FORMS OF PLURALISM
AND DEMOCRATIC
CONSTITUTIONALISM

EDITED BY
ANDREW ARATO,
JEAN L. COHEN, AND
ASTRID VON BUSEKIST

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DECOLONIZATION AND POSTNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

GARY WILDER

The United Nations began its official existence in October 1945 when the five permanent members of the new Security Council and a majority of other signatories ratified the Charter. That same month, Aimé Césaire, from colonial Martinique, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, from colonial Senegal, were elected as deputies to a new Constitutive Assembly in Paris. Following France's wartime occupation by Germany and the Vichy state's collaboration with the Nazi regime, this body was charged with drafting the constitution for a Fourth Republic.

In January 1946, the first session of the UN General Assembly convened in New York. Among the issues it addressed that year were the discovery of atomic energy, the extradition and punishment of war criminals, the problem of refugees and displaced peoples, the crime of genocide, the establishment of an International Court of Justice, economic reconstruction projects for member countries devastated by the war, rules governing admission to membership, world armament regulation, a commission for writing an international Declaration on Fundamental Human Rights and Freedom, and the creation of a World Health Organization (WHO). Here were the general outlines of the new postwar order.

The first General Assembly (GA) also responded to more immediate challenges, including a world food shortage, the need for an international children's emergency fund, the political rights of women, the treatment of Indians in South Africa, the future status of South West Africa, and the situation in Palestine. Clearly the question of decolonization would have to be engaged directly.

The GA created a Trusteeship Council to oversee the administration of the mainland, or "non-self-governing," peoples in accordance with the Charter; it had pledged to promote their "well-being" and to develop self-government for them "according to the particular circumstances of each territory... their varying stages of advancement."10

Over the next ten years, a growing number of colonized peoples in Africa, and the Middle East obtained political independence. For most colonial movements—whether moderate or revolutionary, liberal or socialist—their struggle was one of statehood. The national state became the unquestioned expression of the self-determination that should be secured. Curiously, preference for a national form of decolonization was shared by the world's most powerful states. When France and Britain recognized that they could no longer retain imperial states, they negotiated bilateral agreements with nationalistic alliances, thereby creating spheres of neocolonial influence. The United States pursued a similar strategy toward new Third World nation states, cultivating blocs of noncommunist allies, exploitable resources, and potential consumers within a system of "free trade" among nominally sovereign national states.4

These powerful international actors were equally invested in a UN world order committed to a stable interstate system.4 It was to be organized around the already existing principles of territorial integrity, national independence, and state sovereignty. It would be policed and protected through a direct or indirect system of great powers (the Security Council) and administered through a system of international agencies staffed by bureaucratic and technocratic experts. It would also have the ability to override the national sovereign member states when it was determined that they violated their own international human rights. But this ad hoc ability to elevate abstract humanity to state or national state sovereignty did not fundamentally challenge the principles of territorial sovereignty, national identity, or sovereignty; it was meant, rather, to protect the international system that the UN supervised.5

Geopolitically and economically, the postwar world would be framed by the structure linking great powers, nominally sovereign states, abstract individuals (now possessing human rights), and international agencies and expertise. Despite appearances, nationalism, human rights, international law, and global governance composed a single order (nomos) that presupposed the norm of territorial sovereignty and would create conditions favorable for new type of neocolonial capitalism and liberal imperialism.

Yet during this very time, Césaire and Senghor pursued non-nationalist approaches to decolonization for African and Caribbean peoples. In May 1946, Césaire sponsored the historic law that would officially transform France's so-called Old Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Réunion) into full departments of the French nation state.7
same month, Senghor led a vigorous debate in the Paris Assembly on a constitution that would transform the unitary French republic into a postimperial and postnational federation. This new polity would include former colonies as freely associated members and would reconstitute the former metropole as a federated territory within a new type of decentralized polity and plural democracy. When Césaire in 1956 concluded that departmentalization had become an obstacle to, rather than a vehicle for, Antillen self-determination, he resigned from the French Communist Party, founded an autonomous political party in Martinique, and joined forces with Senghor’s movement in the National Assembly to create a postnational federal democracy. Their aim was not only to abolish colonialism and establish conditions for genuine African and Caribbean self-determination but, at the same time, to overcome the traditional notion of a sovereign and unitary national state, thereby inventing a new political form for a different world order. Their “untimely” belief that decolonization might not require national independence, that self-determination might not require state sovereignty, helps to account for why their interventions have been consistently misunderstood by subsequent generations of critics and scholars who often dismiss Césaire and Senghor as imperial apologists simply because they were not revolutionary nationalists (as if these were the only two possible alternatives). From our current vantage, we can see how the futures they envisioned were based on timely readings of the emergent postwar order, whose logics and arrangements they believed would destroy the prospect for substantive colonial emancipation. In this way, their timely “untimeliness” is just what allows us to think with them now about their world and ours.

Actually Existing Internationalism

Since the end of the Cold War and the intensification of neoliberal globalization, the limits of state sovereignty (to create conditions for substantive freedom and human flourishing) and the failures of internationalism (to create conditions for global justice and human solidarity) have become everywhere evident. Even if populations manage to empower democratic popular assemblies to promote their social and economic well-being, crucial decisions that would determine their life chances are made elsewhere—by private economic actors, unaccountable international agencies, and technocratic experts. The fictions of national self-determination and universal human rights are underscored by recent developments within Europe. Consider the EU’s punitive treatment of Greece for trying to resist the authoritarian dictates of global finance through a popular left government. For many critics, this confirmed the priority that national sovereignty should have over international association.

But we might also read it in terms of the European Union’s disastrous decision to constitute itself as an economic and administrative confederation of states led by technocrats and bankers rather than as a truly democratic federation led by a continental association of self-governing peoples for whom resources were shared, risks were socialized, and autonomy was meaningful.

At a different level is Fortress Europe’s failure to respond adequately to the recent flow of refugees from the eastern Mediterranean. This crisis does not simply reveal the moral failure or hypocrisy of the West and the “international community,” it makes clear that the existing global order, organized around and managed by the interlocking actions of nominally sovereign states, international agencies, and the U.S. imperium, cannot meet the most basic requirements of global coordination, democratic participation, self-management, human rights, and social justice. The existing nomos seems to be entering a moment of unsustainable crisis. Under such conditions, we cannot but think seriously about novel forms of political consociation that might be adequate to the plural, translocal, interdependent demands of our historical present.

The bankruptcy of international law is revealed by Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestine and Russia’s annexation of eastern Ukraine. Such violations pale in comparison to the mass violence perpetrated by the U.S. state in the name of liberal internationalism, which is legitimized through UN-sanctioned doctrines and policies regarding human rights, humanitarianism, and the “responsibility to protect.”

The dangers of cultural and territorial autarky have recently been demonstrated by massacres of foreign workers in South Africa, the mass deportation of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, the flight of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, and the internment of Central American children in the United States. Such dangers will surely be amplified by a Donald Trump administration, which may abandon liberal internationalism to act in the name of “America First.” Immediately after assuming office, Trump pursued immigrant round-ups and Islamicophobic travel bans, manufactured a military threat from Iran and antagonized China, expressed sympathy for Russian Crimea, and offered tacit approval for Israel’s likely annexation of parts of Palestine. Trump’s rule will likely underscore the limitations of international law and the lack of frameworks for long-distance solidarity today. The latter was certainly evident as the world watched the Islamic State’s siege of Kobani in northern Syria in 2014–15.

In recent years, scholars have developed valuable critiques of existing forms of internationalism (and corresponding cosmopolitan ideologies). Such criticism is warranted and welcome, especially when directed at pious acolytes of international legal procedure, righteous proponents of humanitarian intervention, patriotic defenders of Western civilization, and the unaccountable...
technocrats who administer the global order. Much of this work comports with the important critique of European internationalism developed by Carl Schmitt in *Nomens of the Earth.*

Schmitt identifies the system of public international law and its humanist ideology as the legitimizing expression of a European imperium, which is based on the sanctity of property and the reality of great power politics. These, he argues, function perversely and paradoxically to legalize extreme violence against non-European populations. But we should also recall that Schmitt regarded Europe’s invidious humanist internationalism as inseparable from the noms of sovereign states. Far from establishing a binary between internationalism and state sovereignty, he demonstrated how each required and enabled the other. Moreover, Schmitt developed this critique to advance a reactionary vision of imperial spheres of influence corresponding to civilizational mandates. It was a brief for politics as permanent war undiluted by legal veils or liberal shibboleths.

This is not to suggest that critics of U.S.–UN internationalism are covert nativists or realpolitik opportunists. But it does underscore the inadequacy of one-sided critique that simply challenges internationalism from the standpoint of state sovereignty (or vice versa). It also reveals the limitations of a critique of existing arrangements that does not allow for the possibility of alternative forms of democratic and cosmopolitan internationalism. Such arguments tend to employ an either-or logic, tacitly conceding that existing forms of liberal internationalism stand for internationalism as such and implying that the only realistic alternative is an open-eyed acceptance of state sovereignty as a quasi-natural fact and territory-ethnicity-force as the inevitable truth of world politics.

Such false binaries are often employed by recent critics of liberal internationalism. Writing from a social democratic perspective, for example, Samuel Moyn makes the important point that national social rights were more substantive and therefore more appealing for most people after World War II than the minimal, abstract, and distant character of so-called human rights. He also acknowledges that various forms of cosmopolitanism emerged after the war. But he asserts, without support, that “the 1940s did not offer any version of a supranational welfarism that was practically effective then or ideologically plausible now.” He neither examines nonliberal forms of cosmopolitanism and internationalism nor explores how they may have created possibilities for the “transnational politics” whose current absence he laments. Rather, he simply declares that “the nation-state won as a political form and nationalism won as a political ideology.” This realist analytic leads him to ignore unrealized historical alternatives and present an either-or choice between actually existing liberal internationalism, human rights, and empty cosmopolitanism, on one side, and the national welfarism of sovereign states, on the other. (He thus implies that the historical record...

human rights order has exhausted the space of, and ruled out the possibility for, any other form of cosmopolitan internationalism.)

Writing from the standpoint of radical anti-imperialism, Partha Chatterjee, sets up a similar dichotomy and reaches a similar conclusion. He argues that twentieth-century currents of liberal internationalism, Soviet-led communist internationalism, and the post-Bandung “internationalism of the non-aligned” created networks and alliances that promoted the aim of national self-determination, through state sovereignty, for all peoples. He then counterposes these forms of nationalist internationalism to current forms of liberal cosmopolitanism, which he traces back to Kant and uses as a “discourse of human rights” to “justify intervention in the sovereign domain of non-Western governments by a global civic community acting on behalf of humanity itself.” Chatterjee rightly criticizes the “new forms of imperial power” that are enabled by these invidious types of “international politics” and “cosmopolitan imagining.” But he then dismisses cosmopolitanism as such, declaring it the “utopian dream” of “a global intellectual elite located principally in Europe and America.” He bases this position on three claims. First, that “the principal achievement of anti-imperialism in the twentieth century” was “the establishment of a universal civic constitution based on the formal equality of sovereign nation-states,” which is institutionally “enshrined principally in the General Assembly of the United Nations.” Second, that “popular mobilizations” in Africa and Asia only “demand from postcolonial nation-states a rapid material improvement in their living standards and livelihood opportunities” and will likely resist any attempts at global regulation. Third, that the social forces capable of instituting a cosmopolitan program will probably tilt in favor of the West. Finally, like Moyn, he professes a “realist perspective based on the actual record of history” to conclude that “cosmopolitanism as a concept . . . is extremely limited in its historical potential.” We are again presented with the false choice between actually existing liberal cosmopolitanism or sovereign national states.

My point is neither to defend cosmopolitanism nor to criticize nationalism. It is to call into question the one-dimensional and binary thinking that underlies these arguments. It is to challenge the dubious idea that the real is national (which abjures immanent critique and denigrates future-oriented political imagination). It is to push back against the dubious assertion that the arrangements and benefits associated with a future cosmopolitan internationalism would only be of value to liberal Westerners or comprador elites in the Global South, that all ordinary people ever really want is social benefits from a national state. How can we take ideas such as cosmopolitan internationalism, postnational democracy, and transnational politics off the table in a world characterized by imperial wars and occupations, mass displacement and labor diasporas, the criminalization of refugees and migrants, and imminent envi-
Both Moyn and Chatterjee adduce difficulty as proof of impossibility and riskiness as proof of reaction. Each ignores the variety of historical cosmopolitanisms and internationalisms that might point beyond or help us to think across the false dichotomy between liberal cosmopolitanism and national self-determination. And each summarily dismisses historical attempts to anticipate and enact such political forms as fantastic, unrealistic, utopian, lacking mass support, or having "lost out" historically. Both dismiss Senghor's program for a postimperial democrat socialist federation on the grounds that it lost out or was out of sync with the new global order.39

There is no disputing the fact that liberal internationalism has authorized new forms of Western imperialism and state violence, nor the fact that for colonized peoples national independence and state sovereignty were often hard-won victories that should be protected against American and European disregard. The UN General Assembly may indeed be a principal achievement of twentieth-century anti-imperialism, just as national welfare may be understood as a victory of the nineteenth-century workers' struggle in Europe. But each has also served the oppressive status quo by preempting and containing more radical alternatives. Neither should be regarded as a fixed and unsurpassable horizon for anti-imperial and social justice thinking.

I suggest that categorical defenses of national sovereignty reproduce rather than engage the kinds of dilemmas raised by Crimea, Gaza, Greece, Syria, and the Mediterranean refugee crisis. These cases illuminate real problems that have haunted modern democratic politics from their inception; namely, how to fashion effective democratic frameworks through which accountability, legality, and justice might be pursued either on scales that exceed the boundaries of any particular national community or within plural or decentralized polities that seek to displace the model of a unitary sovereign state. Said in a different way: How can the good of popular sovereignty be reconciled with the demands of global solidarity or plural democracy, especially if one cannot be fully realized without the other? How can we conjure a people's right to self-government with recognition that entwined histories, common futures, and a shared planet implicate seemingly separate peoples in each others' calamities and potentialities? How can we preserve the indisputable benefits of being a full citizen within a democratic political community and make claims (in one's own name or in solidarity with others) on distant actors and agencies whose practices circumscribe the life chances of that community? What political forms might guarantee a people's self-determination and accommodate the bonds of interdependence, reciprocity, and responsibility that bind it to seemingly disparate peoples and places?

Criticism of existing arrangements should be relentless, and the dangers of certain alternatives should be specified. But the fact that imagining alternative forms is difficult and often should not be a reason to give up on them. As Kant argued, it is the duty of every person to advance the cause of humanity and human freedom. This requires a commitment to democracy and democratic practices. But this also means that we must be willing to engage with one another, to listen to different perspectives, and to work together to build a better world. The democratic dilemma is one of the central challenges of our time, and we must be willing to engage with it in order to find solutions.
or rule in its place. For Kant, legally governed social relations and democratic self-government worked together to create a state of political freedom and public peace. On the other hand, he argued that insofar as there existed no overarching legal or constitutional order regulating relations among these separate polities, they lived under a permanent threat of unregulated outside aggression. He reasoned that neither political democracy nor human freedom could be fully realized, even for members of self-governing polities, under such lawless conditions within an anagogic international order.

In short, Kant explained that real freedom required the existence of separate sovereign states and that such sovereignty would make real human freedom impossible. Conversely, in his view, only the creation of a global political agency could guarantee freedom for self-governing peoples even as it would, by definition, undermine such freedom. His ambiguous response to this dilemma was to envision a federal world republic or world republican federation. By this he meant neither a world state nor a simple confederation of sovereign states agreeing to follow the rules of interstate behavior (as in commercial or nonaggression pacts). Rather Kant envisioned a self-governing federation of self-governing peoples on a worldwide scale. Through this ideal, he hoped that humanity would be able to reconcile popular sovereignty with planetary entanglement and cosmopolitan responsibility. (Insisting that all peoples had an original right to share the whole planet, Kant also argued that there exists a realm of cosmopolitan right above national and international law, whereby all the world’s citizens may interact with any foreign people without being treated as an enemy.) He thus attempted to envision a cosmopolitan arrangement in which self-determination would not require state sovereignty and in which popular sovereignty would not be violated by an unaccountable world government.

However we might now evaluate Kant’s underspecified suggestions, we should appreciate that he defined a profound and persistent problem for democratic politics. This dilemma did not disappear following the French revolution, when the Jacobin model of a unitary national state enjoying total territorial sovereignty within its borders became the normal and desirable form through which peoples sought to protect or pursue self-determination. Nor did it disappear in the nineteenth century when the industrial revolution unfolded and capitalism increasingly transformed social relations throughout Western Europe and its overseas empires, and sovereign national states facilitated the growth of distinct national economies (and vice versa).

After the end of World War II, Kant’s democratic dilemma reemerged as a concrete problem for global politics. Following Europe’s self-imposition, the genocidal mass murder of its Jewish “minority” populations, and the dawn of mass movements for decolonization, intellectuals, activists, and policy makers engaged in public debates about the problem of freedom, asking how best to reconcile the imperatives of democratic self-government, national independence, state sovereignty, international law, and global justice. Hannah Arendt, for example, maintained that peoples’ humanity depended on their place and participation in a concrete political community through which (public) action becomes (publicly) meaningful. Thus her celebration of the ancient Greek polis as an ideal form of political association. But she reasoned that since citizenship in the modern West had become dependent on national identity, one’s human rights could only be recognized and protected through the framework of a national state. In her view, European history between 1917 and 1945 demonstrated that under existing conditions the concept of human rights was an empty and dangerous abstraction. But we should recall that this was simultaneously a critique of parochial nationalism as the agency that had degraded democratic politics in the modern period. She demonstrated that in a world order grounded in national xenophobia, race thinking, and imperialism, as growing numbers of people were compelled to reside within the boundaries of nation-states to which they did not legally or ethnically belong, nation-states became incapable of guaranteeing them concrete human rights in the form of real citizenship and political belonging.

Like Kant, Arendt recognized that sovereign states were indispensable for a human self-realization that they also made impossible. She demonstrated how this deep and persistent contradiction was revealed in the catastrophic twentieth century when European nation-states and the international order they comprised were unable to address the political problems that they themselves had created, as embodied by diasporic Jews, national minorities, stateless peoples, and refugees. Likewise, neither national nor international legal orders were capable of adequately conceptualizing, let alone addressing, the Nazi genocide as a crime against humanity. She insisted that "the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself" even as she conceded that "for the time being a sphere that is above the nations does not exist." She responded to this dilemma by proposing various forms of multinational federal democracy for European Jews and small states.

At the inception of the postwar period, a range of political thinkers in and beyond Europe shared Arendt’s concern with imagining frameworks for transnational solidarity and postnational democracy that would not invest already powerful states or a new superstate with quasi-imperial authority over other parts of the world. New arrangements would have to respect the autonomy of vulnerable peoples or nations while also allowing them to make claims on the international community, whether against local states or great powers. Thus Albert Camus demanded that the planned United Nations be constituted as a genuine "international democracy" with a true "world parliament" able to enact binding legislation; W. B. E. DuBois demanded that the United Nations remove colonies from imperial powers, declare itself unconditionally opposed
to colonialism, and include delegates from colonized territories; Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a world federation of free, equal, and interdependent states through which the powerful nations would serve the weak, partly through resource redistribution, with the aim of creating "one world"; and Harold Laski insisted that a truly democratic world system could not be based on the principle of state sovereignty and required that capitalism itself be overcome.27

These debates about self-determination and internationalism for a new historical era circulated at a moment when colonized peoples, especially across the black Atlantic, were especially sensitive to how political freedom posed a set of genuine risks and problems for which there was no natural or necessary institutional solution. The shared aim was certainly to end imperialism and secure self-determination. But given the deep relations of entanglement and dependence that would continue to subordinate postcolonial societies to larger processes and stronger states, many wondered whether the sovereign national state was the only or best form in which to do so. This is the context in which Senghor and Césaire attempted to reconcile the imperatives of self-government, translocal interdependence, and human solidarity by envisioning new types of federal polities organized on non-national lines and on transnational scales.

Imperial states typically subjugated non-Europeans in the name of claims to protect populations, generalize liberty, ensure world peace, and improve humanity. They violated subject peoples' autonomy and territorial integrity on the erroneous grounds that they were not capable of self-government. This at a time when the logic of global politics held that a people could neither appear on the stage of world history nor even be recognized as a political actor without being organized as an independent national state. Under such conditions, state sovereignty, national independence, and territorial integrity certainly promised a robust alternative to, and protection against, colonial domination by foreign powers. Any international arrangement that would open the door to new forms of intercontinental paternalism and supranational authority would be rightly suspect.

Yet many non-European thinkers also recognized that formal political liberty could not protect formerly colonized peoples from the depredations of global capitalism, uneven development, great power geopolitics, and an ascendant American state. Political independence would certainly not automatically undo the knots of socioeconomic entanglement and relations of dependence that would continue to bind former colonized peoples to former imperial powers. Moreover, this history of entanglement meant that much of the West's wealth and prosperity, as well as the infrastructure for generating future wealth, was made possible by the exploitation of slave and colonial labor, the expropriation of overseas natural resources, and the relations of intercontinental inequality that imperial capitalism had instituted worldwide.

From this perspective, many colonial critics believed that there should be non- or supranational mechanisms through which this interdependence could be recognized, reciprocity guaranteed, and colonized peoples provided with an enduring claim on the wealth in which they already had a rightful share. They saw clearly that their countries' lack of resources would make impossible the forms of social democracy or state socialism then being attempted in Western and Eastern Europe. They reasoned that some mechanisms for international economic solidarity, political accountability, and justice were necessary to repair the harms of imperialism and prevent its reemergence in a different form. Such critics wondered whether it would be possible to insist on self-determination and to create a real parliament of peoples, new forms of transnational citizenship, or genuine plural democracies on the scales of former empires. Could such frameworks facilitate massive reconstruction or reparations projects through which the West might be compelled to assume responsibility for the social misery and mass poverty it had created and pay its historical debt rather than subordinate new national states through financial debt for development projects? And shouldn't there be some mechanism for criminalizing public and private acts of neocolonialism and imperial domination?

We know that the U.S.-UN system that emerged to govern the postwar global order turned out to resemble the very type of "international dictatorship" of powerful states against which Camus and Du Bois warned contemporaries. Its primary aim was to ensure order among sovereign national states rather than provide a framework for social justice or democratic accountability on a planetary scale. The UN Charter did make provisions for checking state sovereignty, whereby it could punish national states for violating individuals' human rights. But these were usually defined according to a set of Western norms to which the West rarely held itself. And the subjects of this law were individuals rather than communities. In other words, the UN defined conditions under which the international community could interfere in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state, but it never attempted to create a democratic world order that would rethink territorial nationality or state sovereignty.

We also know that by the mid-1950s most colonized peoples—led variously by peasant mobilizations, radical trade unions, nationalist political parties, and urban intellectuals—pursued decolonization through struggles for national independence and state sovereignty. But we should also recall that once the movement for decolonization gained historical momentum, colonial powers, the United States, and the United Nations themselves insisted that separate national states should be the form through which colonized peoples would be emancipated and around which the postwar international order should be organized. Shouldn't this fact alone invite us to pause before any claim about anticolonial nationalism as necessarily emancipatory and internationalism as inevitably imperial?
Between 1945 and 1960, Césaire and Senghor pursued their programs for self-determination without state sovereignty as public intellectuals, party leaders in their respective territories, and deputies in the French National Assembly. Their interventions proceeded from a belief that imperialism itself, by establishing deep relations of interdependence between seemingly disparate peoples and places, had created conditions for new types of transcontinental political association. Just as Marx believed that industrial production had itself opened the door to a postcapitalist form of socialism, they believed that empire itself had created pathways to a postnational form of democracy. Their proposals were fundamentally driven by a concern with substantive freedom, or what Marx called human emancipation, beyond formal national liberation.

If we are to grasp these initiatives historically, we need to recognize that their starting point was the entangled histories that bound overseas and metropolitan peoples and prospects to one another. Believing that European power and prosperity was partly created through the exploitation of African and Antillean labor and resources, they rejected any arrangement that would compel them, the day after independence, to approach the French state as foreigners asking for aid. Given this legacy of imperial entanglement and the new realities of postwar geopolitics and global capitalism, they believed that delinking for Africans and Antilleans was neither practically possible nor morally acceptable. In that historical conjuncture, Césaire and Senghor concluded, mere political separation would not end multiplex relations of economic, social, and cultural (inter)dependence between overseas and metropolitan societies. The crucial question was what the terms and form of that inevitable relationship would be. If decolonization did not also seek to revolutionize metropolitan social relations and reconfigure the very nomos of the global order, it followed that it could never lead to substantive emancipation. In their view, decolonization would have to overcome republican colonialism and unitary republicanism, empires and national states. Only a new type of postnational polity, they believed, would allow Africans and Antilleans to enjoy self-government, protect cultural specificity, and pursue humane and just forms of economic growth through democratic socialism.

Césaire and Senghor thus believed that imperialism had created a pervasively cosmopolitan situation to which European national states and monoculturalists would now have to accommodate themselves by becoming something else entirely. The challenge was how to invent an emancipatory political form that would build upon, rather than retreat from or seek to untangle, imperial interdependencies and heterogeneities. Rather than allow metropolitan France to detach itself from, and renounce responsibility for, its former colonies, they sought to democratize the long-standing entanglements that they recognized would persist even if these countries were legally separate.

Accordingly, they pursued a constitutional struggle to transform the imperial republic into a decentralized federation that would abolish imperialism and revolutionize existing forms of republicanism and provide a model for an alternative world order. Socialist and democratic, transcontinental and multinational, this new type of state would include former colonies as freely associated and self-governing members. Each would possess a local territorial assembly and an autonomous administration through which to manage its own affairs. They would also send representatives to a federal parliament. Metropolitan France, Senghor explained, would become "one state among others, no longer the federator, but the federated." Overseas peoples would be self-managing and subject to their own civil law even as they also enjoyed full federal citizenship, juridical equality within the federation, and socioeconomic solidarity with the rest of France. They would also be charter members of the emergent European Economic Community.

Note that Senghor and Césaire were not simply demanding that overseas peoples be fully assimilated within the existing national state. They were proposing a type of revolutionary integration that would reconstitute France itself by quietly exploding the unitary state and monocultural republic. They also believed that the historical conditions and sociopolitical infrastructure for such transcontinental federal polities already existed. In Marxist terms, they regarded empire as federation in alienated form. Theirs was an immanent critique: rather than simply demand decolonization for Martinique or Senegal, they called on Caribbeans and Africans to decolonize France. The aim was to end colonialism, not in order to retreat into autarchic national states but to elevate the French imperial republic into a postnational federal democracy within which multiple peoples, civilizations, and legal orders could coexist. Legal pluralism, disaggregated sovereignty, and territorial disjuncture would be constitutionally grounded; culture, nationality, and citizenship would no longer have to align with one another. They believed that only such a cosmopolitan formation could ensure autonomy, socialism, and justice.

Rather than beg for charity as foreigners, Africans and Antilleans would be able to claim development and social welfare resources as citizens of an autonomous region. Rather than depend on the goodwill of international agencies to redress harms, they could prosecute claims in a federal justice system. Thus, through this postnational federation, they might have a framework for holding European imperial powers directly accountable for past injuries and ongoing forms of exploitation. It might also serve to protect them against future (that is, American-led) forms of imperial domination. This federal polity could also serve as a building block for an alternative global order that might allow humanity to pursue the dreams of solidarity and reciprocity proclaimed by different currents of postwar internationalism.
Of course their program for postnational democracy was never institutionalized. A wide consensus (which included not only the majority of anti-colonial political movements but former imperial powers, the United States government, and the United Nations organization) held that self-determination required territorial sovereignty and that decolonization should lead to independent national states. And even if Césaire and Senghor had convinced the French state to effectively negate itself by joining their postnational democratic-socialist federation, it is likely that such an ambitious and idealistic arrangement would have created all manner of problems and reached any number of impasses. Moreover, historical conditions have shifted dramatically since the late 1940s. Their solutions then could not possibly be ours now. So why should we today pay serious attention to such seemingly fanciful propositions?

Recognizing Futures Past

Post–Cold War developments have revealed that there is no necessary relation between state sovereignty and self-determination, let alone between being human and possessing rights. Under such conditions, human freedom has again become a public problem for which there is no self-evident institutional solution. This is precisely the insight that motivated Césaire’s and Senghor’s seemingly utimely and unrealistic (and supposedly insufficiently radical) programs for a different type of decolonization that could form the basis of an alternative global order.

However problematic their proposals were, they warned against the very nationalist internationalism, organized around unitary sovereign states, that was established in the postwar period. Given the entangled and interdependent character of a twentieth-century world shaped by global capitalism and colonial imperialism, social mobility and cultural mixture, they believed that such an anemic internationalism would merely allow powerful territorial states to continue to dominate nominally independent nations for whom genuine economic development, democratic socialism, and international standing would become impossible. Moreover, in a situation of global entanglements, they recognized that the expectation that territory, nationality, and state should align would make real democracy in plural societies impossible, whether in newly independent or continental European countries.

Césaire and Senghor hoped to transform the conditions created by imperialism into a world order organized around plural postnational democracies on the scale of intercontinental federations. Within them, legal pluralism and cultural coexistence could be accommodated. Self-government might be reconciled with economic solidarity, rights of work and mobility, political citizenship, and mechanisms for justice on supranational scales. Through them the false choice between, on one hand, sovereign national states, and on the other, either an unaccountable world state or a powerless set of international agencies and ethics might be avoided. Their initiatives were based on the conviction that in the mid-twentieth century, a decolonization that did not also seek to invent political frameworks that could democratize persisting linkages between former colonies and former metropoles on a planetary scale could never guarantee substantive freedom in what we now call the Global South.

As political actors, critical intellectuals, and engaged poets, Senghor and Césaire developed a pragmatic and experimental relationship to politics. Rather than make universal or transhistorical claims about the correct political arrangement, they were open to various possible means to best pursue the desired end of substantive freedom in a given world. At the same time, they practiced a proleptic and anticipatory relationship to politics, acting as if seemingly impossible futures were already at hand, precisely by recognizing transformative potentiality within existing arrangements. Their multifaceted interventions illuminate the affinity between immanent critique, political imagination, and poetic knowledge.

A steady stream of critics have dismissed their projects as “impossible” because they were never institutionalized. We should resist this as an empiricist, conservative, and ideological view, one that presupposes that only the real is rational, and attend rather to how Césaire’s and Senghor’s efforts invite us to rethink conventional assumptions about possibility and impossibility, realism and utopianism, failure and success, and pragmatism and principles.

Such orientations may help us grapple with the challenges of plural and federal democracy for our times. More substantively, their efforts also remind us that self-determination became sutured to state sovereignty through a historical process, but there is no intrinsic relation between them. This process also conflated territorial sovereignty (which is about jurisdiction, borders, and state logic) and popular sovereignty (which is about self-management, active and universal citizenship, and democratic logic). We should resist using the categories that were produced by this historical process to analyze the process itself.

Specifically, they identified transcontinental federalism as the best possible way to abolish colonialism and secure self-determination within a non-national political formation that might be the elemental unit of a different kind of federated world order. If this historical example can serve as some kind of inspiration now, their efforts should also remind us that they were proposing a situated experiment that could only be worked out practically, and possibly itself be abandoned or transcended. We should also recall that their propositions about federalism were typically tied to corresponding propositions about
socialism, which they regarded as the flip side of the same coin. Their legacy reminds us that these types of postnational arrangements should be in the service of, and could only be fully realized under, a set of postcapitalist social arrangements that bound wealthy and powerful peoples to poor and weak ones through relations of economic responsibility and accountability.

We should also learn from their shortcomings and blind spots; namely, their failure to recognize that this radical hope to reconstitute France, Europe, and world order could only have been realized if their constitutional efforts were linked to a corresponding social movement propelling these changes. Without direct pressure and mass popular support, existing states would not, and will not, constitutionalize themselves out of existence (pace Israel today). Similarly, we should beware of the illusion that even the most radical constitutional arrangements can themselves effect societal transformation.

If plural and federal democracies are to create conditions for substantive freedom, they must emerge from, and in turn nourish, a corresponding set of political practices. Constitutional initiatives must index a concrete political ethos or form of life (bound up with autonomy, interdependence, reciprocity, and solidarity). The work of crafting new political forms should proceed on the basis of an understanding of the dialectic between polity and politics, politics and ethos, ethics and subjectivity. In other words, federalist forms require federalist politics, federalist practices, and federalist subjects.

Finally, we should recall that there is nothing intrinsically emancipatory about federalism as such. Variants of federalist thinking have emerged out of liberal, republican, racialist, pan-ethnic, Marxist, and anarchist political traditions. So I suggest that we both pay attention to political form and avoid political formalism and make the claim that if federal and plural democracies are to overcome the unitary national state and create conditions in which self-managing communities can pursue substantive freedom in an interdependent world, if they are to model and help create new types of differential unities, translocal solidarities, and planetary politics, then constitutional arrangements need to emerge in conjunction with everyday practices and cultures of horizontal sociality, self-management, and popular democracy.

Césaire and Senghor were situated humanists, concrete cosmopolitans, and embodied universalists who regarded decolonization not only as a way to secure political liberty or improve material well-being but as an opportunity to transform the global order, to promote model and new planetary politics based on mutuality, reciprocity, solidarity, and métissage. Just as they claimed to have heard the call of their predecessors in the 1790s and 1840s, we may now enter into dialogue with these flawed visionaries from the 1940s. Doing so not least because of the inability of either existing internationalism or its critics to adequately address the deep dilemmas that they, like Kant and Arendt, identified, which continue to plague contemporary global politics.

Notes

2. Documents from the First General Assembly may be found at http://research.un.org /en/docs/go/quick/regular/t.
17. Chatterjee, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and Cosmopolitanism,"

19. For an account of nonliberal forms of Indian internationalism that belie the claims that twentieth century internationalisms either served the aim of national self-determination or were Eurocentric and elite, see Manu Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms," American Historical Review 117, no. 5 (December 2012): 1465-85.


28. The following account is elaborated fully in Wilder, Freedom Time.

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