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What Is Colonialism? The Dual Claims of a Twentieth-Century Political Category

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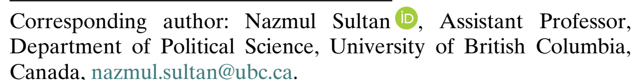
Although a master category of contemporary social and political thought, the conceptual import of colonialism has long been contested. Turning to the political thought of Jawaharlal Nehru, this article reconstructs the surprising, and often surreptitious, intellectual transformations that rendered colonialism into a generic name for European rule over Asia and Africa. It demonstrates how the dual claims of colonialism—a historical reference for the global event of European expansion and a threadbare analytical definition for a particular form of rule—generated a powerful framework in the anticolonial age. While the expanded juridical uses of colonialism in the Cold War era undermined its historical claims, the priority would reverse with its postcolonial re-signification as a shorthand for studying the paradoxes of global modernity. Reframing these debates, this article argues that reflexive navigation between the dual claims of colonialism is key to a capacious appreciation of its historical and normative contentions.

Colonialism now operates as a master category of contemporary social and political thought. At once a category and an idea, the term is deployed both as a descriptor for modern European rule over the globe and as shorthand for an overlapping set of historical phenomena associated with it. The rise of the category in the twentieth century, however, followed a circuitous route, turning its earlier history upside down in the process. Until the early decades of the past century, terms such as "colony" and "colonial" broadly maintained continuity with their early modern history—"a plantation of men, a place to which men emigrated and settled" (Finley 1976, 171). Yet, by the second half of the twentieth century, the foremost meaning of colonialism would pertain to the imperial subjection of Asian and African peoples, while the erstwhile "colonies"—for example, Australia and Canada—required a qualifying adjective, that is, "settler colonies." Soon after, the political history of the vast majority of the non-European world came to be periodized around it: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. The modern political thought of Asia and Africa under the shadow of empire is also organized under the broader scope of the category—anticolonial political thought. Along the way, it spawned a host of sub-categories and subsidiary ideas: neo-colonialism, informal colonialism, internal colonialism, decolonization, decoloniality, and so on.

For all its dramatic ascent in the twentieth century, the meaning of colonialism divided opinions at every stage of its evolution. The range of disagreements spanned from the normative content of the category to matters as fundamental as its very applicability to Asian and African contexts. As the uses of the idea of colonialism multiplied, the theoretical contentions and historical diagnoses that led to its rise became opaque, leading to a protracted uncertainty about its conceptual scope. Insofar as the history of the idea of colonialism has received attention from political theorists and historians, it stemmed from a long-standing debate over its difference from another salient category of modern political life: imperialism (Bell 2016, 211–36; Kumar 2021; Pitts 2010; Said 1993, 9–10). It is usual now to describe the history of European rule over (a great deal of) Asian and African territories as colonial and the movements opposing it as anticolonial. In contrast, the acts of domination not primarily oriented to permanent territorial possession (e.g., the 2003 Iraq invasion) are likely to be characterized as imperialism. At the same time, it will not confuse modern readers if one describes British rule over India as colonialism, even while dubbing its specific policies or events—such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre or sedition laws—as "imperialist." In short, the uses of the imperial and the colonial are too entangled in popular and scholarly discourses to maintain a strict separation (see Pitts 2010, 213–4). Given this interwoven history, any puritan attempt to radically separate the two words, argues Krishan Kumar (2021, 304), is "dangerously restrictive." Others remain unpersuaded. Moses Finley (1976, 168–70) famously defended viewing "colony" as a "technical term," that is, as a species of the genus "dependency." From another perspective, Barbara Arneil (2024, 19), building on her study of domestic colonies (2017), argues that the distinction matters primarily because of the different ideologies and practices of "power/domination" that these categories entail.

Turning away from the problem of adjudicating the boundary between the imperial and the colonial, this



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article shifts the focus onto the specific terms of contestations over the idea of colonialism in twentieth-century anticolonial political thought. It asks a necessary, but largely unexamined, prior question: how—and why—did the category of colonialism go through a radical transformation of meaning in the twentieth century? In addressing this question, the article demonstrates how the idea of colonialism developed simultaneously as a *historical reference* for the global event of European imperial expansion and as an analytical category for the *form of rule* imposed upon Asians and Africans. This I call the dual claims of colonialism. These were not just two ways of defining colonialism; they acted as political claims by way of making possible the articulation of new agendas for a world where the overcoming of foreign rule and the remaking of the global order appeared inseparable from each other. The argument presented below further shows how the confluence of these two claims of modern colonialism had originally rendered its older distinction from imperialism unsustainable for Asian and African political actors. The contention that modern European rule in Asia and Africa accompanied a set of entangled phenomena—underdevelopment, racial hierarchy, psychological degradation, and so on—led to a new historical appreciation of imperial subjection. The history of the unequal modern integration of the European and non-European worlds itself became constitutive of the meaning of colonialism. The simultaneous redefinition of colonialism as a territorial form of rule—where European empires directly exerted sovereignty over Asian and African peoples—helped analytically scaffold this emerging historical diagnosis. Much of the power of the idea of colonialism in the twentieth century, as the article shows, pertained to these dual claims that were complementary and contestatory in equal measure.

In what follows, I analyze the vicissitudes of the idea of colonialism in close reference to the political thought of Jawaharlal Nehru and his broader British imperial contexts. Though a key figure in the history of anticolonialism, Nehru's political thought by no means exhausts the range of debates around colonialism. But the focus on a specific figure enables the article to closely reconstruct the shifting meaning of colonialism and its theoretical stakes without losing contextual complexity. Nehru partook or featured in three transformative episodes I study in the article: the interwar debate organized around the history of European territorial rule, the post-war debate on colonialism as a juridical idea, and the postcolonial debate on the discursive nature of colonialism. Crucially, he also had plenty of exposure to the earlier age when the colonial served a different kind of role within the British Empire. No less important to my argument are the rapidly shifting intellectual and political contexts of Nehru's interventions. Nehru's theory of colonialism emerged out of his interventions into a recurring set of global debates about the past and present of European empires during the tumultuous middle passage of the twentieth century. As we shall see, these political disputes concerning the meaning of colonialism revolved around different ways of bringing together—or separating—the dual claims of the category as a historical reference and as a form of rule.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first section begins with the young Nehru's reflections on the meaning of the colonial in the early twentieth-century British Empire and argues that the relationship between colonies and dependencies was far from a settled question in the nineteenth century. My argument also implies that insofar as a certain distinction between the imperial and the colonial emerged later in the nineteenth century, it was fundamentally shaped by questions pertaining to the classification of imperial possessions. The second section reconstructs the coming together of the historical and analytical aspects of the category in the interwar era. Contrary to what is commonly presumed, Nehru's theorization of the colonial was critically propelled by his departure from the emerging Hobsonian orthodoxy, and by the political stake of rendering the self-proclaimed purveyor of progress, the British Empire, into a *backward* ruler out of touch with the twentieth century. The crucial, post-war dispute over the meaning of colonialism, as the following section shows, pertained to an altogether new political and intellectual context. The promise of an international political bloc composed of colonized or previously colonized peoples was crucial to the transformation of the adjective "colonial" into an "-ism" concept. Yet, once juridically defined, colonialism appeared applicable to contexts well beyond that of European empires. The result was a growing rift between the claim of the category as a form of rule and as a historical reference. The final section traces how these disjointed pieces of the idea became even more disassembled after the revitalization of colonialism scholarship with the postcolonial turn. As postcolonial theorists discovered the complicity of modern knowledge forms in sustaining alien rule, the problem of colonialism and that of modernity overlapped increasingly. In recentering the debate on a discursive paradigm, the postcolonial turn opened up new intellectual horizons and yet set into motion an approach that would eventually undermine the meaning of colonialism as a form of rule.

The stakes of understanding the formative tensions of the idea of colonialism are more than historical. As an object of critique, colonialism stands at the center of attempts to overcome the unequal formation of the modern world. If one takes it as a mere form of rule (as many did in the post-war era), the normative goal falls out of step with the larger problems colonialism signals. Reducing it to a mere synonym for the historical encounter between the European and the non-European world (as many do now) dissolves the idea of colonialism into a still broader set of questions about global modernity. In reframing the history of contestations over the meaning of colonialism in the twentieth century, the article suggests that the problem of the dual claims of colonialism is key to a capacious appreciation of its interpretive and normative contentions.

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BEFORE THE TRANSFORMATION: THE COLONIAL QUESTION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH EMPIRE

In June of 1908, the young Nehru, then based in England, reported to his father by letter that the British weekly *Saturday Review* had recently opined that Indians would have to wait for a period between "a few million years and a wholly incomprehensible period" to reach "the colonial standard" (SWJN1.1: 58).[1] Only then would they be deserving of the right of self-government. The young Nehru's attention to the conveniently indeterminate temporal horizon of British expectation for Indian progress was apt but unremarkable, as was the use of the "colonial standard" to describe a stage that many Indians aspired to reach. After all, the very institutional imagination of "self-government" within the empire in that period was bound up with the example set by the likes of Canada and Australia. But in light of the history that would soon unfold, it is worth specifying the conceptual universe that made possible this contrast between India and the "colonial standard."

When Nehru penned this letter, the Indian National Congress (of which, Nehru's father was a member) was still reeling from the split of the organization six months prior. Directly invoking the examples of Canada and Australia, Dadabhai Naoroji—the towering political figure of the era—argued in a famous 1906 address that the way forward for India lies in demanding the form of self-government enjoyed by those "Colonies." Naoroji was not unaware of the color line dividing Britain's two empires. In fact, he argued, this was what made India more deserving of self-government. India's non-filial association with Britain meant that it was a truer endorsement of the British imperial ideal than the inherited connection of its settler possessions (Naoroji 1917, 255). Many others were critical of such an agenda. Bipin Chandra Pal (1907, 31), for instance, responded that such an approach was a mere dream, since self-government was only extended to "the Colonies" because of their racial unity with the metropolis. These disagreements aside, the loyalty and resistance of Indians until the early twentieth century were both qualified by the fact that India was not a colony.

Though it exuded an air of continuity, this distinction between colonies proper and "dependencies" such as India was stabilized relatively recently. Earlier in the nineteenth century, the growing expanse of the British Empire unsettled the inherited meaning of colony. While the veritable tradition of comparing modern colonies to their ancient counterparts had already begun in the eighteenth century, the first half of the nineteenth century saw a new development: the tendency to describe many territorial—and non-settler—possessions as colonies. To give one authoritative example, James Mill (1825, 3) began his *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on colonies with a complaint that would be repeated many times later: "The term 'Colony' has not been used with much precision." He further noted, "The term 'Colony' is sometimes employed in a sense in which the idea of a body of people, drawn from the mother country, hardly seems to be included. Thus, we talk of the British colonies in the east, meaning, by that mode of expression, the East Indies" (1825, 4). George Cornewall Lewis's important 1841 text, *An Essay on the Government of Dependencies*, offered an explanation of this semantic ambiguity. Lewis (1891, 175) argued that the inclusion of various non-settler territories of the empire under the Colonial Department originally led to a change in the everyday meaning of colony: both the territories predominantly inhabited by the British descendants (e.g., Sydney, Newfoundland) and by non-British peoples (e.g., Ceylon, Trinidad, Mauritius) were now seen as colonies. Even the possessions of the East India Company—above all, India (whose affairs were managed by the India Office rather than by the Colonial Department)—were occasionally called a colony. This practice was not limited to Britain either. James Mill's Indian contemporary, Rammohun Roy (1887, 631), found it perfectly reasonable in 1820 to describe the "Asiatic nations" under European rule as "colonies."

Contrary to Finley's (1976, 170) claim that until the late nineteenth century "colony" was universally understood as a species of the genus of dependencies, a considerable ambiguity enveloped this question earlier in the century. James Mill, for one, concluded the opposite. Complicating the criterion of dependency, he argued that a colony was where the settlers or their descendants do not "come under the authority of any foreign government, but either remain under the government of the mother country, or exist under government of their own" (1825, 3). By that definition, Mill hastened to add, a counterintuitive implication follows: the United States, though no longer under the political control of the British, should still be considered a colony because its government was constituted and run by the descendants of the British. While Mill reflected on the emerging difficulty of defining colonies, he had no qualms against its new popular usage and was happy to consider both "ancient" (settler) and "modern" (non-settler) possessions under the category of colonies (1825, 4). His more pressing concern lay in the utilitarian contention that both these colonies—"an outlying part of the population of the mother country, or an outlying territory belonging to it"—were a drain on the metropolis (31–3).

Writing some years later, Lewis proposed an even stronger distinction between colonies and dependencies: the people who leave their mother country for another territory must form a "separate political community" that might or might not be dependent on the metropolis. In other words, a colony is not necessarily a dependency, nor is a dependency necessarily a colony (Lewis 1891, 171). But, unlike the elder Mill, Lewis (1891, 175) concluded that the criterion of settlers forming a separate political community, strictly speaking, disqualifies the usage of "colony" in the

[1] All citations to Nehru's *Selected Works* (1972–1982; 1984–2019) are abbreviated as SWJN hereafter, followed by the series, volume, and page numbers.

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context of territories such as India. This was not just a definitional dispute. Lewis was also responding to a different context where the British understanding of their imperial realm was undergoing a transformation. In the 1830s, the Wakefieldian, external profit-driven program for "systematic colonization" and the contention that population transfers could help resolve the social problems of the metropolis (Bell 2016, 214–29) had displaced the elder Mill's utilitarian despair, alongside new experiments in creating colonies "within the border of states" to "improve" people who were considered a burden to the society (Arneil 2017, 1). The emerging approach to settler colonies as a potential remedy for the metropolitan social question was complemented by new political considerations. As Richard Koebner showed in his magisterial study of the idea of imperialism, the political concession made to white dependencies in the wake of the Canadian Rebellion of 1837–8 accompanied the growing view that the British Empire proper was composed of the United Kingdom and its settler colonies (Koebner and Schmidt 1964, 50–80). One result of the shift was the attempt to "[restrict] the name colony to places settled by and suitable for Englishmen" (Koebner and Schmidt 1964, 71).[2]

Indeed, these pushbacks against the indiscriminate use of "colony" for all imperial possessions proved highly successful. By the time J.R. Seeley came to write his extraordinarily influential *The Expansion of England*, the questions pertaining to the relationship between colonies and dependencies receded into the background, as did the practice of classifying the East Indies as colonies: "By a colony we understand a community which is not merely derivative, but which remains politically connected in a relation of dependence with the parent community" (1895, 45). Important to this redefinition was the consideration that "the word Empire seems too military and despotic to suit the relation of a mother-country to colonies" (Seeley 1895, 37). If the idea of the British Empire found a new coherence in the mid-nineteenth century as that which is primarily composed of the United Kingdom and its settler colonies (as Koebner argued), there now emerged a split between the "colonial" and "Indian" empires. The "colonial empire" was connected by blood and culture, and thus the development of nationality in the territories peopled by the descendants of Britain would make a larger polity possible (see Bell 2007). The "Indian empire," on the other hand, could never be assimilated into the imperial polity and its eventual growth into a nation would result in a secession from empire (Seeley 1895, 262–3).

The approach to the question of colonies in Victorian Britain became increasingly situated in an inverse relationship with that of "imperialism." From its mid-century association with the particular history of French Bonapartism, "imperialism" turned into a quotidian topic of contention for British party politics during the conflict between Disraelian conservatives and Gladstonian liberals. The Disraelian policy toward imperial dependencies, its liberal critics argued, amounted to an "arbitrary despotic rule" premised on "false military splendour" (Koebner and Schmidt 1964, 147). India was often the case in point for British domestic disputes about imperialism, but it would eventually acquire a wider character in the wake of the Scramble for Africa. As "imperialism" became a commonplace, and often pejorative, register of political discussion in British political life, the colonial increasingly figured as a non-despotic, self-governing space of the empire. This skepticism regarding "imperialism" notwithstanding, the progressivist telos of imperial rule continued to inform the moral confidence with which England ruled over its non-settler possessions.

The changing status of the colonial question in nineteenth-century Britain occasionally triggered critical debates in India. In the 1820s and 1830s, when Indians had a much-publicized reckoning with the question of colonization (i.e., population transfer from Britain to India), it prompted conflicting fears of racial hierarchy and the hope that the settlers would help institute civil rights and separation of powers (see Roy 1887, 613–9). The European debate on colonies ancient and modern also made its way into India. In a powerful 1830 essay, an unnamed "native youth," for instance, invoked this distinction to point out that ancient and modern colonies alike were destructive for their "aboriginal inhabitants" (*India Gazette* 1830, 3). India's self-understanding as a modern colony did not proceed further in part owing to the reorganization of British approaches to their settler and non-settler possessions. Insofar as the condition of being a colony was the settlement of non-official Europeans, India was, at best, a "failed colonial society," as the majority of Europeans were "official" agents (Marshall 1990). That India belonged to the imperial realm was further solidified with its formal inclusion under the British Crown in 1858 following the 1857 Rebellion. In other administrative contexts, the purchase of the term "colony" for segregated settlements—whether designed to the transformation of "wastelands" (see Agnihotri 1996) or simply as a descriptor for enclaves built for government officials—could certainly be observed. These ordinary uses of colony in Indian contexts, however, did not dislodge the larger placement of India in the imperial realm.

Much like Victorian Britain, a generally positive disposition toward the colonial, as opposed to mere imperial rule, was widespread in late nineteenth-century India. In a celebrated essay on the idea of equality, the Bengali thinker Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1954, 395) argued that colonization is a

[2] In Continental Europe, however, the semantic shift that Mill and Lewis underscored appeared to have remained relatively unchallenged. It was already common in the second half of the century in France and Germany to describe their non-settler possessions as "colony." See, for instance, Rambaud (1888) and Roscher (1885). Notably, the Brussels-based International Colonial Institute (established in 1894)—which would emerge as the foremost center for knowledge exchange between "colonial experts"—viewed non-settler societies as the primary target of its "colonial" policy development (see Wagner 2016).

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natural remedy to population increase, which had supposedly "benefitted" both England and its settler territories in the modern era. Another important political thinker of the era, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (1957, 60), showed a greater awareness toward the destructive consequences of European settlement for native inhabitants. But he, too, noted that Britain's Indian empire was motivated by exploitation (*śoshaṇa*) rather than a desire to found *upanibeśa* (a Bengali neologism for colony) there. Others were less willing to draw a stark line between "settler" and "subject" (*adhīna deśa*) territories of the British Empire. The "addiction to imperialism" that was sweeping turn-of-the-century Britain—Rabindranath Tagore (1908, 88) noted in the early 1900s—transcended the divide between its two empires.

Interestingly, the division of the British Empire between its settler and non-settler possessions was as useful to imperial expansionists as it would be to the foremost British critic of imperialism, J.A. Hobson. The question at stake for Hobson, as for other turn-of-the-century observers of imperialism, was: what led to the competitive rush for "territorial acquisition" in the late nineteenth century? The "scramble of Africa and Asia" did not simply result in the annexation of a great swathe of new territories; it also led to the territorial expansion of existing possessions, including India (Hobson 1902, 12, 18). The territorial expansion driven by financial capitalism subverted the supposedly liberal mission of the empire. Against this new phenomenon of aggressive imperialism, he posited "genuine Colonialism…[which] has made for the creation of free white democracies, a policy of informal federation, of decentralization" (Hobson 1902, 125). Hobson's spirited vindication of the colonial against the imperial was no longer simply a matter of filial and political connections (as it was for Seeley); it was also very much a contrast drawn in terms of the normative criterion of self-government.

While India was decidedly not a colony in the turn-of-the-century British imagination, the resignification of the colonial as a bastion of what Hobson called "free" democracy inflected the growing Indian demand for self-government in the period (as evident in Naoroji's reference to the colonial example of self-government as a model for India). This was precisely what *The Saturday Review* ridiculed and what caught the young Nehru's attention in 1908. This political—and intellectual—horizon was to change dramatically soon. Nehru, now back in India, would find himself in a context where the question of the colonial no longer turned on the problem of classifying imperial possessions but on the problem of historicizing imperial subjection.

EMPIRE AND THE TERRITORIALITY OF RULE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE COLONIAL

In a 1928 essay titled "The Changing Face of Imperialism," written for the *Bombay Chronicle*, Nehru took issue with what then was arguably the most influential recent study of imperialism, Parker Moon's 1926 volume, *Imperialism and World Politics.* Moon's account of imperialism was fairly consistent with the Hobsonian diagnosis of the economic logic behind Europe's expansion; he also followed Hobson in characterizing imperialism as a specifically late nineteenth-century phenomenon (Moon 1936, 24). Though less interested in Lenin's Marxist gloss on Hobson, Moon's study followed the emerging semantic distinction that Lenin helped popularize: "imperialism" was a profit-driven economic and political phenomenon that results in the possession of "colonial" territories.[3] Around the same time, Nehru was in Brussels for the meeting of the League Against Imperialism; there he may very well have participated in—or at least would have come across—the discussion about respective priorities of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.[4] While Nehru quickly adopted the language of the colonial, this framing of the relationship between the imperial and the colonial struck him as misleading.

Nehru (SWJN1.3, 139) elaborated on this point in his critique of Moon's Hobsonian study of imperialism: "The economic motive, though all powerful, is obscured by the actual possession of territories." A new set of emerging contentions about the past and future of imperial subjection underpinned Nehru's observation. As he made clear in the same essay, the new American and Latin American literature on imperialism was key to his argument. Singling out the newly founded Vanguard Press's series on American imperialism, he noted that this body of work enabled him to see the "helpless condition of so-called independent countries before the all-powerful magnates of Wall Street" (SWJN1.2, 140). Nehru further expanded on the claim by focusing on Margaret Marsh's *The Bankers in Bolivia* (1928), which detailed the ways in which US business interests and foreign policy worked together to bend Bolivia to their will without necessarily claiming it as a territorial possession. These experiences, Nehru concluded, necessitated a new evaluation of the future of imperialism. As he put it, "most of us, specially from Asia, were wholly ignorant of the problems of South America…But we are not at liberty to remain ignorant much longer, for the great problem of the near future will be American imperialism, even more than British imperialism" (SWJN1.2, 281).

The unfolding Latin American experience threw new light on the history of India's own imperial subjection. The crucial text for Nehru was the Argentine

[3] Lenin often described European territorial acquisitions as "colonies." Hobson, in contrast, had no specific name for these territorial acquisitions: he variously called them "annexed territories" (1902, 26), "territories acquired under new imperialism" (1902, 38), "new imperial expansion" (1902, 21), "recent imperial expansion" (1902, 27), "new territorial acquisition" (1902, 68), and so on.

[4] The delegates at the LAI, as Petersson (2013, 145) showed, considered "anti-imperialism" as an agenda primarily directed against the "center," whereas "anti-colonialism" immediately concerns problems of the subjugated territories. This distinction followed Lenin's lead.

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thinker Manuel Ugarte's *Destiny of a Continent* (1925), which provided him with a framework to critique the Hobsonian periodization of imperialism. An influential socialist propagandist with presence across the Americas, Ugarte's career was devoted to addressing the problem arising from the United States' seemingly non-territorial mode of domination over Latin America. His interventions, which predated the rise of Marxist theories of imperialism, were uniquely preoccupied with the problem of Latin American unity (see Klaiber 1971). Ugarte's analysis of the United States' role in Latin America—dubbed "literary Yankeephobia" by his critics—was centered on the distinction he identified between the operations of European and North American powers; he was also not averse to mobilizing "European friendships" against the United States (Rippy 1922). Nehru's reading of Ugarte's *Destiny* bracketed some of these more Latin America-specific problems and focused instead on the broader implications of the claim that the lessons of the past do not quite apply to the looming future of imperialism.

Quoting Ugarte, Nehru observed that the imperialism of the era required neither territorial control nor levying of taxes on a subject people. It simply required control over the "sources of wealth" (SWJN1.3, 139). Unlike Britain or France which sought to "dominate" their possessions, the United States, Ugarte (1925, 139) argued, aimed to "absorb" outlying territories "in accordance with the tendencies of the age." To help make sense of American imperialism, Ugarte (1925, 140) offered a loose, tripartite periodization of imperialism. The first stage entailed possession of inhabitants (i.e., slavery), the second stage centered on annexation of territories without enslaving the inhabitants, and the third stage involved de facto imperial domination without possessing either the territory or inhabitants of a country. Nehru seized on to this periodization. By this standard, British imperialism was still stuck at the second stage where the possession of territory remained the dominant drive, even as it was not separable from the economic motives of imperialism (SWJN1.3, 139).[5] Crucially, Nehru's arrival at this conclusion also accompanied a new diagnosis that the moment of colonial rule was rapidly passing. The US was better suited for this new age of imperialism because it had fewer "colonial encumbrances" than Britain which still focused on "actual possession of territories" (SWJN1.3, 139). In other words, the field of opposition between the imperial (extra-territorial domination) and the colonial (territorial possession) was set. Nehru (SWJN1.3, 220) soon began to describe the British Empire as a "colonial empire" from this period on. The result was a historicization of colonial rule as a specific stage in imperial expansion, where territorial sovereignty, as opposed to extra-territorial domination, was the driving impulse.

Insofar as Nehru scholars have investigated the sources of his anti-imperialism, they have largely focused on his Marxist (and Leninist) influences (Gopal 2004, 69; Louro 2018, 94; Seth 1993, 462–4). That Nehru was taken in this period by the economic interpretation of history is true, but important disagreements with the Leninist account of imperialism lurked beneath this ostensibly happy encounter. His Ugarte-inspired decision to pit the British Empire against the emerging futurity of US imperialism meant that the former—which had long claimed progress for itself—turned into a marker of backwardness. Imperialism may have been the highest stage of capitalism, but the British Empire was no longer its vanguard.

This rhetorical sleight aside, two important theoretical problems were at stake in Nehru's schematization of the colonial. In departing from the argument that the imperialist pursuit of profit necessarily results in territorial acquisition, he sought to raise a broader set of questions about the unequal integration of the world in the modern era. Instead of merely tracing the origins of twentieth-century imperialism to conflicts internal to late nineteenth-century Europe, he wanted to account for the social and economic inequality between the modern European and non--European worlds that had long cast a shadow of inevitability over the imperial geography of world. With this problem in mind, Nehru traced the economic logic back to a critical moment of modern history: the age of the Industrial Revolution. He fleshed out this argument a year earlier in a lecture delivered in Switzerland, where he reminded his audience that the hierarchy now prevalent between Asia and Europe is of recent origin, traceable to the beginning of the "machine age." Asians were often the "aggressors" invading Europe in the earlier millennia. When the British arrived in India as traders, there was no "basic difference between the peoples of the East and the West" (SWJN 1.2, 333).

With the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe, as he elaborated later, the older system of trade and exchange came under novel pressure: "The British market was to be closed to Indian products and the Indian market opened to British manufactures. The British Parliament, influenced by this new class, began to take a greater interest in India and the working of the East India Company" (1985, 238). It was the Company-State that arrested the economic development of India and accelerated that of Britain. The institution of European territorial *rule* at such a fateful juncture of world history is what rendered it a special form of imperial subjection. The history of British rule, in other words, could not simply be explained by its motive; of equal importance was *when* it emerged.[6] The critical event of the Industrial Revolution and the processes that it set in motion ultimately gave birth to a developmental hierarchy of the world, which manifested itself economically as much as psychologically

[5] This view of colonial possession was thus focused on territorial sovereignty, in contrast to the dispossession of land central to the settler context; see Coulthard (2014) and Wolfe (2006).

[6] On the broader relevance of the "when" question for theories of empire and imperialism, see Jenco and Chappell (2020).

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(Nehru 1985, 302). In the political structure of European territorial rule, then, cohered a number of world-historical phenomena irreducible to the form of rule itself. At the same time, territorial rule was not a mere natural consequence; it consolidated the historical advantage of Europe and ensured that India's own journey toward modernity was shackled.

No less crucially, this particular framing of the colonial also enabled Nehru to address pressing political questions about India's own past. After all, he was theorizing the colonial in a period of increased Hindu-Muslim conflict, when the practice of collapsing the history of Muslim rule in India into that of British imperial domination was driving a wedge between India's two main religious communities. Nehru saw no merit in this claim; invasions were nothing unusual in human history. What mattered was that India's foreign invaders prior to the Europeans assimilated there and introduced "no fundamental changes [to] the economic and social structure of Indian life" (Nehru 1985, 250; see also Bhardwaj 2023, 11–2). This was a direct reversal of the argument that Seeley (1895, 238) once helped popularize: that the British conquest of India merely amount to the replacement of one "foreign yoke" with another. This argument for the fundamental "alienness" of British rule, as Mrinalini Sinha (2006, 123) argues in reference to the work of Uma Nehru, acquired a wider currency in the interwar era, in part because it served to implicate the British in the origins of India's modern "social condition." Nehru built on this line of argumentation to resist the equation of the colonial with mere alien rule or with the mere act of settlement by a foreign people.

It should be added, however, that Nehru was not particularly pedantic about the applicability of the term "colonies" across time. In *Discovery of India*, Nehru (1985, 200–7) dabbled in incipient historical scholarship on ancient Indian "colonies" in southeast Asia to question the essentialist narratives of Indian insularity. At any rate, a new classification was displacing the nineteenth-century debates on the "ancient" and "modern" meanings of colony. As Richard Pares (1937, 125) argued in an influential essay, there are two types of colonies: "colonies of settlement" and "colonies of exploitation."[7] Those who reflected on the ubiquity of the language of the colonial in territories that were not considered colonies only a few decades ago invariably took recourse to this distinction.[8] While the growing purchase of the "colonial" did not result from a clear reckoning with its older settler history, this new classification helped reconcile, however tentatively, the present connotation of the term with its past record. For Nehru, the European history of exercising territorial sovereignty over non-European peoples in a developmentally uneven world was much more than a matter of territorial annexation—a phenomenon certainly not unique to modern European empires. Nonetheless, territorial possession was the political form through which the larger process reproduced itself. The colonial now acquired a specific analytical shape (a territorial form of imperial rule) and stood as a historical reference for the political order constitutive of the developmental hierarchy of the world. This was the formative coming together of the analytical and historical claims of the term.

COLONIAL*ISM*: AN INTERNATIONAL FORMATION

By the 1940s, the distinct politics of the colonial and the imperial that was so meaningful in turn-of-the-century Britain lost much of its relevance. In fact, there was little protest on the British side against the renewed association of the colonial with their "outlying territorial possessions" in Asia and Africa. In the early years of decolonization, the debate between critics and apologists of "colonial empires" usually concerned the political end attributed to it. The vociferous debates on the future of "colonial peoples" at the San Francisco Conference of 1945 supply a case in point. During the deliberation at the Conference, European and non-European delegates both freely employed the descriptor "colonial" to refer to non-settler imperial possessions. For instance, the Mexican proposal at the Conference noted that "the colonial policy is one of the causes of war," and thus "the colonial system" should be "abolished" (1945, 94). By contrast, the delegates representing imperial powers focused almost exclusively on the developmental training in self-government which putatively guided their colonial policies. The international debates on colonial rule thus still turned on a consequentialist premise: did colonial rule lead to development and self-government? In fact, the UN Charter's attempt to hold the imperial trustees accountable on the premise of "proactive" development (Muschik 2022, 29) gave renewed life to the old argument that the legitimacy of empire should be judged based on its contribution to the ends of self-government.

The purchase of colonialism as a polemical "-ism" concept took place precisely in this context: it followed the refusal of anticolonial actors to entertain consequentialist evaluations of European rule over Asia and Africa. As Jussi Kurunmäki and Jan Marjanen (2018, 243) argue in their survey of the history of "-ism" concepts, this development usually entails a "generalizing and universalizing effect." The role of "-ism" concepts in helping "concentrate" otherwise "dispersed" fragments of ideas has also been noted (Koebner and Schmidt 1964, xiv). Many of these same tendencies can be found in the re-organization of

[7] While Pares does not mention it, the original source of the distinction—as far as I am aware—was the French economist Pierre Paul Leroy-Beaulieu (1882). As Jared Holley (2024, 9–10) notes, while Leory-Beaulieu argued that exploitation colonies require "large capital investment," he also saw them as a rapid generator of wealth. In any case, Pares's reworking of the distinction made it more widely known in the Anglophone world.

[8] Guha (2016, 203) would build on Pares in his classic 1963 text. This distinction was also picked up by Kwame Nkrumah as early as the mid-1940s in his *Towards Colonial Freedom.*

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distinct Asian and African experiences under the categorical scope of colonialism.[9] More specifically, the rise of the category of colonial*ism* accompanied a new moral force that would, eventually, be juridified with the signification of colonialism as the conceptual other of self-determination. The anticolonial struggle to build a moral judgment into the category—that is, the aim to render it morally condemnable without entering into consequentialist considerations—marked the uses of the term in the early years of the age of decolonization. Precisely because it was an intrinsically unjust arrangement, as an Indonesian delegate declared at the 1950 UN Trusteeship Council (1950, 46) deliberation, "colonialism could be no substitute for autonomy or independence." Or, as Nehru put it in 1949, "colonialism is an evil thing and wherever it remains it has to be rooted out" (1961, 151). The point of these assertions was the newly sayable global contention: the condemnation of colonialism as a principle requires no qualification.

With its new status as a self-evidently objectionable form of rule, anti- and post-colonial actors turned their attention to rendering colonialism a juridically unacceptable international norm. This was a move that would essentially build on the analytical meaning of colonialism as a territorial form of rule by one people over another. In the process, however, it became a portable, abstract category not necessarily attached to the history that once seemed central to the term. To complicate the matter further, while influential anticolonial actors broadly agreed on the importance of giving a juridical form to the category, they envisioned its scope and meaning differently. Nehru was very much interested in establishing the illegitimacy of colonial rule at the United Nations (see, for instance, Nehru 1961, 510–1), but his was a wager predicated on the simultaneous commitment to colonialism as a specific historical reference. Other postcolonial actors found the juridical premise of the category useful to participate in the Cold War or to continue the struggle against the recurring specter of empire. Much of the political dispute over the meaning of colonialism in the age of decolonization pertained to different ways of navigating the emerging cleavage between the dual claims of colonialism.

In the 1950s, India was independent, while the global project of decolonization was still largely unfinished. Nehru, unsurprisingly, approached the global battle over colonialism from the vantage point of a new postcolonial state seeking to emerge from the ruins of empire. The moral condemnation of colonial rule was not instrumental, but it bled into a pragmatic set of postcolonial concerns. Nehru's approach to the colonialism question had two entwined objectives. The first concerned the challenge of forming an independent international bloc by bringing together postcolonial and decolonizing states at the UN and beyond (see Getachew 2019, 71–106), while the second involved the desire to assert control over the terms of postcolonial development (see Sultan 2024, 159–90).

The Cold War significantly complicated the aim to form an international postcolonial bloc. Deeply wary of the prospect of getting caught in the middle of the Cold War, Nehru sought to devise active plans for India and other postcolonial nations to act as an independent geopolitical force (see Bhagavan 2013; Kona Nayudu 2022). He was convinced that only an alliance of hitherto colonized nations could ensure the independence of remaining European colonies and forestall the reduction of the postcolonial cause into that of the Cold War. Such an international agenda mattered equally for the internal priority of accelerated development. In a note on Gunnar Myrdal's *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions*, Nehru observed that the "main cause" of the ineffective place of international organizations is "international inequality and more especially the weak bargaining power of undeveloped countries." The immediate response to this should be "joining hands and pooling their bargaining power" (SWJN 2.42:104).

These entwined objectives critically hinged on the question of colonialism. Without the independence of the remaining Asian and African colonies, the older problem of colonialism would stand in the way of the postcolonial future. The complete obsolescence of the already "dying colonialism" was crucial for this reason (Nehru 1961, 407). "It must be appreciated," Nehru (1961, 410) argued, "that so long as any form of colonialism exists in Asia or elsewhere, there will be conflict and a threat to peace." This is partly why Nehru was keen on instituting international norms against the perpetuation of colonialism on a global scale. In characterizing colonialism as a vestigial problem, he also remained in continuity with the earlier diagnosis that while colonialism was a problem rooted in the uneven integration of the world, its moment as a form of rule had effectively passed in the twentieth century. The priority thus should be given to the challenges awaiting postcolonial states, especially in light of their shared historical experience of colonialism. Yet, as Nehru soon found out, the newfound juridical force of the idea enabled other political possibilities resistant to his way of navigating between the dual claims of colonialism.

The Bandung Conference laid bare the new landscape of defining and disputing the meaning of colonialism. The Bandung Conference is now rightly commemorated as the highpoint of Afro-Asian unity—a stage where "a *negative unity*, bred by a feeling that they had to stand together against a rapacious West, turned into something that hinted of the positive"

[9] The distinction between "settler" and "exploitation" colonies somewhat indirectly acquired a new juridical form in the same period. The passing of UN Resolution 637 (i.e., the "salt-water thesis") in 1952—which the Afro-Asian bloc supported mainly because of their understanding that the opposing "Belgian thesis" sought to undermine the sovereignty of newly independent states—limited the scope of anticolonial self-determination to Europe's overseas possessions (see El-Ayouty 1971, 50–63). In contrast, African countries with settler presence—which Nehru characterized as colonies where "a small minority of European settlers dominated the vast coloured majority of the population" (SWJN 2.25, 429)—were considered integral to the anticolonial demand.

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(Wright 1955, 149; emphasis added). Yet, it was also where the endeavor to turn the premise of "negative unity" into a positive program of solidarity came into sharp relief. The problem of anticolonial solidarity spanned the "global dimension" of mutual support among colonized peoples (Go 2023, 289) to the "ideal of *symmetrical* relations between moral *equals*" (Holley 2024, 2; original emphasis). What brought together postcolonial states in Bandung was their equality as (former or soon-to-be former) subjects of empire and the common challenge of postcolonial development. Reflecting on this issue, Nehru (SWJN2.42: 104) noted that "solidarity…. [i]s not nurtured by condescending patronage or compassion." To participate in the postcolonial international on the basis of anticolonial solidarity specifically meant a common recognition of the problem that brought different peoples together as much as a collective approval of future goals. That Cold War tensions would get in the way of determining the future goals of the postcolonial bloc at Bandung was anticipated in advance, but few perhaps expected that the challenge of building solidarity would stumble on the question of defining the shared experience that brought these states together—that is, colonialism.

The Political Committee's discussion on colonialism was famously disrupted by Sir John Kotelawala, the Sri Lankan prime minister with an anti-communist reputation. Against Nehru's view, Kotelawala (1956, 190) declared: "All of us here, I take it, are against colonialism, but…. Colonialism takes many forms. Think, for example, of those satellite states under Communist domination in Central and Eastern Europe—Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland. Are these not colonies as much as any of the colonial territories in Africa?" This was seconded by the Lebanese delegate's proposal to specify two forms of colonialism: "Colonialism, Old and New" (Jansen 1966, 203). If colonialism essentially meant the rule of one people over another, the argument went, why should those cases not be seen as instances of colonialism? Nehru answered Kotelawala's objections by proposing a rather restrictive definition of colonialism: the Soviet domination of satellite states in Eastern Europe was "an objectionable thing," but such states could not be considered "colonies" as they were recognized as sovereign states, and some of them were even represented at the United Nations (SWJN 2.28, 101–2; see also Jansen 1966, 205).

The disagreement over the definition of colonialism and its applicability ran so deep at Bandung that it required an especially vague formulation—"colonialism in all its manifestations"— for both parties to come to an agreement and draft the resolution on the premise of what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2005, 4814) has rightly characterized as a "shallow intellectual unity." As one apt observer of the Conference put it, "the committee pondered for some time [on the formulation], like Byzantine theologians estimating the proportion of God and of man in the True Nature of Christ" (Jansen 1966, 215). The formulator of the expression, Krishna Menon, quipped afterward: "Got them to agree to something they don't understand" (Jansen 1966, 215). This compromise—owing more to the allure of Jesuitic subtlety than to definitional balance—would eventually find itself in the famous UN Resolution 1514.

Returning from the Bandung Conference, Nehru noted in his statement to the Indian Parliament that the Conference was unanimous in its "condemnation of colonialism in its well understood sense, namely, the rule of one people by another, with its attendant evils," even though they could not agree upon how to define the status of the alleged Soviet colonies (Nehru 1961, 275–6). Nehru's statement rightly noted a ground of agreement, but it also belied the nature of the disagreement at Bandung. The agreement involved a consensus not so much on the definitional scope of colonialism, but on the assumption that European rule over Asia and Africa was what colonialism meant in its "well understood sense." When the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 brought forth the problem of Soviet interference in Eastern Europe, Nehru found himself returning to the sticky question of colonialism again. Though India was seemingly supportive of the Hungarian cause, it was still necessary to clarify—Nehru (1961, 562) argued while approvingly quoting Krishna Menon —that its "government was convinced that the original revolt against the Hungarian regime that existed was a movement of national liberation, by which is meant not national liberation as a colonial country." While Nehru again invoked the formal independence of Eastern European nations to dismiss the application of colonialism and chose to characterize their struggle as an act of "national liberation," the heart of the matter lay elsewhere. As he clarified later in an interview, "The word 'colonial' has certain political and economic meaning" (SWJN2.63, 465).

This "certain political and economic meaning"—as we saw earlier—pertains to the history of European rule over the world, which capitalized on the developmental unevenness born out of the early appearance of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. This tension also sheds much light on the perplexities of Nehru's political thought in the era. Scholars reflecting on Nehru's momentous, if contentious, role at Bandung and beyond tend to ascribe his refusal to expand the scope of colonialism to factors ranging from his "realistic" expectations from the Afro-Asian alliance (Jansen 1966, 119) to "practical and ideological" priorities relating to India's geopolitical and national agendas (Bhardwaj 2023, 11). While it is evident that the problem of defining colonialism had become bound up with practical political agendas in the age of Bandung, Nehru's restrictive application of the category was fairly consistent with the dual historical and analytical criteria he associated with the term since the interwar era. The juridical framing of colonialism (as a form of rule) gave it a historically unqualified purchase that he was unable to intellectually—and often politically—reconcile with his own understanding of the category.

A different set of political considerations underwrote disputes over colonialism among those otherwise opposed to the Cold War gloss on decolonization. Nehru's disagreements with the Indonesian President Sukarno are relevant in this respect. Sukarno harbored

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stronger worries than Nehru about the persistence of the colonial order, in part because of Indonesia's more precarious postcolonial position. As Sandeep Bhardwaj (2023, 15) argues in a recent study, Sukarno's declaration at Bandung that "colonialism is not yet dead…colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation" was a pointed rejoinder to Nehru's effort to draw a clean break between the colonial and the postcolonial era. This also meant that Sukarno disagreed with Nehru's prioritization of the Cold War as a more pressing threat than the declining hold of colonial empires. To be clear, Sukarno (1960, 8) did not necessarily reject the diagnosis that older forms of colonialism were dying, but he also believed that this "dying" order is "as dangerous as the wounded tiger in a tropical jungle." Nor was "old colonialism" a foregone problem for India. In the same period, Nehru's confrontation with Portugal over its continued possession of Goa resurrected the problem of "dying colonialism." In a way, the debate between Nehru and Sukarno pertained to their respective emphasis on the persistence of colonial rule. This also determined the extent to which they prioritized the context of the Cold War: Nehru's more future-oriented international agenda hoped to recalibrate the postcolonial bloc on the foundation of nonalignment, whereas Sukarno refused to render the threat of renewed colonialism secondary to that of the Cold War. The ways of pronouncing the end of colonialism, then, were themselves a matter of active political contestation.

In the world beyond Asia and Africa, the manifold uses of colonialism elicited condemnation as well as creative appropriations. The arguments of Hans Kohn —the leading authority on nationalism studies at that time—are illustrative of the puzzlement that the term caused. Kohn repeated a definition of colonialism similar to Nehru's ("colonialism is foreign rule imposed upon a people") but added that the claim that "colonial rule [signifies] domination by *white* nations over dark-skinned peoples, or imply race superiority… [is] one of the most bewildering myths of the present time" (Kohn 1958, 11–2; original emphasis). Kohn's observations were more than a fixation on the literal meaning of colonialism; they registered a tension between the juridical definition (implicitly or explicitly assumed) and the historical reference. The simultaneous entrance of the language of colonialism in US foreign policy discourse and Black radical resistance shows the different possibilities contained in it. For Cold War American officials keen to befriend the decolonizing world, the United States stood as the first "anti-colonial" nation; this claim made sense to those who viewed colonialism as primarily descriptive of a juridical status. For their African American critics, the structural and racial hierarchy of the US instead historically paralleled the form of domination seen in European rule over Asia and African peoples (see Klug 2021). Already by the end of the 1960s, "internal colonialism"—which relied on the "powerful rhetorical metaphor" of colonialism to describe the domination of one group over another (Arneil 2017, 9)— emerged as an influential academic framework to study the racial order in the United States (see Blauner 1969) and "Celtic Fringes" in Britain (Hechter 1975).

These turns to colonialism generated debates about periodizing the colonial as much as about its status as an analytical category. Those otherwise opposed to free-standing juridical applications of the idea—as we saw with Sukarno— had their doubts about Nehru's historical periodization of European territorial rule, especially insofar as the break between the colonial and the postcolonial was concerned. In some ways, Kwame Nkrumah's coinage of neocolonialism exemplified a widely felt need to problematize the gray zone between direct territorial rule and extra-territorial domination. In contrast, theories of internal colonialism, while taking the idea to primarily signify a set of problems such as segregation, economic underdevelopment, and racial hierarchy, shifted the problem outside of the principle of direct territorial rule. These historical phenomena associated with colonialism enabled its applications, metaphorical or otherwise, to contexts within and outside Europe. The analytical force of the idea—now also juridified—destabilized this historical meaning in the shadow of the Cold War. The dual claims of colonialism were no longer simply overlapping or mutually antagonistic; they were also charting out trajectories of their own.

COLONIALISM AFTER THE POSTCOLONIAL TURN

The paradigmatic presence of the idea of colonialism in scholarship on the modern non-European world belies its surprisingly belated entrance in the academic realm. It was still possible until the 1970s to write the history of the British era in India without relying on the categorical force of colonial*ism.*[10] This would be an almost impossible exercise by the end of the next decade. In the final quarter of the past century, scholars of British India entered a global intellectual scene where the problem of colonialism was at the center of multi-sited intellectual explorations and debates (thanks in no small part to early Francophone interventions, especially Aimé Césaire's 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism* and Frantz Fanon's 1961 *Wretched of the Earth*). The category's journey from the halls of international organizations to the center of epistemic considerations, however, was not a simple story of transmission. Rather, postcolonial renunciations of the classic anticolonial framing of the problem were key to its rejuvenation as an object of study. Writing amid a widely felt disillusionment with the postcolonial experiment, postcolonial theorists took for granted—or rather ignored what by then was a staid discourse on—the status of colonialism as a form of rule. One of the first

[10] For instance, Sumit Sarkar's 1973 classic *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*—a text that inaugurated a new era of scholarship on colonial India—made no use of "colonialism."

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postcolonial studies of modern India, Ashis Nandy's (1983, 2) *Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, started with an apt summary of the new agenda: "colonialism [is] a shared culture which may not always begin with the establishment of alien rule in a society and end with the departure of alien rulers from that society."

The crux of the revision that Nandy and others offered lay in the discursive framing of the colonialism question. The immediate result of this development was the problematization of colonialism as a historical reference: what if the intellectual framework through which anticolonial thinkers understood colonialism was itself implicated in a colonial paradigm of knowledge production? This specifically meant a skeptical orientation toward the function of modern political norms that undergirded anticolonial resistance. The modernist assumptions with which a Nehru or a Nkrumah indicted colonial rule, it turned out, could themselves be a vindication of the colonial episteme. The re-signification of colonialism as the non-European world's overdetermined incorporation into modernity meant that the "colonial" now could be deployed to name a variety of problems—from forms of knowledge to a matrix of power to a state of mind. If anticolonial thinkers took colonialism to be an interruption of their own journey toward modernity, postcolonial theorists now could see colonialism as a matrix that produced new forms of knowledge and action. Building on the flourishing Foucauldianism of the age, postcolonial theorists showed how political identities and cultural practices were produced by techniques of colonial rule. Whether it is historicism (Chakrabarty 2000), governmentality (Scott 1995), or nationalism (Chatterjee 1986), these modern ideas and practices themselves appeared to be participants in the formation of colonial power. The problems extrinsic or prior to colonial rule—for example, caste in India—could now also be seen as a product of its dynamic interaction with the colonial forms of power and knowledge.

The discursive framing of the colonialism question, too, came to revolve around the dual claims of colonialism as a historical reference (underdevelopment, racial hierarchy, psychological degradation, etc.) and as an analytical category (for a territorial form of rule). Given my focus on Nehru thus far, it is perhaps fitting to tease out the postcolonial framing of colonialism through a classic interpretation of his political thought: Partha Chatterjee's (1986, 30) monograph, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World.* Written at the height of the postcolonial turn, the book argued that "[anticolonial nationalism] … produced a discourse" that despite offering a challenge to "the colonial claim to political domination…also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based." The "bourgeois-rationalist conception of knowledge" of post-Enlightenment European provenance, which anticolonial thinkers such as Nehru took for granted, functioned as "the moral and epistemic foundation for…colonial domination" (1986, 11). The "rational" and "scientific" view of history that was once invoked by the colonizers was now summoned by anticolonial thinkers like Nehru to theorize the postcolonial future. According to Chatterjee, one key element of Nehru's project—industrialization—was legitimated in the name of "the inexorable logic of universal history" (1986, 158). This meant that "there were no grounds left for a moral choice on its desirability or otherwise" (1986, 158). Though this new framing of colonialism strove to bring the problem of modernity out of the unproblematized background to the forefront of anticolonial thought, it resulted in a meta-theoretical gloss on what, in fact, was the outcome of a contingent intellectual history. Nehru's identification of the Industrial Revolution as the crucial background of colonial rule, as we saw, emerged out of a global conjuncture of intellectual exchanges—a historical diagnosis that would eventually lead to the view that industrialization must be the centerpiece of the postcolonial agenda. This specific history of the anticolonial theorization of colonialism was not salient to its postcolonial appraisal; Nehru and his contemporaries' overarching romance with the premises of "bourgeois-rationalist" knowledge instead carried greater importance.

This, then, also necessitated a rethinking of colonialism as a form of rule for postcolonial theorists. For Chatterjee, Nehru and his generation of "mature" anticolonial nationalist thinkers failed to see how the "discursive forms" of colonialism—for example, representation by "enumerable communities"—would survive political independence (1993, 224). The continuation of deeper "colonial" discourses in the postcolonial era thus disrupted the clean break from empire assumed by a form of rule-centric approach. Chatterjee's influential formulation—the "rule of colonial difference"—was an attempt to recapitulate the status of colonialism as a form of rule. Although normalizing and productive in principle, the modern form of power in its colonial iteration enacted a rule of exception where the colonized were inevitably pushed out of the remit of citizenship and other ideals. This "rule of colonial difference," too, was claimed to have survived formal independence in newer forms (Chatterjee 1993, 33).

In locating the power of modern colonialism in the discursive apparatus, postcolonial theorists were left with a dilemma: colonialism was reliant on modern norms and practices, and yet anticolonial resistance could not simply do away with the world that was created in its wake. As David Scott (2004, 9) memorably argued, the point of appreciating the historical entanglement between colonialism and modernity was not to reduce the work of critique to a search for an external vista but to "[alter] the question of the colonial past…. [f]or the criticism of the postcolonial present." A great many postcolonial theorists chose to stay with the two horns of the dilemma while others looked for the "outside" not fully appropriated or subsumed by the colonial modern (see, for instance, Nandy 1995). By and large, as historians such as Ranajit Guha (1999) exemplified, the postcolonial reading of subaltern resistance against the colonial state was

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above all a complication of the premodern-modern dyad; what Guha's argument emphasized was the immanent rather than external quality of peasant insurgencies vis-à-vis the colonial state. These postcolonial analyses of the historical entanglement between colonialism and modernity saw no reason yet for insisting on their conceptual isomorphism.

The recent turn to "decoloniality" has implied a stronger homology between the colonial and the modern. As Aníbal Quijano (2007, 169), one of the first theorists of the decolonial turn, observed: the idea of decoloniality stems from the premise that the (post) colonial world involves "forms of domination" beyond "political colonialism." If anticolonialism was focused on wresting political sovereignty from European empires, decoloniality aims to address the entwined problems of modernity and coloniality at once. The entwined record of the colonial and the modern, accordingly, is less of a story of dilemma and more of an object of disavowal. This disavowal is one reason why the normative scope of decolonial critique has been so dizzyingly all-encompassing: it concerns issues ranging from a reconsideration of the relationship between "nature" and "culture" to preservation of suppressed "forms of life…rather than be hostage of the modernity's designs and desires, and of nationalists' selection of the past of the nation" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 120). It is perhaps unsurprising that the language of decoloniality has proved almost too easily appropriable and too casually separable from the hard-won category that the anticolonial thinkers of the last century fashioned.[11]

In any case, the differences that certain decolonial theorists identify between "political colonialism" and "coloniality" is ultimately a rediscovery of a theoretical tension that goes back to the age of anticolonialism. For all the transformative effect of the discursive turn, there has since been a growing tendency to overlook the theoretical labor that went in to bringing together colonialism as a form of rule and as a shorthand for the complex global history. That European rule over the rest of the world was inseparable from developmentalism, racial hierarchy, economic exploitation, and psychological degradation was already well-known in the nineteenth century. It was only, however, in the interwar era that all these phenomena came together under the rubric of the colonial. Twentieth-century anticolonial thinkers' opposition to European rule, as instantiated by Nehru, was conditioned by a historical (if pre-discursive) interpretation responsive to the quandaries generated by the entangled careers of the colonial and the modern; this is essential to understanding their fundamental intellectual and political preoccupations. As we have also seen, the co-original history of colonial rule and modernity in Asia and Africa neither necessarily implies that they were identical nor that their analytical distinction amounts to a historically contingent relationship. The anticolonial theorization of colonialism instead sought to account for a powerful form of rule against the overarching and unequal backdrop of global modernity. If we read the otherwise integral and necessary context of global modernity into the definitional scope of colonialism, we miss out on the dynamic, rather than predestined, relationship between its dual claims, and much else.

CONCLUSION

At stake here is not the issue of developing a universally agreeable categorization of colonialism. As Finley (1976, 174) himself conceded, "typologies cannot be correct or incorrect; it is only more or less useful for the purpose for which it is designed." The longstanding confusion over the scope of colonialism stemmed in no small part from the different purposes for which the term has been deployed: its uses ranged from the founding of settlements to the classification of imperial dependencies to the still greater problem of the modern expansion of Europe. Much of its twentieth-century purchase, we have seen, followed from the new problem the term was responding to. Leaving behind the largely metropolitan problem of defining the difference between distinct types of dependencies, the category of colonialism became absorbed in the project of historicizing and reclassifying the experience of European imperial subjection. Along the way, it also became populated by discourses ranging from the uneven scales of development to the origins of racial and cultural hierarchies on a global scale. The imperial making of the modern globe, in short, came under its conceptual ambit. In turn, the meaning of colonialism as a form of rule departed as much from premodern variants of foreign rule as from the ideas of turning wastelands into productive properties.

The threadbare categorization of colonialism as territorial rule of one people over another was certainly inadequate for the questions thrown up by the age of decolonization. Anticolonial thinkers addressed this inadequacy by hewing closer to the historical reference that they could only imperfectly schematize. These difficulties notwithstanding, the temptation to return to the pre-twentieth century record of the term (which, at any rate, is not as neat as commonly assumed, as we saw in the first section) is scarcely viable after a century of fraught contestations over it. As Nehru's reckoning with the British Empire shows, the substance of the colonialism question far surpassed its jurisdictional dispute with imperialism in the process of renaming and reframing the problem of British rule. This also meant that the African and Asian theorizations of colonialism, especially because of their commitments to the specificity of territorial rule, did not always speak to the animating problems of settler contexts. The expansion of Europe through settlement generated its own logic and problems that are ultimately irreducible to the lessons derived from the history of "colonialism" in most of Asia and Africa.

[11] For a sharp polemic against the deflation of postcolonial independence as a mere footnote to the larger story of colonial modernity, see Táíwò (2022); on Mignolo's simplification of the history of anticolonial thought, see Temin (2024).

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In any case, the influence of the anticolonial framing of colonialism grew not so much because of any reigning consensus but because of the questions it spawned in the age of the unraveling of European empires. In our own age, as the history of the entanglement between the colonial and the modern has become an argument for their identity, the meaning of colonialism has found an all-encompassing normative purchase, albeit at the cost of the reflexivity that once allowed the term to be resistant to reductivism. Amid this renewed confusion over the category, the anticolonial history of theorizing colonialism stands as a valuable heuristic. Taken together, its dual claims illuminate the way in which a distinctly political form of rule emerged out of the global formation of modernity without implying their identity or denying their historical entanglement. The terms of resisting empire, as well as that of building postcolonial states, were shaped fundamentally by the recognition of the dual claims of the problem of colonialism. Without keen attention to the interplay between these dual claims, we are unlikely to be able to appreciate the paradigmatic problems underlying the uses and abuses of colonialism in the past century—and in ours. What is more, this formative dynamic of the category also holds the key to understanding what it meant to all those it called into political action in the twentieth century.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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