CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Explaining geopolitical inventiveness: Late colonialism, decolonization, and the Cold War (1945–1970)

George Steinmetz [ID]

Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA
Email: geostein@umich.edu

Abstract

This article tries to explain the flourishing of geopolitical alternatives to the nation-state form and foreign policies organized around giant militarized power blocs during the two decades after World War II. The first section presents these new approaches to organizing the world. The first set of alternatives consisted of ideas and practices of the federation and the amalgamation of states into larger political units. These included Senghor's vision of a postcolonial federation in which France and its former colonies would be equals; Nkrumah's vision of a United States of Africa; and various short-lived amalgamations of states, including the Mali Federation and the United Arab Republic. These new geopolitical alternatives also included nonalignment, which originated with Jawaharlal Nehru of India and culminated with Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia but also encompassed Ireland between 1957 and 1961 and France in the early Fifth Republic. One of the distinctive features of this conjuncture is that these experiments were not limited to the global peripheries, colonies, and recently decolonized states, but also characterized certain nonhegemonic European core countries. The second section examines a set of four factors in this period that created an opportunity structure or space of possibilities for geopolitical experimentation: (1) late colonialism; (2) the Cold War; (3) the character of decolonization; and (4) the United Nations. The coexistence of these factors opened spaces of maneuver and autonomy for a flourishing of geopolitical imaginaries. The final section discusses possible reasons for the end of this period of experimentation.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Cold War; decolonization; nonalignment; federation

There is a Marxist, or pseudo-Marxist, position that asserts that a country like Ireland, because of its economic system and class structure, cannot show any independence on international questions. It is true that these factors preclude

certain extremes, but they also leave quite wide room for choice, as experience has shown.
(Connor Cruise O'Brien, Ireland in International Affairs)

The Cold War ... tends to obscure the significance of transnational postcolonial visions in the global South that imagined a world apart both from the bipolar international system and from the imperial order.
(Mark Philip Bradley, "Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War, 1919–1962")

As history moves forward, [the] space of possibilities closes in, for reasons that include the fact that the alternatives from which the actual historically established choice have been forgotten. ... One of the virtues of historical sociology or social history is precisely to reawaken these dead possibilities, these lateral possibilities, and to offer a certain freedom.
(Pierre Bourdieu, Sur l'état).

Introduction

The two decades after World War II saw a flourishing of alternatives to the nation-state form, foreign policies organized around giant militarized power blocs, and bipolar international relations. Federations and unions of states, nonaligned foreign policies, and multipolar systems of international relations emerged as alternatives to the dominant form of global geopolitics arranged in a bipolar structure around the US and the USSR and dominated by the logic of the Cold War. The specific problem addressed in this article, and its main contribution, is how to explain the burst of geopolitical innovation in theory – and to some extent in political practice – that occurred between 1945 and the late 1960s. What conditions permitted this flourishing of critical thinking about global political practices? How were the discussions of foreign policy taking place at the so-called green tables of diplomats and at the meetings of various elected assemblies, Third World summit meetings, and in the United Nations turned into unconventional geopolitical experiments that rejected longstanding, supposedly realist verities about nation-states and their relations with one another?

   The focus of this article is theoretical and analytic rather than empirical. In order to make this argument, I first construct my analytic object.[1] The timeframe examined here is 1945–1970, which includes the era of late colonialism, the transfer of power to independent polities, and the period of postcolonial politics in most of Africa and Asia.[2] Specifically, in the first section of this article, I will describe the alternative geopolitical programs that were elaborated and tested in this period. The first innovation was the idea of amalgamating smaller political units to create larger federations that might better withstand the pressure of the great powers (Wilder 2015;

---

[1]On the importance of deliberately constructing the object of social science against common-sense "prenotions," see Bourdieu et al. (1991).

[2]The fact that the transfer of power varied by years and even decades across the colonized world had enormous consequences for anticolonial movements in different locales.

Cooper 2014; Burbank and Cooper 2023). The second development was the idea of nonalignment, which emerged out of doctrines of state neutrality and the 1955 Bandung meeting and the wider Afro-Asian movement, even while differing in important ways from these earlier movements (Jansen 1966; Prashad 2007; Vitalis 2013; Cavoški 2022; Burbank and Cooper 2023: 153–220). Most of these ideas existed on paper, not in geopolitical reality, and in some cases, they were put into practice only briefly, but all of these ideas were launched into the world and survived, ready to resurface at moments like the present — for better or worse (Cheatham 2023).

The secondary historical literature tends to treat nonalignment policies separately from these postwar projects for state federation and amalgamation, and until recently, it has treated Cold War dynamics separately from the late colonial empires and processes of decolonization. But these were all part of the same dynamic global context after World War II. Much of the secondary historical literature focuses on a single state, region, or continent and ignores the global North, although again, this has been changing in recent years, bringing out one of the most characteristic aspects of this historical moment – the tendency to build bridges between former colonies and these colonies, on the one hand, and smaller European states, on the other. Certain European states embraced nonalignment – most dramatically, Yugoslavia and Ireland. Several European states that had adopted neutrality after World War II began to engage with the global nonalignment movement, including Austria, Finland, and Sweden.[3] In France, the ideas of Eurafrica were mobilized in efforts to reconfigure relations between the metropole and its overseas territories (Brown 2022; Burbank and Cooper 2023), and Gaullism embraced nonalignment in the 1960s. Finally, the secondary historical literature tends to avoid asking causal questions about the reasons for this flourishing of ideas and practices or attributes it to a single factor, usually decolonization, the Cold War, or the leadership of a single individual, such as Nehru, Nasser, Tito, or Nkrumah.[4]

The sociology of knowledge is also concerned with questions of causality. I am concerned here with sketching an explanatory account of the forms of critical geopolitics of worldmaking in the postwar years. I, therefore, turn in the second part of this article to the postwar global geopolitical constellation that nurtured these innovative ideas. This configuration, a *macro-political assemblage,* contained several distinct structures that operated both individually and in combination with others. The specific components of this assemblage were late colonialism, the precipitous process of the transfer of power, the United Nations, and the early Cold War. Considered both as a complex assemblage and as individual factors, these processes expanded the "space of possibilities" (Bourdieu 1993; 2012: 218–220) for the emergence of approaches to geopolitics and international relations opposed to imperialism, the Cold War, and geopolitical bipolarity. The structuring of macro-political space also closed certain possibilities, of course. For example, the

---

[3]The European sources of nonalignment policies are discussed in Kullaa (2012) for Finland and in the historical literature on Yugoslav foreign policy, discussed below.

[4]This is not true of Burbank and Cooper (2023), who point to the policies of European colonial empires and the politics of postwar colonial reform as well as the end of empires and the United Nations – all factors I include here. They place less emphasis than I do on the Cold War and the chaotic nature of the transfer of power. Gerits (2023) has a different explanandum – anticolonial modernity – and a different explanans: decolonization.

achievement of independence by most former European colonies by the early to mid-1960s decreased the resonance of decolonization as a theme among the leaders of these regions, strengthening the appeal of nonalignment. As Vitalis (2013: 273) points out, by the end of the 1961 nonaligned meeting in Cairo, Nehru "opposed … the continued obsession with colonialism," which "was quickly fading into insignificance."

The space of possibilities varies historically and geographically. This point is crucial for the comparison among different geopolitical units, all of which faced distinctive configurations of the Cold War. I also argue that *disjunctures* among overlapping and clashing geopolitical logics and *fissures* among major structuring forces sometimes generate new spaces of epistemic and political exploration. This is familiar in the literature on African and Asian political actors manipulating the divisions between colonial and Cold War powers, most famously during the Suez Crisis, when Egypt was able to take advantage of the division between the European colonial powers and the Cold War great powers. While Nasser became the de facto head of Pan-Arab nationalism, Soviet-American collusion led to the "emergence of bipolarity at the global level" (Yaqub 2013: 15; Bozo 2010: 164). The coexistence, juxtaposition, and overlapping of distinct geopolitical orders in the postwar period was conducive to novel ways of imagining the world. Peripheral movements and political leaders and weaker states were able to take advantage of the expanded room for maneuver resulting from the multiplication and nonsynchronicity of different systems of geopolitical power.

My account draws on the excellent historiographic literature on anticolonial, decolonizing, and Cold War politics in this period. My account diverges from these accounts in two ways. First, I construct the analytic object as critical geopolitical experimentation in the postwar world. Some accounts blur the distinctiveness of the postwar and interwar periods, while others extend the postwar era into the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the increasing importance of the Group of 77 within the United Nations in the 1970s. I argue that the shift from geopolitical innovation to a more economic focus of the NIEO and Group of 77 represents a transition to a different global conjuncture. The second, and more important difference, is that I will sketch a causal account of this moment of geopolitical experimentation.

My approach combines the sociology of knowledge, the history of empires, and Cold War diplomatic history. The sociology of knowledge is inherently critical and reflexive (Mannheim 1925, 1929; Kettler 1967; Bourdieu 2004), which makes it an ideal partner for critical geopolitics. My analytic object is a *geopolitical* one, if we use that term in the critical sense of understanding, criticizing, deconstructing, and offering alternatives to official and hegemonic ideologies of organizing states and their interrelations. Critical geopolitical theorists seek to develop counterstrategies to militarism and imperialism and offer intellectual support to social movements and weaker nation-states against larger states, hegemons, and military blocs (Steinmetz 2012; Dodds 2016). Critical international relations theory rejects the assumption of polarity in realist international relations theory (Anghie 2005; Lawson 2018; Mair 2023; Schlichte and Stetter 2023).

Scholarship has enriched our understanding of this moment of geopolitical experimentation by integrating anticolonial movements and postcolonial politics

into the history of the Cold War. Adom Getachew (2019) discusses this as a period of "worldmaking"; Burbank and Cooper (2023) speak of "reconfiguring world space"; Megan Brown (2022: 19) frames this as "organizing the world." I rely in this article on an enormous historiographic literature on the Cold War and postcolonial geopolitics, especially Westad (2005, 2017); Leffler and Westad (2010); Wilder (2015); Cooper (1996); Burbank and Cooper (2023); Getachew (2019); Cavoški (2022); and Gerits (2023).

The first part of the article presents some of the most interesting geopolitical ideas and practices that emerged during this period, focusing first on federation and amalgamation and then on nonalignment. The second section examines the four structural processes that encouraged this burst of experimentation. The first macro-condition stemmed from the European colonial empires, which engaged in political reforms after 1945. The second precondition was the rushed and precipitous character of the actual transfer of colonial power, which prevented careful planning for the day after independence while simultaneously expanding the space of possibilities and heightening violence and chaos. The third causally important factor was the United Nations, which represented an institutional space within which decolonizing movements and postcolonial and nonaligned polities were able to organize and to influence global politics. The final determinant, and the one that links this article most directly to the theme of this special issue, was the Cold War itself. Although many smaller states gravitated toward the US or the USSR after 1945, nonalignment was articulated as an explicit alternative to bipolarity. The majority of the newly independent states eventually embraced a nonaligned position between 1960 and 1965.

The confluence of these four gigantic processes created spaces of political possibility for rethinking basic geopolitical questions, including the most desirable form of large geopolitical entities and the best ways to organize relations among these units. This opening gradually closed, beginning in the second half of the 1960s. Of course, there was no abrupt or final ending to experimentation. Ideas of regional unity persisted. The nonaligned movement (NAM) created a permanent bureau in 1974 and continued to focus on political questions, even if questions of economic development came to dominate (Mortimer 1984: 114). The politics of the Group of 77 and the NIEO marked a move away from the earlier emphasis on creating new macro-political unities and coordinating nonaligned foreign policies. This overall shift of emphasis from the political to the socioeconomic resulted in part from the narrowing of political possibilities. The Wilsonian nation-state model and realist international relations once again closely constrained the boundaries of the plausible, the thinkable, and the doable. The third part of this article examines these processes of closure.

I. A period of turbulent geopolitical experimentation

This section presents some of the most interesting geopolitical ideas and practices that emerged in this period, all of which moved beyond conventional categories of empire, nation-state, colony, and formal military blocs or alliances.

Federation and union

Some of the most far-reaching institutional experiments after 1945 involved *federations* and *unions* of postcolonial states. Federal or imperial alternatives had always shadowed the "Westfalian" and "Wilsonian" state form. For millennia, empires had been the predominant format for organizing huge political units. Most nation-states emerged from empires and never entirely overcame their imperial origins (Bartlett 1993; Kumar 2013). During the nineteenth century, some British intellectuals began to rethink their empire as gigantic federations of semi-autonomous states gathered around a core metropole, and described "imperial federation" as "the most effective institutional arrangement for securing global peace and democracy" (Bell 2007: 96–97). These ideas influenced the emergence of the British Commonwealth and the Dominion status for "colonies with responsible government," which became a "half-way house between colonial and independent status" (McIntyre 1999: 194). If Commonwealth status was initially applied to the white settlers of "Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Cape Colony, Natal and Transvaal," followed by the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the Irish Free State in 1922, it opened the possibility of a more equal federation among the empire's peripheral states. A paper was presented at the 1921 Pan-African Conference arguing for the formation of a "United States of West Africa" combining all the countries from Senegal to Angola (Obadende 1922). In 1941, W.E.B. Du Bois noted that "radical West Africans have been demanding for a long time" the creation of such a federation (Du Bois 1941: 294).

A more sweeping and worldwide "federal moment" (Collins 2013) emerged after 1945. Projects for federations of colonies, postcolonies, and states proliferated among leaders in the Global South and in Europe. Within the British empire, "there were numerous federations or mooted federations ... during this period, including the Malay Federation, 1948–1963; the East African High Commission, 1948–1961; ... the West Indies Federation, 1958–1962; ... the Federation of South Arabia, 1962–1967," and the Central African Federation, which merged the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland (1953–1963) (Collins 2013: 36). As Gerits (2023: 183) writes, "[w]hat has been coined the 'federal moment' was not a fleeting feature of decolonization or a failed utopian project but a consecutive [sic] element of the postwar international order that cut across North-South and East-West lines." The plans for the European Union as a tool for modernization and collective defense were also part of this federal moment (Brown 2022). These initiatives were not directly created by the central dynamics and actors of the Cold War but existed alongside and interpenetrated Cold War dynamics.

Federation initiatives continued to develop in new directions following the transfer of power to the new states. One of Nkrumah's first foreign policy acts was to continue the tradition of the Pan-African congresses by emphasizing *African unity* alongside anticolonialism, anti-racism, and nonalignment (Biney 2011: 136; Gerits 2015). Nonalignment, in Nkrumah's vision, was closely connected to "continental unification, because neocolonialism's success depended on the existence of small units that relied on the former imperial power or the superpowers for defense and trade" (Gerits 2015: 66). There were vigorous debates and disagreements among African leaders about the "best way to attain that unity" (ibid.), ranging from loose

confederations to integral amalgams. Ghana's 1960 Constitution committed the country to cede its sovereignty to a future African Union (Gebe 2008). In 1958, Ghana entered into a combined state with Guinea, followed by the addition of Mali after its break with the short-lived Mali Federation (which also contained Senegal). The so-called *Union of African States* (Ghana, Guinea, and Mali) lasted from 1958 to 1963 (Thompson 1969: 180). Nkrumah also made secret plans in August 1960 for a never-realized union between Ghana and the decolonized Belgian Congo (Nkrumah 1963, 1967: 30–31; Thompson 1969: 57–70, 125, 145–161). Nkrumah continued to press for the creation of a continental African political unit that would take responsibility for defense, foreign policy, and economic development (Nkrumah 1963; Biney 2011: 145–150). Eventually, however, Nkrumah became "isolated in his pleas for African unity" (Gerits 2023: 101).

Along parallel lines, Presidents Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Milton Obote of Uganda agreed in 1963 to create a merger of their three countries (plus Zanzibar) to form a single East African Federation. East Africans envisioned "independence on a regional scale, with sovereignty distributed between the existing territories" and the planned Federation (Donovan 2023: 376). Although this union "never came into being" (Wallerstein 1967: 118), plans were revived recently for the federation of seven states, which would now also include Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and South Sudan (Kaburu and Logan 2022). The federative form, according to Mahmood Mamdani, recognizes "the fact of decentralized power as a widespread African reality" and represents "a return to one part of our political tradition" (2015).

As the Africanist sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein noted at the time, "the problem of how to achieve larger unities among African states" had become "the whole question of pan-Africanism" (Wallerstein 1961: 101). This expressed a willingness among the leaders of newly independent states to relinquish some of their sovereignty to larger, nonaligned political macro-units. Frank Gerits argues that "the drive to project anticolonial modernity reconfigured the international system into a patchwork of federative and regional units, which slowed down the creation of a bipolar world" (Gerits 2023: 183).

Movements toward federation also appeared within the French Empire. Two giant federative colonies were created in West Africa in 1895 and Equatorial Africa in 1910, and they persisted until 1958. Although these federations were "only administrative units" (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 203), they created a precedent for unification on a vast scale. The French Empire was rebaptized as the "French Union" after 1945. This name was a euphemism that attempted to head off rising worldwide criticisms of colonialism, including from the United Nations. At the same time, the French Union was more federative than the earlier empire, given the allocation of partial sovereignty to new overseas departments and to local assemblies in the overseas territories. Differences between colonial native law (the *indigénat*) and French law were reduced. Citizenship was extended to inhabitants of colonies, although political inequality was reintroduced through the lack of universal suffrage in metropolitan elections, the creation of colonial assemblies with unequal dual colleges, and the partial or delayed extension of metropolitan laws to overseas territories and departments (Julien 1950; Cooper 2014; Burbank and Cooper 2023: 91; Brown 2022: 46). Representatives from the overseas colonies were represented in

the French National Assembly and in the empire-level Assembly of the French Union, which had "240 members, half from Metropolitan France and half from the overseas territories" (Julien 1950: 501). The French journalist and historian Charles-André Julien, who favored independence for the north African colonies, remarked at the time that for the "first time in the world white men and natives [were] meeting together in equal numbers, on equal footing, and sharing equally the posts of responsibility" (Julien 1950: 501).[5] Although the Assembly of the French Union was dominated by the French government and was largely ignored by the French press, it was empowered to submit legislative proposals and to offer advice to the National Assembly. The "embryo of a federal organization" had therefore been created on a giant scale, and Julien believed at the time that it was showing "life and a desire to expand" (ibid.).

Of course, that was not to be, but many African leaders and intellectuals were inspired by the idea of unifying with their former French colonizers on equal footing (Cooper 2014). The radical potential of these ideas was expressed in the thinking of the most important African parliamentarian in the French National Assembly during the Fourth Republic, Léopold Senghor (Cooper 2014; Wilder 2015; Heiniger 2022). Before becoming the first president of independent Senegal in 1960, Senghor and his colleague Mamadou Dia, along with Sékou Touré from Guinea, developed a federalist vision that called for "the territories of francophone Africa (including French Equatorial Africa) to unite in a "primary federation" that would in turn be a component of a "confederation" in which metropolitan France and any other part of the former empire that wanted to join would participate as equals" (Cooper 2018: np). Along with other prominent Africans, Senghor argued that self-determination would be better served by federation or some sort of "transcontinental assemblage" (Wilder 2015: 62), and that immediate independence would be a "poisoned gift" ("un cadeau empoisonné"; Senghor 1954: 422). Senghor's vision of sovereignty and solidarity was divided into three layers, "each of which should have legislative and executive institutions: the individual territory (Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, etc.), a primary federation (French Africa as a whole, potentially expanding to all of sub-Saharan Africa), and a confederation in which European France and the African federation would join as equals along with any other part of the former French empire that wished to participate" (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 98).

Senghor worked to create the Mali Federation, a union of Senegal and French Sudan (Mali) that lasted from April 1959 to August 1960. This involved a partial merger of the two states, a pared-down version of Senghor's vision of West African federalism (Cooper 2014: Ch. 7). The Federation's president, Modibo Keïta, came from Sudan/Mali, but the government was based in Dakar (Foltz 1965). The preamble of the Senegalese constitution stated that elected officials "must spare no effort in the fulfilment of African unity" (Schraeder and Gaye 1997), and the constitutions of Guinea, Mali, and the Central African Republic provided that these countries could conclude "with any African nation, agreements of association or of community of interests, involving total or partial abandonment of its sovereignty for the purpose of achieving African unity" (Thiam 1965: 18). Senegal's first foreign minister, Doudou Thiam, described the Mali Federation as being based on the

---

[5] On Julien, see https://archives.sciencespo.fr/ark:/46513/580172/.

"world view" of Pan-Africanism (Geiss 1974) and *Négritude*, as defined by Senghor (1964). Thiam argued that Pan-Africanism represented a "means of achieving African unity" based on "macro-nationalism" rather than the "micronationalism" of tribal and ethnic groups (Thiam 1965: 12–19). During the early Cold War, the US and USSR opposed these federative projects, preferring that European colonies be transformed into standardized nation-states that could more easily be brought under external control.

Nonalignment: From Rangoon (1953) to Bandung (1955) to Belgrade (1961)

Another array of geopolitical alternatives was embodied by the ideologies, meetings, and campaigns grouped under the term *nonalignment*. Although many smaller states gravitated toward the US or the USSR after 1945, nonalignment was articulated as an alternative to blocs. The majority of the newly independent states eventually embraced that position during the 1960s, "the heyday for the Non-aligned Movement" (NAM) (Niebuhr 2018: 127). This movement flouted realist geopolitical theory. As Indian scholar Angadipuram Appadorai pointed out in 1955, participants in the movement argued that "the so-called realistic appreciation of the world situation, on the basis of which alignment with a power bloc had been justified, was in fact not so realistic, as it had only led them to the brink of a world war" (Appadorai 1955: 229–230).

While Bandung "marked the transition from an anti-imperialism of movements to an anti-imperialism of states," the assumption of sovereignty by states "generated new possibilities," one of which was the NAM (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 183). The NAM's discourse linked colonialism to the Cold War and rejected both logics. Nonalignment was defined as cooperation between nations with different social and political structures, support for nuclear disarmament, opposition to great power hegemony of all sorts, including colonialism, and increasingly, an orientation toward global economic development (Rubinstein 1970: 29). Nonalignment created a geostrategic role for small nations, signaling that small size and economic dependency were not synonymous with political dependency. Moreover, nonalignment after 1961 represented a universalist ideology that transcended the racial-regional solidarities of the Afro-Asian movement, "confirming that the Third World was a political project with a potentially unbounded membership rather than the expression of a non-Western, non-white identity" (Byrne 2015: 912; Rubinstein 1970: 57; Cavoški 2022: 32; Vitalis 2013). In this respect, too, nonalignment should be distinguished from the Afro-Asian movement (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 153–220).

That said, a key precursor of nonalignment was the doctrine of political neutrality, which "for centuries" represented the main alternative "to membership in military alliances" (Goetschel 1999: 115). State neutrality was "legally recognised for the first time in 1815, when the great powers guaranteed Switzerland's neutrality at the Congress of Vienna" (Wyss et al. 2016: 2).[6] The status of neutrality was "legally codified in the Hague Conventions of 1907 on sea and land war," which

---

[6]Swedish neutrality reaches back to the early nineteenth century (Rainio-Niemi 2014: 5) and changed only with Sweden's entry into NATO in 2024.

stipulated that "neutral states are required not to participate in wars either directly or indirectly" or "take part in a military alliance," and were required to "possess adequate military forces" and to "defend themselves against violations of their neutrality" (Goetschel 1999: 118).

The first seeds of the nonalignment variant of neutrality were sown in India between the wars. The Indian National Congress had already started to formulate an independent foreign policy in 1936 when it criticized the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the passivity of Britain and the League of Nations. For Nehru, the Congress Socialist Party, and Khurshed F. Nariman (the mayor of Mumbai in 1935–1936), "cooperation with other dependent or weaker nations" was crucial for India (Framke 2014: 45). Four elements of Indian nonalignment emerged before 1947: "(1) alienation from the foreign policies of Western states in general; (2) an ambivalent attitude towards the main international actors, the United States and the Soviet Union; (3) opposition to all blocs and military alliances, . . . and (4) a belief in the moral superiority of the Indian approach to international affairs, an attitude which, however naive, did invite the international community to judge Indian foreign policy on more stringent criteria than those applied to other states" (Keenleyside 1980: 463). Nehru "outlined his policy of non-alignment in a broadcast speech to the Indian people in early September 1946" (Wyss et al. 2016: 3). Nehru "sought to claim international leadership on the basis of five principles he labeled *Panchsheel*: respect for sovereignty, nonaggression, noninterference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (Gerits 2023: 45; Singh 2019). Immediately after Independence, India embarked on an independent diplomatic course, rejecting "Soviet political ideology" while also keeping its distance from Britain and the United States (Bradley 2010: 476).

Nehru defended a clear neutralist position at the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi (Win 2010: 46). He spoke at the 1953 meeting of Asian socialist leaders in Rangoon, Burma, which extended its purview to Africa and condemned colonialism in general (Niebuhr et al. 2023: 644). The Rangoon conference also included delegates from European socialist parties. The leaders of the 1953 meeting "formed a nucleus of actors who took the concept of neutrality and moved it forward by using a non-allied status to gain concessions from multiple world powers" (Niebuhr 2018: 93). Nehru went on to cosponsor the Bandung Conference together with Sukarno of Indonesia and Nasser of Egypt. Sukarno's five guiding principles closely matched Nehru's *Panchsheel* ideals (Niebuhr 2018: 95; Soekarno 1952). Bandung's emphasis on colonies and anticolonialism led Sukarno to refuse Australia's request to attend the meeting.

There was one European presence at the 1955 Bandung meeting, however, which soon emerged as a leader of the NAM: Yugoslavia. President Tito had sent his chief ideologue, Milovan Đilas, to the Rangoon meeting in 1953 (Niebuhr 2018: 101). Tito and his inner circle initially approved the famous speech by Zhadnov dividing the world into "two irreconcilable ideological camps of capitalism and socialism," and Yugoslavia hosted the newly created Cominform in Belgrade (Naimark 2021: 270). Yet Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in June 1948. Its foreign policy "became truly independent only after [this] excommunication" (Rajak 2014: 147). This led to "Tito's trip to India and Burma in December 1954" and "his first encounter with . . . Nehru," which "played an exceptionally significant role in the

conceptualization of the principles of active peaceful coexistence and non-commitment and in transforming them into a global initiative" (Rajak 2014: 147). Yugoslavia described itself as having been anticolonial from the start, due to its historical subjection to external conquerors and its vulnerability after 1946 to being turned into a colony of the Soviet Union.[7] "Non-alignment" became "universally accepted toward the end of the 1950s," especially after the 1961 summit meeting in Belgrade sponsored by Tito (Rajak 2014: 147). Yugoslavia developed this doctrine assiduously, even setting up "a top quality research institute that would provide, free of any ideological tunnel vision, expert insights into the politics and economics of the outside world and the opportunities offered to Yugoslavia" (Rajak 2014: 155–156).

The Yugoslav intervention changed discussions of Third World solidarity in two important ways. The first was that nonalignment was defined as containing an "activist element," as opposed to simple neutralism à la Switzerland (Rubinstein 1970: 54). Of course, some of the newly independent postcolonies had already taken the political initiative, despite their relative weakness. While the individual states making up the NAM were weak individually, together they constituted a sizable and often coherent voting bloc in the United Nations (Willetts 1978; Jackson 1983: 103–105; Cavoški 2022: 32). They were also able to intervene outside the UN. For example, in 1948, India refused transit rights for Dutch ships and planes bound for fighting against the Indonesian War of Independence (Jansen 1966: 62). Yugoslavia supplied arms to Burma, Indonesia, and the Algerian National Liberation Front (Rubinstein 1970: 45, 83; Niebuhr 2018: 126). Lüthi (2015) details three other issues where NAM was able to make a difference: "mediation in nuclear disarmament talks between the great powers; intervention in the 1967 Middle East conflict; and involvement in the Indochina War" (Wyss et al. 2016: 8).

Tito's second crucial intervention consisted of inviting states from the global North to join the NAM, moving away from the "Afro-Asian" axis. The main European allies before the mid-1960s were Scandinavian states. Some of them were granted guest or observer status at the Belgrade meeting and the 1965 nonaligned summit in Cairo. Other sympathetic European states included Switzerland, Malta, Cyprus (the latter invited to the 1961 Belgrade conference), and Austria, which sent a delegation with observer status to the third nonaligned summit in 1970 in Lusaka, Zambia (Rauchensteiner 2010: 493).

The Organization of African Unity (OAS) was founded in 1963. It effectively undercut all "efforts to construct an institutional basis for African unification" (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 202: Rothermund 2014: 28). In the wake of the Lusaka summit, the NAM became a caucus in the United Nations, and the OAS joined NAM. A condition for NAM membership was that states could not "be a member of multilateral military alliances concluded in the context of great power conflicts" such as NATO and could not have signed any "bi-lateral or regional defense arrangement" (Jansen 1966: 285–286).

---

[7]Yugoslav Foreign Minister Edvard Kardelj in United Nations, *Plenary Meetings of the General Assembly,* Fourth Session, 228th Plenary Meeting, 26 September, 1949, p. 68, paragraph 64.

Nonalignment in Europe: Ireland

Ireland and France achieved considerable autonomy from the United States. Ireland obtained "Dominion status" as a result of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. This meant that the 26 southern Irish counties were no longer a British colony but were also not yet fully independent. Ireland pushed for the 1926 Balfour Declaration, which stipulated that the dominions "were united only by a common loyalty to the Crown," and for the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which "revoked nineteenth century legislation that gave Parliament the power to invalidate laws passed by colonial assemblies" (Carroll 2016: 43). By 1931, "Dominion" had come to mean complete Home Rule in Ireland.[8]

As in India, Irish politicians elaborated a foreign policy prior to full independence (Carroll 2016: 39). Ireland was able to pursue an autonomous foreign policy between 1939 and 1945 (McIntyre 1999: 194–196), effectively becoming the first nonaligned postcolonial state. The policy that Ireland called "neutrality" signified nonsubordination to foreign countries. These policies reached full fruition in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as part of the global context of nonalignment. Of course, the key axis of independence for Ireland in this period was from Britain. But Ireland resembled the independent African and Asian states in its generalized emphasis on nonalignment. This entailed a stance of "complete independence" from the US and the USSR (Carroll 2016: 41). In 1949, the Irish government refused to join NATO "on the grounds that it would involve military partnership with Britain" (Murphy 2000: 17). The Minister for External Affairs, Liam Cosgrave (1954–1957), argued that Ireland "should try to maintain a position of independence, judging the various questions on which we have to adopt an attitude or cast a vote strictly on their merits, in a just and disinterested way." This implied an effort "to avoid becoming associated with particular blocs or groups so far as possible" (quoted in Cruise O'Brien 1969: 128). At the end of the 1950s, Irish foreign policy became explicitly "identified with the perceived suffering of the Third World and its exploitation at the hands of Western capitalism" (Murphy 2000: 17). This policy emerged under the new Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, who "envisaged something of a visionary role for Ireland in the United Nations ... inspired by the country's history and position as a small Western nation which had been at the receiving end of colonialism for centuries, which had achieved independence through revolutionary struggle but which had preserved and practiced democratic values" (Murphy 2000: 17). Between 1957 and 1961, Aiken "associated Ireland strongly with a group of anti-colonial states and emphasized his government's commitment to a broad set of principles ...: democracy, justice, and civil and political freedom for all peoples" (O'Sullivan 2012: 19). Ireland sought "to ensure that self-determination was achieved under the best possible conditions" and "the creation of successful postindependence polities" (O'Sullivan 2012: 23). Aiken also sought "to work in the cause of international peace through the exercise of independent judgement on the issues and ... worked for the reduction of Cold War tensions" (Cruise O'Brien 1969: 130).

---

[8]MI-5 files released in 1999 showed that Irish intelligence cooperated closely with their British counterparts during World War II. Ireland's stance was non-belligerent rather than truly neutral.

Nonalignment in Europe: The French Fifth Republic

Demoted from great power status after World War II, the French Fourth Republic
(1946–1958) initially aligned itself with the US and became the founding European
member of NATO, whose headquarters were in Paris. Yet France soon developed an
approach to foreign policy that sharply separated it from the US. This is illustrated
by efforts to integrate the former French colonies into the emerging European
Union and by the tight bilateral relations France created with many of its former
African colonies. French officials believed that France had to be at the helm of an
integrated Western Europe, and that integrating "Europe and the Six's colonies in
that endeavor would create a French-led bulwark between the two rival super-
powers, complete with a large economy and access to the wealth of African
resources, securing European relevance on the global stage" (Brown 2022: 14).
France's nonalignment is also illustrated in its decision to develop nuclear weapons,
which were officially said to be directed "in all directions" (*tous azimuts*) rather than
solely at the USSR.

After the legal coup d'état of 1958, which brought de Gaulle back into power,
France distanced itself further from the Western alliance through an explicit course
of nonalignment (Bozo 2010; Gaddis 2005: 139–143). France now refused "to allow
US tactical atomic weapons to be based in France . . . leading to the withdrawal from
France of 200 US bomber aircraft" (Bozo 2010: 37, 46). French strategies to maintain
close economic, social, political, military, and cultural ties with the former colonies
provided a counterweight to the domination of geopolitics by the US and the USSR
(Medushevskiy and Shishkina 2022). In 1966, France withdrew partially from
NATO and remained outside NATO's command structure for 43 years. De Gaulle
argued that NATO should be transformed into "a less bellicose, less US-dominated
body that would be more attuned to the new East–West context." This resembled
statements by Nehru, Nasser, Sukarno, Nkrumah, and Tito and was a more radical
break with Cold War polarization than the *détente* policies pursued by Nixon or the
Ostpolitik of Willi Brandt later in the decade.

De Gaulle's strategy resonated with some postcolonial states, including Senegal
and Ghana. De Gaulle accepted the formula of "independence within interdepen-
dence" that had been proposed by Senghor in 1959 (Mortimer 1972: 286). Nkrumah
"could barely hide his admiration for de Gaulle" and "described France as a colony
of the US Empire and de Gaulle as someone who defied US power." Nkrumah
"became an indirect ally of de Gaulle in his search for a world that was not
dominated by the superpowers." Ghana's Foreign Affairs Minister visited France in
June 1965 (Gerits 2015: 962). Although French foreign policymakers would never
admit to being influenced by politicians from the global South, their adoption of
nonalignment policies in this period underscores the existence of a global
conjuncture spanning both North and South and East and West.

II. Determinants of the opportunities for geopolitical experimentation

This section explores the reasons for the geopolitical experimentation discussed in
the previous section. A unique global geopolitical assemblage of states and
institutions played a decisive role here. The first macro-condition consisted of the

European colonial empires, which were involved in significant political reforms between 1945 and decolonization. The second factor was the precipitous character of the actual transfer of colonial power. This rush prevented careful planning for the day after, but at the same time, it temporarily opened the space of geopolitical possibilities (while also heightening violence in India, the Belgian Congo, and elsewhere). The third causally important factor was the United Nations, which represented an institutional space where decolonizing movements and postcolonial and nonaligned polities could interact with one another and sometimes influence global politics. The final determinant, and the one that links this article directly to the theme of this special issue, was the Cold War per se. The opportunity structures linked to this unique geopolitical assemblage were conducive to an efflorescence of political and social imaginaries, to new theories of colonialism and postcolonialism (discussed in Steinmetz 2023), and to new definitions of socialism and nonalignment.

The confluence of these processes created opportunities for the reexamination of basic geopolitical questions, including the most desirable form of large geopolitical entities and of relations among them. The ideological opening gradually narrowed during the second half of the 1960s. Of course, ideas of federation and unity persisted. The NAM created a permanent bureau in 1974, and continued to focus on political questions, even if questions of economic development came to the fore in international activities among the countries known at the time as the "Third World" (Mortimer 1984: 114). The politics of the Group of 77 and the NIEO and Julius Nyerere's autarkic socialism in Tanzania represented "the most ambitious project[s] of anticolonial worldmaking" (Getachew 2019: 144), but these projects moved away from the earlier emphasis on creating new and larger political unities and coordinating nonaligned foreign policies. The Wilsonian nation-state and realist international relations again defined the boundaries of geopolitical plausibility . The third part of this article examines this process of closure.

The postwar world was divided into different arrangements of geopolitical power. The Cold War structure emerged tentatively during World War II and was soldered together after the Yalta conference. Colonial empires were shaken by liberation movements, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, during the immediate postwar years, but colonies in Africa and the Caribbean were reconsolidated with the financial support of the United States (Louis 1977; Louis and Robinson 1993). These "late colonial" empires differed from interwar and earlier models in ways that were conducive to autonomous and inventive theorizing about geopolitics. Late colonialism was also a directionless system whose aims and trajectories were defined in vague or contradictory ways by the Europeans who were ultimately in charge. This very open-endedness and lack of a clear telos promoted critical social and geopolitical thought.

Disjunctures and fissures between geopolitical logics may produce new spaces of strategic exploration.[9] The maneuvering room for novel ways of imagining the world and innovative geopolitical action was expanded by the coexistence, juxtaposition,

---

[9]There is little space in world system theory for complex geopolitical assemblages or logic. Whereas Wallerstein (2003) characterizes 1945–1968/1973 as a period of American hegemony, the ruptures in the early 1960s discussed in this article remain invisible even in his mature theory. This is paradoxical in

and overlapping of two distinct geopolitical orders – colonialism and the Cold War – combined with the social movements of decolonization and the new possibilities of organization and action in the United Nations.

The Cold War

African, Asian, and European intellectuals writing in European colonies during the 1950s were shaped more decisively by the colonial context than by the Cold War. This fact might not seem surprising if it were not for the secondary literature on the Cold War. Even where colonialism is fully integrated into writing on the Cold War, there is a tendency to frame the issue as "the Cold War in the colonies," rather than examining causal chains running in both directions (Byrne 2016: 294). Yet, there are different ways to problematize and decenter the literature on the Cold War. One possibility is to show that "what has conventionally been seen as a peripheral theater of the Cold War," namely the colonies and the Third World, "actually played an important role" in the Cold War itself (Szonyi and Liu 2010: 1). A second possibility is to demonstrate that local interests took advantage of the Cold War to mobilize Americans or Soviets for their own agendas, or to fight their own battles independent of the superpowers. Third, one can trace practices in the postwar colonies and early postcolonies that were largely unaffected by the Cold War.

At the same time, some of the geopolitical innovation in the global South was stimulated directly by the Cold War. This includes, above all, nonalignment itself, which was defined as an alternative to bipolarity. The decision by European powers to abandon their empires was driven partly by the Cold War division – for example, when the United States successfully pressured the Netherlands to quit Indonesia. This, in turn, helped lift Sukarno to power, allowing him to sponsor the Bandung meeting. Joint Soviet and US pressure on Britain, France, and Israel during the Suez Crisis strengthened the hand of Egyptian president Nasser in his assertion of leadership over newly decolonized African states. Tito developed his unique foreign policy to avoid domination by both the USSR and the US.

It is worth examining the components of the multifaceted postwar geopolitical assemblage in a bit more detail.

The specificity of postwar (French and British) colonialism

The reconfiguration of European colonial policies after 1945 decisively shaped geopolitical alternatives in the postindependence global peripheries. The most obvious example of sharing sovereignty was indirect rule, a system in which Europeans maintained ultimate power. Indirect rule tended to point toward postcolonial policies of tribalism rather than federation. By contrast, postwar colonial policies of partial parliamentarization pointed toward colony-wide political projects. Some European empires also carried out experiments in federation, pointing the way to postcolonial federations. Changing the international borders of colonies through amalgamation, as with Britain's creation of the Central African

---

light of Wallerstein's earlier writing on African politics, including the politics of federation (Wallerstein 1961, 1967, 1986).

Federation (1953–1963), could reinforce colony-level political identifications as a form of resistence to the colonial ruler.

The coexistence of the European colonial empires with the superpowers during the postwar period constituted a "multipolar world." Once the first former colonies became independent, they complicated this picture further by expanding the opportunities for new actors to emerge in the spaces between clashing and intersecting macro-political structures.

The chaos of the transfer of power

In most cases, there was little or no prior discussion of the constitution of the political entities that would emerge from the transfer of sovereignty. The question of whether the outlines of the states on the map of postindependence Africa would resemble colonial era maps, or would be reconfigured, had barely been raised. The precipitous, unanticipated, and unplanned character of transferring power stimulated a widespread sense of geopolitical possibility and experimentation.[10] Of course, the degree to which independence raised questions about future state forms was posed differently in colonies that were based on preexisting polities, such as Morocco, and in colonies where European conquest had divided certain previously unified "tribes" and amalgamating previously disconnected cultures, as in Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, or Tanzania.

The United Nations

Another important determinant of postwar experiments in geopolitical worldmaking was the United Nations, whose existence empowered the newly independent and weaker states. The first legal declaration of the inalienable right of all peoples to self-determination was the General Assembly's Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (Resolution 1514) in 1960. The United Nations also provided a space in which weaker states could mobilize a "third front," organize joint political actions, and stimulate ideological innovation in international relations. At the same time, the UN limited the viability of geopolitical units larger than the nation-state, channeling activism away from federation and union and toward nonalignment.

By giving each country a single, equal vote and by requiring each nation to take a position on issues that were not directly related to their immediate, local interests, participation in the UN made isolationist neutralism less attractive and encouraged a more global consciousness among its participants (Willetts 1978: 21). It also allowed for bloc-like voting by nonaligned states that, in principle, opposed the idea of a bloc (Jackson 1983: 103–105; Cavoški 2022: 32). The United Nations therefore had contradictory effects on nonaligned geopolitical imaginations.

---

[10]The question was posed differently in colonies based on preexisting polities, like Morocco, or on long-standing and institutionally strong colonial states, such as French Algeria, where "the colonial imprint [was] far more marked than it was in either of its two neighbors" (Willis 2014: 19).

III. The shift away from alternative forms of diplomacy and geopolitical units

The Cold War eventually overpowered colonial logics (Louis and Robinson 1993; Thomas 2008: 57). Global geopolitics became more uniformly organized around the great superpower standoff, and counter-reactions were more powerfully shaped by this logic. There was a return to traditional models of state sovereignty and to closer alignments with the superpowers. Relations between former colonies and their former rulers took more bilateral forms. Many postcolonial states and weaker core states aligned themselves with one of the superpowers. This included Nehru (Mastny 2010) and Nkrumah (Telepneva 2018: 15), whose defeat by a coup in 1966 ushered in a swing toward pro-Western foreign policies (Gebe 2008). The founding of the OAS in 1963 locked into place the system of African states and international borders inherited from colonialism. China had seemed to support nonalignment at Bandung in 1955, but it now adopted a strategy of "international class struggle," violating the nonalignment movement's commitment to peace. Ireland moved closer to US positions, declaring in 1969 that there was "no question of neutrality" (Fanning 1982: 37) – although, like France, Ireland has shifted back into nonaligned positions periodically.[11]

Another aspect of the end of the postwar period and the "middle Cold War" in the postcolonies was that state-making "took an increasingly intrusive and militarized turn, first in Vietnam and later in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Central America, and Afghanistan" (Bradley 2010: 484–485). Projects for African federation and unification, which had promised "diversity and difference between the states," gave way to state centralization and domestic repression of minorities (Getachew 2019: 121). A "new generation of more militant local actors emerged … whose worldviews heightened levels of … repression among …. peoples of the postcolonial world" (Ibid.). The wars fought in the Third World became more "despairingly destructive" (Westad 2005: 400), and the belligerents were usually aligned with one of the superpowers. The more violent forms of anti-imperialist geopolitics that emerged in the 1970s – global Maoism and the new Salifism (discussed by Plys in this issue) – differed from earlier Third World politics, which were characterized by an emphasis on disarmament (Prashad 2007: 42–43, 101).

This shift away from alternatives to the conventional nation-state and foreign policy alignment can also be tracked in the Portuguese colonies and the main settler colonies of Southern Africa – Namibia, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa. Decolonization came later in these regions, and the Cold War correspondingly had a greater influence on their paths to self-determination. Discussions of alternatives to the conventional nation-state were marginal. The other important difference was the nature of the colonizing powers. Portugal remained fascist until the bloodless Portuguese military coup of 1974, which ended the country's 500-year career as an imperial power. South Africa was an authoritarian settler colony organized around the uniquely brutal policies of Apartheid. Portugal and South Africa resisted

---

[11]The current criticism of US-Israeli policy falls outside the scope of this article, which ends even before the end of the Cold War. It is a sign of the continuities of nonalignment, however, that Ireland was "the first European Union member to call for Palestinian statehood" and the most vocal critic of American support for Israel in 2024 (Frayer and Al-Khassab 2024; Aodha and Sherlock 2024).

international pressures to end their colonialist policies, violently repressed internal opposition, and sent mercenaries and official troops into other African conflict zones. Before 1960, the resistance movements in Portugal's colonies and South Africa were entangled with the rest of the colonized world, but after 1960, they became deeply entwined with key actors in the Cold War. The culminating battles against Portuguese colonialism in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau were dependent on Cold War patrons – the US, the USSR, China, and Cuba (Noer 1985; Gleijeses 2002).

The end of Apartheid in South Africa also underscores the centrality of the Cold War to processes in the global South after 1960. Two key factors broke the stalemate in the 1980s: the death of P.W. Botha in 1989 and his replacement by the reformer F. W. de Klerck (Dubow 2014: 263), and the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev as president of the USSR, who offered "to withdraw Soviet involvement in southern Africa and to put similar pressure on the Cubans" (Beinart 2001: 270). Yet the "single most transforming event was the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the ensuing swift collapse of Communist rule in eastern Europe," which removed "a key factor underpinning National Party rule in South Africa – the threat of Soviet expansionism in southern Africa." De Klerk quickly unbanned all political parties, released Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, and "committed the government to the negotiation of a new constitutional order" (Dubow 2014: 265). The end of the Cold War provided the decisive impetus to ending Apartheid.

One further result of the reconsolidation of global politics around the logic of the "great schism" was that critical thinking about empire in Europe and the United States returned to its earlier emphasis on political economy. This mirrored the turn from political to economic activism in the "third world" coalition, discussed above, and the economic reductionism of Soviet-style anti-imperialism. Social theorizing about international politics became more rigid and less ebullient, multicausal, and open to cultural arguments. The rich scientific and political lexicons informing anti-imperial struggles narrowed to the epithets "imperialism" and "colonialism," defined in "Leninist" terms as economic exploitation. This narrowing can be seen clearly within the discipline of sociology, where the loss of interest in comparative colonialism dates precisely to the mid-1960s (Steinmetz 2009). For a few years after 1965, sociologists still engaged in research on development and underdevelopment, unequal exchange, and economic imperialism. These topics were included in sociological reference works published between the 1960s and the late twentieth century; sociology departments taught courses on economic underdevelopment. But topics such as "empire," "the colonial state," "indirect rule," "colonial developmentalism," "decolonization," "postcolonialism," federation, and nonalignment, were nowhere to be seen. Sociological interest in these themes only remerged after the end of the Cold War.

Conclusion

This article has made several contributions to the existing literature. I have been concerned with proposing an explanatory account of the politics of federation and

nonalignment. I proposed the concept of the *macro-political assemblage* consisting of several distinct structures that operate both independently and in combination. I have argued that the specific components of this assemblage were late colonialism, the precipitous process of the transfer of power, the United Nations, and the early Cold War.

Another argument concerned the ways periodization is complicated by the necessarily overdetermined and processual character of social structures. It would be quite misleading to characterize the period examined in this article in terms of a singular meta-dynamic such as the "Cold War," "Late Colonialism," or "Decolonization." There is no correct label for historical periods, given the multiplicity of simultaneously coexisting social processes and structures. Terms like "Cold War," when used to summarize an entire historical epoch, are inevitably misleading, insofar as social reality is radically complex and overdetermined, consisting of a rainforest-like profusion of generative causal mechanisms and contingently determined events and processes that coexist, intersect, overlap, merge, and separate.[13] As Fredric Jameson argued, periodization "tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, "expresses" some unified inner truth – a worldview or a period style or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breadth of the 'period' in question" (Jameson 1981: 27). Yet at the same time, while "such an impression is fatally reductive," this does not mean that concepts like "Cold War" and "late colonialism" correspond "to no realities whatsoever" (Jameson 1992: 256). They can be construed as social contexts, processes, or structuring causal mechanisms that combine with others in unexpected and contingent ways. I have tried to identify such a combination, a structural assemblage that existed on a global scale but that had geographically differing effects.

A final set of conclusions is political and ethical, relating to the value of revisiting past intellectual and political imaginaries, even ones that were unsuccessful in

---

[13]Causal power means the power to bring about some sort of change at the level of empirical events. The Critical Realist (CR) philosophy of science argues that "there are enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events" (Bhaskar 2011: 2). According to CR, causal mechanisms are the "relatively enduring structures of nature and their characteristic ways of acting" that scientific activity tries to identify and characterize. These mechanisms may or may not be empirically observable. Mechanisms possess causal powers, "which, when triggered or released, act as generative mechanisms, with *natural necessity* and *universality* (within their range) so as to codetermine the manifest phenomena of the world, which occur for the most part in open systems: that is, where constant conjunctions do not pertain" (Bhaskar 2009a: 17). This "codetermination" may take the form of generating or preventing, enabling or constraining, events, or effects (Hartwig 2007). A law in CR is not a constant conjunction of events but the characteristic pattern of activity, or tendency, of a mechanism (Steinmetz 1998). CR also argues that that mechanisms and their powers shape the course of empirical events within *open systems*. In open systems, which means in all social systems, "constant conjunctions of events do not occur." Single causal mechanisms do not act in isolation or in universal conjunctions in producing empirical effects. Causal laws should not be "regarded as empirical regularities" but instead as the expressions of the "tendencies of things" (Bhaskar 2009b: 199; 1997: 10). In open systems, mechanisms combine to produce actual events conjuncturally, that is to say, in concert with other mechanisms (Steinmetz 1998). The events, processes, cultural phenomena, etc., that are studied by sociologists are always "multiply determined" and always within causal "conjunctures" (Bhaskar 2009b: 196). While there are, of course, other definitions of causal mechanisms, and while some readers find the metaphor of "mechanism" rebarbative, its use in CR is distinctly non-mechanical (Gorski 2009).

practical terms. A reader might object that these forgotten scenarios for organizing global politics, these alternatives to Westphalian sovereignty and Cold War thinking, are best left undisturbed in their burial sites. Yet some of these historical discourses may resurface, as can be seen in Russian discussions of Eurasianism (Burbank and Cooper 2023: 221–261), such as Dugin's neo-Eurasianism (Hell and Steinmetz 2017). The revived discussion of the East African Federation is another example. Nonalignment may currently be a shadow of its 1960s self, but that does not mean that these ideas will not resurface at some future point, and if they do, it will be important to be aware of their earlier histories, which are never entirely absent, even if they are latent and unconscious. Recalling these geopolitical alternatives also complicates the picture of the Cold War as a monolithic, oppressive, all-encompassing structure, and by extension, calls attention to the question of human agency within oppressive social structures. Colonizers and the colonized were able to produce intellectual work of great importance under colonialism (Steinmetz 2023, 2024, forthcoming). Important intellectual and cultural work was produced under Stalinism (Hell 1997), imperialism (Hell 2019), and fascism (Steinmetz forthcoming). The project of recovering alternative theories of geopolitical self-determination therefore sheds further light on the question of intellectual autonomy.

This article has identified a set of causal determinants operating together during a specific period (roughly 1945–1970). It would be misleading to suggest that these factors directly produced diplomatic ideas. Overlaps and disjunctures among different structural logics widened the space of possibilities for thought and action concerning alternative ways of organizing geopolitics. Analyzing agency in this way avoids sliding into empty celebrations of socially disembodied "agency" – a pervasive trope in discussions of anticolonial politics, and in politics more generally – while dislodging the pessimistic fatalism of the present (Bourdieu 1997).

References

Anghie, Antony (2005) Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aodha, Gráinne Ní and Cillian Sherlock (2025) "Israel has become 'blinded by rage' – Varadkar," https://www.breakingnews.ie/israel-hamas/leo-varadkar-says-israel-has-become-blinded-by-rage-1588287.html (accessed February 3, 2025).

Appadorai, Angadipuram (1955) "The Bandung Conference," India Quarterly 11 (3): 207–35. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2943315

Bartlett, Robert (1993) The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Beinart, William (2001). Twentieth-Century South Africa. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bell, Duncan (2007) The Idea of Greater Britain Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bhaskar, Roy (1997). A Realist Theory of Science. London: Verso.

—— (2009a) Plato Etc. London: Routledge.

—— (2009b). Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation. London: Routledge.

—— (2011) Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy. Routledge: Taylor & Francis.

Biney, Ama (2011) The Political and Social Thought of Kwame Nkrumah. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, Pierre, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron (1991) The Craft of Sociology. Epistemological Preliminaries. New York: de Gruyter.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1993) "Principles of a sociology of cultural works," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.) Explanation and Value in the Arts. New York: Cambridge University Press: 173–89.

—— (1997) "'Défataliser le monde' (Interview with Sylvain Bourmeau)," Les Inrockuptibles **99** (April): 22–9.

—— (2004) Science of Science and Reflexivity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—— (2012) Sur l'État: Cours au Collège de France, 1989–1992. Paris: Seuil.

Bozo, Frédéric (2010) "France, "Gaullism" and the Cold War," in M. Leffler and O. Westad (eds.) The Cambridge History of the Cold War, vol. **2**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 158–78.

Bradley, Mark Philip (2010) "Decolonization, the global south, and the Cold War, 1919–1962," in M. Leffler and O. Westad (eds.) The Cambridge History of the Cold War, vol. **1**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 464–85.

Brown, Megan (2022) The Seventh Member State: Algeria, France, and the European Community. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Burbank, Jane and Frederick Cooper (2023) Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Byrne, Jeffrey James (2015) "Beyond continents, colours, and the Cold War: Yugoslavia, Algeria, and the struggle for non-alignment," The International History Review **37** (5): 912–32. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24703163

—— (2016) Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carroll, Francis M. (2016) "Ireland Among the Nations of the Earth: Ireland's Foreign Relations from 1923 to 1949," Études Irlandaises **41** (1): 35–52. https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.4796

Cavoški, Jovan (2022) Non-Aligned Movement Summits: A History. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Cheatham, Andrew (2023) "The new nonaligned movement is having a moment," https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/new-nonaligned-movement-having-moment

Collins, Michael (2013) "Decolonisation and the 'Federal Moment'," Diplomacy & Statecraft **24** (1): 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2013.762881

Cooper, Frederick (1996) Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— (2014) Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—— (2018) "The politics of decolonization in French and British West Africa," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History. https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-111

Cruise O'Brien, Conor (1969) "Ireland in international affairs," In Owen Dudley Edwards (ed.) Conor Cruise O'Brien Introduces Ireland. London: Andre Deutsch: 104–34.

Dodds, Klaus, ed. (2016) The Routledge Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis.

Donovan, Keven P. (2023) "Uhuru Sasa! Federal futures and liminal sovereignty in decolonizing East Africa," Comparative Studies in Society and History **65** (2): 372–98. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417522000500

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1941) "A chronicle of race relations," Phylon **2**(3): 289–306.

Dubow, Saul (2014) Apartheid, 1948–1994. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fanning, Ronan (1982) "Irish neutrality: An historical review," in Irish Studies in International Affairs **1**: 27–38. https://www.jstor.org/stable/30001722

Foltz, William J. (1965) From French West Africa to the Mali Federation. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Framke, Maria (2014) "International events, national policy: The 1930s in India as a formative period for non-alignment," in Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tine, and Nada Boskovska (eds.) The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade. London: Routledge: 37–56.

Frayer, Lauren and Fatima Al-Khassab (2024) "Why Ireland is One of the Most Pro-Palestinian Nations in the World," https://www.npr.org/2024/03/14/1233395830/ireland-pro-palestinian. (National Public Radio) (accessed February 3, 2025).

Gaddis, John Lewis (2005) The Cold War: A New History. New York: Penguin Press.

Gebe, Boni Yao (2008) "Ghana's Foreign Policy at Independence and Implications for the 1966 coup d'état," The Journal of Pan African Studies 2 (3): 160–86.

Geiss, Imanuel (1974) The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa. New York: Africana Pub. Co.

Gerits, Frank (2015) "'When the bull elephants fight': Kwame Nkrumah, non-alignment, and pan-africanism as an interventionist ideology in the global Cold War (1957–66)," The International History Review 37 (5): 951–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2015.1064465

—— (2023) The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945–1966. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Getachew, Adom (2019) Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gleijeses, Piero (2002) Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Goetschel, Laurent (1999) "Neutrality, a really dead concept?" Cooperation and Conflict 34(2): 115–39. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45084643

Gorski, Philip S. (2009). "Social 'mechanisms' and comparative historical sociology: A critical realist proposal," in Peter Hedstrom and Born Wittrock (eds.) Frontiers of Sociology. Leiden: Brill: 147–96.

Hartwig, Mervyn (2007) Dictionary of Critical Realism. London: Routledge.

Heiniger, Sébastien (2022) Décolonisation, fédéralisme et poésie chez Léopold Sédar Senghor. Paris: Classiques Garnier.

Hell, Julia and George Steinmetz (2017) "'A period of wild and fierce fanaticism': populism, theo-political militarism, and the crisis of US hegemony," American Journal of Cultural Sociology 5 (3): 373–91. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-017-0041-y

Hell, Julia (1997) Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

—— (2019) The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Jackson, Richard L. (1983) The Non-Aligned, the UN, and the Superpowers. New York: Praeger.

Jameson, Fredric (1981) The Political Unconscious. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

—— (1992) "Nostalgia for the present," in Jane Gaines (ed.) Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 253–73.

Jansen, G. H. (1966) Nonalignment and the Afro-Asian States. New York: Praeger.

Julien, C. A. (1950) "From the French Empire to the French Union," International Affairs 26 (4): 487–502.

Kaburu, Mercy and Carolyn Logan (2022) "What do Africans Think about the Proposed East African Federation?" Washington Post Sept. 9. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/09/eac-east-african-federation/

Keenleyside, T.A. (1980) "Prelude to power: The meaning of non-alignment before Indian independence," Pacific Affairs 53 (3): 461–83. https://doi.org/10.2307/2757304

Kettler, David (1967) "Sociology of knowledge and moral philosophy. The place of traditional problems in the formation of Mannheim's thought," Political Science Quarterly 81: 399–426.

Kullaa, Rinna (2012) Non-Alignment and its Origins in Cold War Europe: Yugoslavia, Finland and the Soviet Challenge. London: IB Taurus.

Kumar, Krishan (2013) "Empires and nations: Convergence or divergence?," in George Steinmetz (ed.) Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 279–99.

Lawson, George (2018) "International relations as a historical social science," in Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Nick Onuf (eds.) The SAGE Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations. London: Sage: 75–89.

Leffler, Melvyn P. and Westad, Odd Arne, eds. (2010) The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Endings. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Louis, William Roger and Ronald Robinson (1993) "The imperialism of decolonization," Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 22: 462–511. https://doi.org/10.1080/03086539408582936

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

Lüthi, Lorenz M. (2015) "Non-alignment, 1961–74," in Sandra Bott, Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl and Marco Wyss (eds.) Neutrality and Neutralism in the Global Cold War: Between or Within the Blocs? New York: Routledge: 90–107.

Mamdani, Mahmood (2015) "The East African Federation: Challenges for the Future," Makerere Institute of Social Research, Working paper no. 20. https://misr.mak.ac.ug/sites/default/files/publications/2018/02/MisrWorkingPaperNo20-The%20East%20African%20Federation-M-Mamdani.pdf/

Mastny, Vojtech (2010) "The Soviet union's partnership with India," Journal of Cold War Studies 12 (3): 50–90. https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00006

McIntyre, W. David (1999) "The strange death of dominion status," The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 27 (2): 193–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/03086539908583064

Mair, Stefan (2023) "In defense of multipolarity," Internationale Politik Quarterly Nov. 17. https://ip-quarterly.com/en/defense-multipolarity/

Mannheim, Karl (1925) "Das Problem einer Soziologie des Wissens," Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik 53: 577–652.

—— (1929) Ideologie und Utopie. Bonn: Friedrich Cohen.

Mastny, Vojtech (2010). "The Soviet Union's Partnership with India," Journal of Cold War Studies 12 (3): 50–90. https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00006

Medushevskiy, N. A., and A. R. Shishkina (2022) "Modern French policy on the African continent: Transformations of a Françafrique model," Journal of Asian and African Studies 57 (6): 1141–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211046275

Mortimer, Robert A. (1972) "From federalism to Francophonia: Senghor's African policy," African Studies Review 15 (2): 283–306. https://doi.org/10.2307/523924

—— (1984) The Third World Coalition in International Politics. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press,

Murphy, John A. (2000) "Irish Neutrality in Historical Perspective," In Brian Girvin and Gregory Roberts (eds.) Ireland and the Second World War: Politics, Society and Remembrance. Dublin: Four Courts Press: 9–23.

Naimark, Norman M. (2021) "Yugoslavia in the Cold War: Afterword," In Martin Previšić (ed.) Breaking Down Bipolarity: Yugoslavia's Foreign Relations during the Cold War. Berlin: De Gruyter: 269–78.

Niebuhr, Robert (2018) The Search for a Cold War Legitimacy: Foreign Policy and Tito's Yugoslavia. Boston: Brill.

Niebuhr, Robert, David Pickus, and Zvonimir Stopic. 2023. "Toward Rangoon: Cold War Internationalism and the Birth of Yugoslavia's Globalism," Journal of World History 34 (4): 617–49. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2023.a912772

Nkrumah, Kwame (1963). Africa Must Unite. London: Heinemann.

Noer, Thomas J. (1985) Cold War and Black Liberation: The United States and White Rule in Africa, 1948–1968. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.

Obadende, I.M. (1922) "An African program," The Crisis 24 (1): 33.

O'Sullivan, Kevin (2012) Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War 1955–75. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Prashad, Vijay (2007) The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World. New York: New Press; W.W. Norton.

Rainio-Niemi, Johanna (2014) The Ideological Cold War: The Politics of Neutrality in Austria and Finland. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.

Rajak, Svetozar (2014) "No bargaining chips, no spheres of influence: The Yugoslav origins of cold war nonalignment," Journal of Cold War Studies 16 (1): 146–79.

Rauchensteiner, Manfried (2010) Zwischen den Blöcken: NATO, Warschauer Pakt und Österreich: Böhlau.

Rothermund, Dietmar (2014) "The era of non-alignment," in Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tine, and Nada Boskovska (eds.) The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis: 19–34.

Rubinstein, Alvin Z. (1970) Yugoslavia and the Nonaligned World. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schlichte, Klaus and Stephan Stetter (eds.) 2023. The Historicity of International Politics: Imperialism and the Presence of the Past. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schraeder, Peter J. and Nefertiti Gaye (1997) "Senegal's foreign policy: Challenges of democratization and marginalization," African Affairs **96** (385): 485–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2021.2014355

Senghor, Léopold Sédar (1954) "L'avenir de la France dans l'Outre-Mer," Politique étrangère **19** (4): 419–26.

—— (1964) Liberté, Vol. **1**. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Singh, Zorawar Daulet (2019) Power and Diplomacy: India's Foreign Policies during the Cold War. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Soekarno (1952) Lahirnja Pantjasila/The Birth of Pantjasila: An Outline of the Five Principles of the Indonesian State. 2nd ed. Jakarta: Ministry of Information.

Steinmetz, George (1998) "Critical realism and historical sociology," Comparative Studies in Society and History **40** (1): 170–86.

—— (2009) "The imperial entanglements of sociology in the United States, Britain, and France since the 19th Century. Ab Imperio **4**: 23–78.

—— (2012) "Geopolitics," in George Ritzer (ed.) The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization, Vol. **2**. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell: 800–22.

—— (2023) The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—— (2024). "Durkheim's Critique of Colonialism and Empire," Modern Intellectual History **21** (4): 874–96. https://doi.org/10.1017/S147924432400026X

—— (forthcoming). "Colonial studies and social scientific epistemology: Richard Thurnwald between 1922 and the late 1930s," Sociologus, **100**.

Szonyi, Michael and Hong Liu (2010) "Introduction. New Approaches to the Study of the Cold War in Asia," in Yangwen Zheng, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (eds.) The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds. Leiden: Brill: 1–11.

Telepneva, Natalia (2018) "Saving Ghana's revolution: The Demise of Kwame Nkrumah and the evolution of soviet policy in Africa, 1966–1972," Journal of Cold War Studies **20** (4): 4–25. https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00838

Thiam, Doudou (1965) The Foreign Policy of African States: Ideological Bases, Present Realities, and Future Prospects. London: Phenix House.

Thomas, Martin (2008) "Innocent abroad? Decolonisation and US Engagement with French West Africa, 1945–56," The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History **36** (1): 47–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530801889384

Thompson, W. S. (1969) Ghana's Foreign Policy 1957–1966: Diplomacy, Ideology and the New State. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Vitalis, Robert (2013) "The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (Bandoong)," Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development **4** (2): 261–88. https://humanityjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/4.2-The-Midnight-Ride-of-Kwame-Nkrumah-and-Other-Fables-of-Bandung-Ban-doong.pdf

Wallerstein, Immanuel (1961) Africa: The Politics of Independence. New York: Vintage.

—— (1967) Africa: The Politics of Unity. An Analysis of a Contemporary Social Movement. New York: Random House.

—— (1986) Africa and the Modern World. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

—— (2003) The Decline of American Power. New York: New Press.

Westad, Odd Arne (2005) The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— (2017). The Cold War: A World History. New York: Basic Books.

Wilder, Gary (2015) Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World. Durham: Duke University Press.

Willetts, Peter (1978) The Non-Aligned Movement: The Origins of a Third World Alliance. London: F. Pinter.

Willis, Michael (2014) Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Win, Kyaw Zaw (2010) "The 1953 Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon: Precursor to the Bandung Conference," in Derek McDougall and Antonia Finnane (eds.) Bandung 1955: Little Histories. Caulfield East, VIC: Monash University Press: 43–56.

Wyss, Marco, Jussi Hanhimäki, Sandra Bott, and Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl. 2016. "Introduction: A tightrope walk – Neutrality and neutralism in the global Cold War," in Sandra Bott, Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, and Marco Wyss (eds.) Neutrality and Neutralism in the Global Cold War: Between or Within the Blocs? New York: Routledge: 1–14.

Yaqub, Salim (2013) "The Cold War and the Middle East," in Robert J. McMahon (ed.) The Cold War in the Third World. New York: Oxford University Press: 11–26.

George Steinmetz is a professor at the University of Michigan and has held tenured positions at the University of Chicago and the New School for Social Research, as well as a Visiting Professorship at the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton UP). He has published three archivally based historical monographs: *Regulating the Social: The Welfare State and Local Politics in Imperial Germany* (Princeton UP), *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa* (Chicago UP) and *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: French Sociology and the Overseas Empire* (Princeton UP), and is currently finishing *The Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought: The British Empire* (Princeton UP). His edited volumes include *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Cornell UP), *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Others* (Duke UP), *Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline* (Duke UP), and *The Social Sciences in the Looking-Glass: Studies in the Production of Knowledge* (Duke UP).