the British did in Egypt in 1882 and 1956: gone are the days when states annexed new territory and then permanently incorporated that territory as an inferior dependent body of subjects subject to the control of a metropolitan country and its citizens. Gone are *formal empires*: those expansive political formations constituted by a spatially organized subject/citizen and metropole/colony hierarchies. A look at the number of colonial establishments in the world-system shows this quite clearly: since the mid-twentieth century, *no country or state has established a new colonial dependency* (see Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

The end of colonialism in practice has also been met in theory. In 1960, the United Nations adopted Resolution 1514. Known as the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, it announced, among other things, that “the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and co-operation.” Given this resolution, even if a powerful state were to annex new territory and turn it into a subordinate dependency, it would have a lot of justifying to do.

Why and how did this happen? How and why did the dominant political form of the three or four centuries (at least) suddenly end? Existing scholarship offers some possible clues but has not directly addressed the question. For example, in-depth qualitative case-studies of decolonization in the twentieth century, largely based upon the British empire, debate the causes of decolonization, while other qualitative analyses catalog the myriad of factors involved. Abernathy’s (2000) large-scale study of colonialism and its fall, for example, argues that contingent crises, like wars, exacerbated

existing contradictions within colonialism and this led to empire's dissolution (Abernathy 2000: 325-329). Quantitative studies trace the fall of empires over longer swaths of time and provide a variety of answers for why empires fell and nation-states emerged. Strang (1990; 1991) uses event-history analysis to test a slew of variables to model decolonization rates (Strang 1990; Strang 1991). Wimmer and Feinstein's (2010) powerful explanation for the emergence of the nation-state tells a nuanced story about anti-imperial nationalists who are able to cultivate enough support to eventually overthrow colonial rule and create nation-states in their wake (Wimmer and Feinstein 2010).

All of these studies are informative, but they are limited in the sense that they are primarily about explaining why empires decolonized and why nation-states emerged. They do not directly explain why colonialism has ended completely. The decolonization of the European empires is part of the story about the end of colonialism but it is not the whole story. Yes, colonies were turned into independent nation-states and empires fell. But at the level of historical possibility, those fallen empires, or new great powers, could have just as well retaken them or taken other territory as colonial dependencies. To address this question about the end of colonialism as a dominant political form, we must not only ask why older empires fell and nation-states emerged but also: why did great powers *not* colonize or recolonize territory in the mid-twentieth century and afterwards? At issue is not the decolonization of the old empires but their lack of reemergence thereafter. In other words, at issue is the fact that *formal colonization has been excised from the repertoire of global power*.

While the literature on decolonization and the historical emergence of the nation-state does not directly address this question, there is another literature that ostensibly does: the IR and sociological literature on global norms. According to this literature, whether it be in the form of constructivist IR/norm theory or the "World Society" (aka "World Polity") perspective in sociology, the twentieth century was indeed an important movement for the history of empires because it was when colonialism became illegitimate. As the nation-state model spread (or "diffused") from the West to the Rest and took over the imaginations of everyone, colonization became illegitimate in inverse

proportion to the rising hegemony of the nation-state model. A new decolonization norm emerged.

As I will show later, this story is partially informative, but in fact it does not directly address our question, because it is descriptive rather than explanatory. If “norms” refer to behavior, the most this literature tells us is that empires decolonized and that colonization no longer became the practice. It does not *explain* the trend.² At best, the answer from norm IR theory or the World Society approach would be tautological. Why did colonization end, such that colonialism is no longer legitimate? Answer: because colonialism ended, and was no longer legitimate. Or, put differently: why did great powers no longer colonize? Because a new non-colonization norm emerged, i.e. because great powers no longer colonized.³

To better understand the end of colonialism, a non-tautological explanation is needed. To do so, the wager of this essay is that looking more closely at exactly why great powers did *not* initiate a new round of colonization in this period is helpful. We could look at cases where Great Britain, for instance, might have taken a new territory but did not. Or we could find where France might have but did not. But more fittingly, we could look at why the United States did not. Great Britain and France after World War II were weakened, while the United States was in a position of global economic power. If any state had the internal capabilities and capacities to colonize, it is the United States, and indeed, conventional Realist IR theory would be obliged to predict that the United States would have colonized in this period, for it had the capabilities to do so. Yet, we know it did not. Why not? Answering this question and related ones can tell us much about why colonialism ended. Accordingly, this essay looks at both Great Britain and the United States in the mid-twentieth century to understand the expulsion of colonialism from the global repertoire of power. It will paint a broad portrait, but will also hone in on exemplary events to help clarify the story, in particular the Anglo-French assault on the Suez Canal in 1956, including the reactions of the United States to it.

²See also Jackson (1993) and Crawford (1993).

³ What about the United Nations’ Resolution 1514? Is not that an alternative measure of a new norm which in turn explains the lack of colonization? Partly, but again the fact of why the Resolution emerged itself must be explained. It is an outcome not a cause

First, though, I consider some possible existing explanations for why the United States or Great Britain did not colonize. I then sketch out the alternative explanation of the present essay. That explanation in turn is grounded in a particular theoretical framework that can be contrasted with both Realist theory and variants of IR Norm or World Society theory. I call it *global field theory*.

THEORY & EXPLANATION: WHY NOT COLONIZE?

While existing scholarship has not directly answered our question about why the US or Great Britain did not colonize, we can induce possible answers. One explanation for why the US did not colonize in the mid-twentieth century, for instance, might come from Realist theory in IR. This would emphasize Cold War rivalry. Here the argument would be that United States did not colonize after the Second World War because doing so would have triggered responses in kind from rivals, not least the Soviet Union. Why bother colonizing when it would just provoke the Soviet Union or China to do the same? The explanation could be extended to the case of Great Britain and why it did not colonize. In this story, Great Britain was weakened after the Second World War and became a dependent ally of the United States. Since the United States did not want to provoke its enemies by colonizing new territory, it forced Great Britain to refrain too.

This explanation does not take us very far however. Later we will see that Cold War rivalry was important for the end of colonialism, but not for the reasons specified in this explanation. In fact, when considering questions about intervention into weaker countries, US policy makers did not typically register fears of counter-colonization by Russia. It was not a major concern. In addition, if Cold War rivalry was the sole or even most important determinant, then the end of the Cold War should have led to a new round of colonization in the 1990s through today. But as we know, this is not the case.

Another possible explanation has to do with America's ostensibly deeply-rooted anticolonial values or its liberal-democratic political culture. According to this explanation, hegemons impose their values on the world-system. In the mid-twentieth century, the United States was the global hegemon, it valued democracy and national self-determination, and so it imposed those values upon the world, thereby ending

colonialism once and for all (Strang 1991: 443; Hoffman 2013).⁴ This would also explain why London did not embark upon a new round of colonization: because it believed in self-government and freedom, the United States pressured Great Britain to refrain from territorial expansion, and since, after WWII, it had the global power to exert that influence over the ailing British empire, it chose to do so.

The problem with this argument is that it is a theoretical stretch, and it does not match empirical reality. It is a theoretical stretch because the explanation (1) imputes essential, transhistorical beliefs or “values” to the United States (i.e. its “political culture” or “national character”) and (2) assumes that those essential transhistorical beliefs or values translate directly into foreign policies. If we are to find a case of this in history, the United States and its beliefs and actions regarding colonialism are not it. The United States has *not* always been anti-colonial: in the early 20th century, it had acquired its own overseas colonial empire. This was supported by a wide swath of American statesmen and the public, and so flies against the notion that the US has an intrinsic political culture opposed to colonialism. So does the fact that in the 1940s, polls revealed that the vast majority of Americans, and many officials in Washington, *supported* the colonial annexation of the former territories of Japan, Germany and other European powers. Moreover, the United States did not promote anticolonial values upon the world-system after WWII. To the contrary, it did the opposite, spending billions of dollars to materially support the maintenance of the European colonial empires up and through the 1950s.⁵ The argument that colonization ended in the world because of America’s values or America’s supposed promotion of democracy is not only far-fetched, it is just plain wrong.

So what’s the explanation? Rather than relying upon the tenets of Realism, political culture theory, or even IR norm theory/world society theory, my argument instead considers the agency of subaltern actors, their relation to powerful states like the United States, and the wider global field in which these actors operated (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998) Specifically, I argue that we must first consider the historical rise of anti-colonial nationalism and its associated principles of popular sovereignty in the global

⁴ US “hegemony accelerates decolonization because the United States has historically embraced notions of popular sovereignty and national self-determination” (Strang 1990: 858).

⁵ I discuss all of these points in Go (2011).

field. IR norm theory/world society theory would probably also have us look at anti-colonial nationalism, but the argument induced below tells a different story than the one these approaches would be obliged to tell.⁶ I suggest that anti-colonial nationalism was not important because it represented a new norm authorized and promoted by the American empire-state due to its beliefs and values (as if such unitary beliefs and values can be imposed upon an entire state). Nor was it a new norm that just happened onto the scene and so suddenly everyone had else to follow it. Instead, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism represented a new form of agency that powerful states had to contend with. It was important because it changed the terrain of struggle between the colonized world and dominant states; and between dominant states themselves (the American empire-state included). In brief, anti-colonial nationalism became a new form of that *political* and *symbolic capital* all of these actors competed for. This process of struggle and competition over anticolonial capital ultimately produced a new world in which colonization in the old-school mode could no longer happen without staggeringly high costs. In short, understanding the expulsion of formal colonialism from the repertoire of empire-states today requires a historical analysis of social structuration – or “fielding” – on a global scale. It also requires a look at the global field from the bottom-up – from the colonies and ex-colonies of the world – as much as from the top-down.

Evinced in this explanation is also a theoretical intervention: an intervention into the logically inter-related concepts and categories by which we make sense of the international system. The first intervention has to do with how to theorize and analyze history and historical transformation. Arguably, one of the reasons for why a traditional IR realist theory, which would focus upon US-USSR rivalry, is insufficient, is because its categories posit transhistorical or timeless attributes to the “international system.” In our case, this misses the transformations in the very *terms of competition* between states and the *changing forms of capital* they compete for. For example, as we will see, rivalry between the great powers (such as the US and USSR especially) was important in leading

⁶ For world society/neoinstitutional approaches Meyer (1999), Meyer (2010), Meyer, Boli and Thomas (1987), Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez (1997), forms like the nation-state diffuse from the dominant states to weaker ones – the latter are compelled to strategically or unconsciously adopt them. They would thus see anti-colonial nationalism in similar terms – viz., as a diffusion of the nation-state form to weaker states or “latecomers” to world society (as this approach would call them) (e.g. Strang 1991). This tells us nothing about how *more powerful states* are constrained by world society.

to the end of colonialism, but we also need to recognize the different forms that rivalries take, and these are contingently created – ie historical.⁷

This attention to historical transformation brings the analysis here closer to theories of the international system offered by IR norm theory, the English School and constructivism, or the World Society neoinstitutionalist approach to the international system in sociology. All of these theories recognize and track transformations in global systems; highlighting, for example, changing norms in the system or the diffusion of political forms. But as these theories obtain new insights through historicizing, they nonetheless lose an understanding of conflict. Culture in the international system is seen in terms of consensus, of shared norms and values, that emerge and diffuse. It is less often seen as a site of, or operative in, struggles between actors in the system; nor is it analytically articulated with an examination of the relations of power by which actors create and reproduce hierarchy. For understanding the end of colonialism, we need a historical and cultural approach but also one that does not avoid conflict or power relations.

Finally, my argument suggests the importance of weaker states and weaker actors in the system. This is something that none of the foregoing approaches take seriously. Conventional IR theory focuses upon powerful states only. World society or norm theory, for their part, do discuss weaker states, but those states are not actors so much as they are passive recipients of Western values and norms to which they have to conform as “late comers” to the system (Meyer 1999; Meyer 2010) cf. (Finnemore 1996). To remedy some of these occlusions, the “subaltern realist” approach in IR hoped to bring weaker states “back in”, but even in this approach, the weaker states’ agency and role in the world is cordoned off (Ayoob 2002). The point of subaltern realism is to shift analytic attention away from the dilemmas and actions of powerful states and towards the dilemmas and actions of weaker states in the Global South, but in the process we overlook the *relations* between them, and how the actions of the latter may in fact not just

⁷ Here the premise of Historical IR is my premise too – viz., that the so-called “international system”, presumably based upon sovereign states operating in a timeless context of anarchy, is forged historically, with changing properties, units, and relations, and should be analyzed as such Hobson (2002), Lawson (2006), *ibid.*

respond to more powerful states but also how they might constrain or shape the actions of those powerful states.⁸

For understanding the end of colonialism, I argue that we must move from the substantialism in dominant accounts of the international and towards a relational approach that is sensitive to how *all* actors in fields jostle, maneuver, strategize, and act in relation to each other (Go and Lawson 2016; Jackson and Nexon 1999). This sensitivity to relations can be obtained if we think first of the international system, or global political space more generally, as a historically dynamic *field* of power relations. In this approach, which rescales and extends Pierre Bourdieu's social field theory to the transnational and global level, all states and actors compete and interact in relation to each other, and they do so amidst multifaceted struggles over various forms of capital (Go and Krause 2016). This relational and historical approach thus attends to history, culture, and power at once; and my claim is that, because of this, the categories of field theory help us better see how and why colonialism has been expunged from the repertoire of global power.

ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM

The rise of anti-colonial nationalism and its articulation with the principle of popular sovereignty has been documented already by historians, and historically-minded IR scholars like Reus-Smit (2013) have shown its impact upon the contemporary global regime of individual rights. Here I briefly sketch its main contours.

The rise of anti-colonialism can be divided into two main waves: the first wave emerged in the late 18th through the early 19th centuries in the Americas, and the second began around the turn of the 20th century and proceeded after the Second World War. A birds-eye view of the development and proliferation of anti-colonial nationalism can be seen with time-series data charting the founding of anti-colonial nationalist organizations around the world. The data comes from Wimmer and Feinstein's (2010) data that lists the "first national organizations" and their founding date. From that list I selected and charted

⁸ For promising exceptions to this general occlusion of the role and agency of weaker actors, see Reus-Smit (2013). Earlier, the work of Keck and Sikkink fruitfully try to bring in activists and the way they constrain states, positing the "boomerang effect" as a mechanism of agency Keck and Sikkink (1998).

the first anti-colonial nationalist organizations, defined as organizations within Anglo-European colonies promoting national independence (see Fig. 2).⁹

FIG. 2 about here

The data visualize the two waves, and show that the second wave was bigger in terms of numbers. This intimates important differences between the two waves. With the exception of the Haitian slave revolt (which was a portent of the second wave later), the first wave was a settler-creole nationalism, exemplified in the American Revolution against England and the Latin American republican revolutions against Spain. It involved metropolitan displacements or descendants in overseas colonies seeking political equality in the form of national separation from the empire. What was different about the second wave in the twentieth century was the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism across the globe rather than in just one region; and among predominantly non-white colonized populations rather than white settler or creole populations in the Americas. The notion of popular sovereignty, citizenship, and equality among peoples and territories around the world – regardless of race – was definitive of this second wave. Earlier in the 20th century, W.E.B. Dubois had warned that the struggle of the century would be a struggle about race. “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” The second wave of decolonization led by non-white populations – with their claims of racial equality for all, to be manifest in national sovereignty for all – began to bear this out. It marked the *universalization* of anti-colonial nationalism and the principles of popular sovereignty.

The earliest stirrings of this are seen in the Indian National Congress (1885), the Islamic revival movements in the Middle East (beginning in the late nineteenth century), the Philippine Revolution against Spain (1896), and the Pan-African Congress in 1900. The Japanese victory over Russia (1905) and the Xinhai Revolution in China (1911) added fuel to the fire, signifying to the colonial world that non-white peoples could determine their own destinies. The American influential eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard

⁹ Many thanks to Andreas Wimmer for readily sharing this data. The figure here includes anti-colonial groups in European or American colonies only (e.g. excludes Russia, China or colonies thereof).

fretted particularly about the former. Due to the Japanese victory, he wrote, “throughout Asia and even in Africa, races hitherto resigned or sullenly submissive began to dream of throwing off white control.”¹⁰ Seizing upon this global development of anti-colonialism, V.I. Lenin joined the chorus, articulating anti-imperial rhetoric and calling for self-determination of all peoples. It was Lenin’s discourse that compelled Woodrow Wilson to add pronouncements on self-determination in his Fourteen Points. Rather than the originator of anti-colonial nationalism, Wilson was just trying to keep up. And along the way, new questions about racial hierarchy were raised, and older conceptions of racial superiority were challenged. The Universal Races Congress of 1911 in London brought together activists and thinkers from colonies and metropolises – purportedly “representatives of all races” from around the world – to debate racial issues of the day. Though it included colonial officials and was politically conservative, it nonetheless helped to defend and spread the monogenism thesis which rejected the dominant notion that the races of the world were of different species. It also defended and helped spread the proto-Lamarckian notion that culture rather than heredity was the root of racial difference (Pennybacker 2005).

The period between the World Wars was a turning point. President Wilson had received pleas for help from anti-colonial nationalists around the world but, as he did nothing to help, disappointment spread. Imperial boundaries existing before WWI were reinscribed at the postwar Treaty of Paris, much to the further disappointment of anti-colonial nationalists who held out hope that they would be dismantled. During the 1920s, Ghandian populism spread through India and he received attention from newly-educated colonial elites around the imperial world. At the Fifth Pan-American Conference at Santiago, Chile in 1923, Latin Americans joined the chorus, charging the U.S. with imperialism for intervening into the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The 1930s depression then laid the socioeconomic conditions for protests across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and began to puncture the already weakening European empires (Furedi 1994: 22). The slowly globalizing anti-colonial sentiment can be seen in the world-wide reaction to the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in 1934. “This was probably the first instance of a Third World-wide reaction to an instance of Western intervention,” writes Furedi

¹⁰ Stoddard quoted in Horne (2003), p. 50.

(1994: 23). There was a truly “diasporic” response, represented by riots in different parts of the British empire, and captured in part by W.E.B. DuBois’ article on the “Inter-racial implications of the Ethiopian crisis” in *Foreign Affairs* (DuBois 1935). Once Italy subdues Ethiopia, he wrote, “an understanding between Japan and China will close Asia to white aggression, and India need no longer hesitate between passive resistance and open rebellion. Even black men will realize that Europe today holds Africa in leash primarily with African troops, a religion of humility, vague promises and skillfully encouraged jealousies.” The reaction of then-student Kwame Nkrumah also exemplifies the response: “At that moment [the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy] it was almost as if the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally....My nationalism surged to the fore; I was ready and willing to go through hell itself, if need be, in order to achieve my object: the end of colonialism.”¹¹

World War II helped hasten the trend. It weakened colonial structures, armed colonized peoples, and raised questions about the strength of European empires and their future viability. It not only challenged the infrastructure of the European empires, it also exacerbated the demise of its ideological infrastructure, further highlighting the hypocrisy of European colonialism. Writers like Césaire were quick to point out how Nazi Germany had merely been carrying out in Europe what European states had been carrying out overseas. Hitler was merely a “terrific boomerang effect,” and the Allies’ postwar attempt to retain its colonial upper-hand in the world looked increasingly suspect in the wake of their war against Germany’s own racist colonial bid (Césaire 2000 [1955]: 36). Césaire was unequivocal: “What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment” (39). In 1945 Kwame Nkrumah, the Gold Coast African political leader, wrote and issued a “Declaration to the Colonial Peoples of the World” which was approved by a pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945. The Declaration set out

¹¹Quoted in Grimal (1978), p. 47.

the “rights of all people to govern themselves” and affirmed “the right of colonial peoples to control their own destiny.” It continued: “All colonies must be free from foreign imperialist control, whether political or economic...we say to the peoples of the colonies that they must strive for these ends by all means at their disposal”¹²

After the war, anti-colonial nationalism continued to spread. The data show a surge in the number of anti-colonial nationalist organizations in the 1930s but a bigger surge in the wake of the war (Figure 2). A culmination of sorts was that, in 1951, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted for a review of the UN system of territorial administration of mandates and for a statement to be inserted into Covenants that “all peoples shall have the right of self-determination.”¹³ The Bandung Conference marked another related culmination of sorts. Colonialism was a consistent theme in the opening address by the conference President, Ali Sastroamidjojo, and in the end the conference adopted a resolution firmly against colonialism: “colonialism in all its manifestations is an evil which should speedily be brought to an end” (Meister 1958: 250). Even one of America’s seeming allies at the conference, Carlos P. Romulo, criticized colonialism and America’s support of European colonialism (exactly at a time when the US was supporting the French against Algerian nationalists). Romulo also attacked the “racialism” of the Western powers, including the US (Espiritu 2006: 181). Not long afterwards, Hans Kohn of the Foreign Policy Research Institute at the University of Pennsylvania noted that, “until the end of the nineteenth century the words ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ were generally used in a laudatory and not a pejorative sense” but that “the meaning and implications of the word ‘colonialism,’ and of the closely connected terms ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ have undergone a profound transformation in recent decades” (Kohn 1958: 2).

A NEW FIELD

We see here the *potential* for a new global norm, but there is a long road from anti-colonial values in the world system to anti-colonial practice constituting a new “norm.” How, in other words, did new political values articulated by anti-colonial nationalists

¹² Quoted in Boyce (1999) p. 117

¹³ The U.S. delegate voted against this.

actually lead to new behaviors?¹⁴ We need to trace the causal pathway between, on the one hand, the rise of anti-colonial nationalists demanding popular sovereignty and, on the other hand, the actual demise of colonialism.

I claim that the first way in which the rise of second wave of anti-colonial nationalism was determinant is that it set the conditions for the creation of a new global political field. A “field,” in the sense of Bourdieu’s theory, refers to a shared space of recognition and conflict or struggle between actors over capitals of different types. A field thereby requires, first and foremost, mutual recognition. As just seen, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism marked increasing consciousness among the colonized and recently postcolonized peoples. But a proper global field would have required powerful countries to recognize the new anticolonial actors and their demands – to at least some cognizance of them. This is exactly what happened.

Scholars in the metropole were among the first to recognize the rise of the new anti-colonial ideas. Charles’ Merriam’s “Recent Tendencies in Political Thought” (1924), which was exemplary of the thought of the nascent American discipline of International Relations, observed the rise of anti-colonial movements for self-determination around the world and declared it to be one of the three main epoch-making processes around the globe (industrialization and feminism were the other two). Soon enough, state elites and not just scholars took notice too. By the Second World War, the transatlantic powers had become increasingly concerned over the loyalty of colonial peoples. Jan Smuts wrote, “I have heard the Natives saying, Why fight against Japan? We are oppressed by the whites and we shall not fare worse under the Japanese” (Furedi 1994: 28). Singapore’s surrender in February of 1942 must have confirmed these fears, suggesting that colonized peoples would not fight in support of their old colonial masters. It compelled *The Times* of London to suggest that the fall of Singapore demonstrated the need for Great Britain to do something about the rising anti-colonial sentiment, “adapting herself to changed needs.” It continued: “In the future scheme of things there is no place for the Britain of the past.” It also compelled a group of US specialists of Africa to suggest that the fall of Singapore suggests that “white people as represented in Great Britain should give up any

¹⁴Res-Smith (2013: 153) elegantly shows how anti-colonial nationalists in newly independent nations around this period “undermined the normative foundations of empire” by adding inscribing new norms in the United Nations. But not explain why powerful states adhered to the new norms.

thought of trying to control the world in the way often characteristic in the past” (Committee on Africa 1942: 2).

That was probably a wishful notion at the time, but it is the case that as anti-colonial nationalism spread during and after the war, officials in Great Britain had to take it into account as never before. The overwhelming tide of anti-colonial nationalism likely contributed to the Labor Party’s anti-imperial stance and also to various colonial reforms in British territories designed to appease anti-colonial sentiment. But it also led to bigger reconsiderations. This is seen especially in a report prepared by the British Foreign Office in 1952 and subsequently circulated to the Colonial Office and throughout Whitehall and presented to Winston Churchill’s cabinet. Titled “The Problem of Nationalism,” it was itself a notable document: rising nationalism around the world was not just identified, it was identified as a “problem.”¹⁵ The report’s aim, therefore, was to “suggest means by which we can safeguard our position as a world power, particularly in the economic and strategic fields, against the dangers inherent in the present upsurge of nationalism.” As the report circulated, other offices joined in, clarifying the key contours of the new problem. An official in the Colonial Office stressed that “the distinctive feature in the post-war period is the spread of nationalism to Asia, the Near East and Africa, so that now for the first time it threatens conflict on racial lines.” He added while Latin American nationalism has always been around, “the region where we have a new dynamic force in the world is Asia and the Near East.” The report did mention variance: the “Asians”, for instance, have developed a stronger nationalistic sense, while in much of Africa, nationalism was incipient. The Colonial Office response to the report likewise fretted that Asians were particularly vehement, and had been stepping up their “attacks on the West for ‘imperialism’.” But despite these notes on nationalism’s variation, London officials agreed that nationalism and anti-colonial nationalism was on the rise. They also agreed that something needed to be done about it.

Rising anti-colonial nationalism was also felt in Washington, D.C.. In 1946, the former director of the Department of the Interior’s Division of Territories and Island Possessions noted that the “time has passed when the peoples of the Indies, Indo-China,

¹⁵ “The Problem of Nationalism” CO 936/217/1, with covering letter by Sir William Strang (Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office) dated 21 June 1952, FO, 936-217, PRO

Burma and India would permit white men to dictate the tenor of their lives.” Officials in Washington also noted how the Soviet Union was playing upon anti-colonial sentiment to their own advantage. This had begun during the First World War with Lenins’ anti-imperial rhetoric, prompting Wilson, as mentioned earlier, to declare support for self-determination. But as anti-colonialists mobilized further during and after WWII, and as the Cold War heightened between 1947 and 1951, officials in Washington became increasingly worried that the Soviet Union would penetrate anti-colonial nationalist movements and use the new powerful discourse for their own ends. A 1950 policy paper from the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs assessed the situation in Africa as follows:

While Communism has made very little headway in most of Africa, European nations and the United States have become alert to the danger of militant Communism penetrating the area. The U.S.S.R has sought within the United Nations and outside to play the role of the champion of the colonial peoples of the world. While the greater portion of the areas of Africa have as yet no firm nationalist aspirations, there are certain areas such as French North Africa and British West Africa where the spirit of nationalism is increasing. The USSR has sought to gain the sympathy of nationalist elements (FRUS 1950 V, p. 1525)

Anti-colonial nationalism for colonized and postcolonial leaders was a powerful force that could enable them to mobilize populations across religious, ethnic, gender, and other lines. For them, pronouncing anti-colonial rhetoric became a form of political capital. This was then recognized by Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union – and the latter even tried to tap into that capital.

The point, at any rate, is that anti-colonial nationalism was recognized, discussed, and theorized by the imperial policy-making elite. The question now is this: how did the proliferation of anti-colonial nationalism in the colonial world and the recognition of it by powerful actors actually lead to the expulsion of formal colonialism from the repertoire of empires in the twentieth century?

CONSTRAINING EMPIRE

Bourdieu theorizes fields relationally: actors in the field not only recognize and acknowledge each other, they also maneuver *in relation* to each other. This relationality

is missing from conventional realist theory, which only examines powerful states in their relations with each other but not others in the field, and from World Society theory, which sees only a simplistic one-way relation: powerful states provide the organizational models that weaker states adopt. Yet the relationality is critical for our story: one of the ways in which the proliferation of anti-colonial nationalism was important is because it added a new *constraint* upon powerful states – one that had been absent before. The report on nationalism from the Foreign Office is suggestive of this. It noted that nationalism, and particularly in the colonies or formerly colonies, posed a potential fetter to great power actions. It has been part of a wider movement toward “world democracy as expressed, e.g. in the United Nations Charter” that has “*severely limited* the ability of the great Powers to enforce their points of view.”¹⁶ In other words, anti-colonial nationalism became a new force with which to reckon - a power from below was poised to pose limits upon actions by those at the top. This was not so much a “boomerang effect” (Keck and Sikkink 1998) as it was a simple exertion of subaltern agency – an effect of field relations – and its empirical manifestations are multiple.

For example, as officials in London worried about the increasing demands for self-government, they developed new strategies by which to try to maintain some semblance of imperial power while nonetheless conceding to some of the demands. That is, the force of anti-colonial nationalism ultimately prompted a search for new tactics to maintain some kind of imperial control in the face of the rising tide. Initial strategies within the British empire, reaching back to the 1930s, involved attempts to “modernize colonialism”, i.e. embarking upon developmental projects aimed at appeasing dissatisfaction with colonialism (Cooper 2005). But as nationalism continued to spread, and as the Second World War hastened its growth, officials in both Washington and London had to search other tactics.

In this context, the support of the Trusteeship system can be understood, for the very idea of international mandates or trusteeships was one such tactic. Originally proposed to President Wilson by Jan Smuts of South Africa, and later to President Franklin Roosevelt by Chiang Ki Shek, the trusteeship idea was a strategic response to anti-colonial sentiment. The State Department noted that “the use of

¹⁶ “The Problem of Nationalism”, emphasis added.

trusteeship...frequently avoids the controversial issue of the extension of sovereignty over the area by any State” (FRUS 1952-54, III, p. 1086). Accordingly, officials in Washington and London saw international mandates or trusteeships as one way to appear non-imperial while nonetheless exerting territorial control. President Franklin Roosevelt had warmed to the idea of trusteeships after reckoning the power of anti-colonial mobilization. In his discussions with advisors and representatives from Russia in 1942 about the postwar order, President Roosevelt argued that trusteeships would be preferable because there had been “a palpable surge toward independence” in Southeast Asian colonies “and the white nations thus could not hope to hold these areas as colonies in the long run” (Sherwood 1950: 573).

More than trusteeships, however, the British empire came to recognize the futility of maintaining old-style colonial control in those areas where anti-colonial nationalism was most developed. The Foreign Office report encapsulated the theory that was applied in practice. The report fretted that anti-colonial nationalism has increased “the pressure...for a speeding up of the process of granting sovereign independence.” W.G. Wilson in the Colonial Office replied that, given this, “we have to-day no hope of maintaining our control of the Colonies in the pre-war political sense of the word ‘control’.” Instead, Great Britain had to try its best to: (a) promote self-government in the form of Commonwealth status to those colonies that were most ready for it, and (b) try to “control” nationalism in other colonies by promising eventual independence but all the while cultivating local classes “with a vested interest in co-operation” with Britain. The principle was this: “Progress towards sovereign independence is both inevitable and desirable. We are bound to swim with the stream but we can hope to exert influence on the speed at which the current runs, both in general and in specific cases.”¹⁷ This strategy explains Great Britain’s uneven approach to independence within its empire. As existing scholarship of individual cases reveal, a pattern can be discerned. In those colonies where anti-colonial nationalism had developed too strongly to withhold, such as India, independence (though preferably within the Commonwealth system) would have to be granted. But in those areas where it was still incipient (the report noted most African

¹⁷ “The Problem of Nationalism”

colonies to be in this situation), eventual self-government might be promised but imperial control could be maintained for the time being.

If this helps us understand decolonization, however, it does not in itself speak of the end of colonialism as a tactic. Promising eventual self-government is one thing, but *not* colonizing new areas is another. But the latter followed as a logical, and practical, implication; and indeed, the Foreign Office report and the responses to it reveal a clear sense that a new round of colonialism in almost anywhere in the world was now out of the question due to the power of anti-colonial nationalism from below. Scholars of US foreign policy like to attribute these new attitudes and policies within the British empire to the power and persuasion of the United States. In this view, key figures in Washington as early as WWII, like Sumner Welles and President Franklin Roosevelt, were anti-colonial at their core, and so pressured Britain to decolonize, which in turn explains Britain's eventual decolonization policy. But notably, the Foreign Office report made comparably no mention of American pressure. It instead focused upon the constraints upon colonialism posed by anti-colonial sentiment in the colonial and ex-colonial world. "Governments cannot, even if they wish to, hold out for long against public opinion", declared the report.

In fact, the report entertained the notion that one strategy for dealing with nationalism was outright "occupation by force", i.e., colonial rule, but then discarded the idea. The reason had nothing to do with the US but instead with anti-colonial sentiment around the world: "it is hardly conceivable that in the circumstances of the world today we could use force, e.g. to retain a large colony under our administration against the wishes of a majority of its people." The response to this discussion from the Trafford Smith, representing the Colonial Office, is telling enough: Smith was incredulous that the idea of domination through occupation was even entertained in the report. "Does anyone really think that...the 'domination' methods referred to in paragraph 21 will ever be applied"? Note the import: here was an official in the Colonial Office, who had served in British colonies like Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Ceylon suggesting that colonial occupation as a tool of imperial power was useless, or at least anachronistic. At most, powers like Great Britain can use its military to intervene, but only temporarily, and only if it was justified on the grounds that it was necessary "to prevent the establishment of a

Communist regime” or “to save British lives” – and always in consideration of the “limits set by world opinion and international law.”¹⁸

What, then, of the United States? It is true that, in the 1940s, Sumner Welles and President Roosevelt made loud declarations that the United States stood for anti-colonial values. In 1942, Sumner Welles gave an influential speech in which he declared simply: “Discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed or color must be abolished. The age of imperialism is ended” (Louis 1978: 154-55). It is also true that the United States pressured the British to decolonize India. But these pronouncements and pressures must be understood for what they were: rather than a reflection of deep American values and beliefs, they were strategic responses to the rapidly changing global field wherein anti-colonial nationalism had become a powerful tool of mobilization. When Welles made his declarations calling for the end of empire, they were made in order to enlist the colonial world to the Allies’ cause in the wake of the speedy fall of Singapore. Welles’ famous speech, of which some historians like to take as evidence for America’s anti-colonial values, came a few months after the fall of Singapore, and preceding its declaration that the “age of imperialism is ended” was this: “If this war is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world, as well as in the world of the Americas. Our victory must bring in its train the liberation of all peoples” (ibid). The same goes for Roosevelt’s pressure upon Churchill to decolonize India. As demands for self-government in India had been most developed, for decades at least, Roosevelt calculated that promising them independence would secure their support in the war. “We should demand that India be given the status of autonomy,” Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long argued on 25 February 1942, summarizing the strategy that was eventually adopted. “The only way to get the people of India to fight is to get them to fight for India.”¹⁹ Later, in 1943, William Philips, the US Ambassador to India, wrote to Roosevelt pleading: “Indians feel they have no voice in the Government and therefore no responsibility in the conduct of the war. They feel that they have nothing to fight for. [...] The peoples of Asia – and I am supported in the opinion by other diplomatic and military observers – cynically regard this war was one between

¹⁸ ibid.

¹⁹ Breckinridge Long to Sumner Welles, 25 Feb. 1942, FRUS, 1942, 1: 606-7.

fascist and imperialist powers...And the colonial people conquered by the Japanese might hopefully feel that they have something better to look forward to than simply a return to their old masters” (Grimal 1978: 178-79).

ANTI-COLONIALISM AS A STANCE

After the war, in fact, the American state revealed its real colors: it actively *supported* the European empires. As noted earlier, and as I have shown elsewhere, in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, the US spent billions to help France, England, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands maintain their colonial control in strategically important areas.

Maintaining the colonial empires in those areas would serve as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, provide America with access to raw materials within a secure European-controlled environment, and provide protected locations around the world for the US to plant its new military bases. As late as 1950, the State Department summarized the policy: “the colonial relationship [between Europe and its dependencies]...is still in many places useful and necessary” (FRUS 1950: V, 1527). It was especially useful in French Vietnam, for instance, for stopping Communist encroachment – which is why the US funded eighty percent of the French military’s costs, most of which went to colonial counter-insurgency. But it was also useful in Malaysia, Indonesia, and parts of Africa, which is also where the US supported the old empires.

So why, then, did the US eventually stop encouraging or relying upon colonialism as a tool of post-war power? Anti-colonial nationalism posed a constraint against the US as it had for Great Britain, but it also influenced America’s postwar non-colonial strategy as an opportunity: an opportunity to use it as a form of political capital. Here the Cold War mattered, but not because it directly restrained the US from colonizing out of fear of Soviet reprisals. It rather mattered because, given the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, US-USSR rivalry led to a competition to win over anti-colonialists to their side. As noted earlier, the USSR had tried to present itself as the champion of national independence in order to capitalize upon the new anti-colonial sentiment, and officials in Washington worried over this move. In response, they decided that they would have to do the same.

Accordingly, while the American state supported European empires to help realize its imperial imperatives, it began to shift. When and where nationalism was

perceived as relatively well developed, the U.S. came to dissuade the continuance of European colonialism. This approach was most clearly articulated in a series of policy papers in the State Department that reconsidered policy towards dependent areas of the world. The conclusion was that continued support of European powers would be fruitless, for strong anti-colonial nationalist movements would effectively overthrow them and create instability and disorder. More worrisome, it would damage America's "reputation" and push nationalist forces to the U.S.S.R. Of particular concern was Soviet "propaganda" in the colonial world that played upon anti-colonial sentiment: this would portray the U.S. as an imperialist and win over nationalists to the Soviets. Strategists in Washington therefore insisted that the U.S. would have to disavow its alliance with the European empires.

On the other hand, when and where American policy-makers perceived anti-colonial nationalism to be relatively weak or nascent, the U.S. was more willing to continue to prop European colonialism. In most of Africa in the early 1950s, the U.S. continued to support the European empires because nationalism was perceived to be weaker there, and the efforts of the U.S.S.R. to "win" over nationalists had been "unsuccessful" (FRUS 1950: III, 1105). The U.S. only stopped its support as nationalism and the threat of communism developed more strongly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles insisted that the U.S. should aid nationalist forces in Africa rather than suppress them because America's "prestige" was at stake (FRUS 1955-1957: XVIII, 18-19). The State Department had summarized this policy in its policy paper on dependent areas: "In most dependent areas of the world the security interests of the U.S. at the present time will best be served by a policy of support for the Western Colonial Powers [But where nationalist movements] have so effectively challenged European administration...it is in the interest of the U.S. to accept the situation as it is and to encourage the progressive and peaceful transfer of administration from the imperial power to the local inhabitants" (FRUS 1950-1953:III, 1078-79).

The proliferation and power of anti-colonial nationalism, coupled with Cold War competition for hearts and minds, compelled the U.S. to diminish its support of the European empires, but it likewise compelled the U.S. to turn away from colonialism altogether. If the U.S. worried about how its support of European empires would be

perceived, it followed that the U.S. would not initiate a new round of territorial rule over postcolonial areas. After all, a new round of colonization would arouse nationalist resistance and significantly raise the costs of occupation. A National Security Council report stated it boldly. Noting the staggering development of nationalist consciousness in Southeast Asia, the Council concluded simply: “19th century imperialism is no longer a practicable system in SEA [Southeast Asia]” (NSC 51). Colonialism was indeed no longer tenable, because the costs were too high – and the costs were only too high because anti-colonial nationalism became a powerful force to be reckoned with, by both the US and USSR.

At the same time, though, colonization would arouse the indignation of postcolonial countries and nationalist movements around the world, pushing all them towards the U.S.S.R. The U.S. would lose the Cold War even if it gained new colonies. As the National Security Council stated in a secret memo: “The peoples of the colonial states would never agree to fight Communism unless they were assured of their freedom” (FRUS 1952–1954:XIII, Part 1, 1259). In other words, to win hearts and minds and thereby win the Cold War, the U.S. had to support national independence around the world rather than squash it by recolonization. This strategy was clearly stated in a famous 1952 State Department paper identifying the “General Objectives of U.S. Policy Toward Colonial Areas.” It stated that America’s main objective was to “favour the progressive development of all dependent peoples toward the goal of self-government.” The reason was that:

...substantial advocates toward self-government have been made in a number of territories and more than 500 million people have achieved independence. Nationalist movements are gaining strength in non-self-governing territories throughout the world. U.S. policy must be based on the general assumption that nationalism in colonial areas is a force which cannot be stopped but may, with wisdom, be guided. [...] It is clearly in the interest of the U.S. to give appropriate encouragement to those movements which are non-communist and democratic in character. [This would] contribute toward the building of colonial areas into bulwarks against the spread of communism. The very fact of a demonstrated U.S. in democratic nationalist movements will strengthen the hand of these groups against their communist counterparts (FRUS 1952–1954:III, 1084–85).

U.S. policy, therefore, should “seek the alignment with the democratic world of dependent peoples and those achieving self-government or independence; in particular to maintain and strengthen their friendship and respect for the U.S.. The importance of this objective is clear in view of the Soviet Union’s obvious bid for the sympathies of colonial peoples.”

It is in this context that the notion of “American empire” became distasteful. In fact, earlier in the century, statesmen and scholars alike freely spoke of the US as an “empire,” especially in the wake of the acquisition of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other islands in 1898. Even into the early 1930s, articles in popular magazines discussed the “American Empire” with pride, referring not just to American power but to its myriad of colonies and protectorates. Amidst the Cold War struggle to portray itself as anti-colonial, however, the American empire state initiated a new propaganda campaign to sketch the Soviet Union as the true “imperialist” and to thereby counter the Soviets’ claims to be the champion of the colonial world. One part of that campaign was the international distribution of hundreds of thousands of copies of the pamphlet *Who is the Imperialist?* The pamphlet listed all the territories that the USSR had annexed since 1939 and “described communist ‘imperialism’ in North Korea, Poland, North Vietnam, and Tibet” (Belmonte 2013: 102). The effort here was not just to portray the US as the real champion of anti-colonialism but also the USSR as its enemy: in either case, the goal was calculated and precise: to use anti-colonial discourse as a means of winning hearts and minds. In Bourdieu’s terms, anti-colonialism thus became a “stance”: a form of capital that powerful states like the US could deploy and convert into political loyalty. In the process of this posturing, concomitant with the competition for global prestige, colonialism became less and less an option for would-be empires like the US just as it had become an impossibility for falling empires like Great Britain. This was a new field indeed – a new field of struggle between great powers and between them and postcolonial states with new rules and forms of capital.

SUEZ, 1956

One way to better see the foregoing processes at work is to return to Suez, 1956. This encapsulates many of the pressures discussed above and it also serves as a portent for

present-day neoimperial interventions. As noted in the introduction, by 1956, the British had already ended its rule over Egypt, having granted nominal independence in 1922. British interests remained, however, in the Canal Zone, and had relied upon King Farouk as their ally. The 1952 military coup that ousted King Farouk posed trouble; as did of course Nasser's declaration that the Canal was to be nationalized. When London caught word of the latter action, officials consulted the French and the Israelis, both of whom had significant interests in the area, and began to strategize. The result was an Anglo-French military assault on October 31st of 1956, preceded by an Israeli invasion on October 29, when Israeli forces forced their way through the Sinai desert and proceeded swiftly towards the Canal.

The event has been discussed in countless studies. The typical interpretation is that it represents the final folly of the British empire. In this view, Prime Minister Eden, in leading the assault, against the protestations of the public and the United States, was tragically clinging to an outdated view of the British empire – and that his determination to invade represents an attempt to reinscribe British imperial power in the post-war world. There is merit to this view, but what gets lost in it is the method by which Eden, if he was indeed interested in reestablishing British power, *sought* to do so. It is notable that, despite the sizable interests in the region, at no point did Eden intimate that retaking Egypt was on the cards; that the military intervention was meant to lead to a new colonial occupation. The British-French ultimatum to Nasser, and released to the public, emphasized that troops would be used for “temporary” occupation. This can be readily contrasted with the British military intervention in 1882, which had lead to a sustained occupation and the transformation of Egypt into a protectorate. But such an action by 1956 could barely be entertained. In discussing the possible response to Nasser's nationalization of the Canal with President Eisenhower, Prime Minister Anthony Eden did not mention colonial occupation. The long-term goal instead should be “the removal of Nasser, and the installation in Egypt of a regime less hostile to the West.”²⁰ And he later expressly stated to Eisenhower that the “old Colonial” approach was not their intention. We see here the expulsion of colonialism from the imperial repertoire, and its

²⁰ Eden to Eisenhower, August 5th, 1956 in Boyle (2012), p. 157.

replacement instead with, at best, informal empire – an empire of clients and allies, not colonies and protectorates.

But why? Why not colonialism? In their aversion to the “old Colonial” approach, it is clear that London officials were concerned about the potentiality of anti-colonial protests and resistance. A few years earlier, the Foreign Office’s report on nationalism worried about how “there is always the danger that a particular blow [against Britain from nationalist forces] may set off a chain reaction with incalculable results, affecting not only Great Britain but other Western Powers and thus the stability and strength of the free world.” And a few months prior to that report, in January, Egyptians in Cairo had taken to the streets to violently cast out British troops who had remained stationed in the region. In his discussion with Eisenhower, Eden intimated that he understood the need to exercise restraint in whatever action would be taken by stating flatly: “I have not forgotten the riots and murders in Cairo in 1952.”²¹ The costs of colonialism had become too high – but only because the would-be colonized were no longer willing to take it.

A different explanation for why the British did not aim to (re)colonize Suez is that it was too costly because the British empire was already in decay. Given the empire’s comparable financial and military weakness – comparable, that is, to the late nineteenth century when Britain first colonized Egypt and when it was undisputed in its capacities – it would have been a stretch to recolonize Egypt, even if anticolonial nationalism was not operative. Is this the real reason? If we turn to the US, we can see more clearly how anti-colonial nationalism and its role in Cold War politics was in fact determinant in the shift away from colonialism. The US *did* have the capacity to colonize the region. It also had the capacity to support the British – and had been doing so in other colonial areas. But in this case it did neither, and the reason was the “constraint” – as the Foreign Office’s report had put it – that anti-colonial nationalism had placed upon great powers.

The Suez crisis had emerged just after the Bandung Conference – over which Dulles and many in Washington had fretted (Nasser had been there, though his precise role, and what Americans thought of him, is unclear). It had also come after years of American concerns about nationalism in the region. On the one hand, after the passage of the global strategy of NSC 68, the US had become increasingly vested in the region,

²¹ Eden to Eisenhower, Sept. 6th, 1956 (in Boyle 2012, p. 164).

linking security directly stability there. The initial strategy – as elsewhere in the world – was to prop up Britain’s formal and informal role there; or, in Dean Acheson’s words in 1951, to “assist [the British] in strengthening their capabilities” (quoted in Lucas 2000: 145). This culminated in an agreement to support Britain’s proposals for a Middle Eastern Command, which would sustain a Western presence in the Suez Canal base, in exchange for British support for Turkish and Greek entry into NATO.

On the other hand, at the same time, Washington officials became increasingly worried about anti-colonial sentiment in the area. In 1949, George McGhee, Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, had warned that “nationalism was not necessarily friendly to British and American interests” even if ‘the United States government had found it advantageous to back nationalism against communism.” McGhee’s conclusion was that the US “should aim at putting the Middle East countries on their own feet and persuading them voluntarily to turn toward the West” (Lucas 2000: 141). The revolution in Egypt in 1952 changed everything. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles noted in 1953 that the peoples of the Near East and South Asia are “suspicious of the colonial powers” and so “the day is past when [nationalist] aspirations can be ignored” (Lucas 2000: 147). President Eisenhower told Winston Churchill in 1954 that “should we try to dam up [nationalism in the Middle East] completely, it would, like a mighty river, burst through the barriers and could create havoc” (ibid). And after the riots in Cairo against the British erupted in early 1953, Dulles reported to Eisenhower that the reputation of Britain, and its allies like the US, was “deteriorating, probably to the point of non-repair.” He continued: “The days when the Middle East used to relax under the presence of British protection are gone” (Lucas 2000: 148).

Eisenhower’s skepticism, concern, and eventual criticism of Eden and his interventionist policy followed. When Eisenhower read the ultimatum of the British and French governments noting “temporary” occupation, he was initially concerned that the meaning of “temporary” was too ambiguous to be a clear statement that Britain no longer had a colonial interest. He wrote to Eden that he was “ignorant of our minimum objectives and what you expect to do after you attain them. But I am struck by the emphasis you placed in your announcement, as well as in your message to me, on the

word ‘temporary’ in your occupation.”²² To this Eden responded in a way that discloses the concerns over anti-colonial sentiment that was on all their minds: “I can assure you that any action which we may have to take...is not part of a harking back to the old Colonial and occupational concepts. *We are most anxious to avoid this impression.*”²³ Later, concerned about the fact that others in the world might not be getting the signal, President Eisenhower wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, in response to Nehru’s letter of concern to him about Suez: “I can well understand that memories of colonialism linger in some countries, but we do have assurances from the Government of Britain that they have no intention of trying to revive this practice, regardless of appearances.”²⁴

As for America’s own role, Eisenhower stated to Eden that he objected to the intervention on the grounds that the use of force would arouse anti-colonial sentiment, thereby not only prolonging an occupation but also pushing the region to the USSR. He insisted that the British and French call for an immediate cease-fire, “clearly state the reasons why you entered the Canal zone”, and “state your intention to evacuate” immediately after the hostilities end. This would “diminish” the “almost universal resentment now.”²⁵ The Eisenhower administration also realized that, if the intervention were to continue, it would have to dissociate from it as much as possible. This was a reversal of policy from the previous years of supporting Europe in the colonial and postcolonial world. As noted, the previous strategy in the Suez had been to support the British in order to prevent it from going to the Soviets. Unless they tightened security, wrote Ambassador Caffery from Cairo to the State Department in 1951, “we must resign ourselves to the fact that the Canal Zone may, unless something foreseen turns up, explode with a loud bang at no distant date, an explosion with a potential chain reaction of occupation, revolution, eventual Commie domination” (FRUS 1951, V, p. 428). But anti-colonial sentiment had changed the terrain irrevocably, so the strategy now had to be disarticulation from the British.

The record of the National Security Council meetings on the matter reveal the thinking. The statements by John Foster Dulles, US Secretary of State, are of particular

²² Eisenhower to Eden, Nov. 1, 1956, PDE.

²³ Eden to Eisenhower, Oct. 1, 1956, PDE, emphasis added.

²⁴ Eisenhower to Nehru, Nov. 2, 1956, PDE.

²⁵ Eisenhower to Eden, Nov. 1, 1956, PDE.

interest, since his view ultimately won out. Dulles first reminded everyone that, for the past decade or so, the US had been walking a “tightrope” between supporting “our British and French allies on the one hand, and, on the other trying to assure ourselves of the friendship and understanding of the newly independent countries who have escaped from colonialism” on the other. But the Anglo-French assault on Suez now forced the Eisenhower administration to choose: would the US continue to support the European powers as it had been doing, or would it do something different? The issue was that the Anglo-French assault appeared to the world to be “the straight old-fashioned variety of colonialism,” and so in deciding whether to support the assault, the US had had “reached the point of deciding today whether we think the future lies with a policy of reasserting by force colonial control over the less developed nations, or whether we will oppose such a course of action by every appropriate means.” They were choosing between the US “following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa, or splitting our course away from their course.”²⁶

Dulles’s own suggestion was that the US should do all it could to avoid to be supporting European colonialism, once and for all. Why? If the US supported the assault, “we will be looked upon as forever tied to British and French colonialist policies,” and “all these newly independent countries will turn from us to the USSR.” In short, “the United States would survive or go down on the basis of the fate of colonialism if the United States supports the French and the British on the colonial issues.” And in Dulles’s view, the world had changed too much. Given that “recent events are close to marking the death knell for Great Britain and France,” the “British and French would not win.”²⁷ In other words, due to the power of anti-colonial nationalism around the world, the once great powers became far too constrained. Colonialism was over, and the US was not about to go down with it.

THE NEW DOXA FROM SUEZ TO CRIMEA

The point is not to explain individual incidents of decolonization, or the unevenness of decolonization from the 1940s through the 1960s. Decolonization was a complicated

²⁶Memorandum of Security Council Meeting, Nov. 1, 1956 (FRUS 1955-57: XVI, Doc. 455).

²⁷Ibid.

process and its features for any given case differed. The point has been rather to explain the macro-level phenomenon that has hitherto gone unexplained in existing scholarship: why did colonialism end in the time period that it did? Why did colonialism no longer become a tool in the imperial repertoire of power only in the mid-twentieth century?

The answer provided here is not a story about great power rivalry in the theoretical mode of conventional realism. While the realist principle of rivalry and competition is operative in our story, it itself does not account for the changing forms or terms of that rivalry and competition – such as, for instance, whether competition takes the form of colonization or whether it instead involves an *anti-colonial* stance, a discourse that can serve as political capital. Nor do we have a story of new norms “diffusing” or spreading from the West to the Rest, or even of norms simply changing over time. Norms did change, but explaining why requires more than just tautologically saying that norms changed. And yes, anti-colonial nationalism may have spread from core countries to peripheral countries – not least through the mechanism of colonialism itself – this in itself does not explain why core countries later turned away from colonialism. At best it provides a partial explanation for how anti-colonial nationalism may have spread.

The story told here is different. This is a story of struggles among the powerful and between the powerful and the less empowered creating transformations in fields and fundamentally restructuring them: structuration and “fielding” at once. This approach comes from Bourdieu’s field theory. In Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus, every field is marked by competition and struggle over various forms of capital, and in accordance with tacit or explicit “rules of the game.” Also in that apparatus is an explanation of change in fields: those with less capital in the field can become “challengers”, and as they make their bids for power, they can question the definition of what counts as capital, and seek to alter the rules which had been partially responsible in the first place for their marginalization. Amidst these challenges, the taken-for-granted rules or “doxa” become challenged by an oppositional discourse – a “heterodoxy” – and a new orthodoxy can eventually be inscribed. The rules of the game change, and field struggles proceed, however under new conditions.

We can now see that, in the global political field, this is exactly what happened in regards to colonialism. The events of Suez was but one example of others in the late 1950s and early 1960s that revealed that colonialism was no longer on the table; no longer available in the repertoire of empire. In Bourdieu's terms, the "rules of the game" in the field had changed. Power struggles would continue, but they could no longer continue in the form of colonialism. Quite the opposite in fact: as seen, power struggles between the US and USSR took the form of *anti*-colonialism. Appealing to anti-colonial nationalists became a struggle for symbolic capital convertible to political capital; a means of winning hearts and minds. Colonialism was no longer the means to exert domination over others; a stance of anti-colonialism had replaced it. By 1960, in fact, the United Nations had made anti-colonialism official, passing Resolution 1514, The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. And yet none of this was because of the agency of powerful states alone. It was because challengers in the field, in this case colonized and postcolonial peoples, had demonstrated that they had agency too, and it was an agency that officials in Washington and London could not ignore – as they themselves admitted amidst their strategizing and calculations.

But if the field had changed, it has also changed for good – at least for now. Indeed, in Bourdieu's theory of transformation, once the challengers challenge the preexisting taken-for-granted order of rules with new rules, those heterodox rules themselves become orthodoxy and, ultimately, part of a new doxa – a new taken-for-granted order. To be sure, because of the processes noted here, anti-colonial nationalism has been institutionalized in the field to the point of no return. It is embedded in various resolutions of the United Nations. It is an almost taken-for-granted principle of powerful countries like the United States. The new "rule" that you cannot colonize is never really questioned. It is so institutionalized that it has even become a part of the global discourse that pretenders to power – like India and China – try to manipulate or at least deploy amidst their strategic positioning in the field (Miller 2013). To this day, it seems, competition and struggle in the global field of political power today cannot do without anti-colonial rhetoric as a form of capital.

None of this is to say that *empire* is over – it is merely to say that the form of empire has changed. It is to say that *colonial* empire, whereby a foreign state declares

absolute sovereignty over weaker states and incorporates them as inferior dependencies, is over. Take Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In some respects, this is classic territorial imperialism. Indeed, it follows Russia's conventional pattern of imperial expansion (Lieven 2002). But there are two major differences from formal colonialism, both of which are related, and are arguably shaped by the very processes discussed above. The first is that Crimea has not been annexed by Russia as a colony – that is, as an inferior political unit whereby its citizens are subjects. Officially, Crimea is fully incorporated into the Russian Federation, meaning that it is equal to other “federal subjects” in the system and hence has the same rights and privileges (it can, for instance, send delegates to the Federation Council, just like other federal subjects). Conversely, the modern colonial form that anticolonial nationalists sought to overthrow – the “old colonial” way, as Eden put it in his letter to Eisenhower – was one where incorporated territories became unequal subjects within the empire, maintaining a strict subject-citizen hierarchy.

Second, and relatedly, the official line of Russia is that Crimea chose democratically to be part of Russia through a referendum, which purported that 97% of Crimean residents wanted to join Russia. The referendum is challenged by critics. The United Nations' resolution condemning the annexation has declared the referendum to be invalid. And we might indeed question whether the referendum truly represents the sovereign will of the Crimean people. But what is notable is that Russia at all tries to legitimate the annexation by reference to popular will. Ballot boxes were set up. Votes counted. Polls were mobilized and deployed in the arena of public opinion. And so on. Hence, in response to critics, Vladimir Putin rejected claims that he was taking Crimea by “force” and instead pointed to the referendum. In his view, the popular will in Crimea declared that “Crimea has always been an inalienable part of Russia,” so the annexation was merely meeting that will.²⁸ The Russian Federation's representative to the United Nations responded to the UN's condemnation by referring to the referendum and stated:

²⁸Smith, Matt and Eschenko (2014), “Ukraine cries ‘robbery’ as Russia annexes Crimea.” *CNN* online at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/18/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/> (accessed Oct. 1, 2015).

“We call on everyone to respect that voluntary choice.” He went on to say that Russia would not “refuse Crimeans their right to self-determination.”²⁹

This is a fundamental difference from colonial empire, where empires incorporated territories without bothering to legitimate it by appeals to popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty was not a relevant principle – not a form of discursive capital. At most, if colonial powers at all tried to legitimate their usurpation of sovereignty through colonial annexation, they did it based upon claims of colonial subjects’ inferiority or incapacity. The case of Crimea shows the difference: now annexation, if it is to happen at all, has to be based upon popular sovereignty. Western powers denounce Russia’s claim that the annexation represents the sovereign will of Crimeans, but the very fact that Western powers denounce the referendum as a sham gets to the point. At stake is popular sovereignty, and this reliance upon popular sovereignty as a criteria or basis for whether great powers can extend their territorial reach is what marks the transformation away from colonialism.

The last point worth hitting: even though formal colonialism is over, informal imperialism persists, precisely because informal imperialism is about exercising power over *nominally independent* states. Great powers can still intervene into the affairs of other countries, as long as they pay lip service to the principles of popular sovereignty. They can even use popular sovereignty as a *warrant* for neo-imperialism. When the US invaded Iraq or Afghanistan, counter-terrorism was one warrant, but the other legitimating discourse was that the people of Iraq and Afghanistan needed to be liberated from despotic rulers: colonialism as the means by which to realize anti-colonialism. The other legitimating discourse was that Iraq and Afghanistan needed to be rebuilt and strengthened precisely so that they can more properly exercise sovereignty; hence “nation-building.” Informal imperialism, justified by reference to popular sovereignty, is but a contemporary extension of the earlier discourse of anti-colonial nationalism which ended colonial empire in the first place.

²⁹ “General Assembly adopts resolution...” 27 March 2014, UN General Assembly meetings coverage, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm> (accessed Oct. 2, 2015).

FIGURES

Fig. 1

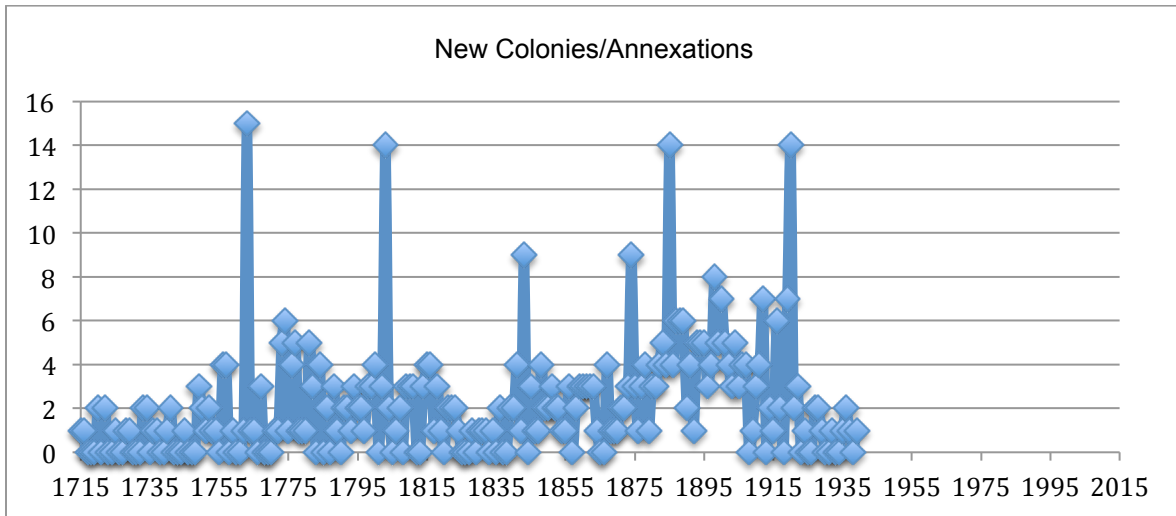
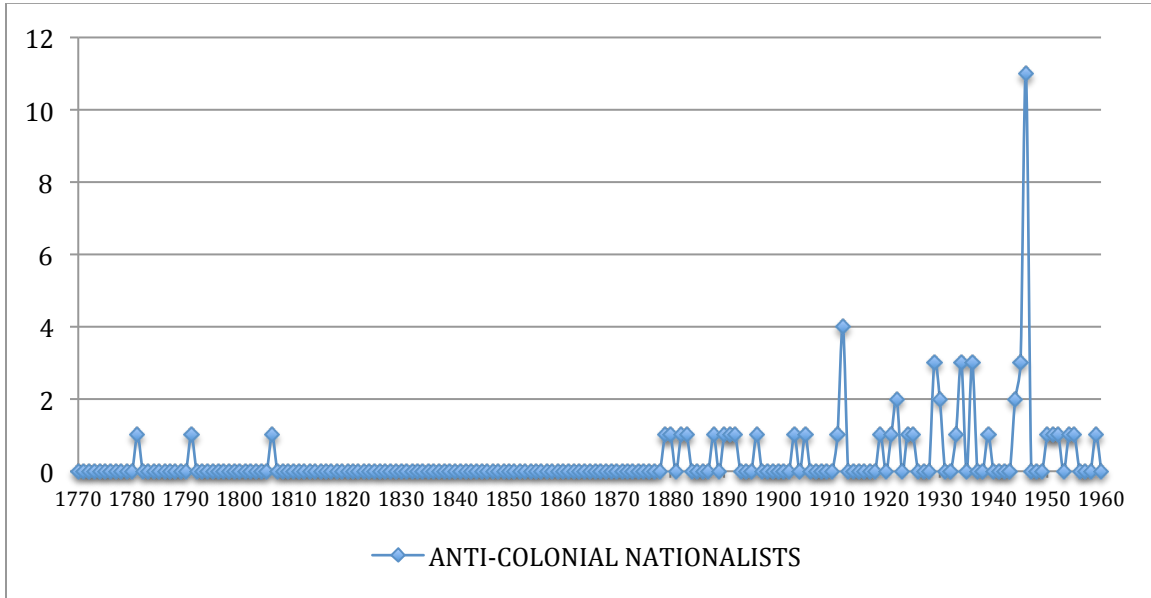


Fig. 2



Source: extracted data in Wimmer and Feinstein (2010)

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Abbreviations and Archives

CO	Colonial Office, PRO
FO	Foreign Office, PRO
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
PDE	Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower
PRO	Public Records Office, Kew, UK

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