



# **A World Remade by Decolonisation?**

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Empires, until recently, were everywhere. They shaped borders, stirred conflicts, and set the terms of international politics. With the collapse of empire came a fundamental reorganisation of our world.

Decolonisation stands alongside the great world wars as the most transformative event of twentieth-century history, the largest global process of state-making (and empire-unmaking) in modern history. Its struggles became internationalised and transnational, as much global campaigns of moral disarmament against colonial injustice as local contests of arms. Exploring these shifts, the lecture also highlights interactions between decolonisation and its intrinsic link to globalisation. Martin Thomas traces the connections between these two transformative processes: the end of formal empire and the acceleration of global integration, market reorganisation, cultural exchange, and migration. The aim is to show how profoundly decolonisation shaped the process of globalisation in the wake of empire collapse.

In the second half of the twentieth century, decolonisation catalysed new international coalitions; it triggered partitions and wars; and it reshaped North-South dynamics. Globalisation promised the decolonised greater access to essential resources, to wider networks of influence, and to worldwide audiences, but its neoliberal variant has reinforced economic inequalities and imperial forms of political and cultural influences. In surveying these two co-dependent histories across the world, from Latin America to Asia, Thomas explains why the deck was so heavily stacked against newly independent nations.

On one side of the equation, ending empires energised different ideas of belonging and transnational connection, of sovereignty and independence, and of the struggles necessary to achieve them. Late colonial conflicts spurred other connections as the colonised 'weak' built transnational networks of support to overcome the military and economic advantages of 'strong' imperial overseers. Insurgencies spread. The counterinsurgencies that followed triggered rights abuses whose global exposure left empires shamed.

On the other side of the equation, the meaning of decolonisation is contested because disagreement persists about its essential qualities. The word 'decolonisation' was not widely used at the height of the changes it describes in the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, decolonisation was a process of several moving parts: the withdrawal of European rule, the takeover of governmental apparatus by anti-colonial nationalists, the pressures of Cold War rivalries, and the efforts by minority groups in decolonising states to assert separate claims to nationhood. Locating those processes historically invites global perspectives and a stress on contingency. One implication of this is that anti-colonialism makes sense as a unifying abstraction, an expression of opposition to something ethically indefensible, rather than as unswerving support for a particular national form.

These are some of the issues and dilemmas that the lecture discusses.

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