Recensie

Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and António Costa Pinto ed., *The ends of European colonial empires: Cases and comparisons* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY; 2015; XII+288 p.) ISBN: 978-1-137-39405-7; €88,50

It is certainly not a mere coincidence that this volume, published by two Portuguese scholars specialized in the history of decolonization, bears the title *The ends of European colonial empires*, as opposed to the title of Martin Shipway's influential monograph *Decolonization and its impact: A comparative approach to the end of the colonial empires*. While the latter publication from 2008 constituted an ambitious attempt to merge the fragmented decolonization narratives into a single broad exploration of common patterns, this volume, according to its editors, should be understood as 'a plural and multilayered collective effort which […] enables the assessment of international, transnational, metropolitan, and colonial approaches' advantages and shortcomings, exploring the variegated analytical possibilities opened by their articulation'. (p. 6) Hence, this publication, featuring a diverse cast of authors from the field of colonial and decolonization history, is underpinned by a distinctive methodology emphasizing particularities rather than generalizations.

While the chapters encompass a remarkable range of topics and perspectives such as the history of developmentalism (Cooper), the catalyzing impact of decolonization myths in Britain, France, and Portugal (Bruno Cardoso Reis) or the fascinating career of the Indian UN-bureaucrat and anti-apartheid-activist Enuga Reddy (Ryan Irwin), the geographical scope of the book is mostly restricted to African colonies. Therefore, this review will approach the discussion from a different angle, linking some of the paradigms appearing in this volume to recent research on the case of Indonesian decolonization. Crawford Young's chapter 'Imperial endings and small states: Disorderly decolonization for the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal' shall serve as a starting point.

The foundation of Young's comparison is the observation that the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal shared similar imperial ideologies, in which the colonies were seen as playing a key role as projections of territorial power and as economic motors indispensable for the wealth of the homeland. However, while this conceptualization of these three small-scale nation-states desperately clinging to their colonial possessions seems plausible and offers a suitable template for the study of public discourse on decolonization in these countries and the drastic measures taken to maintain

control over their overseas territories, it misses a crucial point: The disorderly political and military attempts to sustain, or reclaim tight control over the colonies is just one of several components accounting for the tides of chaos that eventually swept over new states like Indonesia, the Congo, Angola or Mozambique. Internal disintegration and turmoil in these colonies were often a product of frictions that had evolved and intensified during colonial times and whose outbreak was facilitated by the sudden lack of a coercive political control system. Thus, Young's notion of a 'disorderly decolonization' is ambiguous since it is not at all clear what he refers to: the identity crises of the colonizers or the civil war-like consequences in the colonies? While he offers convincing arguments for the former viewpoint, stating that 'the trauma is even greater for the small state condemned to a diminished role in the world through loss of empire' (p. 122), the question whether something like an *orderly* decolonization ever existed is debatable.

As Philip Murphy points out in his chapter on the pragmatics of violence in Central Africa in the 1950s and 1960 under British rule, the 'tendency to make a distinction between violent and peaceful instances of decolonization […] has tended to obscure the extent to which the implicit threat of violence suffused the negotiations surrounding many apparently peaceful transfers of power' (p. 178). Concerning the Indonesian case, similar arguments have been made with reference to Henk Schulte Nordholt's notion of the Dutch colonial empire as a 'state of violence' influencing the Indonesian Revolution and post-decolonization society.[1] Yet, the intriguing quest for such continuities may appear, they should always be taken with a grain of salt, as they yield limited explanatory power.[2]

However, the discovery of concrete circumstantial pressures and alleged exigencies should be approached with equal caution. The Dutch historical debate on the Indonesian decolonization was for a long time clouded by constant references to situational pressures during guerrilla warfare, later paving the way for structural and then cultural approaches. Then again, situational contextualization of localized dynamics should not

[1] H. Schulte Nordholt, 'A Genealogy of Violence in Indonesia' in: F. Colombijn and T. Lindblad ed., *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective* (Leiden 2002) 33-61.

[2] See also the remarks in: R. Raben, 'Epilogue: On Genocide and Mass Violence in Colonial Indonesia' in: B. Luttikhuis and A. Dirk Moses ed., *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: The Dutch Empire in Indonesia* (Abingdon 2014) 329-347.

be discarded altogether. Cooper, whose insightful reconstruction of debates in the social sciences during the 1940s and 1950s form an important chapter in this volume, argues in *Colonialism in Question* that situational perspectives of historical inquiry have their time and place as components of a refined analytical framework.[3] The case of Dutch historiography offers a prime example of how paradigm switches in research and public discourse can profoundly affect the perception of a period if a single paradigm is used in lieu of others. As current historiography on colonialism and its aftermath keeps adding new facets to a growing 'bigger picture,' paradigmatic pluralism becomes an indispensable prerequisite for truly polycentric historical research. Therefore, *The ends of European colonial empires* serves as yet another reminder to acknowledge the multifocal nature of decolonization extending far beyond a bilateral relationship between colonizers and colonized. While the unfolding Cold War constellation is still often referred to as the emergence of a bipolar world order, its entanglement with decolonization processes all over the world shows the multipolar reality of these times with great clarity. However, this book does not only raise historians' awareness of potential historiographical pitfalls stemming from the use of binary perspectives, but makes suggestions as to how current research can be connected in fruitful ways.

For precisely that reason this edited volume is an invaluable contribution to the field of decolonization studies. The editors' choice of favoring synopsis over juxtaposition or argumentative streamlining may at first glance appear daunting because it reveals that, from a comparative perspective, every tiny patch of analytical common ground is contested. However, this realization has at the same time a potential for encouragement since it reveals that comparative research on a topic as entangled and multi-faceted as decolonization benefits our knowledge of every individual case. This excellent volume proves that the decolonization histories of countries like the Netherlands or Portugal, both still inadequately connected to the bigger picture of decolonization as a stepping stone to an increasingly multipolar world order, can potentially be integrated into a more ambitious narrative.

Yannick Lengkeek

[3] See F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA 2005) 35.