

Decolonization and its Impact

A Comparative Approach to the
End of the Colonial Empires

Martin Shipway

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Introduction: Decolonization in Comparative Perspective

It is now more than half a century since the first irrevocable steps were taken towards the dissolution of the European colonial empires, and barely more than forty years since all but the most insignificant or obdurate colonial regimes were consigned to some virtual historical junkyard or museum. Revolutions in Vietnam and Indonesia in August 1945, which blocked French and Dutch efforts to recover their colonial possessions from Japanese occupation, were followed in 1946 by the American grant of independence to the Philippines (promised ten years previously), by Transfers of Power in India and a newly created Pakistan in 1947, and in Burma and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1948. After protracted insurgent campaigns, Indonesia became independent in 1949, Vietnam finally defeated the French colonial power in 1954, and Malaya (subsequently Malaysia) gained its independence in 1957. Between 1954 and 1965, most of the continent of Africa was freed from colonial rule, though the more recalcitrant colonial or settler armies continued to fight on into the 1970s. South Africa alone, which had undergone decolonization of a kind in 1910, maintained quasi-colonial (or perhaps ultra-colonial) structures of rule based on racial segregation until the last decade of the century. A slightly later wave of decolonizations brought independence to a scattered galaxy of smaller nations in the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas, and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For many British commentators, the final, symbolic act of decolonization was the transfer of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule in 1997, leaving only a few 'confetti' of colonial empire to survive into the new century. But in the main it took only about twenty years for most of the formal structures and institutions of colonialism (though not nearly so comprehensively of their associated mentalities) to be swept away. It is this brief, often violent and intermittently intense period of crisis which forms the subject of this book.

Explaining an international phenomenon as complex as decolonization raises a general problem associated with the shape and purpose of historical narratives, particularly when those narratives have relevance for the contemporary world. Cooper (1996: 6) has summed up this problem: we know the end of the story. Or perhaps, rather, we *think* we do. As with that other global structuring event of the post-1945

world, the Cold War, it is virtually impossible *not* to see decolonization as part of some bigger picture, as the enactment of secular, perhaps even millennial, historical processes, or perhaps as a step towards the abyss. Just as there were those who, however tentatively, saw the 'End of History' in the vertiginous culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall (Fukuyama 1989),¹ so too the precipitate withdrawal of colonial administrations from Asia, Africa and other parts of the world was seen typically at the time as marking the end of a centuries-long process of European imperial expansion, or more positively (and fleetingly) as the dawning of a new era of relations between the developed and the under-developed worlds. The problem is not simply that such a grandiose version of History-with-an-H may mask the deeper continuities of historical process – and few would dispute that the fundamental structure of North–South relations survived the decolonization process largely intact. It also glosses over the contingency and sheer complexity of major historical crises, and the extent to which the impact of crisis led the actors involved to recast their actions retrospectively in terms of the 'wider' historical picture. Historians have also tended to shape their narratives in such a way as to explain the outcome of national independence and imperial dissolution almost as givens, although the cruder forms of determinism have usually been discounted. Certainly, independence was neither simply wrested by force from the colonizers by triumphant and united new nations, nor was it generously bestowed by wise western statesmen, acting as it were *in loco parentis*, when their charges attained their majority. Nor, whatever else it may have been, was decolonization inevitable in the forms it took. At the very least, it is axiomatic that the precise outcomes of decolonization were rarely ones which anyone had intended, not least because they were brought about according to a timetable that no one had imagined possible.

A further conceptual problem which arises with decolonization more acutely than is the case for the Cold War is that, while the emerging history of the Cold War would tend to support the dictum that history is written by the victors, writing about colonialism and decolonization tends to mirror the structure of the former empires. Thus, working from first principles, decolonization may be seen *either* as a composite of the individual national narratives of each of the hundred or so ex-colonies' paths to independent statehood, *or* as the 'bigger' story of the breakdown of a number of imperial systems against the backdrop of a major structural shift in the international system. The trouble is that neither of these narratives taken on its own is necessarily reliable or complete.

Much of the recent historiography of decolonization has tended to reflect the second of these narratives and thus to favour a top-down or imperial approach, especially when the imperial system under consideration is the British empire. Thus Darwin (1991: 116) rejects the possibility that the decolonization of the British empire might be considered as 'a story of fifty separate chapters'. Similarly, extending this broad approach to a comparative survey of all the European colonial systems, Holland (1985: 1) proposes that decolonization 'happened because colonialism as a set of nationally orchestrated systems (by the British, French, Dutch, Belgians and Portuguese) ceased to possess the self-sustaining virtue of internal equilibrium'. The fact that decolonization took place in such diverse places, and yet over 'so compressed a timescale', suggests to Howe (1993: 11–12) that 'however powerfully determinant

local conditions may have been, the procedures of, and pressures on, metropolitan policy making were decisive in the end of Empire'. This argument may be extended to the other colonial empires, particularly to the French, but the concept of a 'Scramble out of Africa' mirroring the process of colonial conquests at the end of the nineteenth century is persuasive. Even the relatively substantial time-lag involved in the Portuguese empire's ragged decolonization, seen throughout the twentieth century as 'marching to a different drummer' (Young 1988: 52), shrinks to insignificance according to all but the most 'in your face' perspectives.

The corollary of this approach is a concern with the overall 'pattern and timing' of decolonization, and with the identification of developments which occurred as part of a clearly identifiable process of imperial dissolution, as opposed to factors which might have had an impact on imperial policy, but which were contained, absorbed or defeated by colonial rulers. This approach tends to discount local factors, such as the rise of anti-colonial nationalist movements or, more generally, the impact of 'colonial politics'. As Holland (1985) puts it, 'ramshackle political coalitions in the underdeveloped world were only one element – and not the most vital – in determining the end to twentieth-century empires'. Although it originated as a way of shifting the perspective of imperial history from the metropolitan centre to the colonial periphery, Robinson and Gallagher's now classic, so-called 'peripheral' or 'excentric' approach to imperialism still attributes much, if not all, of the dynamism and initiative for colonial policy to the imperial power.

The generally accepted landmark according to this approach to decolonization is the Second World War, whose 'corrosive effects... at every level of the imperial connection', according to Darwin (1991: 118f.), set off the chain of crises which culminated in the liquidation of the colonial empires. This is not to say, however, that decolonization somehow became inevitable at war's end, because one has to take into account the intense but short-lived reinvigoration of colonial purpose after 1945, the 'revival' of the colonial empires identified by Gallagher (1982), often described as a 'second colonial occupation'. Certainly, Gallagher's preferred metaphors for colonial interaction suggest a wily, resourceful and endlessly energetic colonial power, even to the last:

Every colonial power sustained itself by shifting the basis of its rule from time to time, dropping one set of imperial collaborators and taking up another. In principle, this process could have continued endlessly. The imperial croupier never found any shortage of colonial subjects ready to place bets with him at the table, although they usually staggered up from the table in some disarray. Certainly in India in 1947, and in Africa in the late nineteen-fifties, there were still plenty of groups ready to try a flutter. (ibid.: 153)

Gallagher's thesis as a whole, in his final, definitive statement of the peripheral approach, is that colonialism was normally a distraction from, or a drain upon, the more serious enterprise of British imperial expansion: in the long view, the British empire in the colonial period may be seen to shift from a world system where influence predominated through a system of informal empire, the preferred mode of British imperialism, to one of direct rule, and to fail in its attempt, in the 1950s and 1960s, to

shift back to a system of influence, 'more than British and less than an *imperium*', through collaboration with the new imperial power on the block, the United States (Louis & Robinson [1994]2003).

It should be emphasized that this imperial approach is more a question of geo-political perspective than of ideology. An account of decolonization may be critical or dismissive of the imperial role in the process, but still consider the question from a top-down perspective. Such is by and large the case for a long tradition of anti-imperial literature, as represented by a chapter in Hobsbawm's magisterial survey of the 'short' twentieth century (1994: 344–71). Certainly the historian of French decolonization would find it difficult to maintain that French policy makers maintained more than nominal control over the process of decolonization in wide parts of the French empire at various moments in the 1940s and 1950s, and there is little to admire in French handling of this process, and yet writing about the French empire in this period, including that by the present author, has tended to mirror the centralizing structure of that empire. More generally, the very phrase 'End of Empire', even when divorced from any sense of nostalgia or apologia, would tend to suggest that global causes must be found for such a strikingly global phenomenon as decolonization or, more tendentially, that the imperial hand cannot simply have been forced (at least, not by 'ramshackle political coalitions') into something so momentous as imperial dissolution.

Nonetheless, for the most part, one writer's imperial grand narrative looks very like another's imperial apology, and it is a short step from saying that the initiative for imperial change and dissolution was located at the metropolitan centre, to claiming that imperial policy makers decided the manner of their parting, or even that they planned it all along. There is a time-honoured British imperial tradition of accommodating even unwelcome change within an appeal to secular trends, or a 'belief in contingency as a form of destiny – in short, providence – [which] reaches far back into English history' (Boyce 1999: 1). Thus, British 'decolonization' can be dated back to the disastrous loss of the 13 American colonies, taking in the gradual extension of self-government to the settler colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the troubled process which led to South African independence (albeit within the imperial system) in 1910, and is reflected even in the shifting and divided constitutional status of Ireland after 1919. British policy makers could thus lay claim to a long tradition of devolving power, which in the mid-twentieth century found expression in the reluctant and ultimately irrelevant promise to accord Dominion status to India and other dependencies, and in the attention paid to the niceties of Commonwealth membership and to the 'invented traditions' of royal protocol in the 1950s.

British claims to foresight and generous paternal wisdom became something of a cottage industry for politicians and officials alike. While Britain's decolonizing prime minister, Harold Macmillan, patented his own brand in such rhetoric, the Colonial Office turned it into a policy, as constitution after Westminster-style constitution was churned out on a rough-and-ready production line. Such 'Whiggish' rationalizations of the end of empire have been reflected more or less uncontroversially in what Twaddle has called the 'Old Commonwealth paradigm' of British decolonization (Twaddle 1986). The corollary of this view is a sense that, somewhere along the way, British policy makers 'lost the plot' and that, just as the British empire could

be seen to have been won, as Seeley famously noted, 'in a fit of absence of mind', so also was it lost in an albeit well-intentioned muddle in the corridors of Whitehall (Howe 1993: 11ff.).

It is worth noting that the French counterpart to the British 'Whig' tradition was not simply conjured up by that genius in self-serving rationalizations, President Charles de Gaulle, but constituted a recurrent, if secondary theme in French colonial doctrine, as expressed, for example, by veteran Socialist Prime Minister Léon Blum, reluctantly talking down the *fait accompli* of Franco-Vietnamese hostilities in December 1946:

According to our republican doctrine, colonial possession only reaches its final goal and is justified the day it ceases, that is, the day when a colonized people has been given the capacity to live emancipated and to govern itself. The colonizer's reward is then to have earned the colonized people's gratitude and affection, to have brought about interpenetration and solidarity in thought, culture and interests, thus allowing colonizer and colonized to unite freely. (in Shipway 1996b: 94)

However, such claims rang hollow against the dominant unison of appeals to a Republican unity which precluded self-government, but more particularly against the cacophony of almost continuous colonial violence through to Algerian independence in 1962. Indeed, in response to this traumatic mismatch between French national purpose and the catastrophe of Algerian decolonization, it is small wonder that the French nation long chose to remain silent, so that it is only recently that debate over the memories and legacy of decolonization has erupted in France (Beaugé 2005). Even so, French parliamentarians have attempted to steer the debate towards the proposition, bizarrely enshrined in law in February 2005 (and subsequently repealed by President Jacques Chirac), that French colonization had a 'positive role', especially in North Africa (Liauzu & Manceron 2006).

What, then, if decolonization is viewed, *pace* the imperial historians, according to our alternative narrative, as the combined history of individual national struggles for freedom. Here, in at least a hundred 'different chapters', decolonization may more readily be conceived as the culmination of a history of interaction and conflict between colonizer and colonized, externally influenced but nonetheless determined at least in part by internal structures. The imperial historian's concern with 'pattern and timing' gives way to the more complex idea of decolonization as the culmination of a dialectic between colonizer and colonized, or between the various social and political groups within the emerging polity, whether European or indigenous, ruling or ruled, consenting or resistant, traditional or modernizing. Thus there is often a striking difference in emphasis between studies of 'decolonization' which are mostly about the end of empire, and individual national or regional studies presenting a more seamless process of political and social development under colonial rule and beyond. Paradoxically, decolonization as such may be de-emphasized by this approach, either because, as Lonsdale has put it, 'colonialism was a social process which decolonization continued' (in Killingray & Rathbone 1986: 135), or because independence brought an all too brief moment of triumph followed by disenchantment, or accompanied by the awareness that decolonization was merely a stage along the way towards the fulfilment of greater, more satisfying national and international goals.

An implied teleology is perhaps more plausible here, that independence from colonial rule was won by individual colonized peoples united in struggle under their own Nationalist leadership. Few historical processes can have apparently fulfilled the promises of their protagonists so rapidly and completely. But it would be more accurate to say that the scholarly literature is haunted by the ghost of the Nationalist Struggle, rather than possessed by it. Thus, a first generation of writing on decolonization consisted of the manifestos, autobiographies or hagiographies of nationalist politicians themselves, alongside the writings of a self-constituted 'Committee of Concerned Scholars for a Free Africa', as one historian sees the work of western academics in the 1950s and 1960s (Lonsdale, in Cooper [1994]2003: 25). This approach has also been characterized as following a 'Romantic Nationalist paradigm', where the epithet 'Romantic' might be understood as in the 'Wrong but Wromantic' Cavaliers of 1066 and All That (as opposed to the 'Right but Repulsive' Roundheads in the English Civil War) (Twaddle 1986: 132; Sellar & Yeatman 1930: 63). Indeed, the thesis of fulfilled national promise is one which is almost universally taken as an 'Aunt Sally' to be ritually knocked down by sophisticated professional historians.

It was perhaps to be expected that, from the lofty perspective of imperial decline and fall, little would be made of the role of successor nationalist movements in bringing about the end of empire. Thus Gallagher (1982: 148) argued that in Africa in the 1950s, 'just as in India before it', British policy created the conditions in which mass political parties emerged to generate the 'apparent expression of nationalist demands', thus denying the very possibility that British imperialists, though they might miscalculate, could ever surrender the initiative to their colonized antagonists and collaborators. Darwin (1991: 109) is more generous in allowing that nationalism contributed to decolonization partly through the 'skill and energy with which colonial politicians seized the opportunities for political action which opened up before them'; but even this concession is made within an imperial framework. Such a perspective is less plausibly maintained by historians of French, Dutch or Portuguese decolonization, and even Gallagher concedes that Algerians fought for their freedom.

More surprisingly, the record of colonial nationalists has for long been subjected to extensive critical revision from ostensibly more sympathetic perspectives. The lead was given by the Martiniquan psychiatrist and activist for the Algerian cause, Frantz Fanon, in his posthumously published polemic, *The Damned of the Earth* ([1961]2002). Fanon's coruscating attack on a moribund but still resourceful colonialism reserved a special measure of venom for a collaborating 'national bourgeoisie' taking over the structures of state power from cynically retreating colonial powers which, at the end, 'decolonize so quickly that they impose independence on Houphouët-Boigny' (ibid.: 69).² Fanon's at times almost-messianic vision of a decolonization that never was, a violent and cleansing revolution which would establish a post-colonial *tabula rasa*, where formerly colonized 'new men' would enter for the first time into their historical birthright, overlapped with an emerging pessimistic and recriminatory analysis of decolonization as a disguised reinvigoration of imperial purpose. Part of the argument of what came to be known as 'dependency theory', was that formal colonialism had merely shape-shifted into a less costly neo-colonialism, in which the imperialist powers (Americans as well as British and French) now collaborated with a class of 'comprador' capitalists, drawn precisely from that class which had most obviously

championed, and in turn benefited from, anti-colonial nationalism, which is to say 'bourgeois' nationalist elites recruited by former colonial rulers. Aside from its function as a comforting explanation, or alibi, for some early national leaders seeking to understand why their own hopes had not been realized (for example, Nkrumah 1965), and notwithstanding the identification of an undoubted structural problem in North-South relations, dependency theory replaced the notion of heroic nationalist agency by a sordid picture of the former colonized as either dupes or victims of an implausibly efficient conspiracy between prescient colonizers and their new collaborators (Bayart 1993).

The critique of triumphant bourgeois nationalism has become increasingly explicit in more recent debates, so that little now remains untouched of the 'Romantic Nationalist' paradigm. Thus, in the early volumes of the *Subaltern Studies* journal, radical Indian historians focused their attention on the ways in which the Indian National Congress Party, dominated by professional and capitalist elites and fearful of popular revolution, sought to subordinate class struggle to national struggle. The often acute material grievances of Indian peasants and workers, whose perspective was characterized via the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci's notion of the 'subaltern', were thus suppressed, hitched to the bandwagon of Gandhian populism, or glossed over in the interests of national mobilization, while the diverse but misunderstood histories of peasant protest and insurrection under the Raj were appropriated as the prehistory of a determinist 'official version' of inevitable nationalist triumph over the British (Guha & Spivak 1988: 35-6, 37-44).

The final few nails in the coffin of nationalism's reputation have been hammered in by the exponents of a rich and densely argued body of post-colonial theory. A large measure of inspiration for this came from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which explored the ways in which British and French imperialists and scholars over two centuries had systematically misrepresented the cultures of the Middle East, a secular habit of mind which was then taken over enthusiastically by a new wave of late twentieth-century American imperialists, whose grip on the foreign policy of the world's first 'hyper-power' seems to be showing signs of hubristic abatement as the first decade of the twenty-first century proceeds. Both *Orientalism* and its 'sequel', *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), are presented as histories of, and from within, western culture, but the wider implications of Said's work were rapidly realized. Thus Chatterjee writes of the epiphany which accompanied his first encounter with Said's work:

I was struck by the way *Orientalism* was implicated in the construction not only of the ideology of British colonialism which had dominated India for two centuries, but also of the nationalism which was my own heritage. Orientalist constructions of Indian civilization had been avidly seized upon by the ideologues of Indian nationalism in order to assert the glory and antiquity of a national past. So Indian nationalists had implicitly accepted the colonialist critique of the Indian present: a society fallen into barbarism and stagnation, incapable of progress or modernity. (in Sprinker 1992: 194-5)

Chatterjee's (1986) study of Indian nationalism thus charted the ways in which successive generations of Indian nationalists had been constrained to articulate

their struggle against British imperialism within the bounds of 'derived discourses' of western-inspired nationalism. Central to this line of argument was the concept of 'power/knowledge', derived from a reading of Michel Foucault. The pessimism of Foucault's studies, examining the processes by which an all-embracing post-Enlightenment state came to exercise control over even the most private and intimate practices and discourses of the individual, seemed to apply all the more forcefully to the cultures enthralled (in both senses: enslaved *and* entranced) by post-Enlightenment western imperialism. The enthusiasm with which Saidian and Foucauldian approaches have been adopted has not gone unchallenged by historians and anthropologists, although this has led to some interesting efforts to establish a new research agenda (Sprinker 1992; Cooper & Stoler 1997). Amongst others, Sumit Sarkar, whose own history of modern India rehearsed many of the arguments of *Subaltern Studies*, has since warned of the political dangers inherent in attempting to wipe clean the historical slate and to return to a state of pre-colonial 'innocence', dangers which are especially pertinent in a wider national or international context of rising religious and cultural fundamentalism (Sarkar 1989, 1997; & in Chaturvedi 2000).

Locating Decolonization in Space and Time

The edifice which awaits inspection by the historian of decolonization thus has an apparently M.C. Escher-like tendency to turn into an optical illusion. In so far as decolonization is written about extensively as a distinct phenomenon, it has often been synonymous with the End of Empire, and the end of the British empire in particular. Conversely, decolonization seen from below has been subsumed into a far wider field of colonial and post-colonial historical study, which tends to elide the moment of decolonization itself, and discounts any suggestion that this moment was more than fleetingly positive. This study attempts to reconcile 'imperial' explanations of decolonization with a comparative approach based on an understanding of the political and social processes of colonialism and colonial rule, and the ways in which those processes culminated in decolonization. Where, then, do we look in order to seek to understand the processes of decolonization? And over what timeframe?

The answer to the first question, or at least the answer that is given in this study, is simple: by triangulating between 'top-down' and 'grass roots' perspectives, and by comparing the various colonial empires, we arrive at that curious entity known in the literature as the 'colonial state'. Since the evolution, structure and composition of colonial states form the subject of Chapter 1, here we consider only how this focus may help to understand decolonization. First, the colonial state is a logical unit of comparison, since the empires themselves were so dissimilar in size and purpose, and since, arguably, only British imperialism was so overwhelming as to be more than the sum of its parts. Secondly, as it turned out, colonial states were in some sense the prize over which colonial governments and nationalist political forces were fighting, competing or negotiating during decolonization; this is suggested not least by the correlation between colonial and post-colonial state boundaries. Thirdly, at this level we may appreciate the complexity of the interaction between colonizer and colonized, between colonial administrations and their chosen or self-selected collaborators

and opponents, whom we meet for the first time in Chapter 2. Conversely, reversing the imperial polarities of 'centre' and 'periphery' does not preclude a proper appreciation of metropolitan decision making, for which the colonial state acted as a kind of 'gatekeeper'. Moreover, when it comes to international influences, including the building of an effective international ideological consensus against colonialism, which Darwin (1991: 109) concedes as a further achievement of nationalism, clearly this consensus could not be mediated either by colonial governments or by the metropolitan capitals.

A key reason for focusing on the colonial state is that this may help us with our second question, concerning the timeframe of decolonization. The problem here has been posed with some acuity by Howe, commenting on the 'poverty of historiography' of decolonization:

... whilst the acquisition of colonial empires has generally been understood as constituting, or at least reflecting, structural changes – shifts in the *longue durée* – in the world system, most of the literature on decolonization has seen the process purely in the short view of particular events; or in Braudelian terms at best as conjunctural. (Howe 1993: 3)³

Where this study risks further disappointing Howe's expectations, however, is in that it locates decolonization precisely at the level of event, or more precisely in a 'twenty years crisis' (to borrow E.H. Carr's label for the interwar period) from 1945. However, neither the *longue durée* nor, particularly, 'conjuncture' can be disregarded. To return to an earlier comparison, whereas the Cold War may be understood as an admittedly large-scale event, the more so because it is now safely over, the grand abstraction contained in the notion of decolonization, or End of Empire, seems to imply some structural shift lasting several lifetimes. Thus Gallagher (1982) traces British imperial decline, revival and fall, along with the workings of a steadily rational British 'official mind', over more than a century from the mid-nineteenth century. Chatterjee (1993) too is prepared to concede the political sphere to the Westernized elites of the Indian National Congress, in favour of a purer Indian national identity located in the private sphere of family and religion.

Interestingly enough, these secular perspectives reflect the imperialist view of change, according to the long vistas and evolutionary timescales of the so-called 'pre-requisites' model for imperial development. As Moore puts it parodically: 'Before India secured self-government it must pass through the stages of evolution that Britain had experienced since the Middle Ages' (1977: 399). Suggesting an even longer timescale, Churchill accused the British government that introduced the 1935 Government of India Act of running 'counter to nature', and of 'trying to put the clock forward without regard to the true march of solar events' (in *ibid.*). Such perspectives still found utterance in the opposition mounted by British Governors to official proposals for African political development in the 1940s. Until the late 1950s, Belgian administrators sought to apply a Belgian model of building Congolese government up from a strong local base, reproducing the slow evolution of Walloon and Flemish civic government (Young 1965). The French 'official mind' was more straightforward: when, in early 1944, an improvised conference of African governors assembled

at Brazzaville under the aegis of General de Gaulle's Free French movement, they ruled out 'the eventual establishment of self governments [*sic*] in the colonies, even in a distant future' (in Shipway 1996a: 35; and see Chapter 5). Even in the 1960s, the empire's *longue durée* remained fixed in the British 'official mind' like an image burned on the retina. Thus, British prime ministers, Harold Macmillan (Conservative, 1957–63) and Harold Wilson (Labour, 1964–70, 1974–6), both came to power resolved to maintain the Empire-Commonwealth or, in Wilson's case, an improbable British frontier on the Himalayas.

The problem with understanding decolonization in terms of the *longue durée* is that, if the Braudelian method may be compared to the use of time-lapse photography to capture the life-cycle of an ancient baobab, then decolonization was the removal of several boughs by a logger with a chain-saw, operating between the exposure of individual frames: now you see them, now you don't. If the camera is speeded up somewhat, however, we move into the Braudel's intermediate stage of conjuncture, at which level we may at least start to pick out some detail in the shorter life-span of the colonial state, if not yet of decolonization itself. In other words, although metropolitan politicians, colonial officials and nationalist leaders alike may have perceived the stakes of decolonization in terms of imperial decline and fall, in fact what was immediately at stake was the survival of formal colonial rule within the boundaries of the colonial state, and that, as it turned out, could be liquidated very quickly indeed: now you see it, now you don't.

The colonial state's essential modernity may be understood in three ways. First, as Hobsbawm (1994: 7) points out, the 'entire history of modern imperialism' may be encompassed within a long lifetime, and though the lifetime he chose was Winston Churchill's (1874–1965), it could have been Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), Ho Chi Minh (1890–1967), born Nguyen Tat Thanh, the son of an Annamese mandarin, or Joseph Ravoahangy (1893–1970), Malagasy nationalist and scion of the Merina royal dynasty. Official careers also stretched from the early days of conquest in Africa and Southeast Asia to the struggles with anti-colonial nationalism; while many younger officials went on to enjoy 'second careers' after independence, including Pierre Messmer, High-Commissioner in Dakar in 1959, then de Gaulle's Minister of Armies and subsequently Prime Minister (Messmer 1992). A fair degree of continuity may be supposed in the 'official mind' and in colonial officials' efforts to contain and manage colonial disaggregation after 1945; some of these continuities will become apparent in the course of this study.

But, secondly, colonialism may be understood also as modern in a stronger sense, as an integral part of twentieth-century European cultural and political modernism. Thus, Mazower (1998: ix) argues that Europe too was 'in many respects very new, inventing and reinventing itself over this century through often convulsive political transformation'. Whereas we have tended to see European history culminating in the triumph of democracy at the end of the Cold War, for Mazower it is rather to be understood as a 'story of narrow squeaks and unexpected twists, not inevitable victories and forward marches', where the principal drama resided in the near-defeat of democratic values by those of fascism and its authoritarian near-relations (*ibid.*: xii). By viewing the history of colonialism from such a perspective (although Mazower's canvas is already broad enough, and stretches only fractionally wider in the teasing

implications of his title), we may better understand some of the characteristics of colonial rule, and by extension the reasons for its demise.

To return to solar imagery, it would be a truism to state that the zenith of imperial splendour was also the first moment of decline. But given that the colonial empires reached their greatest extent in 1919–20, with the transfer in the Versailles and Sèvres Treaties of former German and Ottoman territories in Africa and the Near East to British, French, Belgian and South African rule, we may observe that placing transferred territories under League of Nations Mandate, while implying that some nations (i.e. Germany) were 'unfit' for colonial rule, introduced an element of international accountability to colonial rule.⁴ More generally, the Paris peace process was guided by President Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of national self-determination, which ostensibly applied more widely than to the multi-national empires of Europe. As Fűredi argues:

Since the declaration of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, nationalism has been accepted as a legitimate vehicle for asserting autonomy. This has presented a problem for the defenders of empire. Since 1919, it has not been possible to mount an intellectual case against the right of nations to self-determination. (1994a: 10)

The Bolshevik Revolution, too, directly challenged the imperial powers as bastions of the 'last stage of capitalism', and in 1919 established the Third International with the aim of actively bringing down those bastions. Moreover, as if on cue, the Paris Peace Conference coincided with the Indian National Congress's first prolonged, if as yet inchoate, challenge to British rule in India, in the 1919–22 campaigns of disobedience. At the same time, Japanese delegates to the Paris Peace Conference failed to secure a Racial Equality Clause in the League of Nations covenant, with far-reaching implications over the next quarter-century (Shimazu 1998). Thus, the modern era of 'institutionalized' colonial rule was accompanied from the outset by the ideological challenge characterized as the 'Moral Disarmament' of the British empire (Robinson 1979).

This is not to argue simply that the colonial states contained the seeds of their own ineluctable dissolution. Rather, colonial rulers were all the more sensitive to the need to legitimate their rule, and were constrained to couch their policy in recognizably modern terms, whether in the domains of administrative structures, revenue generation, labour policy, agriculture, health and welfare, town planning, internal security, external relations or trade. In other words, colonial states were implicitly accepted as normal parts of the modern world, and indeed, they served as 'laboratories of modernity' in many areas of state practice (Wright 1997; Martin 1996).

However, following Mazower, 'modern' does not mean as modern as all that, and the modernity envisaged in the interwar period might have taken a quite different direction – or indeed simply maintained the direction in which it was apparently headed. Thus the interwar European experience tended to reinforce arguments that democracy was 'not for export' outside of Northern and Western Europe, and was probably decadent even there. National self-determination could be equated with the harsh and often violent treatment of ethnic minorities across Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe; while nationhood was to British imperial eyes at best a paltry

thing, which once acquired, would place, say, the grandeurs of Indian civilization on the same level as, say, 'Guatemala or Belgium'. Turning then to the overseas empires, not only did the ideological sea change of 1919 leave intact the 'civilizing missions' and presumptions of racial inequality implicit in colonial rule, but it was still generally held that 'Civilization', whatever that meant, had to be learnt over 'solar' timescales, and colonial states were instruments for that learning.

Thirdly, however, the colonial state was probably never intended to bear the burden of modern statehood that was thrust upon it. These were, after all, conquest states, their external boundaries defined by international rivalry, their often rickety internal structures and forms of government developed in the aftermath of military occupation, their legitimacy based on technological supremacy. Thus Darwin (1999: 73) describes the colonial state as a 'bundle of districts cello-taped together by colonialism into a dependency', while for Lonsdale:

The colonial state was, and remained to the end, a conquest state. . . . However successful the management of the colonial order was, and however placid the colonial order may have appeared to be, colonial rule always was predicated on the overt or hidden recourse to violence. (Lonsdale 1986a: 235)

The argument here is thus that colonial states were largely cobbled together from other entities with a quite different purpose, some derived from pre-colonial polities, others merely the by-products of imperial convenience, but which retained, as it were, a palimpsest of their origins in conquest. This is not to deny the seriousness of efforts by colonial governments to rule justly or rationally according to their lights, and, as we will see, those efforts intensified in the wake of the Second World War. Rather these efforts might be likened to the process of 'bricolage' described by Lévi-Strauss, for whom mythical thinking is comparable to the work of a handyman (bricoleur) who improvises with pre-existing 'second hand' materials, as opposed to the engineer, who designs everything for the purpose in hand (1962: 30–6). Like Lévi-Strauss's myths, colonial states were in a sense found objects constructed from the 'residues of human works', pressed into service according to a new and rapidly evolving purpose. Looking ahead to later chapters, by 1945 at the latest the colonial state was being subjected to ever more complex iterations of the handyman's craft, and that was even before the question was raised of passing on this improvised creation to new ownership. Indeed, at their most ambitious, the efforts of colonial reformers after 1945 often seemed like an attempt to remake the colonial state from bottom up, to make the shift, in Lévi-Strauss's terms, from bricolage to engineering. The corollary of this, of course, was that colonial rulers wanted to be around for long enough to see their work completed.

Decolonization and the Late Colonial Shift

How then do we articulate the critical shift from 'conjuncture' to 'event', that is, to the short-term political timescales of decolonization? This study does not diverge from the general consensus that this crisis was precipitated by the Second World War, the direct impact of which will be explored more fully in Chapter 3. But it is argued

more generally that the War effected a profound shift in the perceptions of both colonizers and colonized concerning the purpose and future of empire. This will be referred to, in shorthand, as the *late colonial shift*, by association with the 'late colonial state', whose 'lateness' derived from its proximity to decolonization (Darwin 1999). This was experienced quite differently by the colonized and by the colonizing 'official mind', but for both it might broadly be characterised as a shift from a view of colonial rule as 'normal' and a stable fixture in the foreseeable future, to one predicated on rapid, possibly violent or radical political change, even if that change was not always immediately conceived in terms of national independence. What therefore chiefly characterized the late colonial state was an unprecedented degree of uncertainty, where the securities of colonial rule – administrative and military control, metropolitan confidence in imperial continuity, but also inaction, stagnation, repression – were superseded by flux, unpredictable change and fresh opportunities to seize the initiative. This is in fact what we mean by 'crisis' – a term which does not seem out of place when the whole colonial scene is surveyed after 1945, notwithstanding some relatively 'trouble-free' decolonizations.

The concept of a late colonial shift has two immediate analytical advantages for understanding decolonization. First, it allows us to cut across the question of whether colonial empire in 1939 was 'still remarkably resilient' (Darwin), or whether the colonial powers had already, like a latter-day court of Belshazzar, been weighed in the balance and found wanting. On the one hand, the 'steel frame' of colonial rule, as described by David Lloyd George in 1922, held firm, and the colonial 'pax' was maintained. Thus, even the Indian National Congress 'had been forced by 1937 to accept a federal constitution of whose long-term effects its leaders were rightly fearful' (Darwin 1991). The Indian case, and also the contrasting cases of interwar nationalism in Vietnam and Algeria, will be examined in Chapter 2. On the other hand, even before the cataclysm of the Second World War, the colonial powers were already having to work harder at colonialism's 'self-sustaining virtue of equilibrium' (Holland 1985: 1), as they confronted the deeper continuities of imperial instability, or of resistance or challenge to colonial rule, or contemplated the sort of policy reforms which were to become commonplace after 1945. Nationalist revolt or more general disorder in the interwar colonial state heralded the beginnings of progress towards independence from colonial rule, as nationalists in India, Vietnam, or the Dutch East Indies flexed their political muscle, while officials in the Central African Copperbelt, the West Indies, French North and West Africa and elsewhere sought to contain increasingly modern-looking social unrest. In other words, although the Second World War precipitated a crisis of far greater magnitude, colonial rule was coming up against its own internal contradictions. Berque's elegant formulation of this idea suggests both impending decolonization, and its inherent unpredictability: '... seen as a whole, the Maghreb in 1920 has moved beyond the opening Act. The drama has reached Act Two. But it would not be theatre if it did not leave some surprises for the denouement' (1969: 83).

Secondly, since all parties were now finding their way in an intrinsically open-ended process, the agency for decolonization need not be ascribed solely to the colonial powers or to nationalism. On the colonial side, the late colonial shift replaced the 'bricolage' of the pre-1939 colonial state with a new sense of deliberate ambition in

post-war imperial and colonial planning. Not that this planning was necessarily well-founded. On the contrary, it was typically based on persistent myths of colonial purpose, illusions of imperial strength or metropolitan political will, and on 'fantasy' visions of the colonized and their imagined futures (Cooper 1988; Lonsdale 1990). Nonetheless, it would be anachronistic to apply a simple ideological framework, whereby 'liberals' promoted or acquiesced in 'inevitable' decolonization, while a conservative 'old guard' sought to preserve colonial empire against the odds. According to this view, there probably *were* no liberals in the colonial administrations, since officials to a man (and they were almost all men) in London, Paris, Brussels and The Hague sought to preserve empire in some shape or form, or at the least to manage the process of colonial change over the medium to long term, and in that timescale, as John Maynard Keynes used to say, 'we are all dead' (or in the case of the British 'official mind', safely retired to Bath or Tunbridge Wells).

For political actors on the side of the colonized, encouraged by the outcomes of the Second World War, the late colonial shift was of a quite different order. No hard-and-fast distinction need be made between those who actively 'fought for freedom' against colonial rule, and those who accepted the invitation to the gaming table of Gallagher's putative 'imperial croupier'. Certainly, in a number of instances around 1945, anti-colonial nationalists seized the initiative from a hard-pressed, drastically weakened or temporarily eclipsed colonial regime: India, Vietnam and Indonesia spring to mind. 'Freedom fighters' of diverse ideological varieties, and with varying strength of arms and of purpose, figure prominently in several cases. However, the Vietnamese defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was the great exception proving the general rule that colonial armies, even after 1945, inflicted military defeat more readily than they sustained it. On the other hand, the translation of military superiority into political triumph proved more elusive to colonial powers after 1945 than it had in earlier periods. More usually, and although many ostensibly 'peaceful' colonial states teetered on the brink of all-out disorder and violence, the colonial 'struggle' after 1945 was primarily a political one that stayed within official bounds, as colonial politicians responded to the challenge of official initiatives for reform or the limited devolution of political representation and responsibility. Moreover, as Cooper observes, the politics of decolonization 'appears less as a linear progression than as a conjuncture' and African political success was 'less a question of a singular mobilization in the name of the nation than of coalition building, the forging of clientage networks, and of machine politics' ([1994]2003: 36). In other words, we will often find ourselves dealing with 'politics as normal', although the 'normality' of late colonial politics proved to be short-lived as colonial states moved towards the endgame of the later 1950s.

After two introductory and complementary chapters, Chapter 1 addressing the pre-1939 colonial state, and Chapter 2 the character and outlook of indigenous political actors within that state, much of the remainder of this study is taken up with a series of case studies, which have been chosen to exemplify, and in part to synthesize, various aspects of decolonization. Faced with a historical process which touched a plurality of the member states of today's international community over the greater part of the twentieth century, the book's scope has been limited in a number of practical ways. First, it has seemed worthwhile to concentrate on depth rather than

breadth of coverage. The cases chosen are relatively few in number, and may be seen as paradigmatic in various ways; or their interest may be attributed in part to their relative neglect in the literature of decolonization. These cases will mostly be examined in some detail, and many are covered across several chapters. Secondly, almost all cases are taken from the Asian and African formal empires of the four major European colonial powers: Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Of those regions excluded from study, the Middle East largely conformed to a different pattern of imperial over-rule and its demission after 1945, while smaller colonial dependencies in the West Indies, Pacific Ocean and elsewhere largely followed the Asian and African empires, in the timing if not in the manner of their decolonization. Thirdly, the timeframe is largely that of the 'twenty years crisis' after 1945, which may be seen as the 'classic' period of decolonization; this excludes 'late' decolonizations such as the Portuguese cases from consideration, but also more recent quasi-decolonization such as the South African transition to democracy or the handover of Hong Kong. On the whole, the 'end of the affair' in each case is the moment of independence, again for reasons of practicality, but also because it was arguably at this point that the bases for comparison began to diverge, as ex-colonial states embarked on their singular national histories. 'Impact', in the title of this book, should therefore not be taken to embrace the whole post-colonial history of the countries studied, but rather the recognition of how the often-convoluted and compressed processes of decolonization contributed to the sometimes surprising manner and suddenness with which formal empire came to an end.

The hypothesis of a late colonial shift is most easily tested in those cases where the Second World War led more or less immediately to decolonization, in South and Southeast Asia. In South Asia, as we will discuss in Chapter 3, British plans to reconcile Indian self-government with the maintenance of British interests were almost fatally compromised, first by the near-collapse of British rule, and secondly by India's chaotic partition into two separate Dominions. British faith in the ultimately meaningless formula of Dominion status within the British Commonwealth is further illustrated by the divergent cases of Ceylon and Burma. Conversely, even in the Southeast Asian dependencies, following the eclipse of colonial rule under the Japanese onslaught of 1942 (also studied in Chapter 3), it will be shown, in Chapter 4, how the European colonial powers attempted to launch their 'return' on the basis of more rational, 'engineered' state structures, and on the negotiation of new terms of engagement between the colonial state and its clients and antagonists; and how the attempt largely failed, not least because of an underestimation of the forces of nationalism ranged against the new colonial state.

Elsewhere, and particularly in Africa, the policies that emerged from post-war planning had a more decisive impact on the shape of the colonial empires, and thus also on decolonization. Indeed, it has been argued, for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, that the impact of the Second World War was as momentous as that of eventual decolonization (Cooper 2002). This is a subject to which we will return extensively in Chapters 5 and 7. Clearly, African politics in this period was informed by mounting confidence in the possibility of progress towards self-government. However, it would be a mistake to seek to interpret the motivation of ordinary Africans in 1945 in terms of what had been achieved by, say, 1960.

What happened when the channels of 'normal' late colonial politics were blocked off, or the contradictions of colonial rule became too acute, and the late colonial state was forced to respond to armed challenges? In Chapter 6, we examine a number of key cases – Madagascar, Kenya, Algeria, Cyprus – where decolonization was thus dominated by armed insurgency and by the tactical panoply of colonial counter-insurgency. Here, it will be argued, 'lateness' brought not only a new urgency to anti-colonial resistance but also a newly systematic recourse to violence and repression on the part of the colonial state.

Finally, in Chapter 8 we turn to the concept of colonial 'endgame', and to the acceleration of decolonization as it reached a climax at the end of the 1950s. Here we examine not only the reappraisals on the part of the colonial 'official mind' which allowed metropolitan governments and colonial officials to contemplate rapid withdrawal from formal colonial rule, but also the consequences of these reappraisals for the shape and outcomes of decolonization.

Notes

- 1 The subsequent debate was premised, as Fukuyama's article was not, on the collapse of communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe over the autumn of 1989.
- 2 Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1905–93): Ivorian political leader and member of the French parliament, and French minister in the 1950s, first President of Côte d'Ivoire from 1960 until his death.
- 3 The reference is to the French historian Fernand Braudel's (1980) subdivision of historical time into 'structure', i.e. over the *longue durée* lasting perhaps centuries, 'conjuncture', i.e. the length of economic cycles lasting up to perhaps a century, and 'event'. This article was written in 'this year of grace 1958' (ibid.: 34), a crowded year indeed for '*l'histoire événementielle*' in France and Algeria.
- 4 For the brief over-extension of British imperial responsibilities into Central Asia in this period, see Gallagher 1982. For the Mandate System, see Chamberlain 1998: 13–15; German territories in the Pacific were transferred to Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

The Colonial State: Patterns of Rule, Habits of Mind

Whatever the future may hold, the influence of the West upon India is likely to decrease. But it would be absurd to imagine that the British connection will not leave a permanent mark upon Indian life. On the merely material side . . . the largest irrigation system in the world . . . some 60,000 miles of metalled roads; over 42,000 miles of railways . . . 230,000 scholastic institutions . . . a great number of buildings . . . The vast area of India has been completely surveyed, most of its lands assessed, and a regular census taken of its population and its productivity. An effective defensive system has been built up . . . , it has an Indian army with century-old traditions, and a police force which compares favourably with any outside a few Western countries. The postal department . . . the Forestry Department . . . These great State activities are managed by a trained bureaucracy, which is today almost entirely Indian. (Thompson & Barratt 1934: 654, in Chatterjee 1993: 14–15)

REG: All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

XERXES: Brought peace.

REG: Oh. Peace? Shut up! (Chapman et al. 1979)

. . . oxen taxes, taxes on 'chattering pigs', salt taxes, rice field taxes, ferry boat taxes, bicycle or conveyance taxes, taxes on betel or areca nuts, tea and drug taxes, lamp taxes, housing taxes, temple taxes, bamboo and timber taxes, taxes on peddlers' boats, tallow taxes, lacquer taxes, rice and vegetable taxes, taxes on cotton and silk, iron taxes, fishing taxes, bird taxes, and copper taxes. (The 'Asia Ballad', popular in the Tonkin Free School in 1907, in Scott 1976: 95)

Appointed French Minister of Colonies in 1906, Etienne Clémentel is said to have exclaimed: 'Ah, the colonies, I didn't know there were so many!' Aside from what this may tell us about colonial expertise amongst the French Third Republic's legions of parish-pump politicians, Clémentel's professed ignorance also reflected the novelty of the map's message. At the time, although the Algerian agricultural lands