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Human Rights and Decolonization: New Perspectives and Open Questions

Jan Eckel

**Menschenrechte im Schatten kolonialer Gewalt: Die
Dekolonisierungskriege in Kenia und Algerien 1945–1962**

Fabian Klose

R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009. x + 346 pages.

(forthcoming in English translation

from University of Pennsylvania Press)

**Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human
Rights**

Roland Burke

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 264 pages.

In the global history of human rights in the twentieth century, decolonization is one of the most interesting fields to study. The independence of practically all of Africa's and Asia's nations, gained in the almost miraculously short span of the two decades after the Second World War, was one of the most dramatic processes of political emancipation in world history. The events and the consequences of decolonization were to profoundly shape international politics until at least the end of the century. Viewed from the angle of human rights history, the setting for the struggle against colonial domination after World War II greatly differed from what it had been before. It was only in the 1940s that the language of human rights gained a foothold in international relations, as part of the Allies' attempt to spread positive visions for the postwar future. Even more importantly, the new international human rights regimes of both the United Nations and the Council of Europe, with their highly symbolic rights declarations and their monitoring committees, were established in the years after the war and thus well before the decolonization process took on steam. Consequently, unlike in the interwar years, the ideal of human rights was now available as a possible justification for the colonies' struggle for freedom and as a potential supporting ideology. In the historian's hindsight, this turns the study of decolonization into a crucial test for the emancipatory potential of the human rights idea in history.

Two new books—both published dissertations—set out to delve into the complexities of this topic. By and large richly documented, they deal with different and mostly

complementary subjects. Fabian Klose's *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Power* focuses on two colonial wars: Great Britain's suppression of the so-called Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya between 1952 and 1956 and France's war against the Algerian independence movement between 1954 and 1962. Roughly half of his book is dedicated to the analysis of colonial violence and the British attempts at legitimizing their brutal warfare. These parts, consequently, are not related to human rights history in the strict sense. The other half deals with the human rights policies of both the metropolitan governments and the anticolonial movements, drawing on archival material from British, French, and UN records. Roland Burke's *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*, meanwhile, examines the role African and Asian nations played in the development of the UN human rights regime from its inception in 1946 through the 1970s. He concentrates on four key moments or aspects of this development which he sees as symptomatic of broader trends: the conference of African and Asian nations in Bandung in 1955; the attitudes toward the right to self-determination and the right to petition; the UN human rights conference in Tehran in 1968; and, finally, the emergence of the doctrine of cultural relativism.

Klose and Burke share a number of important assumptions. Both consider the idea and the politics of human rights as a key feature of the decolonization process. On the one hand, they regard human rights ideals as an essential ingredient of anticolonialism. Klose, looking at political activists in the colonies, emphasizes that human rights rhetoric came to play a key role in legitimizing their struggle. Burke, for his part, stresses the fact that during the 1950s independent African and Asian states strongly committed themselves to the "universality" of the human rights idea. On the other hand, the authors see colonial and postcolonial politicians as decisive actors in the shaping of international human rights politics, especially at the United Nations. More specifically, they frame Afro-Asian initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s as a positive "contribution" to a praiseworthy human rights regime. In this way, at least for the roughly two decades following the war, they trace an essentially positive relationship between human rights and colonial emancipation. Both interpret human rights as an expression of progressive, emancipatory ideals and even an important basis for the furthering of independence and freedom. Finally, another shared characteristic of both books is that they stop short of examining whether and to what extent human rights mattered for the decision of the colonial powers to abandon their colonies.

The two studies may not add up to a coherent narrative but they develop elements of an interpretation with which every future analysis will have to engage. Therefore, they seem to provide a fruitful occasion for a reflection on the history of human rights in decolonization. As yet the still nascent historiography on human rights has not paid much attention to the decolonization process and authors have dealt with only rather limited aspects. In response, it seems valuable to take stock systematically, examining the role of human rights for both activists in the colonies and metropolitan powers, the uses of the idea in different forums, and the effects of human rights politics for the overall process of decolonization. In part, I build on the results Klose and Burke have reached, but I also suggest new interpretations on the basis of different material or by highlighting aspects with which they do not deal. In addition, since research on the topic is still fledgling it seems useful to raise some important questions that will

have to be addressed in future studies in order to fully understand the many facets of human rights in decolonization.

Without disagreeing with many of the authors' observations, in what follows I offer an essentially different line of interpretation. Broadening the historical focus underlying both studies, respectively, I argue that the history of human rights in decolonization is more complex and ambiguous than either of the accounts might suggest. It should be stressed that this history is not a terrain for easy formulae; it hardly seems fit to provide historians with a "grand narrative," whether one of emancipation or one of hopes betrayed. At the most general level, what can be said is that in the process leading to the end of colonialism, human rights were neither highly significant nor completely absent. Their interest for the study of decolonization lies in between these extremes. The story of human rights in decolonization is the story of their occasional importance and relative weight, of experimental and shifting strategies, ambiguous appropriations, and limited effects. Their meaning and instrumentality were different for different actors, at different points in time, and in different forums. This makes it necessary to focus on specific contexts and to look for partial explanations.

More specifically, I will contend that looking beyond those relatively few instances where African and Asian actors did refer to human rights, the new international language proves to have been clearly marginal in their political project. Furthermore, those activists and states that did base their claims on human rights did not so much express their commitment to universal norms as appropriate them for their specific anticolonial policies. To them, human rights served as a largely sporadic strategy of legitimizing their struggle against colonialism. This strategy, moreover, seems to have been much more important at the level of supranational coalitions than in the rhetoric of individual activists. By far the most important forum was the United Nations, and both Klose and Burke are quite correct in arguing that postcolonial actors decisively shaped UN human rights work. African and Asian initiatives in the UN were ambiguous, however, serving as a highly politicized, if largely symbolic, attempt to counter the global hegemony of First World states and to restructure the international state system. All these efforts did make a difference in metropolitan governments' considerations about withdrawing from the colonies—but the difference was slight. In the British case, indications can be found that in the eyes of policymakers anticolonial criticism did come to affect the international image and the legitimacy of the British position in the world and thus constituted a factor in the decision to end colonial rule. However, this occurred at a relatively late point in time and human rights accusations never formed a dominant motivation for colonial retreat.

This essay will discuss three dimensions of the topic that appear to be particularly important. The first section attempts to assess the significance of human rights for anticolonial movements. The second deals with the policy of postcolonial states in the United Nations. Finally, the third section considers the attitude of colonial powers toward human rights and analyzes the role human rights played in the end of colonial rule. By looking at these different contexts, I hope to provide an interpretation that is in keeping with current views of the decolonization process itself. Given the vast dimensions and enormous complexity of the dissolution of colonial empires, many

historians have come to prefer limited, fractured, and case-by-case explanations over static, general models, however multicausal. In view of the variegated character and long duration of decolonization, it would indeed be surprising to discover that human rights played a clear-cut role in the process.

Human Rights in Anticolonial Movements

In the 1940s, the colonial powers committed themselves to a wide range of principles that stood in notable contrast to the idea and practice of colonial rule. Already during the Second World War, in an attempt to mobilize worldwide support and, not least, to harness the colonies for the war effort, metropolitan governments vowed to fight the war for the purpose of freedom, democracy, and human rights. After the end of the war, they formalized their commitment by signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950 (though France did not ratify it until the 1970s). In theory, the newly proclaimed principles provided colonial actors with a new basis to justify their aspirations to gain independence.

Both Klose and Burke use the emergence of human rights language and the establishment of international rights regimes as starting points for their studies. In the first chapter of his book, Klose argues that in the early 1940s activists in the colonies began to seize upon the Allied promises for the postwar future, human rights figuring prominently among them (29–45). In particular, they referred to the so-called Atlantic Charter of August 1941, originally a press statement following the meeting between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill (and subsequently interpreted by both in different and mutually exclusive ways).¹ Klose cites a considerable number of political leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, Carlos Rómulo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, and Ferhat Abbas, who demanded that the Charter's principles be put into practice.

These activists were certainly important exponents of anticolonial thought and Klose is quite correct in arguing that the Atlantic Charter turned into a central reference point for anticolonialism. However, this was not due to the idea of human rights, a term which the Charter did not even mention. Rather, what sparked the enthusiastic reception in the colonies was the fact that the Charter explicitly stated the principle of self-determination. By speaking of self-determination, the Allied leaders reactivated a promise that had been prominent in the subjected regions of the world since the end of the First World War, when U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and British prime minister David Lloyd George had first given it international salience.² Many of the activists in the colonies who now heralded the Atlantic Charter did so precisely because it seemed to confirm and to finally fulfill the hopes that had been harbored for more than twenty years. Significantly, in his "Political Blueprint of Nigeria" Nnamdi Azikiwe (who was to become the first president of independent Nigeria) referred to both the Atlantic Charter *and* Wilson's Fourteen Points. Arguing that "political autonomy is the summum bonum of political existence," he used both documents to legitimize his demand for the "right of all people to choose the form of government under which they may live."³ At the time, self-determination had not yet been formulated as a human right and not even the landmark Universal Declaration

included it explicitly.⁴ It was only later that the principle was defined as an element of the human rights idea and, as will be argued below, this was to be one of the primary ways decolonized nations appropriated the international human rights regime. To stress the distinction between self-determination and human rights is not a matter of semantic hair splitting. Particularly since Klose is not the only author equating both ideas, it seems important to recall that in tracing the genesis of international human rights language historians should be careful not to project back the ample understanding of human rights that we have come to be familiar with.⁵

Not only does the Atlantic Charter not illustrate the prominence of human rights language in anticolonial thought. A close and comprehensive reading of political writings suggests that it never turned into an anticolonial ideology or even into an important rhetoric at all.⁶ The role of human rights in anticolonial thought is a question of proportions. It is true that in the vast number of anticolonial pamphlets numerous authors can be found who at one time or another adopted the term “human rights.” However, they are outweighed by the sheer mass of texts that do not mention it at all. Many more political activists could be cited who simply did not refer to human rights, including figures as different as the first Indian president, Jawaharlal Nehru, the Vietnamese resistance leader Ho Chi Minh, Sékou Touré, the Guinean exponent of Marxist authoritarianism, or Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Senegalese philosopher-statesman who developed the concept of an African cultural identity.⁷ At the level of supranational coalitions, particularly in the nonaligned movement and in Pan-Africanism, human rights assumed a greater importance. These movements’ use of the concept was surprisingly short-lived, however. Thus, the overall picture belies the assumption that the new international language came to occupy a central place in the struggle for independence.

To begin with, the ideological conceptions of African and Asian activists consisted of extremely heterogeneous ideas and plans. Politically, they ranged from parliamentary democracy to communism and from “African Socialism” to “forced development.” There was hardly anything on which leaders of the anticolonial struggle did not disagree, whether the question of which “Western” values should be adopted and for what purposes, the question of violence as a means of liberation, the shape of their countries’ postindependence relations to the colonial powers, future intra-African relations as articulated in “Pan-Africanism,” or the pace and priority of economic development. In this bewildering *mélange* of ideas, shared beliefs were rather few. Since the only reference point all authors had in common was the fairly abstract notion of the “colonial experience,” agitation against colonial domination essentially rested on a negative consensus. More than anything else, the ideology of African and Asian movements was an “anti-ideology,” creating a sense of coherence by emphasizing what was to be rejected. Consequently, anticolonialism, anti-neocolonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and anti-apartheid were the foremost political catchwords of the speeches and pamphlets, providing the anticolonial movement with what little unity it had.

It was entirely consistent with this ideology *ex negativo* that those “positive” objectives figuring prominently in anticolonial writings were few and general in character. Essentially, they amounted to vague countervisions of colonial subjugation. Three of

them were particularly important: the aim of national independence and freedom, the principle of self-government or self-determination, and the idea of racial equality. The project of economic development, even though frequently proclaimed in the pamphlets, appears to have been less consensual. Finally, national unity, another prominent propagandistic claim, was a reflection of ethnic and cultural diversity rather than of colonial rule, used to mobilize all different groups within the colonies. Even though they clearly did not provide a consistent political program, these principles at least constituted widespread and frequently voiced demands on which most activists could agree.

In connection with these objectives, the language of rights did play a notable role. Political leaders brandished colonialism as the denial of rights and they insisted on the “right” to self-determination, sovereignty, or independence. Patrice Lumumba’s apodictic claim in 1958 that Congolese independence could not “be considered by Belgium as a gift; on the contrary, it is a question of the enjoyment of a right that the Congolese people have lost,” was only one of many that used a similar rhetoric.⁸ This was a general rights discourse, however, that had been circulating in the colonies for some decades, as Bonny Ibhawoh has suggested, and neither referred to the term “*human rights*” nor to the UN declarations and institutions.⁹

Looking at those groups and activists who did explicitly refer to human rights and examining the concrete political use they made of it, the picture becomes even more complex. Activists were far from applying human rights in a uniform way. The most consistent advocate of a human rights idea that closely matched the principles enshrined in the UN human rights system was Azikiwe. Already in 1943, he drafted a “Freedom Charter” that included a comprehensive catalog of rights, including the right to life, freedom of opinion and of association, the right to education and to health, and the right to self-determination. In later years, Azikiwe persistently criticized the denial of fundamental human rights to Africans, frequently referring to the Universal Declaration of 1948. Furthermore, he worked out the vision of a democratic Nigeria, of which human rights, mainly spelled out as basic political rights, formed an integral part. Finally, he even planned the outlines of a Pan-African union which, among others, would be based on a human rights convention.¹⁰

Nevertheless, with his conception of human rights Azikiwe was a singular figure, an exception even among exceptions.¹¹ Much more typical of the anticolonial seizures was an occasional use that did not make human rights the centerpiece of the political rhetoric. In Julius Nyerere’s speeches, for instance, human rights had shifting meanings, underscoring the demand for suffrage independent of income, or alternatively expressing the notion of a just rule of law. Most importantly, Tanganyika’s first president defined human rights as a commitment to the equality of men and races.¹² At times, both the embrace and the rejection of the human rights idea coexisted in the political thought of one author. The first Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, occasionally strengthened his claims by referring to the Universal Declaration, even though more often he distanced himself from the ideas it expressed.¹³

The very example of Nkrumah points to the fact that at the radical end of the spectrum, anticolonial activists denounced human rights and related principles as hypocritical or decadent “Western” values, repudiating them as guidelines for the

postcolonial future. Nkrumah himself derided Western politicians for the fact that they “broadcast the need to respect fundamental freedoms, the right of men to live free from the shadow of fears [, that they] proclaimed the Atlantic Charter and the Charter of the United Nations, and then said that all these had no reference to the enslaved world.”¹⁴ Similarly, Frantz Fanon, the prophet of violent resistance, ridiculed the belief in human rights rhetoric as a contemptible arrangement with the colonial oppressor: “The entire action of these nationalist political parties during the colonial period is action of the electoral type: a string of philosophico-political dissertations on the themes of the rights of peoples to self-determination, the rights of man to freedom from hunger and human dignity, and the unceasing affirmation of the principle ‘One man, one vote.’ The national political parties never lay stress upon the necessity of a trial of armed strength, for the good reason that their objective is not the radical overthrowing of the system.”¹⁵

A more visible and more consistent use of human rights can be observed at the level of supranational coalitions and in international forums, where African and Asian states sought to articulate common interests in the hope of increasing their weight in the international arena. It was here that postcolonial nations used the strategy of anticolonial appropriation most prominently. They did so precisely by defining their central demands of self-determination and racial equality as human rights. However, this was only one strategy among others in the fight for independence and a more important role in international relations; outside the United Nations it was never applied more than tentatively. This tentative embrace has to be seen as part of a more general “subaltern” logic with which political and social groups in the colonies used metropolitan discourses in order to employ them against the colonial powers and demand that the latter practice what they preach.¹⁶ These attempts can be observed in the field of labor legislation just as much as in discussions about citizenship or freedom of movement. In the same way, the language of development can be viewed as a strategy of appropriation and as such probably filled a more important role than the reference to human rights.¹⁷

The nonaligned movement, which was the most important and long-lived of the supranational coalitions, provides a case in point. This movement was a loosely organized platform coordinating a vast array of African, Asian, and Arab states. Their meetings aimed at establishing a “third force” in international affairs, drawing international attention to the needs of the postcolonial world and articulating their positions on world politics.¹⁸ The nonaligned movement (calling itself Afro-Asian solidarity movement at the time) made its first appearance at a widely noticed conference at Bandung in 1955 and subsequently met at regular intervals.

Roland Burke uses the Bandung conference as a key example of the strong commitment African and Asian nations in the 1950s and 1960s displayed toward the idea of human rights (1–35). From the various invocations of the term in conference speeches and from the official recognition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a “common standard of achievement,” he concludes that Bandung marked the “high point in support for the universality of human rights among the Third World states” (14–15). However, Burke who otherwise is careful to differentiate between the various uses and meanings of the human rights idea, seems to take the

Bandung rhetoric too much at face value. He focuses exclusively on the “universalistic” notions in the proceedings. Thus, his interpretation of the early relationship between decolonization and human rights loses sight of both the overall place of human rights at the conference and its manifest political instrumentalization. To begin with, Bandung was not a human rights conference but rather a formative gathering dealing with a broad range of current world problems. “Human Rights and Self-Determination” constituted one major topic among several, others being economic cooperation, the problems of dependent peoples, or world peace. More importantly, the delegations infused human rights with a specific meaning. They placed particular emphasis on the principle of self-determination as “a pre-requisite of the full enjoyment of all fundamental Human Rights” and denounced racial discrimination and colonial rule as violations of human rights. None of these had been prominent claims in the human rights context at the time, not even at the United Nations. Thus, by referring to genuinely colonial experiences and framing them in the new international language, Bandung provides the clearest example of the attempt to redefine the human rights idea and shape it according to anticolonial principles.

Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that Bandung constituted only a brief moment. At the subsequent nonaligned summits in the 1960s and 1970s, human rights clearly receded to the background. Conference documents almost exclusively applied the term to denounce current cases of what was considered to be colonial suppression, specifically directing it against South Africa, Israel, Portugal, and the United States for its policy in Indochina.¹⁹ To a very large degree, the nonaligned movement was and remained an anticolonial platform. In this case, too, the negative consensus of opposing (neo-)colonialism, imperialism, and foreign domination proved to be the only element holding together the otherwise unlikely coalition of culturally diverse and politically heterogeneous countries vastly differing in their economic levels. Even the two other main concepts that the nonaligned movement contributed to the discussion about world affairs—peace and development—remained closely linked to the colonial experience. The movement saw the end of colonialism as an essential precondition for a peaceful world order and it regarded developmental policies as a strategy of overcoming the economic inequalities resulting from colonialism and neocolonialism. Human rights reappeared only in 1979, as a reaction to the rapidly increasing importance that the term had been gaining in the Western international politics of the decade.²⁰ Now the nonaligned movement framed its concern for economic development in the language of human rights, in a move that paralleled the efforts of African and Asian states in the United Nations at the time.²¹ Thus, just as at Bandung earlier, the movement sought to appropriate human rights for its specific political project. However, by now the relationship to the concept had grown even more ambiguous. This was manifested in the fact that the 1979 conference harshly criticized what delegates regarded as the Western states’ attempt to use human rights accusations for intervention into the domestic affairs of Third World countries.²²

The trajectory of the Pan-African movement, the second prominent supranational coalition, largely confirms these observations. Revived at the end of the Second World War, the movement remained largely dormant before the late 1950s, when finally it took a number of initiatives. The year 1958 turned out to be the *annus mirabilis* of

human rights in the Pan-African context.²³ At the Conference of Independent States, the conference of the Pan-African Movement of East and Central Africa, and the All-African Peoples' Conference, all held between April and December, references to human rights and the Universal Declaration abounded. Again, the anticolonial and antiracist appropriations predominated in the various speeches, resolutions, and final acts. However, the embrace of human rights proved to be even more transitory than in the case of the nonaligned movement, as the follow-up conferences did not even use the term for the many accusations of colonial repression and the numerous demands for national freedom. The conferences of the 1960s were shaped by the fact that an increasing number of states were on the threshold of independence or had already attained it. Accordingly, the principles of nonintervention, territorial integrity, and economic and cultural cooperation, most of them sitting uneasily with human rights norms, took center stage.²⁴ Finally, these priorities were also mirrored in the structure of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the intergovernmental organization founded in 1963. The OAU did not adopt a declaration of human rights. Even though the Charter of the OAU did contain a reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it mainly stipulated the sovereign rights of the member states: nonintervention, territorial integrity, national independence, sovereign equality, and freedom for still-dependent territories.²⁵ In line with these principles the practical work of the OAU in the next decade and a half turned out to be extremely passive, the struggle against Portuguese colonialism and apartheid remaining at the fore. The organization intervened only occasionally in internal conflicts, and only when they threatened regional stability, such as in the Congo crisis in 1964–65, the Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970, and the Angolan civil war in 1975–76.

Thus, a look at the broader picture reveals that even though not completely absent, human rights rhetoric in most contexts served as a rather marginal and sporadic strategy of anticolonial legitimation, a strategy that moreover was not free of ambiguities. The one important exception was the United Nations. The UN constituted the only forum in which human rights acquired a persistently high importance for African and Asian states. It was only here that they invested considerable resources and energies into influencing international human rights policies. Consequently, African and Asian policies in the world organization merit close attention, as they seem to be crucial for explaining the role of human rights in decolonization.

Anticolonialism and Human Rights at the United Nations

The institutional precondition for the Afro-Asian attempt at influencing the UN human rights work was a huge influx of newly independent states. Between 1955 and 1965, almost fifty former colonial territories entered the world organization as members, providing postcolonial countries with the majority of votes in the General Assembly. This change in membership undoubtedly marked the most profound caesura in the history of the organization up to that point.

Both Klose (46–61, 275–89) and Burke agree that the United Nations was an important institutional framework for the anticolonial struggle, not least because it enabled African and Asian nations to regularly voice public criticism of colonialism. In addition, both authors convincingly argue that postcolonial states dominated the

UN human rights work and were in a position to significantly shape the agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the Afro-Asian hegemony manifested itself in four areas. First, it was the driving force behind the salience given to the right to self-determination in various contexts. Moreover, the Afro-Asian initiative and votes were crucial in bringing about the adoption of two signal documents, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960 and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1965, both establishing new committees to monitor infractions. Finally, postcolonial states engaged in a persistent, decades-long struggle against apartheid that strongly contributed to isolating South Africa in the international arena. By highlighting these developments in the realm of human rights, both books substantiate and differentiate earlier assessments of the effects of decolonization on the United Nations, most notably the account of Evan Luard, who has called the decade after 1955 the “Age of Decolonization” in the UN.²⁶ Burke’s book, in particular, provides the first detailed study of African and Asian states’ policy in the United Nations, covering the relatively long period from the late 1940s through the 1970s.

In his interpretation of postcolonial human rights policy in the 1950s and 1960s, Burke employs a discourse of “contributions” and “achievements,” characteristic not only of his book but of a whole strand of recent human rights historiography.²⁷ This discourse leads him to frame African and Asian initiatives as positive steps in developing the UN human rights regime inasmuch as they developed it at all. In his third and fourth chapters dealing with the right of petition and the right to self-determination, respectively, every right codified and every committee established as a result of Afro-Asian proposals appears as a valuable addition to the human rights system. This perspective falls short not only because the claim that a “Commission on Human Rights that devoted too much time to debating apartheid was better than one that debated nothing” appears to be a personal or political judgment rather than a historical one (147). In addition, this interpretation fails to conceive of the United Nations organization as the political arena it actually was: an arena in which all initiatives followed a decidedly political logic and sprang from complex state interests.²⁸ It is at this point that the clearly limited empirical focus of the book, which is almost exclusively based on official UN records, most strongly comes to the fore. Even though understandable for pragmatic reasons, the decision not to use archival material reduces the analysis to official positions and public speeches. On this basis, the political motives and aims behind the human rights initiatives can only be inferred. (Burke does so by contextualizing the publicly voiced positions of African and Asian delegations with the political situation in the respective countries.)

At any rate, the story of the right to petition demonstrates that what Burke regards as “contributions” in reality were expressions of shrewd political calculation (59–91). As Burke shows, African and Asian states supported the idea of individual petitions from the early 1960s on after the great powers had blocked it in the UN Commission on Human Rights in the 1950s. Thereby, they gave rise to the establishment of petition mechanisms in the Special Committee of 24 monitoring the Declaration on the Granting of Independence, the Special Committee on Apartheid, and under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Moreover, the Afro-Asian

group also voted in favor of expanding the competence of the Commission on Human Rights, allowing it to study situations revealing a “consistent pattern” of human rights violations. However, these developments hardly seem to be a “most stunning paradox [because] a UN dominated by dictatorships should prove more successful in expanding human rights monitoring than one occupied by a majority of democracies,” as Burke argues (91). Rather, African and Asian states were careful to support the procedure of petitions only in those cases where they could be directed against colonial powers and held little risk of being applied against themselves. Burke himself provides ample evidence for the tactically limited aim of discrediting colonial rule and in particular apartheid.

The same underlying view of inherently positive contributions leads Burke to overemphasize the “universalistic” approach of African and Asian nations in the United Nations. In his chapter on self-determination, the author convincingly argues that in the 1950s the notion of self-determination as brought forward by postcolonial states contained democratic elements corresponding to the relative strength of democratic anticolonial nationalism at the time (92–111). He pushes this point too far, however, when he calls the Declaration on the Granting of Independence the “zenith of the universalist, democratic tendency” or speaks of a “successful struggle to make human rights truly universal” (55, 145). Again, this interpretation overlooks the fact that the anticolonial appropriation of human rights was a highly instrumental strategy.

In addition, both Klose and Burke omit or at least strongly underemphasize the reverse side of the anticolonial shaping of the UN agenda, an aspect that profoundly qualifies the assumption that Afro-Asian human rights initiatives represented an undiluted gain for freedom and emancipation. An important consequence of the predominance of postcolonial states was the fact that Israel came to be the only state alongside South Africa that was singled out for human rights violations and for decades was subjected to fierce attacks. In 1975, the concerted anti-Israeli policy culminated in a notorious resolution of the Economic and Social Council equating Zionism with racism. Likewise, anti-Semitism had no chance of being explicitly defined as a human rights violation. Significantly, the original impulse behind the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, viewed by both authors as a landmark “achievement,” was a worldwide wave of anti-Semitic violence in the late 1950s.²⁹ Once African and Asian nations had seized the initiative, however, anti-Semitism was dropped from the list of discriminatory ideologies and was not mentioned in the final text of the Convention. Moreover, as effectively as it put their enemies in the dock, the Afro-Asian group also managed to block debate on crimes that had been committed by postcolonial states. For this reason the United Nations took no measures—or at best only weak ones—against some of the worst mass murders of the 1970s, including the large-scale killings under Idi Amin in Uganda or under Macías Nguema in Equatorial Guinea.

It should be acknowledged, however, that Burke goes beyond the thesis of universalistic achievements. The particular strength of his analysis lies in those parts dealing with the late 1960s and the 1970s, highlighting what he calls the “multidimensional nature of anticolonialism and its relationship to individual rights” (4). Here, the author plausibly traces a shift in African and Asian nations’ understanding of self-

determination occurring in the 1960s when an increasing number of states gained independence. Burke demonstrates that representatives at the United Nations now engaged in separating the notion of self-determination from the concept of individual rights, almost exclusively associating it with sovereignty and noninterference and using it as a defense against colonialism or neocolonialism (92–111). Even more important is Burke's persuasive account of the emergence of a discourse of cultural relativism around the end of the 1960s. He regards the UN human rights conference in Teheran in 1968 as an important indication of the changing attitudes, since Third World countries now set out to contest the concept of civil and political rights as well as the universality of the human rights idea. Instead, they stressed national liberation and economic development as the new priorities for international politics. In the course of the 1970s, the cultural relativist argumentation came to be predominant, so that African and Asian states in the United Nations largely limited themselves to discrediting the human rights idea as an expression of Western imperialist and neocolonial designs. In demonstrating that this view did not exist from the beginning but was the product of the Third World's drift toward authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, Burke's book marks a considerable step forward in understanding international human rights politics (112–44).³⁰ It should be added, however, that the cultural relativist turn was not merely an expression of authoritarianism. In addition, it was a reaction to the new human rights interventionism of Western actors, both governments and NGOs, rapidly expanding in the 1970s and primarily directed against Third World nations.³¹

Consequently, the overall picture of African and Asian human rights policy in the United Nations reveals a decidedly more ambiguous picture than the emphasis on the supposed anticolonial achievements might suggest. Essentially, it demonstrates that postcolonial states did not harness human rights any less for their particular political project than Western countries or the Soviet bloc did—even though to many authors today the project itself may appear more legitimate.

This interpretation raises the additional question of what repercussions the anticolonial human rights project had in the context of decolonization and postcolonialism. It is striking that the existing literature on human rights in the United Nations has completely avoided assessing the general political relevance of the UN proceedings beyond their implications for the world organization itself. Both Klose's and Burke's books are in keeping with this trend since they do not address the significance that the United Nations and the anticolonial policies within it had in the broader realm of international relations. It will be an important task of future studies to overcome the separation between the sphere of the UN and global politics at large. Even though this will certainly involve more in-depth research, some preliminary observations may be in order.

Looking at the broad picture of international relations, it can hardly be argued that the UN initiatives of the Afro-Asian group made a notable difference. State relations outside the world body essentially continued to depend on military and economic power. These power inequalities promoted and further strengthened the position of First World countries, both democratic and communist, in the international realm. In the decades to come, this fact was dramatically manifested in two trends fundamentally shaping global politics: in the widening economic gap between

industrialized and Third World countries and in the continuing Cold War interventions of the superpowers in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.³²

Nevertheless, considering the fact that profound hierarchies of empires and states were the signature of the international system during all of modern history, the founding of an organization in which all sovereign nations had an equal say, irrespective of their “power” status, represented a spectacularly new departure. The principle had already been introduced in the League of Nations but because at the time practically all of Africa and Asia was still under colonial rule, the true diplomatic revolution did not occur until after World War II. Policymakers of the “great powers” were acutely aware of its effects, lamenting that the new world organization was “infinitely less favourable to the interests of Western Europe than the composition of the League [because] unfortunately it is far more representative of the world we live in.”³³ Seen against this backdrop, the results of Afro-Asian collaboration in the United Nations did mark a notable change in international affairs. It was above all in the relationship between the (former) colonial powers and the postcolonial states that the United Nations proved to be a forum which the great powers could no longer dominate and in which the global hierarchy of power was reversed. In essence, this reversal was symbolic. Precisely by their repetitive and often enough ritualistic character, the denunciations and counterdenunciations, the votes and declarations came to be an *enactment* of an alternative world order.

The problem of the UN’s relevance for decolonization should be focused on the fact that at least in the 1950s and 1960s, the organization primarily constituted an arena for symbolic politics. In the process, human rights issues provided a framework to publicly discuss the norms, structure, and principles of international relations. Thus, they turned the United Nations into a forum to debate legitimacy in international politics.³⁴ Judging by the relatively high attention that governments such as those of the United States, Great Britain, and France paid to the proceedings, it can plausibly be assumed that in this specific sense the UN’s human rights work gained considerable importance.³⁵ The reasons for this may have differed, though, ranging from propagandistic motives to the attempt at projecting domestic values into the international sphere.³⁶ At any rate, in order to find out if and how the symbolic struggles in the United Nations affected the formulation of state policy, the crucial question appears to be whether and to what extent states came to bind their political legitimacy to human rights issues. The final section of this essay will focus on this question in an attempt to determine the role of human rights in the colonial withdrawal of the metropolitan powers.

Human Rights: A Reason for Decolonization?

Obviously, an assessment of the role of human rights in decolonization requires discussing the attitudes that the colonial powers displayed toward the new international rhetoric and the strategies they used to adopt the idea or defend themselves against accusations. After all, metropolitan governments were arguably the most important actors in the process of decolonization, as they were able to control the pace and range of their colonial withdrawal to a considerable extent. Moreover, by formally endorsing the new international regimes of the United Nations and the

Council of Europe they made the appropriation of human rights seem attractive to (post-)colonial politicians in the first place.

A significant part of Klose's book deals with precisely this aspect, highlighting the similarities and parallels in both Britain's and France's approach to human rights in the colonial context (rather than focusing on possible differences). He convincingly argues that the new international human rights regimes engaged both Britain and France in a prolonged tight-rope walk (46–62). On the one hand, both governments supported the values proclaimed in human rights declarations and saw themselves obliged to cooperate in developing the institutional frameworks of both the United Nations and the European Council. On the other hand, the existence of their colonial empires seriously hampered these efforts, being a constant "source of embarrassment," as the colonial ministries did not tire of lamenting. The attempt at preventing a possible backlash of human rights norms for their colonial policies came to decisively determine Britain's and France's stance in both international organizations. They resolutely rejected all proposals that could have constituted political interference into colonial affairs, being particularly wary to prevent the establishment of petition mechanisms. Thus, with his analysis Klose largely confirms the earlier findings of Brian Simpson's *opus magnum* on "human rights and the end of empire."³⁷

Moreover, Klose shows that human rights accusations could become an acute threat for both powers' international standing when anticolonial movements managed to turn them into forceful public campaigns (239–90). In a revealing analysis, the author compares the attempts of the Kenyan resistance movement and of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) to discredit colonial repression and garner international support. He demonstrates that the FLN, due to its organizational skill, media savvy, and logistic support from Arab states, was in a position to effectively "shame" France in the international arena, using the United Nations as the primary forum (256–75). In this respect, Klose's book can be read as a confirmation of Matthew Connelly's interpretation that the FLN won the media battle even though it lost the war in military terms.³⁸ Klose seems a little more skeptical, however, emphasizing that French policy was not greatly affected by the numerous protests reaching the UN Commission on Human Rights nor by the fact that between 1951 and 1961 the Algerian struggle for independence continually formed an issue in the United Nations. The Kenyan case provides a surprisingly stark contrast (239–56). The Kenyan resistance movement entirely failed in internationalizing its cause, even though the Kenya African Union and individual politicians such as Tom Mboya engaged in public relations work. In spite of their efforts, the conflict never made it on the UN agenda, the Human Rights Commission received hardly any petitions, and the Mau Mau rebellion did not have nearly as much resonance in British media and politics as the Algerian war did in France.

Regrettably, the role of human rights rhetoric in both the Algerian and the Kenyan cases remains somewhat vague in Klose's account. A more detailed analysis of their importance would have been desirable, as it could have provided valuable insight into the concrete functioning and the limits of international human rights politics. This is all the more interesting, because from Klose's own quotations as well as from a look

at the FLN's general propaganda, it appears that charges of genocide may have been more frequent than human rights claims (261, 263–64).³⁹

Nevertheless, Klose's findings suggest an important conclusion. His analysis makes it clear that in the 1950s there was no automatism in mobilizing international support for anticolonial struggles. Human rights accusations did not per se guarantee that international attention would be directed to the supposed violations. Klose points to the organizational weakness of the Kenyan movement and to the vigor of British counterpropaganda stigmatizing their fight as an illegitimate uprising tainted by barbaric cruelty. In his account, the French countercampaign against the FLN seems to have been at least as forceful, though. Therefore, an explanation of the striking lack of international concern in the Kenyan case would have to pay special attention to the mechanisms that mobilized (or, conversely, failed to mobilize) the Western public and the international community. After all, human rights campaigns in the twentieth century were waged selectively and in each case followed highly complex dynamics.⁴⁰ Even so, the noncampaign on Kenya illustrates the yawning gap that opens between international human rights politics in the 1950s and in the 1970s. The Kenyan case gives substance to the view that it was not before the 1970s that a wide range of crimes and conflicts in almost all world regions spurred international efforts to halt human rights violations.⁴¹

In his book, Klose convincingly demonstrates that Britain and France were highly preoccupied by anticolonial human rights initiatives, constantly grappling with delicate proposals in the United Nations and with embarrassing campaigns in and outside the organization.⁴² However, he does not reflect about the relative weight that these preoccupations had in the foreign policy considerations of both powers. The book does not even raise the question whether the anticolonial policies of the Afro-Asian group, and more specifically human rights accusations, constituted a factor for the dismantling of the British and French empires, even though this appears to be a crucial aspect of decolonization. More archival research will be necessary to determine the mechanisms involved and the precise place of human rights in this process. Nevertheless, the remainder of this section will suggest a framework of analysis that hopefully will be able to point to a possible answer. This framework can be developed only briefly here. Moreover, it focuses exclusively on the example of Great Britain.

A few characteristics of the dissolution of the British Empire should be highlighted before the place of anticolonial criticism and human rights claims can be determined. In view of the number of governments involved, the geographic reach, and the long duration of British decolonization, a systematic overall explanation appears bound to be unsatisfactory.⁴³ An important strand in the literature of the last twenty years or so has plausibly demonstrated that no consistent strategic plan existed but that decision making was fractured, ad hoc, and sensitive to rapidly changing circumstances.⁴⁴ Moreover, the colonial withdrawal moved by fits and starts. Most notably, it consisted of two phases of acceleration in which Britain dismantled the largest part of her empire. From 1945 through 1948 she abandoned the Indian subcontinent and Palestine; and between 1959 and 1964 she granted independence to all of her African territories. Rather than by way of a series of decisions to dissolve empire, British decolonization consisted in the progressive loss of tenability of empire or, more

precisely, individual territories. All postwar governments—those of Attlee, Churchill, Eden, and Macmillan—held the unshattered conviction that empire was an indispensable attribute of Britain’s position in the world. It was the increasing difficulty of holding on to empire rather than the willingness to give it up that in practice made them preside over its end. More often than not, their policymaking was reactive, yielding to the force of circumstances when the costs of colonial rule became too high or when colonies ran the risk of becoming “ungovernable.”

The particular shape of this process, the growing untenability of empire, resulted from the complex significance empire actually had for British policy and self-understanding. In the view of the political elite, a number of tangible factors were at stake, such as geostrategic advantage, economic gain, the increasingly important defense against Soviet penetration, and the sizable communities of white settlers in East and Southern Africa which politicians feared they would abandon to an uncertain fate. Above and beyond these calculations, however, empire was a question of prestige.⁴⁵ An essentially vague category, prestige nonetheless profoundly influenced colonial policy. The possession of empire did not matter only out of material interest but also for what it symbolized to the outside world. Prestige and image constituted a dimension in their own right, precisely because British politicians conceived of them as affecting the country’s political and military strength, its economic stability, and the loyalty of the colonies.⁴⁶ Consequently, the *appearance* of legitimate and orderly rule assumed considerable importance—hence the ubiquitous fear of giving the impression to “scuttle”—and British politicians greatly cared about the *way* they managed colonial affairs.⁴⁷

It is only by drawing attention to these assumptions that the effects of anticolonial criticism can be adequately understood. From the very beginning, British governments closely observed the anticolonial policies forged in the United Nations and the criticism voiced in the various bodies constituted a factor in planning colonial policy: “Since the United Nations Organization came into being,” an internal paper concluded in 1947, “world attention has been focused on colonial questions to perhaps a greater degree than ever before. [The] UN have come to represent an organised pressure group in regard to colonial territories with which we are obliged to reckon.”⁴⁸ This criticism mattered because it threatened to undermine the legitimacy of colonial rule.⁴⁹ Numerous comments testify to the fear of British officials that anticolonial initiatives would seriously bedevil implementation of their colonial policies and thus create severe problems of governability. In their view, highly publicized denunciations brought forward in the United Nations would damage British authority in the colonies, increase dissatisfaction among colonial populations and stimulate increasing demands, upset the delicate political stability in some of the territories, spread anarchy and chaos, and force Britain into making concessions she would prefer to avoid.⁵⁰ Most of these possible dangers were summarized in a memorandum of 1952 addressing the question “In what way have the proceedings at the UN damaged our position in colonies and trust territories?”⁵¹ The list given in response was impressive: “By tending to edge us into a position in which we have to give an account to the UN of our administration of our colonies. [. . .] It [the Trusteeship Council] passes resolutions tending to tie the hands of our administration, e.g. calling for the abolition of corporal

punishment. It encourages unrest in colonies by: Weakening respect for British authority [. . .]. It provides a forum where speeches encouraging agitation are delivered [. . .]. By its handling of South West Africa it has made it less likely that African countries, after attaining independence, will agree to remain within a Commonwealth of which South Africa is a member.” In short, anticolonial policies in the United Nations mattered because, by affecting the legitimacy of empire, they contributed to making colonial rule untenable. In this sense, the symbolic struggles within the world organization did have manifest consequences for British policy-making.

However, attacks on colonialism mattered much less before 1960 than they would subsequently. The British withdrawal from India and Palestine occurred before the UN human rights system really started working and long before African and Asian nations were in a position to forcefully articulate their anticolonial positions. The 1950s saw much British discussion about scaling down colonial commitments but hardly any territories reached independence (the major exceptions being Sudan, Malaya, and Ghana). On the contrary, throughout the empire unrest was stifled by force, not only in Kenya but also in Uganda, British Guyana, Malaya, and Cyprus.⁵² During this phase, human rights criticism may have been an “embarrassment” but it was one that could be kept under control. Britain’s robust handling of both the Kenyan war and the case of Cyprus in the European Council testifies to the fact that anticolonial initiatives could be nipped in the bud without producing strong international reverberations.⁵³

The years around 1960 witnessed some watershed changes that were to profoundly alter this situation. Even though the Macmillan government did not have a radically new program when it assumed power in 1957 and was conceivably far from planning a large-scale withdrawal from the colonies, it found itself in a rapidly transforming international environment.⁵⁴ The United States under President John F. Kennedy started to display an increasing interest in the Third World, precipitating the realization among British politicians that in the long run Great Britain would find it difficult to maintain its position as a leading power in these regions. Moreover, in British government circles the perception spread that Cold War rivalries in Africa were coming to a head, increasing the danger of communist interference.⁵⁵ As France and Belgium moved rapidly toward dissolution of their empires, colonial rule became associated with extremely reactionary states such as Portugal and South Africa, provoking British fears that “it will be the French and perhaps the Belgians who will be regarded by world opinion as the leaders, while we may be classed with the Portuguese as the obstacles to further advance,” “find[ing] ourselves on the wrong side in a losing battle.”⁵⁶ In addition, the swath of colonies gaining independence during these years made a much stronger impact on still-dependent territories than the piecemeal granting of autonomy had done in the 1950s. This process led to intensifying demands; violence increased and the prospect of further unrest loomed large in the considerations of British policymakers.⁵⁷ Finally, international attention toward decolonization grew dramatically. The Algerian war since the Bataille d’Algers of 1958, the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960, and the Congo crisis from 1960 onward were all international media events and brought the situation in Africa to the center stage of

international diplomacy and political awareness.⁵⁸ At the risk of overstating, it might be said that the true internationalization of decolonization occurred only in the years around 1960.

The confluence of all these events dramatically increased the weight of anticolonial criticism in UN organs. Now problems with the world organization began to consume “immense quantities of time, energy and paper” within the British government.⁵⁹ A memorandum drawn up by the Colonial Office concluded that “we have entered a period in which the international climate in which we have to deal with the problems of our own territories has changed and has become a more decisive factor.”⁶⁰ Shortly afterward, perceptions of an increasingly precarious standing in the United Nations sparked a prolonged discussion among British officials whether to leave the Committee monitoring the Declaration on the Granting of Independence.⁶¹ In the end, Britain decided to stay on and searched for new ways of improving its standing within the world organization, one of them being the landmark decision to withdraw support from South Africa.⁶²

Thus, it was only around 1960 that denunciations of colonial rule assumed more than the secondary importance attached to them during the 1950s. Due to the changed international climate, the attacks now gravely affected the legitimacy of British empire and thus threatened to damage British prestige and image with all the dire consequences this implied for governability, order, and British “power” status in the world. Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that international criticism constituted a major factor for the colonial turnabout of the Macmillan government and thus for the British withdrawal from Africa—and from Africa only. Around 1960, the Macmillan government realized that the costs of holding on to empire would outweigh the benefits. Consequently, it started shifting its approach from “empire” to “influence.” By bringing about an “orderly transfer of power” the government hoped it would be able to secure an important future role of Britain in the colonies, in political and military as well as economic terms.⁶³ In this way, more consciously than not British policymakers initiated the real beginning of the end of the British Empire.

This said, it should be stressed that human rights claims constituted but one element of the anticolonial attitudes voiced in the United Nations. Not all the accusations brought forward by postcolonial states and the Soviet bloc in the General Assembly, the Trusteeship Council, and the Economic and Social Council (with its human rights bodies) discredited colonial rule as a violation of fundamental rights. Oftentimes they simply stigmatized it as repressive, inhumane, unjust, or illegitimate. What can be inferred from published sources is that British officials neither regarded human rights denunciations as central nor found them easy to discard. The statement closest to assessing the relative weight of human rights can be found in the 1952 memorandum quoted above, as the author concludes: “It is not only in the Fourth Committee [dealing with trusteeship questions] that things detrimental to our interest have been going on. The UN as a whole is responsible for creating examples of colonial territories attaining independence, e.g. Libya, Indonesia, Somaliland, and these have an unsettling influence on other dependent territories. The discussion of human rights in the Third Committee and the general ventilation of ideas of racial equality and self-determination also tend to undermine our position.”⁶⁴ Given the

lack of more detailed studies, it seems difficult to draw any other conclusion than that human rights accusations formed a visible part of the anticolonial criticism that mattered less before the end of the 1950s and more afterward. Does this mean they were important for the delegitimization of British colonial rule? They provided an additional avenue, and considering the situation before the end of the Second World War, when anticolonial movements had fewer strategies of justification and fewer forums in which to use them, this was not insignificant. On the other hand, by themselves human rights claims never shattered the foundations of colonial rule and thus did not prove to have emancipatory power. Neither central nor entirely without impact: in a curious way, the role of human rights for the end of empire seems to reflect the significance they had for anticolonial policies.

Conclusion

Both Klose's and Burke's books are important contributions to the historiography on human rights in decolonization. They provide many illuminating results that will serve as a solid foundation for future research. In view of the existing literature on the history of human rights, the most innovative aspect about their approaches may be their focusing on non-Western actors. Thereby, they open up an extremely fruitful field of research that should be further explored.

Broadening the historical focus underlying both studies, however, ambiguities emerge in the relationship between human rights and decolonization that run counter to the authors' fairly clear-cut interpretation of the decades from the 1940s through the 1960s. Human rights claims did not constitute a prominent strategy in the anticolonial struggle, and those activists making use of them engaged in a distinct appropriation of the idea for highly politicized ends. For this reason, the Afro-Asian group's shaping of the UN human rights agenda cannot be considered as a series of steps developing a universal rights regime. Rather, their human rights policies were part of a symbolic struggle to counter the dominance of First World nations in the international sphere. As such these policies came to be a factor in delegitimizing the British Empire and precipitating its dissolution. They did so only in conjunction with a number of other factors, however, that for most of the time clearly outweighed the supposedly emancipatory potential of the human rights idea.

In their analyses of the anticolonial and postcolonial uses of human rights, both books largely break new ground. It is precisely by their pioneering character that they also draw attention to the many aspects that remain to be examined. Still, not much is known about the relative importance and the concrete functioning of human rights rhetoric in individual conflicts and campaigns or for specific groups and movements in the colonies. Further, archive-based studies of the motives behind African and Asian policies at the UN, paying heed to possible conflicts and differences in opinion among them, would be desirable. A broad field of research opens when it comes to the shift in the attitudes of postcolonial states toward human rights. To date, only some general tendencies appear to be clear.⁶⁵ On the one hand, many newly independent governments rapidly moved from a tentative and strategically limited use of human rights to the open repudiation of the concept. With this political turnabout they reacted to both oppositional movements within the new nation states and "Western" states and

NGOs who now employed human rights language to denounce repressive policies and, increasingly, social practices in the Third World. On the other hand, the 1970s saw a “second attempt” of African and Asian nations to appropriate the idea of human rights. This time, they couched their criticism of global economic inequality and their demand for the restructuring of world economy in the supposedly universal language of a “human right to development.” Again, however, they essentially failed to bring about the desired changes in international politics.

Finally, for a comprehensive assessment of human rights as a factor in decolonization, the policy of other colonial powers apart from Britain and France will have to be examined. Given the great importance of political legitimacy and a democratic self-image for British governments, it does not come as a surprise that human rights criticism could at times affect the formulation of their colonial policies. In comparison, the French retreat from the colonies seems to have been less influenced by UN proceedings. If the panorama were further widened to include the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal, the overall effect of human rights politics on the end of colonialism would very likely appear much weaker than the British example alone might suggest. The Dutch had dismantled the largest part of their empire before Afro-Asian human rights initiatives reached their apogee, leaving Indonesia in 1949 (while continuing colonial rule in New Guinea and Suriname until 1963 and 1975, respectively). The Portuguese, in spite of strong international outrage, held on to an extremely firm colonial line until the dictatorial regime was finally toppled in the mid-1970s.

These observations have important implications for situating decolonization within the broader history of human rights in the second half of the twentieth century. The clearly circumscribed use of human rights by anticolonial actors, the rather exceptional mobilization in the case of the Algerian war, and the strongly delimited “embarrassment” that human rights accusations represented for metropolitan governments all point to the limited appeal of human rights as a political project in the roughly two decades after World War II. This was to change in the 1970s when human rights almost overnight gained immense popularity, assuming a new political meaning for a number of actors around the world. Only then did human rights politics turn into a form of global moral interventionism—for the booming NGO movement in Western countries as well as for the U.S. government under President Jimmy Carter and its spectacular departure in American foreign policy. And only at that time did human rights come to be a prominent and highly mobilizing strategy of self-help in the face of acute danger, most dramatically in Latin American military dictatorships and in the communist countries of Eastern Europe. It is within this profoundly transformed context that both the discourse of cultural relativism and the discourse of the “right to development” have to be situated. However much African and Asian strategies changed in reaction to the new international salience of human rights, they clearly retained their familiar face of political ambiguity.

NOTES

1. See William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

2. See Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
3. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Political Blueprint of Nigeria* (Lagos: n.p., 1943), 56, 43. Wilson's Fourteen Points did not explicitly mention "self-determination" but were widely perceived as confirming his earlier statements on the topic. For a very similar document, compare African National Congress, "Africans' Claims in South Africa," December 1943, in *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1964*, ed. Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter, 5 vols. (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), 2:209–23.
4. Klose, however, argues that the principle of self-determination was implicit in article 21 of the Universal Declaration (54–55).
5. See Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).
6. This view is essentially in keeping with Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), chap. 3, as well as Moyn, "Imperialism, Self-Determination, and the Rise of Human Rights," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century: An International History*, ed. Akire Iriye et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Andreas Eckert, "African Nationalists and Human Rights, 1940–1970," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
7. In his illuminating chapter 3 of *The Last Utopia*, Samuel Moyn argues that the rise of international human rights language came too late to make an impact on the ideological outlook of older anticolonial leaders, namely, after the formative phase of their political thinking. Even though this is certainly true, one might also argue that they were shrewd politicians who were not hesitant in using "new" ideas or institutions if they seemed promising to them. Nehru, for instance, even though extremely skeptical toward human rights declarations, including the UN Charter, nevertheless welcomed the UN's condemnation of South Africa's behavior toward its Indian minority on human rights grounds. See Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 15 vols. (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1977), 10: 616–17, or *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Second Series*, 39 vols. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1984–), 1:450–51, 468. See also Ho Chi Minh, *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920–66*, ed. Bernard B. Fall (New York: Praeger, 1967); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); Senghor, *On African Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1964). On Touré, see the documents in Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S. W. Rohio, eds., *Readings in African Political Thought* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1975).
8. See Patrice Lumumba, "Speech at Leopoldville," December 28, 1958, in *Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba, 1958–1961* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 66. For more examples, see the statement by Mamadou Dia in 1962, in Mutiso and Rohio, *Readings*, 278; "ZAPU Memorandum to Wilson," November 12, 1964, in *Zimbabwe Independence Movements: Select Documents*, ed. Christopher Nyangoni and Gideon Nyandoro (London: R. Collings, 1979), 89–90; Kwame Nkrumah, "What I Mean by Positive Action" (1949), in *Revolutionary Path* (London: Panaf Books, 1973), 85–95; Gabriel d'Arboussier, "Die theoretischen Grundlagen der RDA" (1948), in *Befreiungsbewegungen in Afrika: Politische Programme, Grundsätze und Ziele von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Rainer Falk and Peter Wahl (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1980), 113–14.
9. Bonny Ibhawoh, *Imperialism and Human Rights: Colonial Discourses of Rights and Liberties in African History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 1–28.

10. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Zik: A Selection from the Speeches of Nnamdi Azikiwe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), and *The Future of Pan-Africanism* (n.p., 1961), 302–27.
11. The South African anti-apartheid movement provides an equally exceptional but highly interesting case. Of all anticolonial movements, the South African groups most strongly referred to human rights, at least in the 1940s and 1950s. However, their use of the term has to be seen against the backdrop of their specific position as an opposition within an extremely repressive state. The South African groups did not demand the withdrawal of a metropolitan power but rather the substitution of a ruling minority by majority government. In the process, rights protection assumed an acutely important role since the white minority engaged in severe discrimination and persecution of Africans. It is consistent with this interpretation that rights language lost importance for South African groups when in the 1960s they had been outlawed and took up the violent struggle. Several editions of documents are available; see, for example, Karis and Carter, eds., *From Protest to Challenge*.
12. Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1952–65* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1967), 69–71, 75–80, 144–56, 266–85.
13. Nkrumah, *Revolutionary Path*, 130–34, or *Africa Must Unite* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), ix–xvii.
14. Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, ix.
15. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 59.
16. On the concept of subaltern studies, see Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).
17. Frederick Cooper has particularly emphasized these points. See his *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), “Provincializing France,” in *Imperial Formations*, ed. Ann L. Stoler et al. (Santa Fe, N.M.: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 341–77, “Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
18. See Volker Matthies, *Die Blockfreien: Ursprünge, Entwicklung, Konzeptionen* (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1985); A. W. Singham and Shirley Hune, *Non-Alignment in an Age of Alignments* (London: Independent Publishers Group, 1986).
19. See Odette Jankowitsch and Karl P. Sauvart, eds., *The Third World without Superpowers: The Collected Documents of the Non-Aligned Countries*, 4 vols. (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, 1978–84).
20. On these developments, see my “Utopie der Moral, Kalkül der Macht: Menschenrechte in der globalen Politik seit 1945,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 49 (2009): 437–84, here 458–78.
21. See Roger Normand and Sarah Zaidi, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 289–315.
22. Jankowitsch and Sauvart, *Third World*, 5:66–68. In 1983, the movement mentioned human rights in its declaration of principles. In 1989 and especially in 1992, after the end of the Cold War, the uses of human rights would take on a considerably greater importance.
23. On the following passage, see the documents in *Awakening Africa: Conferences of Inde-*

pendent African States (Accra: Bureau of African Affairs, [1962?]); Mutiso and Rohio, eds., *Readings*, 368–84; J. Ayo Langley, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856–1970: Documents on Modern African Political Thought from Colonial Times to the Present* (London: R. Collings, 1979), 776–81; Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Unity: A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1952–65* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1967), 69–71.

24. A similar shift can be observed in the nonaligned movement at the time. See Jankowitsch and Sauvart, eds., *Third World*.

25. The OAU Charter is printed in Rachel Murray, *Human Rights in Africa: From the OAU to the African Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 271–79.

26. Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations*, vol. 2, *The Age of Decolonization, 1955–1965* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

27. These accounts, however, do not necessarily apply this perspective to decolonization. Compare Paul Gordon Lauren, *Visions Seen: The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001); Micheline R. Ishay, *The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (New York: Random House, 2006); Normand and Zaidi, *Human Rights*.

28. Compare Mark Mazower, “The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933–1950,” *Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 379–99, and *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009) on the role of power and interest at the UN in general and the erection of the human rights regime in particular.

29. See Normand and Zaidi, *Human Rights*, 247–88.

30. Less persuasive, however, is Burke’s argument that in the 1950s Western colonial powers had been the real exponents of cultural relativism. More accurately, they used every argument they could think of to prevent human rights from being extended to the colonies. The idea that colonies were culturally and politically too backward as to be able to enjoy human rights was one of these arguments and did not constitute a cultural relativist discourse.

31. On the distinct mixture of rejection and appropriation of human rights in the debate among African intellectuals during the late 1970s and 1980s, see my “Utopie der Moral,” 479–82.

32. On this latter aspect, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

33. See “The UN: A Stocktaking: Memorandum by I. T. M. Pink,” February 7, 1957, in *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1957–1964*, ed. Ronald Hyam and Wm. Roger Louis. British Documents on the End of Empire, Series A, Volume 4, Parts 1 and 2. (London: HMSO, 2000), 2:306.

34. For a similar argument concerning the League of Nations, see Susan Pedersen, “The Meaning of the Mandates System: An Argument,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 32 (2006): 560–82.

35. For the U.S. case, see the archival material in National Archives, College Park, Md., record group 59, 1238, Bureau of International Organizations’ Affairs; 1381, Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State for UN Affairs; 1456 Bureau of UN Affairs; record group 84, 1030, U.S. Missions to the UN.

36. Compare Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002). Her account is lopsided, however, in focusing exclusively on these propagandistic motives.
37. A. W. B. Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
38. Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
39. On the FLN, see Mohammed Harbi and Gilbert Meynier, eds., *Le F.L.N: Documents et histoire 1954–1962* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Gilbert Meynier, *Histoire intérieure du F.L.N.* (Paris: Fayard, 2002). A study of the relationship between human rights and the concept of genocide is highly desirable.
40. Compare Eckel, “‘Under a Magnifying Glass’: The International Human Rights Campaign against Chile in the 1970s,” in Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights*.
41. Eckel, “Utopie der Moral,” 459–63, 472–78.
42. Klose persuasively points to the fact that this precarious situation led Britain and France to closely coordinate their policies with each other and at times with Belgium and Portugal. Only after the end of decolonization both were able to “normalize” their relationship with the United Nations and their human rights work.
43. The threefold model used by some authors, pointing to the importance of metropolitan decisions, the policy of nationalist movements in the colonies, and the international context, provides a somewhat static framework that would have to be applied to different territories in different ways. On this model, see John Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945: The Collapse of European Overseas Empires* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
44. I am drawing here in particular on R. F. Holland, *European Decolonization, 1918–1981: An Introductory Survey* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1985); John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Darwin, “Decolonization and the End of Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. Robin Winks, vol. 5, *Historiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 541–57; Frank Heinlein, *British Government Policy and Decolonisation, 1945–1963: Scrutinising the Official Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Hyam, introduction to Hyam, ed., *The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945–1951*. British Documents on the End of Empire, Series A, Vol. 2 (London: HMSO, 1992), xxiii–lxxviii.
45. Heinlein has made this point most powerfully. See Heinlein, *British Government*.
46. For a particularly revealing statement, see “British Overseas Obligations: Cabinet Memorandum by Mr. Eden,” June 18, 1952, in David Goldsworthy, ed., *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1951–1957*. British Documents on the End of Empire, Series A, Vol. 3 (London: HMSO, 1994), 5–6.
47. Eagerness to avoid the impression of “scuttling” and thus of appearing not to be in control of decolonization was a *leitmotiv* in British officials’ considerations throughout the 1950s and 1960s.
48. See “The Colonies and International Organizations: African Governors’ Conference Paper AGC 17,” November 1947, in Hyam, ed., *Labour Government*, 281–292 at 281–82.
49. Surprisingly, the literature on British decolonization has not systematically dealt with the question of legitimacy. Most texts either do not deal with legitimacy at all or treat it as a self-evident category.
50. “The Colonial Empire Today: Summary of Our Main Problems and Policies: CO Inter-

national Relations Department Paper,” May 1950, in Hyam, ed., *Labour Government*, 334–366; “The Colonies and International Organizations,” 284; “Circular Despatch from Mr. Churchill to UK Ambassadors,” August 22, 1952, in Goldsworthy, ed., *Conservative Government*, 393–94; “Despatch no. 4 from Sir G. Jebb (New York) to Mr. Eden,” January 12, 1953, in *ibid.*, 271; “The Colonies and International organizations,” 285.

51. “The Fourth Committee: Memo by D. I. Dunnett Analysing Anticolonialism in the UN,” March 1952, in Goldsworthy, ed., *Conservative Government*, 387–390.

52. Goldsworthy, introduction to Goldsworthy, ed., *Conservative Government*, xxv–lxvi.

53. On Cyprus, see Simpson, *Human Rights*, 874–1052.

54. For a key document, see “Africa in the Next Ten Years: Report of Committee of Officials,” June 1959, in Hyam and Louis, eds., *Conservative Government*, 1:113–33.

55. For key documents, see “Future Policy Study, 1960–1970: Cabinet Memorandum, Report of Officials’ Committee,” February 24, 1960, and “Policy towards Africa South of the Sahara: Officials’ Interdepartmental Paper (FO, CO, CRO),” August 1961, both in Hyam and Louis, eds., *Conservative Government*, 1:87–107, 189–99.

56. “Africa in the Next Ten Years” and “Colonial Questions at the UN: Notes by Sir H. Foot,” August 22, 1962, in Hyam and Louis, eds., *Conservative Government*, 1:124 and 2:361.

57. In 1959, reports on killed Mau Mau detainees and the Devlin Report on the British “police state” in Nyasaland combined to spark concern and outrage in the British public and among politicians.

58. This has not been studied in depth. See Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation*, 245; Holland, *European Decolonization*, 175.

59. Hyam, introduction to Hyam and Louis, eds., *Conservative Government*, 1:lxv.

60. “CO Circular Letter from Sir H. Poynton to Various Governors,” September 29, 1960, in Hyam and Louis, eds., *Conservative Government*, 2:307. Prospects for the future were considered to be even more dramatic.

61. “Letter about Draft Cabinet Paper from Maudling to Lord Home,” May 21, 1962; “Cabinet Conclusions,” June 7 1962; “Joint CO-CRO-FO memorandum,” September 20, 1963, all in *ibid.*, 2: 349–52, 364–67.

62. Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 146–67.

63. See again as a key document “Africa in the Next Ten Years.”

64. “The Fourth Committee: Memo by D. I. Dunnett,” 387.

65. Compare Eckel, “Utopie der Moral,” 479–82.