

Decolonization and the Materialist Evolution of Liberty

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Introduction

While freedom is often viewed through the paradigm of social and political rights, it is also inextricably linked to economic conditions. In effect, freedom is primarily governed by the material circumstances in which it exists, with social and political rights being largely contingent on certain economic rights also guaranteed. These exist on two distinct fronts. 'Capabilities,' which refer to the equality of rights and abilities for individuals to acquire particular economic instruments — for example, the right to ownership of property in an individual or collective sense. If a person or community cannot hold property where others can, then their liberties are obviously restricted.

Conversely, 'Capacities' relate to the ability of individuals within a society to be socially mobile — not merely in a theoretical, potential sense, but practically. This concept has its origins in materialist critiques of liberalism, and is in effect a reflection of how the economic class relates to freedom, insofar as both the baron and the beggar have the equal to purchase a bayside mansion under equal economic Capabilities; a Capacities approach recognizes the positive relationship between wealth and true freedom under market structures.

Colonialism and its aftermath reflect the duality of these different notions of economic freedom, with Capabilities afforded on paper while economic Capacities were limited in practice.

More specifically, colonialism and imperialism formerly served as the primary tool of economic consolidation for global superpowers, producing higher material living standards for Europeans while severely constraining the rights and freedoms of colonized people.

During the early period of colonization in Africa, the European powers used the economic tools of taxation and currency to enforce hegemony over resource ownership within the region, prioritizing an expansion of their international productive capacity. As the alignment between ethnicity and power disintegrated in postcolonial Africa, class became increasingly prominent, with entrenched interests of an elite minority limiting genuine political participation. Decades later and on the other side of the globe, decolonization would coincide with the establishment of Cold-War-era intergovernmental institutions, which in turn defined political self-determination and liberty in postcolonial nations.

Imperialism & Material Freedom

The limitation of economic Capacities imposed by colonial powers also resulted in limitations on the political agency of colonies. Conversely, European powers enforced hegemony and defended their productive capacities by restricting their colonies' political agency. This is most acutely presented in the case study of British imperialism in its western African regions.

When the British arrived on the west coast of Africa (1821-1888), they encountered an immediate issue with their desire to create a vast resource-producing empire: a lack of market systems that would incentivize production. This stemmed from the largely communal economic structures in place that did not necessitate the production of goods and services beyond what was needed, which, through a combination of both economic interest and racial vilification, led the Empire to see the African peoples as 'lazy.' This is in itself deeply ironic given the greater freedoms enjoyed by the Africans under the pre-colonial system, where production matched only what was needed for consumption at the time — a reflection of both Capability and opportunity in economic freedom.

After formulating a justification for intervention, the British devised a plan that coerced the native population into working directly for the Empire. They began creating jobs paid with British pounds and, to force an incentive to work, coupled it with a new “hut tax,” requiring that individuals pay a given amount of these pounds or have their hut burnt down by authorities. In addition to this, they began operating markets that only accepted paid British pounds, creating a positive incentive for British monetary acquisition.

By operating this dual system of taxation and barter, the British effectively forced the local population into wage labor without directly threatening violence as the starting point. In doing so, they placed heavy restrictions on the economic liberty of the colonized Africans, forcing them to adopt capitalist modes of economic production through the implied threat of violence. This system was soon adopted across the German and French colonies, becoming a staple of restrictive economic practice as well as expansion for empires.

As colonial independence movements grew in popularity, the various European nations backed off from direct control over their colonies — often operating legislatures that granted a modicum of representation. However, in all cases, the nations were still bound to the occupying power’s currency, meaning that, while on paper they enjoyed political liberties, they were still bound to the interests of their currency-issuer, thus restricting any true freedom in policy-making on both fiscal and monetary fronts. In effect, they became states of the larger European nations, as, say, Ohio in the United States on an administrative level. However, the colonies lacked the cultural hegemony of a federation, and were instead subjected for the material benefit of Europe. By restricting their protectorates’ monetary sovereignty, democratic self-determination and freedom in fiscal policy-making were deliberately subverted.

This effect persisted through decolonization and into the postcolonial world. The limitations placed on government policy-making limited the postcolonial populace’s political and economic freedoms, which became unable to rely on the State as an investor, thus strengthening the control of foreign powers and corporations over their resources. Even now, many African nations are bound to the CFA Franc, which is in turn pegged to the Euro, predictably producing a similar result as the imposition of European currencies on Africa. This is, in turn, a direct reflection of the theoretical Capabilities and Capacities approaches, wherein native populations are granted the theoretical Capability for independence and freedom, while the practical Capacity to obtain it is restricted.

Stratification in Postcolonial Africa

Conversely, because the limiting of colonial populations' economic Capacities (and thus liberties) persisted post-decolonization, the legacy of colonialism in postcolonial states created conditions conducive to increased inequalities.

In Africa, for instance, high levels of inequality and restrictions on mobility can be understood as resulting from a process of class stratification originating from the formation of economic institutions of the early colonial state. For much of the colonial era, the European bureaucracy found it challenging to recruit functionaries for their colonies; subsequently, European 'public servants' in most African colonies were better paid and less qualified than their metropolitan counterparts. The colonial government thereby recruited individuals whose subpar performance had limited their advancement in the metropole and were attracted by the greater responsibility and discretionary power they would enjoy in the colonies. In coordination with the absence of any political representation of the African population, this further undermined the responsiveness of states, exacerbating corruption while systematically suppressing demand for greater political liberty.

Upon its departure, a rapid transfer of power was effectuated from the colonial state to a new elite, with only a sparse measure of legitimacy. In public office, top positions were available to a small minority of Africans, with isolated attempts from the late 1920s onwards to include more Africans into the civil service failing. This handful of Africans rose into leading positions, drawing level to, but moreover outranking Europeans, for the first time in the 20th century. This particular segment of the population was often the greatest beneficiary of the colonial era; in West Africa, the state after independence was predominantly staffed by ethnic groups that enjoyed intimate contact with colonial authorities. In the private sector, despite improving attitudes toward local elites by European expatriates, members of the upper echelons of corporations maintained distance from the African employees and the majority of the working population. Overall, the resulting postcolonial society was thus unresponsive to broader African populations, felt little to no incentive to increase popular participation, and was less likely to improve welfare and afford greater liberties to the majority of the populace.

Decolonization and the Cold War

While stratification was a side product of elite formation during decolonization, regaining genuine political liberty in newly decolonized states was also shaped by proxy, non-colonial interests. The waning role of European colonization in the 20th century afforded an opportunity for renewed self-determination of occupied states; at the same time, this coincided with the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, which effectively redirected efforts at national independence towards adherence to intergovernmental institutions.

Through Roosevelt's promotion of the Atlantic Charter, the United States signified the end of the colonial era. Yet, although the US generally supports the concept of national self-determination, it maintained strong ties with its European allies, which continued to maintain imperial holds over their former colonies. Intensifying geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and 1950s would only complicate its anti-colonial and anti-imperial position, since American support for decolonization was offset by its concerns about communist expansion and Soviet strategic ambitions in Europe. As the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union became the focus of American foreign policy, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations became increasingly worried that as European powers lost their colonies or granted them independence, the Soviet-backed communist bloc could gain power. In turn, this could tip the international balance of power in the direction of the Soviet Union and make it more difficult for US allies to maintain control over economic resources. Indonesia's struggle for independence from the Netherlands (1945-50), Vietnam's war against France (1945-54), and nationalism and self-proclaimed socialist acquisitions of Egypt (1952) and Iran (1951) intensified the US's anxiety. Independence and the accompanying uncertainty of alliances became an overwhelming prospect for the American administration, even if the new government did not directly associate itself with the Soviet Union.

As a result, the US encouraged the newly independent countries in the third world to adopt a government allied with the West through a package of assistance, technical assistance, and sometimes military intervention. The Soviet Union adopted a similar strategy to encourage new countries to join the communist bloc and tried to persuade the post-colonial countries that communism was a non-imperialist economic and political ideology.

Ultimately, despite both the US and the Soviet Union proclaiming anti-imperialist agendas, the economic demand for resources, proxy territories, and alliances necessitated their respective interventions into decolonizing states through intergovernmental institutions and

authority. The newly independent states that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s became an important factor in changing the balance of power within the United Nations. In 1946, the United Nations had 35 member states. As newly independent countries joined the organization after decolonization, its membership expanded to 127 in 1970.

The development of genuine self-determination in these newly independent states is thus inextricably linked with these intergovernmental institutions' agendas; by extension, we must examine the degree to which genuine liberty was enabled within the scope of these materialist interests.

Conclusion

Colonialism is, at its core, a materialist exercise that sought to strengthen global powers' intercontinental supply chains and resource base at the expense of native rights and liberties. Though formal colonial vestiges collapsed, this practice continued, with stratification and Cold War anxieties shaping the postcolonial nation-states that emerged internationally. So long as the instruments that enforce the denigration of the global south persist, true self-determination and individual freedom for once colonized people will be a difficult, if not unachievable, ideal.

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