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Reimagining Decolonisation Today: A Review of Neither Settler nor Native

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In his 2001 book on the Rwandan genocide, *When Victims Become Killers*, Mahmood Mamdani asks, 'What can the study of Africa teach us about late modern life?'(Mamdani 2002: xv). This question, as Ibrahim Abdullah has recently reminded us in his review of Mamdani's latest book *Neither Settler Nor Native*, emerged in the context of Mamdani's nearly five-decade-long examination of the practices and consequences of African state formation, which began with his 1973 work, *From Citizen to Refugee.* Abdullah argues that this early autobiographical account of Idi Amin's regime in Uganda spurred the trilogy of *Citizenship and Subject, When Victims Become Killers* and *Saviors and Survivors,* which reconstructed the framework of late colonial rule in Africa and examined its legacies for postcolonial citizenship, attending in particular to the recurring problem of political violence. In these works, Mamdani pioneered a method of studying African politics that maintained a concern with historical specificity yet viewed the continent as a site of generating political theory. Mamdani described this critical standpoint in *Citizen and Subject* as one that refuses the choice of 'abstract universalism and intimate particularism' (Mamdani 1996:11). This is a position that refuses to view Africa through an exceptionalising gaze while approaching the crises of postcolonial citizenship on the continent as sites of wider, perhaps even universal, significance.

Neither Settler nor Native offers two answers to the question of what Africa teaches us about late modern life. First, the analysis of colonial and postcolonial African state formation that Mamdani has developed in his works, ranging from *Citizen and Subject* to *Define and Rule*, is transformed through a lens that reveals the working of colonial modernity more generally. That is, the politicisation of racial and ethnic identity, which was central to the experience of colonial statecraft in Africa, is now conceived as part and parcel of the formation of the modern nation-state. This process, Mamdani argues, began with the onset of European colonial expansion in 1492. By examining state formation and political violence in the United States, Germany, South Africa, Israel and Africa's newest state, South Sudan, Mamdani argues that the modern nation-state has everywhere involved the construction and reification of political identities. Moving from the exploration of the African state to this global canvas, Mamdani shows us how the theoretical frameworks he developed in his study of late colonial rule and the postcolonial state in Africa provide a new window into the character of the nation-state as such. The persistence of politicised identity so central to postcolonial Africa is not aberrational or incidental, but instead can be seen as a recurring pattern of state formation.

Mamdani is alert to the divergent instantiations of these patterns in the examples he covers. And I will soon turn to how one of these divergences becomes an opportunity for him to offer the second lesson of late modern life from the African experience. For now, I want to dwell on Mamdani's global extension of his thinking on citizenship and political identity as an example of how Africa can be positioned as a site of generating 'analytical universals' that speak to the global conditions of political modernity. Analytical universalism, which seeks to uncover recurring political logics, can be distinguished from the 'abstract universalism' that Mamdani rejects.[1] The latter posits an ideal norm of political institutions and practices that serves as a barometer for existing practices. In *Neither Settler nor Native*, Mamdani dismisses the idealised picture of the

nation-state, in which it is the product of an internal social contract and governed above all by an ethic of tolerance. His central interventions, that the nation-state is a colonial project and that it requires the manufacture of permanent majorities and minorities, identify general political dynamics of state formation. When viewed against the idealised picture of the nation-state, the African postcolonial state is exceptional or pathological. However, Mamdani shows that its historical trajectory is in fact the universal experience of the nation-state.

In Mamdani's work, Africa not only offers leverage for analysis of late modern life, but it can also be the grounds of building an alternative normative model to address the impasses of political modernity. Here, the example of the struggle against apartheid is especially significant. For Mamdani, the crucial turning point arrived in South Africa in the 1970s when student- and worker-led mobilisations abandoned race-based resistance to forge cross-racial alliances that would become the basis of a deracialised vision of political membership. He emphasises here the process of coalition-building that helped to generate a wide political base internal to the country. The formation of this internal political coalition, he argues, was more important than the exiled ANC and international solidarity in the pivotal period of the last decades of apartheid. The recent general strike in Palestine, in which Palestinians on both sides of the green line participated, suggests the beginning of a similar stage in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

South Africa's transition period also provides a second normative lesson, concerned with how a society can reckon with political violence. Mamdani contrasts South Africa's framework of political justice with the criminal model of Nuremberg. The criminal model depoliticised Nazism, rendering its violence the responsibility of individual actors while ignoring the wider structures and political roots that had enabled its rise. Absent from this focus on individual perpetrators was attention to the economic elites (from German industrialists to foreign corporations), the intellectual classes and others who had supported Nazism and benefited from the regime. Despite the limits of the criminal framework, it has become a model of transitional justice in the post-Cold War moment, especially in postcolonial contexts. It has also been elevated to the wider stage of international justice through the International Criminal Court. The story of South Africa's transition is sometimes folded into this framework of transitional justice. Its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been replicated in other contexts of genocide, civil war and transitional justice. Despite the global celebration of the TRC, however, Mamdani de-emphasises it and centres, instead, the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). CODESA, he argues, sought not punishment but reform. It was not the victor's justice, but a negotiated settlement that created a new political system in which apartheid's victims and critics as well as its supporters and beneficiaries were included as citizens.

At the various public discussions of *Neither Settler nor Native* since its publication late last year, the limits of the South African process of democratisation, particularly the ongoing demands for overcoming apartheid's economic hierarchies, have been raised. It is not that Mamdani thinks that the emergence of a multiracial and democratic South Africa has addressed the social and economic elements of the apartheid state. He argues instead that in the context of the negotiated process, the balance of forces between the anti-apartheid coalition on the one hand and the apartheid state and its supporters on the other hand did not allow for a more thoroughgoing challenge to the apartheid economy. He also suggests that by remaking the political community through a deracialised citizenship the negotiated settlement that ended apartheid created new terrain for demands for social and economic justice. Mamdani's disaggregation of political and economic justice in *Neither Settler nor Native* speaks to his longstanding concern to correct what he perceived as an overemphasis on political economy in the first generation of African Studies scholars after formal decolonisation. As he argued in *When Victims become Killers,* political identity has a distinct logic, which is neither reducible to nor exchangeable with market-based identities. The achievement of the anti-apartheid struggle, on this view, was its successful deracialisation of political identity, such that equal citizenship could be realised by all South Africans.

Mamdani's efforts to draw out alternatives and possibilities from the history of political struggle in South Africa speaks to a commitment to a historically grounded political theory. As he notes in the introduction, historical narrative and normative ideals are entangled moments in the book. The normative is excavated from history; that is, normative horizons are immanent to Mamdani's analysis. They do not form an ideal theory that stands apart from political practices. Instead, they are disclosed in the modes of political contestation that are generated within and against its frameworks. The up-

shot of this mode of theorising is that it not only locates alternative trajectories within each historical context, but also points to the contingent political processes of coalition-building and the distribution of power within a political field, which are central to realising any political vision.

The connection between the narrative and the normative informs Mamdani's vision of political decolonisation. In the remaining space of this review, I would like to pose three questions about political decolonisation as both a narrative and normative project. Political decolonisation, Mamdani writes, is a two-sided process: externally, the assertion of independence from foreign rule, and internally, 'the reimagination and redefinition of the political community'. In Mamdani's account, 'epistemological revolution is closely tied to internal political revolution—not throwing off outside rule but excising the ideology of political modernity internalised under colonialism' (2020: 34). I was struck by this pairing of epistemological and political decolonisation because critiques of 'epistemic injustice' and 'epistemic colonisation' as well as demands to 'decolonise knowledge' are recurring features of the contemporary political landscape, leading with South Africa, where #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall have made the university a central site of contemporary decolonisation.

How should we think about Mamdani's call for 'epistemological revolution' in this wider context? Its explicit linkage to the reconstruction of political community seems to me to be a significant difference, and one that perhaps ties Mamdani's vision to earlier moments of anticolonial thought, like Fanon's, which viewed epistemic decolonisation as a necessary part of their political project. One of Fanon's central critiques of nationalist parties was that their mimicry of European political institutions and practices failed to take seriously the specific social and political contexts of the colony, including especially the rural/urban divide. His famous call for stretching Marxist analysis appeared in the context of this critique as a call for developing social analyses and strategies of political mobilisation that would be adequate to the historical and political trajectories of the colonised world. Mamdani offers another possible example of epistemic revolution in *Define and Rule.* There he highlights the work of Nigerian historian, Yusuf Bala Usman, whose pioneering scholarship on precolonial Nigeria destabilises ethnic categories, highlighting alternative ways of imagining ethnic and religious pluralism. While Fanon emphasises the generation of new analysis and concepts from the experience of the colonial/postcolonial world, Usman's contribution suggests a historical reconstruction that challenges what appear now to be stable, almost natural, configurations of ethnic politics. Where does the contemporary struggle for an 'epistemic revolution' overlap with and depart from these earlier examples? And what lessons, if any, might we learn from these efforts?

Mamdani models the epistemic revolution he calls for by locating the birth of the modern nation-state in 1492, rather than following the standard narrative in which the 1648 Peace of Westphalia is the originary moment of the modern state system. The implications of this reorientation are significant. Where 1492 points us to the birth of the state in conquest and genocide, 1648 points to a rosy dawn of toleration and state self-limitation. Where 1492 makes the extra-European world central to the story of the rise of the nation-state, 1648 is an entirely intra-European affair. Yet even as we take up this long imperial history of the nation-state, how do we think through important transformations of the nation-state, particularly the rise and universalisation of popular sovereignty and democracy in the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries? Far from separate political forms, the democratic state and the nation-state were mutually entangled in this period. The numerical principle central to the democratic imaginary has contributed to enshrining majoritarianism as the only morally and politically legitimate form of rule.[2] Mamdani distinguishes between permanent majorities and political majorities, which are shifting democratic coalitions. 'From a democratic point of view,' Mamdani writes, 'majorities and minorities cannot precede the democratic process; rather, they must be its outcome' (Mamdani 2020: 339). Yet, in practice, democratic majorities and ascriptive permanent majorities are difficult to disentangle. Are there structures internal to democratic practices—electoral competition, partisan mobilisation, for example—that have entrenched the politicisation of identity? And if democratic practices have contributed to the calcification of permanent majorities and minorities, how might we rethink democratic politics in the present?

Finally, I would like to turn to the call to decouple the nation from the state, which is part of Mamdani's vision of political decolonisation. This 'relationship between state and nation', Mamdani argues, 'produces a vicious cycle whereby the nation imagines that state as its protector and aggrandizer, the state fulfills the role, and the nation's investment in the state's bestowals of privilege

only intensifies' (2020: 334). In addition to decoupling nation from the state, I wonder if this argument also points to the need to diminish and fragment the power of the state such that it cannot monopolise the role of protector and aggrandiser. Capture of state institutions becomes so central to political communities because it appears as the only way to protect rights and privileges. If these powers and capacities were not centralised in the state, would this help to limit competition and conflict over control of the state? Would a decentralised and confederal structure work to undo the pathologies of the nation-state? To be sure, federal structures that maintain the politicisation of tribal and ethnic identity would not move us far in this direction. For in these cases, the coupling of nation and state is only replicated and reproduced internally by tribe and ethnicity. This is one of the central lessons Mamdani draws from the experience of South Sudan. But might there be forms of fragmenting state power such that political power is distributed in overlapping and plural institutions that help to disperse and mitigate escalating conflicts tied to state capture? If the nation is decoupled from the state, might the state, with its claim of omnipotence, its vision of unitary sovereignty, also have to be radically reimagined?

These questions are informed by a concern that Mamdani had already highlighted in *Citizen and Subject.* There he argued that while conservative regimes of postcolonial Africa maintained the 'decentralized despotism' of indirect rule, radical regimes generated a 'centralized despotism', overcoming the bifurcations of tribe, but reinforcing the Leviathan-like power of the state. Across various postcolonial contexts in Africa, and elsewhere, this has generated authoritarian and assimilationist states that have repressed a recognition of pluralism, local autonomy and self-determination. The challenges of religious, ethnic and national pluralism calls for a reconsideration of the state side of the nation-state model as much as it does the decoupling of nation from state. The decentralisation of political power, in addition to its democratisation, might well be a necessary correlate to overcoming the colonial legacies of the state.[3]

Notes

1. For an account of this idea of analytical universalism, see Getachew and Mantena, forthcoming 2021.
2. On the number principle and democratic politics, see Scott 1999: 158–189.
3. A critique of centralised state pow.er and even forms of anti-statism played an important, albeit largely ignored, role in 20th-century traditions of anticolonialism (see Fejzula, 2020: 1–24). In a consideration of the Middle East, where for a century the redrawing of nation-state boundaries has served as an antidote to pluralism, Asli Bâli has recently argued that reforms predicated on decentralisation and devolution are likely to be less violent and might provide better grounds for democratisation (Bâli 2020: 405–460; Bâli and Dajani, forthcoming).

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