The Ends of European Colonial Empires

Cases and Comparisons

Edited by

Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo
Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal

and

António Costa Pinto
Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal

Contents

Acknowledgements

5
Myths of Decolonization: Britain, France, and Portugal Compared

Bruno Cardoso Reis

This chapter considers the construction of the notion of decolonization in the context of national political cultures. It seeks to explore the question: What was the role of cultural prejudices and preferences in the end of the three biggest European colonial empires in Africa? Answers will be provided by tracing the impact of some explicit and recurrent cultural prejudices at the level of senior decision makers and officials in comparing British, French, and Portuguese decolonization.

It is not possible to show unequivocally here the decisive role of political culture in decolonization. My aim is simply to present arguments and evidence from some relevant sources that it did play an important role in both setting the pace and helping define the shape of decolonization.

Why decolonization myths matter

Decolonization is understood in this text as primarily the formal end of colonial empires through 'the surrender of political sovereignty over the peoples of Africa and Asia and the emergence of independent nation-states'.[1] The end of formal empires as proud political and cultural constructs is one of the cornerstones of contemporary international politics resulting in around 200 states recognized by the United Nations (UN). Yet there was no complete military collapse of these colonial powers comparable to other cases of imperial demise (Ancient Rome, Tsarist Russia). The Second World War seriously weakened Western colonial empires in some parts of Asia, but this was not true in sub-Saharan Africa. Colonial powers in Africa still had some choice, some ability to resist and shape decolonization according to core preferences and

prejudices. This is where I believe that taking political culture seriously is indispensable.

Myth is defined for the purposes of my analysis as a widely shared 'traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief'. A 'popular belief or tradition [...] *especially*: one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society'. This is Barthe's definition in his seminal book *Mythologies* that significantly provides as an example of the importance of myths in late modernity a cover of *Paris-Match* with a young black soldier saluting the French flag. He interprets this as an affirmation of the myth of France as a 'great empire' in which 'all' 'without colour discrimination' 'served her faithfully'.[2] The importance of myths of empire has also been explored in the field of international relations but with a focus on imperial expansion.[3] Surely it is equally worth exploring the myths of the end of empire, the myths of decolonization.

There has been some reference to potential myths of decolonization in key works on British or Portuguese decolonization. For instance, John Darwin made a strong case against romantic delusions of a well-planned British decolonization. The imperial legacy was artfully repackaged as the great work of nation building, but this could not disguise the growing fragility of British global power leading to frequent crises and unexpected accelerations of decolonization.[4] Norrie Macqueen has argued that the notion of the Portuguese coup of April 1974 organized by the Armed Forces Movement (Movimento das Forças Armadas, MFA) as a fourth liberation movement aimed at decolonization was a convenient façade covering the loss of colonies by the military by turning them into liberators overseas as well as at home.[5]

But while these mythical narratives may not be good guides for objective analysis, they are important social constructions with real impact, and require careful study. A book that illustrates the importance of this process of cultural construction is the pioneering work on the French 'invention of decolonization' by Todd Shepard; another is a recent collective volume on the 'French colonial mind'.[6]

The last Portuguese (overseas) territories co-ordination minister argues that it took more than a decade of wars in Africa for 'the greater power of realities over convictions' regarding overseas Portuguese territories to prevail, leading to decolonization.[7] This is surely a powerful indication that it is both wrong to ignore the real, potentially even deadly, power of political culture, and to argue its influence has no limits.

Approach and research questions

D. K. Fieldhouse is right in pointing out that 'the history of imperialism is distinct from that of particular imperial possessions'.[8] Even if we were to concur with Ronald Robinson that 'British and French imperialism are as different as chalk from cheese', we would still need comparative studies to better understand how and why.[9] The addition of a third case – Portugal – offers the added value of making it more difficult to argue in terms of simplistic dichotomies. These are also the three largest colonial empires in Africa, even if Portugal is often quickly dismissed as a marginal oddity. And while the comparative analysis of the history of decolonization has been present for some time, it is still indispensable to fully comprehend such an international phenomenon as decolonization.[10]

The second main element of my analytical approach is a focus on culture, in particular political and strategic culture. But is this not too fuzzy and undetermined to be of use in rigorous analysis? This has been debated in depth in the field of international relations, with advocates of a culturalist approach to international politics arguing convincingly that norms condition what is deemed acceptable in a given community/organization and often have a demonstrable impact in terms of perceptions, discourse, and behaviour.[11] The so-called constructivist school has emerged around the importance of culture understood as norms, that is collective expectations about proper behaviour for a given identity. Even if it accepts that 'the presence of norms does not dictate compliance. Any new or emergent norm must compete with existing, perhaps countervailing, ones'.[12] The notions of Greater France or Portugal are prime examples of a social definition of identity seriously constraining what is deemed do-able and acceptable in terms of political culture. The triumph of the new international norm of decolonization therefore required the difficult task of reconstructing national identity.

The key questions derived from this approach are: In what way have cultural preferences affected decisions on decolonization? Was this seen as a menace to the basic identity, the constitutional norms of a certain polity? How was this overcome or accommodated?

Britain: from liberal colonial power to centre of the Commonwealth?

Pragmatism is often emphasized as the cornerstone of Britain's approach to decolonization. Based on a massive collection of documentation,

Ronald Hyam concludes that from the Second World War on, 'pragmatic tactics operated over a broad spectrum of colonial problems'. John Darwin argues that 'British governments, or certainly their advisors in the Foreign Office, prided themselves on their pragmatism'.[13] This might seem as incompatible with the importance of cultural factors. In fact we see this proud pragmatism as an affirmation of a strong cultural preference. Furthermore, even if taken at face value and as an unproblematic affirmation of a preference for a more instrumental approach to reality, it does not automatically guarantee success in achieving an unbiased, coldly realistic vision of the actors and actions about which to be pragmatic. For instance, it does not guarantee an unprejudiced attitude towards colonized peoples, their elites and their ability for self-rule. Nor does it automatically dictate any less of a wish for (pragmatically) insisting on as much (pragmatic) metropolitan imperial control throughout the process as possible. It did not preclude British elites from showing some political blindness in an initial absolute refusal of decolonization, because of the alleged (pragmatic) strategic necessity for bases in the Suez, Cyprus, Aden or even Kenya and Rhodesia with its white settlers.[14] Pragmatism is, in other words, less linear than it might seem, but it was certainly a strong preference in British political culture and one that did have some impact.

The most obvious evidence of this British pragmatism came with the official reviews of costs and benefits of overseas territories. These reflected an attitude after the Second World War of cutting adrift from dependencies that were net losers, like Burma and Palestine, while keeping those 'possessions which remained bankable assets'.[15] Malaya was the paradigmatic example of a dollar-earner exporter of commodities essential for the sterling area that should – pragmatically – be kept under colonial control as long as possible and carefully entrusted to friendly elites.

The most cited – and one of the most systematic – of these reviews was ordered by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1957. Perhaps less obviously important for decolonization, but arguably even more decisive, were the strategic defence reviews under Conservative defence secretary Duncan Sandys, also in 1957, and Labour defence secretary Denis Healey in 1965. The interesting point is that these wider reviews of colonial costs and benefits were relatively inconclusive – another illustration that pragmatism does not necessarily provide unequivocal answers for complex political questions. But the defence reviews were very conclusive regarding the colonial policy implications of deep defence cuts. The defence White Paper of 1957 states: 'It is [...] in the true interest of

defence that the claims of military expenditure should be considered in conjunction with the need to maintain the country's financial and economic strength'.[16] One key implication of these defence reviews was that there should be no major overseas counter-insurgency campaigns in the future.[17] The decisions to get out even more quickly of central and eastern Africa, after the Nyasaland Emergency of 1959, or not to engage more in the campaign in South Arabia (Aden) and eventually to withdraw from all British bases east of the Suez were the logical conclusion of this. As Healey made clear when discussing the implications of the 1965 defence cuts: 'there were two military tasks that we could not undertake in the future', one of those being 'large-scale long-term counterinsurgency operations'.[18] The British approach to decolonization therefore changed from being (in the late-1940s and early-1950s) one of pragmatically balancing between places to stay and fight and places to leave, to one (from the end of the 1950s) in which the need to avoid any more conflicts to stop or slow decolonization became increasingly paramount.

Two further points should be underlined. The first is that even if not always offering an obvious answer, this pragmatic attitude was not seen as anti-patriotic anathema as was the case for a long time in discussions of French and Portuguese decolonization. The reactions to the arguments of the leading French public intellectual Raymond Aron are paradigmatic, with him being widely attacked, including by senior political figures, for selling the national honour and ignoring the moral duty of France when he argued precisely for a policy review of French engagement in Algeria and Africa in light of 'economic pragmatism'.[19]

The second is that pragmatism does not eliminate culture. Not only can it be seen as in itself an expression of a cultural preference, but it cannot work independently from perceptions of reality that are often biased by cultural prejudices. This is best illustrated by the fact that this British pragmatism was comforted by what proved to be a largely illusory myth of decolonization; that pro-British, or at least pragmatic, moderate forces would prevail in former colonies, and that as independent countries they would consequently continue to turn to Britain for experienced guidance.[20]

The central importance in British decolonization policy of a Whig narrative of deliberate gradual development of the dependent territories into self-governing dominions and then independent members of the Commonwealth is clear from the start. Creech Jones – the colonial secretary in the post-1945 Labour Government that initiated the process of decolonization – stated unequivocally in a widely distributed

report that 'the central purpose of British colonial policy is simple. It is to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth'. This vision may well be criticized as self-serving, paternalistic; representative of a grand plan that was never really implemented. Though to be fair, in the same document it is pragmatically recognized that 'though the policy is clear enough, the problems to be overcome in carrying it out are numerous and complex'.[21] Yet regardless of these problems, the central British myth of decolonization was still relevant.

A 1946 guideline for propaganda signed by Herbert Morrison for the Central Office of Information and the British Council global network stated that 'Britain is the centre of a world-wide association of free peoples', the British Commonwealth makes it a 'world power' with the credibility and the will to approach the various 'problems presented by the administration of backward tropical territories which comprised the greater part of the colonial empire' in terms that were 'both liberal and dynamic'.[22] Naturally, in a significant sign of the importance of historical change in cultural sensibility, today the notion of backward tropical territories would not be seen as liberal or pragmatic, but rather as strongly prejudiced. This gives evidence of a crucial point I wish to underline here: even during decolonization, and because of cultural prejudices shaping it, there was no notion of real as opposed to formal equality between colonizers and colonized.

The myth of British decolonization presents an ideal image of the latter as: first, the continuation of the glorious history of gradual constitutional development of the British peoples; second, the affirmation of the liberal character of British colonialism, the appropriate kind for a political community that identified deeply with liberalism as well as with pragmatism; third, not a rebuttal but a culmination of the civilizing mission of the British among primitive natives; and fourth, not undermining but enhancing its global great power status. This may not be very helpful as a guide to the concrete difficulties of setting actual policy in all its details, but it is certainly very revealing about the kind of mainstream cultural preferences according to which senior British officials and decision makers perceived and tried to shape decolonization.

The fact that two major aspects of British identity could be used to facilitate the acceptance of decolonization's appropriateness certainly made it easier. One was its linkage with a long liberal heritage. The other was the composite nature of the British polity uniting in shared allegiance to the Crown varied and varying institutional entities, starting with the United Kingdom itself and extending to the dominions. David

Cannadine's approach to empire as a historical construct closely linked to British national identity is particularly fruitful, especially his insight into the impact of decolonization as happening not just overseas but also in Britain. This chapter hopes to contribute to the effort to grapple with that process of reconstruction of the British identity during decolonization by comparing it with other cases.[23]

The acceptance of decolonization was also made easier by a great degree of cultural commonality between the UK and the US – enthusiastically 'discovered' by British elites after 1945. This tended to make British elites slightly more comfortable with a pressure for decolonization coming from the US. The reverse was true in the case of France and Portugal, which had very strong reservations about a process seen as the result of self-serving Anglo-Saxon powers sticking together bound by a common culture.[24]

France: from republican empire to *francophonie*?

There is a strong preference in mainstream French culture for rationality understood in terms of a uniformity of approach commonly referred to as Cartesianism. This has visible effects from the orthogonal landscape design of public parks to the way diplomatic negotiations are conducted with what is often perceived by others as rigidness and arrogance.[25] De Gaulle, the dominant political figure in French politics during the most crucial stage of decolonization, is often perceived abroad as an example of this. Yet he was himself aware of this as a potential problem, at least in others, complaining about the French mind 'age-old allurements of the a priori, the absolute and the dogmatic'.[26]

Girardet in his seminal study of French colonial ideology describes well the impact of this trend in the 'ever present centralizing and unitary mentality' that made any significant devolution within the so-called French Union, created after 1946, very difficult to accept in principle and implement in practice.[27] This French determination to impose a similar Cartesian approach to its relations to its overseas territories did not exclude change. But it did shape a particular kind of change; for instance, the response to the new challenge posed by the independence of Guinea Conakry in 1958. Change should logically be led by Paris, should ensure by a formal treaty and informal networks a strong linkage with and publicly expressed gratitude to France, and result in a similar status for all large French territories in continental Africa.

But how could the French be so rational and apparently – with hindsight and taking decolonization as a given – pursue such an irrational policy? Arguably, this was the case especially of French Algeria, formally

a (special) part of the metropole itself. This made any attempt at rational cost/benefit analysis very difficult to accept as appropriate. The repeated violent reactions – from military *pronunciamentos* to assassination attempts – against decolonization of Algeria, targeting first the Fourth Republic and then President de Gaulle, throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, prove the real importance of this kind of cultural taboo for policymakers who want to survive, literally, not just politically. It was no accident that Aron referred to the heroism of letting-go (*l'héroisme de l'abandon*) being required to pursue decolonization, particularly of Algeria, in the context of French political culture of this period.[28]

The strong mainstream consensus in France – from the Left to the Right, with the exception of the Communist Party and some left-wing Catholics, but only after 1956 – concerning the need to honour the constitutional norm that France extended from Dunkirk to Tamanrasset did not result, however, in a strong French government during this crucial period. The emphasis on a unitary republic can therefore be seen as reflecting a long-term cultural preference for centralization, but also a form of over-compensation for the very real fragmentation in French politics. Not only was the French party system very fragmented, but basic constitutional norms of the Fourth Republic – dating from 1946 – were not supported by two of its strongest parties: the Communists and the Gaullists. The idea of the 'weakness of the [political] institutions', in fact, gained increasing popularity as an explanation for the ills of France. This made the governing elite all the more anxious to rally support around the flag by appealing to the ideal of republican imperialism.[29]

Regardless of or despite calculations, the degree to which political leaders or intellectuals were also permeable to the power of these cultural norms that were closely linked with the social construction of national identity should not be underestimated. The very influential editor of *Nouvel Observateur*, Jean Daniel, states that in the mid-1950s all the political elite, but also all the intellectual elite, saw Algeria as 'irreversibly French' regardless of the criticism they might have of its mismanagement. And he went further by saying that 'it is difficult to make people understand' nowadays that 'French Algeria' was then 'something so natural' that it was 'audacious to discuss and blasphemous to question'.[30] This was demonstrated through the massive parliamentary majority that voted for the granting of special powers to the government in 1956 to deal with the Algerian insurgency.[31] These are clear markers of strong mainstream cultural norms – requiring unquestioning acceptance of certain assumptions, certain taboos that are then difficult

to understand for people in other contexts. This is also evidence of how they could become major obstacles to decolonization. The Algerian War (1954–62) can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how 'war is an extension of culture, as well as politics'.[32]

The relation with the rest of overseas France was not as legally pre-determined as with the so-called Algerian departments. But the great ideals of the French republic were still seen as the best chance for the liberation of the native population by better integration into a great fraternal French Union, the core myth that made this republican empire fit with French self-perception. These more idealistic assumptions were reinforced by the strong conviction that the greatness of France depended on Greater France overseas, and so did its security. The very recent trauma of the German occupation during the Second World War, and the role of the colonies and the colonial Army in reviving French fortunes by rallying to the Free France of de Gaulle, only reinforced this. In a speech in 1944 in Brazzaville, de Gaulle had promised progress for the colonies. But after 1945, he emphasized, and his followers devoutly echoed, the notion that for France 'to lose the French Union would be a downgrade in status that might cost us our independence. To keep it, to give it vigour, is to remain great and consequently free'.[33] It took the cumulative erosion caused by the successive wars of decolonization in Indochina (1946–54) and Algeria (1954–62), and growing international isolation, to eventually force de Gaulle and a majority of Frenchmen to do some painful rethinking.

In the meantime, however, decolonization had been made more difficult because the war in Algeria gave an increasingly strong role to the French Army, which traditionally saw itself as the guardian of empire. This allowed the military to add its own veto to that of multiple political actors, blocking any major change and creating even more of an impasse.[34] The return of de Gaulle to power was the ultimate proof of this, being the direct result of the military *pronunciamento* of 13 May 1958 – even if the end result would be the exact opposite of the wishes of those colonial officers who promoted it. The French Empire 'offered a field of glory for the fighting services [...] it is this part played by the French army in Africa [...] which explains the attitude of certain "colonels" of the present time, and their implacable hostility to the prospect of "decolonization"'.[35] For colonial officers, the survival of their corporate identity, the meaning of their life of service overseas, was at stake.

One of the most influential of these colonial officers, Colonel Trinquier, chose for his memoirs the title *Le Temps Perdu* – his life defending Greater France had been wasted. He had, after all, been a

major actor in developing French counter-insurgency in Indochina and Algeria, had advocated the use of brutal interrogation – torture – to defeat the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) network in Algeria. He had been a major player behind the May 1958 *pronunciamento* that led to the fall of the Fourth Republic, a fact duly acknowledged by Trinquier's appointment as the third-highest ranking figure in the Algiers committee of public safety. This provides context for a revealing *tête-à-tête* with de Gaulle. The new French president made a point of visiting the remote sector to which Trinquier had been transferred after all officers had been ordered out of politics. De Gaulle told Trinquier: 'You people must not press me!' Trinquier replied that, surely, he 'did not reproach the army for its passion for Algeria'. De Gaulle curtly replied: 'Every passion has its limits!'[36] This is revealing of the kind of high emotional attachment to goals that are highly valued culturally.

Reason and therefore decolonization had to prevail over strongly entrenched cultural preferences. To do this de Gaulle would need to legitimise his Fifth Republic centred on a 'Clausewitzian presidency' with total control over all key strategic decisions.[37]

General de Gaulle may have been emotionally torn between the present rational need to turn the page on the glorious past of the French Empire, but he was also uniquely equipped with charisma and cultural sensibility to make this as acceptable as possible in the context of French political culture. What de Gaulle believed was required was a reconstruction of French national identity and a reframing of its links with former colonies, but also the reconstruction of the French Republic so as to make the state stronger, to overcome the difficult problems not only of imposing decolonization but also of rebuilding post-colonial French status in the world.

De Gaulle decided upon the strategic necessity of abandoning Algeria, not because of a sudden conversion to the goodness of emancipation, or the equality of the colonized. In fact he described the task of decolonization as a 'cruel trial', but it was necessary to 'disengage from the costs, no longer countered by benefits, of our empire'.[38] There was also a wider global normative calculation in his choice, as he put it to a close confidant, to recover French prestige 'we cannot have the entire world against us'.[39] This only shows that de Gaulle's cultural preferences and assumptions, and his difficulty in overcoming them, were not fundamentally different from those of his adversaries.

President de Gaulle also moved towards decolonization, however, because in his understanding of French identity it would be absurd to

try to retain sovereignty by integrating fully all Algerians as citizens of France, as required after the collapse of the international legitimacy of the standard of civilization that had solved the contradictions of having a republican empire. It would simply be unimaginable, in his strongly culturalist, if not racialist, vision of France, to eventually have an 'Arab in the Elysée' as French president.[40]

Another key concern for de Gaulle was to avoid any impression of a new traumatic and humiliating defeat, to be able to say: 'there will be no Dien Bien Phu. The army will withdraw victorious' from Algeria.[41] As for decolonization more broadly, he explicitly stated that it was essential to grant independence voluntarily not 'by a defeat inflicted by the colonized on the colonizers'.[42] The success of the Challe Plan In Algeria and the defeat of an uprising in the Cameroons provided him with that in 1959–60. De Gaulle also needed a political victory. He turned the October 1958 referendum into a choice for him, for the new constitution of the Fifth Republic, but also in the overseas territories into a choice for France. Vote 'Yes for France' as his propaganda posters put it. His victory meant he could present his decision for decolonization in 1959–60 as not being imposed by Algerians or other Africans, but as wisely given by France, despite the continued political allegiance of the population of their overseas territories. Even if this has a strong dimension of myth – because it is unclear how representative the vote was or how long this would last – it still performed an important symbolic role. It was indeed especially important for the acceptance of decolonization in terms of French political culture for de Gaulle to be able to plausibly argue, as he did, that France was 'leading the people of overseas France into self-rule and at the same time building between them and us close co-operation'. The French manifest destiny as a universal civilizing power would not be lost, because 'the progress, the friendship, the attitudes, the interests' that had resulted from French 'vocation of influence and expansion would make them privileged partners' of France.[43]

Once the decision by de Gaulle was made to accelerate towards decolonization it was naturally carried out according to a Cartesian logic. If a few wanted to go – namely in 1959, the leaders of Madagascar and Mali – then all had to go. This imposition of a French approach is best illustrated by the fact that the presidents of the Ivory Coast and Gabon had to be more or less pressed into independence, even if most pro-French African leaders were showing a growing desire for a more prestigious international status. The norm of union with France without independence could be logically replaced by a new norm of close co-operation with independence for all major French territories in the African continent.[44]

This turned out to be not just culturally adequate, but also really significant with the emergence of a French sphere of influence in most of its African colonies, with formal summits of *francophonie* and frequent state visits being complemented by close support for African ruling elites by French intelligence and military force if need be.[45] For all the weaknesses and normative criticism that can be made of this neo-colonial French way of decolonization, for all the bad press it has had in English, the fact remains that France was the most successful case of the three in obtaining, at least for a while, the stated aims of this *Gaulliste* decolonization. Not bad for a Gaullist France so often accused of delusions of grandeur, and powerful evidence that to see culture and power, myth and reality as fundamentally opposite is simply wrong.[46]

The decolonization of French sub-Saharan Africa was made to conform to French political culture. A French preference for Cartesian uniformity led to a rapid uniform granting of independence to all the major French colonies in continental Africa.

This created some difficulties for Britain, which suddenly could no longer keep on planning for a more conditioned and slower decolonization in certain areas of central and eastern Africa and claim that it was the great liberal colonial power. Not when even France, soon to be followed by Belgium – that had long provided a useful contrast for British diplomats – was granting it all and granting it fast. Whitehall still claimed it was not going to be pressed; in fact it suddenly had to accelerate its pace if it wanted to keep its myth of decolonization alive and avoid alienating African elites. Portugal would, of course, be in even greater difficulties.

Most crucial of all, this Cartesian shaping of French decolonization, granting independence to all its African colonies in 1960, not only made the 'year of Africa' at the UN possible; it was also vital in creating the very concept of decolonization that only then entered common usage.

Portugal: from Republican imperialism to fraternal liberation

Portuguese imperial policy under Salazar, who ruled the country from 1928–68, has been portrayed as paradigmatic of lack of realism, of a fundamental disconnect between foreign policy and international systemic imperatives of realpolitik. It would therefore seem to provide the ideal case to show the potentially overwhelming influence of cultural political constructs in determining foreign policy against any rational

calculation of interest. And yet, as we just argued, a linear concept of the decolonization of Africa was far from clear until at least 1959–60.

Still, when in 1963 George Ball, a US undersecretary of state, was sent by President Kennedy as a personal envoy to try to convince Salazar to be more realistic and adopt a policy of gradual decolonization, he reported to Washington that he had failed, because Portugal was ruled not by one dictator but 'by a triumvirate consisting of Vasco da Gama, Prince Henry the Navigator and Salazar'.[47] Ball was right in pointing to the importance of a deep-rooted colonial nationalism in Portuguese political culture. But this was neither exclusive of the New State regime, nor did it mean Salazar was totally lost in the past and unaware of the dynamics of the modern world or the potential costs of his choice.

There is evidence that this manifest colonial mission was deeply rooted and widespread in Portuguese political culture for most of the 20th century. It was not simply something forced by Salazar's authoritarian regime. Salazar claimed that 'this union [with the overseas territories] gives us an indispensable optimism and sense of greatness';[48] while General Norton de Matos – supported by all the groups opposing Salazar as their presidential candidate in 1949 – in his electoral manifesto went as far as to state: 'the Nation is one [...] the development of the colonies must therefore be properly called national development, because there is no such thing as colonial policy, there is only national policy'.[49] Almeida Santos, an influential figures of a new generation of political leaders opposing the New State regime, who would himself eventually play an important role in the decolonization process, in 1974–75 as the last (overseas) territories co-ordination minister, did not hesitate to confess his conviction that in 1961, when Salazar reacted by sending massive numbers of troops against the first major nationalist uprising in Angola, 'he [Salazar] had with him the majority of the people, including some of his most prestigious political adversaries'.[50]

This very strong and widespread political prejudice in favour of a Greater Portugal was formalized into Portuguese constitutional law by the Colonial Act of 1930, which stated in Article 2 that: 'it is part of the organic essence of the Portuguese nation to pursue the historic mission of holding and colonizing overseas territories, and civilizing their native populations'; and that all territories under Portuguese sovereignty were part of a unitary Portuguese Republic.[51] In 1951 the empire was replaced by the even more integrationist concept of Overseas Provinces, formally part of a single multi-racial and pluri-continental single Portuguese state.

The Portuguese military was particularly immersed in this political culture that saw the empire as part of a glorious legacy going back to the

golden age of the discoveries. Officers – who would later became critical of colonialism and who played crucial roles in the post-1974 decolonization process – recognize that initially they too saw 'their' counter-insurgency as the continuation of the epic of the *africanistas*, officers who became part of the national pantheon of heroes because of their role in occupying Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea. This was even more the case, of course, among the militant nationalists who volunteered to fight in Africa. For them, Portuguese Africa and the whole empire overseas was 'a myth, a principle, and as with all myths [...] untouchable, indisputable'.[52] Any wavering in this respect, moreover, by an authoritarian regime that had as its official motto 'Everything for the Nation' would have potentially disastrous political costs, as would be shown by the reactions to the feeble attempts of Salazar's successor Marcelo Caetano to change something in the Portuguese politico-administrative framework overseas.[53]

Does this mean that Portugal was so blinded by cultural prejudices that it refused to see decolonization coming its way? In part the answer is yes. And yet Salazar always prided himself of being a realpolitiker, as is made clear by his reaction to American attempts to make him see the world as Washington did. After an attempt at regime change resulted in a failed *pronunciamento* by senior military commanders in April 1961, Salazar complained to a close confidant that he did not mind so much the politically logical attempt 'to get rid of me', what 'irritates me is the fact they are treating me as a fool', that is as someone whose political differences with Washington could only be the result of his failure to understand global politics.

Salazar could credibly claim that he did not ignore the strong global trend towards decolonization, or the risks in resisting it, but he still wanted to fight it for reasons that had to do with culturally shaped preferences as well as a certain perception of realpolitik. Indeed, in 1957 – anticipating Macmillan's famous speech, and probably reflecting knowledge of Eisenhower's second inaugural address, and most certainly his analysis of the implications of the Suez Franco-British debacle – Salazar publicly stated that 'one of the winds that dominate the world is anti-colonialism'.[54] What he probably did not expect was for the wind to gain so much speed so quickly. Portugal was partly deceived by the confidential information it was receiving from quadripartite consultations with Belgium, Britain, and France, during which it was far from clear that speedy decolonization of all of Africa was on the cards until as late as 1959, namely for the territories bordering Angola and Mozambique. To a certain degree, Salazar was therefore most likely

somewhat surprised by the sudden and generalized nature of French and then Belgian decolonization in Africa.

Salazar's conclusions even then remained different from the ones extracted by Macmillan or even de Gaulle. He would not seek to appease this new political wave by giving in to it. The Portuguese dictator believed he had to resist this wind of change at all costs because it was contrary to his notion of Portuguese identity as a great country whose manifest destiny it was to be present overseas.

Salazar knew this was a risky option for a relatively weak country like Portugal. In a private conversation with one of his confidants, who questioned him about the state of national defence, Salazar simply replied: 'in the case of Portugal [...] it is a permanent miracle!' But in his view, the very existence of Portugal as a truly independent state of some importance in the world was at stake. Salazar's vision of international politics took into account power politics but also what can perhaps best be characterized as a notion of balance of wills, where strong convictions and firmness in defence of a certain vision had a major role as a power multiplier. Salazar argued in November 1951 that while no state was ever 'entirely free', it was possible to resist foreign pressure if: first, there was a clear political vision; second, the latter was pursued relentlessly by a strong government with solid public support.[55]

Two major questions remain. Would a different regime have acted differently and decolonized earlier? What happened to these cultural preferences that led to a collapse of the commitment to a Greater Portugal alongside the collapse of the New State in 1974?

The first question is impossible to answer definitively, inevitably requiring speculative counter-factuals. But this comparative approach allows us to point out that France had a democratic regime but with a very similar political culture to that of Portugal in terms of the importance of a republican empire and of a profoundly colonial nationalism. Therefore a democratic regime in Portugal in the 1950s or 1960s would plausibly not have been less nationalistic than that of France. On the other hand, it is probably true that a democratic regime in Portugal would have been more open to outside pressure than the one led by Salazar – as the French Fourth Republic indeed was, but then this was a major factor in its downfall in 1958. It is worth bearing in mind that the only realistic option of a fall of the New State during this period was the failed military pronunciamento of April 1961, which had been preceded by informal conversations between the military leaders involved in the attempt to force some kind of regime change and the US Embassy. During the talks, these possible future leaders of Portugal asked for, and apparently

obtained, informal US support for a prolonged period of transition ending in self-determination, but not necessarily independence. The most that can be said is that it would be mistaken to take as a given that, in light of Portuguese political culture, decolonization could have been pursued with ease by a different of Portuguese regime.

What had changed then, in the run-up to 1974? There were short-term triggers, like the global crisis of 1973, which hit Portugal particularly hard; and the replacement of Salazar by a less charismatic successor, Marcelo Caetano. Caetano, even if he had more doubts than Salazar about the possibility of full integration and of successful resistance, still felt very much bound by the taboo that the fatherland could not be questioned. Therefore, in his eyes, any changes in Portuguese Africa would have had to be contained within a vague 'progressive autonomy'. Perhaps he would have liked to go further, perhaps not. He avowedly 'belonged to a generation to whom overseas [territories] had become the focus of national hopes [...] the Republic was from the beginning a dogmatic defender of the overseas heritage'. For him independence, certainly in the short to medium term, was simply unthinkable: 'Portuguese public opinion would be nauseated to see the butchers [i.e. the nationalist insurgents] rewarded'. He went on to ask rhetorically: '[H]ow could we give up [to] a few dozen adventurers all these people, the work we had accomplished?'[56]

The Portuguese population had also changed. Demographic growth had led to an increasingly young population that was more and more integrated into Western Europe because of better education, economic migration, and the flow of migrants and tourists from Europe every summer; because, among the elites, of membership of NATO and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). The urgency of a rethink evidently came from the protracted and seemingly endless nature of the war to which all this younger population were exposed as conscripts. This was even more the case for the reduced cadre of professional officers, whose colonial patriotism was brutally tried by the experience of often three two-year tours of combat duty in Africa in the span of a decade. This was made more urgent given the possibility of serious military problems from 1973 onwards, at least in Guinea, where a number of military outposts on the borders were on the verge of becoming a Portuguese Dien Bien Phu. Last but not least, the close identification of the war and the empire with an increasingly discredited authoritarian regime ended up increasingly discrediting by association the tradition of nationalist imperialism.

What is amazing, in light of this context, is not that the will to fight against decolonization of many military officers collapsed in April 1974.

Rather, it is the fact that strong cultural attachments to this idea of a Greater Portugal kept the struggle going for more than a decade, and that, indeed, some of the leading officers in the April 1974 coup, not least its first formal leader General Spínola, still tried to retain some kind of close federal connection with at least Angola. In the book that helped ignite the revolution and promote Spínola to head the new transitional junta – *Portugal e o Futuro* (Portugal and the Future) – he argued for a Lusitanian federation. More importantly, he argued this should be achieved by 'gradual evolution' to permit the 'development in political consciousness of all populations' – that is, of whatever colour – as a way towards 'self-determination' that would preserve 'harmonious and permanent unity'.[57] The points of contact with other myths of decolonization are obvious.

Major crises like a war or a revolution – or, in the case of Portugal, both – are typically necessary to allow a major revision of deeply rooted cultural norms and identity. They allowed the unthinkable decolonization to become conceivable. Yet decolonization still required some kind of cultural myth-making to make it more acceptable. As one of the most politically committed officers in the MFA, Major Melo Antunes later acknowledged, the suppression of a reference to independence or even self-determination in the coup manifesto – that he wrote for the most part – was due to the fact that 'despite all the cares in terms of semantics' this was still 'an extremely delicate subject'.[58]

Even in defeat, when forced by circumstances on the ground in Africa and politically in Portugal to move faster towards independence than he had hoped, Spínola still tried to save his honour and the myth of decolonization he was attempting to create by affirming that this was just another way to achieve what had always been his ultimate vision. This was why Spínola claimed the Law of July 1974 corresponded to his aims of self-determination going back to his time as governor of Portuguese Guinea. Another way of doing this was to identify the former Portuguese regime as their common oppressor, and point to independence as shared liberation. The Portuguese military conspirators, the MFA, who openly took over from Spínola after September 1974, quickly came to frame themselves as the fourth armed liberation movement, closely identifying with the nationalist anti-colonial movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea, as brothers-in-arms, all victims of the oppression, the violence, and the war imposed by the former Portuguese regime.

National liberation in Portugal – democratization – was increasingly seen as logically implying decolonization, that is national liberation for

its African territories. This may well be largely a myth and a cover for many military officers who wanted to stop fighting. But even if this was the case, the question remains: Why did this myth become necessary? Why not simply state the obvious interest in stopping the conflict? In my view, the answer is that Portugal also required some variant of the myth of decolonization for it to be acceptable as the appropriate and honourable thing to do, not as simply being forced by military exhaustion – and this was indeed not necessarily the case in all theatres. And here again we are caught in the traps of political culture; if the regime, and more broadly Portuguese nationalism, had for so long presented the overseas territories as one *Ultramar*, then conversely they had to decolonize them as one, even areas like East Timor where, initially at least, it is unclear this was what locals wished.

Decolonization was perceived and portrayed not as a sacrifice of a close Lusotropical connection with former colonies, but rather as the creation of new and better bonds, of a new fraternal community based not only on shared language and culture, which would not be lost, but also shared oppression and liberation. We should not dismiss out of hand myths' power of attraction even for their own creators, or their real political impact. Melo Antunes was the major military figure in the MFA articulating this programme of rapid decolonization, and also for years after the 1974 coup an influential figure as a presidential advisor working towards closer relations with the former Portuguese colonies. Some of his even more revolutionary comrades went on to sacrifice their military careers for their – more or less recent, but sincere – radical political convictions, sometimes in exile in the former colonies.

The Portuguese case certainly seems to show that, even in the face of major, international systemic pressure and international normative ruptures, to change cultural preferences that are deeply rooted in domestic political traditions requires not only time and major crises and/or losing a war, but also some effort at reframing identity by cultural myth-making.

Conclusion: myths of decolonization and their study

The main common element of the myths of decolonization in these three cases was that decolonization should not be equated with defeat, decline, or a definitive loss of a traditional overseas connection. From this common aspect derive specific constructions of decolonization according to different political cultures. In the case of Britain, there

was the Whig version of the history of decolonization as a great liberal design pragmatically administered resulting in the Commonwealth. In the case of France, there was the ideal of a republican empire giving way to a French Union and then *la francophonie*. The union of French-speaking countries could be presented plausibly as being wisely transformed by de Gaulle's Fifth Republic into a *francophonie* united by a shared language and a shared culture, with Paris still its undisputed centre. In the case of Portugal, the notion of a single pluri-continental country was replaced by the notion of a fraternal partnership based on mutual liberation by armed movements. This transformed the Portuguese officers involved in the 25 April coup into liberators both overseas and at home, using the complete change in governing elites and the turn to the Left in Portugal to give credence to a narrative of a common struggle against an authoritarian regime, oppressive in Europe and in Africa, eventually leading to a new community of equals. The Commonwealth, *la francophonie*, and eventually the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa, CPLP) can be seen, in part, as a formal manifestation of this cultural construction of decolonization.

The main argument of this text is that these three colonial powers linked their colonial empires closely to national identity. Britain, France, and Portugal were very much proud imperial nations, at least at the level of mainstream views. Even if the degree of imperialist conviction is hard to judge exactly, few will dispute that generic anti-colonialism – as different from specific criticisms of particular colonial practices – was significantly very much a minority view well into the 20th century. This close association in British, French, and Portuguese political culture between imperialism and nationalism became a major obstacle to decolonization. Decolonization, therefore, only became acceptable once a new cultural construct, a myth, was built around it. This had to be a credible story, but it evidently does not have to be the whole story. It still performed the crucial task of reconciling decolonization with a partially reconstructed national identity. Historians have for some time been carefully deconstructing, based on archival work, these myths of decolonization. This is a very important task, but it is insufficient: it is also necessary to take these myths seriously and analyse them in depth. Another key point is that the very word 'decolonization' was very much a cultural construction that only spread rapidly from France from 1959 onwards. This is of course an area of research to be pursued further, not just by comparing colonizing powers, but also by looking at the mutual re-constitutions of national identities of former colonizers

and the former colonized. This can best be done through a comparative approach, as a way of analysing cultural specificities without falling into essentialist or organic notions of culture.

Notes

1. J. Darwin, *Britain and Decolonization: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-Cold War World*, London, MacMillan, 1988, p. 6.
2. R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p. 189.
3. J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991.
4. J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 612–614, 634–635.
5. N. MacQueen, *The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa: Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire*, London, Longman, 1997, pp. 80–84.
6. T. Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2006; M. Thomas, 'Introduction: Mapping the French colonial mind', in M. Thomas, ed., *The French Colonial Mind*, vol. 1., Lincoln, NE, Nebraska University Press, 2011, Loc. 25.
7. MacQueen, *Metropolitan Revolution*, 1997, p. 92.
8. D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, 2nd ed., London, Macmillan, 1982, p. ix.
9. R. Robinson, *French colonialism 1871–1914: Myths and Realities*, London, Pall Mall, 1966, p. vii.
10. P. Gifford and W. R. Louis, eds, *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization in Africa 1940–1960*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1982; R. F. Holland, 'Review of Ronald Hyman, Britain's declining Empire […]', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies*, 36, 1, 2008, pp. 135–137.
11. T. Terriff, '"Innovate or die": Organizational culture and the origins of maneuver warfare in the US Marine Corps', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29, 3, 2006, p. 479.
12. R. L. Jepperson, A. Wendt and P. J. Katzenstein, 'Norms, identity, and culture in national security', in P. J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 54, 56. See also T. Farrell, 'Constructivist security studies: Portrait of a research programme', *International Studies Review*, 4, 1, 2002, pp. 49–72.
13. R. Hyam, *The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945–1951*. vol 1. *High Policy and Administration*, London, HMSO, 1992, *British Documents on the End of Empire*, series A, vol. 2, p. xxix; J. Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 115.

14. See J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 615 ff.
15. R. F. Holland, 'The imperial factor in British strategies from Attlee to Macmillan', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12, 1, 1984, p. 169.
16. Ministry of Defence, *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, London, HMSO, 1957 (Sandys' White Paper).
17. Holland, 'The imperial factor', 1984, p. 179; R. Hyam and W. R. Louis, *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire 1957–1964*, vol. 1, *High Policy, Political and Constitutional Change*, London, TSO, 2000, p. xlii.
18. NA, CAB 130/213 MISC 17/8 Defence Policy Record Meeting 10 Downing Street, 13 November 1965.
19. R. Girardet, *L'idee coloniale en France de 1871 a 1962*, Paris, Table Ronde, 1972, pp. 329–332, 345–346; R. Aron, *Le spectateur engage: entretiens avec Jean-Louis Missika et Dominique Wolton*, Paris, Fallois, 2004. pp. 259 ff.
20. P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781–1997*, London, Vintage, pp. 516 ff.
21. CO 875/25 circular memorandum 28, 'Notes on British colonial policy', March 1949, Doc 71, *The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945–1951*, vol. 1, *High Policy and Administration*, 'Introduction', London, HMSO, 1992, 'British documents on the end of empire', series A, vol. 2, p. 327.
22. Doc. 68 CAB 124/1007, 62, 17 August 1946, 'Projection of Britain overseas', BDED, pp. 308–309.
23. D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire*, London, Penguin, 2002, p. xvii passim.
24. D. Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the International History of the 1940s*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 309–330; J. Kent, *The Internationalisation of Colonialism: Britain, France and Black Africa*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1992, pp. 154–155, 186.
25. C. Cogan, *French Negotiating Behavior*, Washington, DC, USIP, 2003.
26. C. de Gaulle, *The Edge of the Sword*, London, Faber & Faber, 1960, p. 94.
27. Girardet, *L'idée coloniale*, 1972, pp. 300–301.
28. Aron, *Le Spectateur Engagé*, 2004, p. 267 passim.
29. M. Agulhon, *La République: De Jules Ferry à François Mitterrand – 1880 à nos jours*, Paris, Hachette, 1990, p. 373.
30. F. Malye and B. Stora, *François Mitterrand et la guerre d'Algérie*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2010, pp. 57–58.
31. M. Thomas, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 2284–2297.
32. K. Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, New York, NY, Holmes and Maier, 1979, p. 64.
33. De Gaulle speech of 15 May 1947 cited in Girardet, *L'idée colonial*, 2009, p. 287.
34. H. Spruyt, *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 265 passim.
35. R. Aron, *Imperialism and Colonialism*, Leeds, The University of Leeds, 1959, p. 6.
36. R. Trinquier, *Le Temps Perdu*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1978, pp. 357, 365.
37. S. Cohen, *La Défaite des Généraux: Le Pouvoir Politique et l'Armée sous la Ve République*, Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 48.
38. C. de Gaulle, *Mémoirs d'Espoir: Le renouveau 1958–1962*, Paris, Plon, 1970, pp. 41–42.
39. Peyrefitte, *C'Était*, pp. 88–89.
40. Ibid., p. 56. This is a collection of table talk between de Gaulle and a close confidant.
41. De Gaulle to Ély, 8 November 1960. See M. Faivre, *Le Général Paul Ély et la politique de défense (1956–1961)*, Paris, Economica, 1998, p. 83.
42. De Gaulle, *Le renouveau*, Paris, p. 43.
43. Ibid., p. 43.
44. J. Foccart, *Foccart parle: Entretiens avec Philippe Gaillard*, vol. 1, Paris, Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1995, pp. 194–195, 223.
45. J.-P. Bat, *Le Syndrome Foccart: Politique Francaise En Afrique, 1959 à nos Jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.
46. For a carefully nuanced analysis of de Gaulle's policy of grandeur, see S. Hoffmann, *The Diplomats 1939–1979*, Princeton, NY, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 228–254; see also M. Vaïsse, *La puissance ou l'influence? La France dans le monde depuis 1958*, Paris, Fayard, 2009.
47. G. Ball, *The Past has Another Pattern*, New York, NY, Norton, 1982, p. 277.
48. V. Alexandre, 'A África no imaginário português, séculos XIX–XX', *Penélope*, 15, 1995, p. 62.
49. A. Santos, *Quase Memórias do Colonialismo e Descolonização*, vol. 1, Cruz Quebrada, Casa das Letras, 2006, p. 16.
50. Santos, *Quase Memórias*, 2006, p. 16. For an example of this among the most distinguished adversaries of Salazar see C. Leal, *O Colonialismo dos Anticolonialistas*, Lisbon, Autor, 1961.
51. C. Castelo, *'O Modo Português de Estar no Mundo': O luso-tropicalismo e a ideologia colonial portuguesa (1933–1961)*, Oporto, Afrontamento, 1998, p. 46.
52. J. N. Pinto, *Jogos Africanos*, Lisbon, A Esfera dos Livros, 2008, pp. 16–17 passim.
53. Castelo, *O Modo Português*, 1998, pp. 50, 57.
54. A. de O. Salazar, 'A atmosfera mundial e os problemas nacionais', *Discursos e Nota Políticas*, vol. 5: *1951–1958*, Coimbra, Coimbra Editora, 1958, pp. 414–444.
55. Salazar, 'Independência Nacional – Suas Condições', *Discursos*, vol. 5, Coimbra, pp. 63, 66–67.
56. M Caetano, *Depoimento*, Rio de Janeiro, Record, 1974, pp. 17, 33–34.
57. Macqueen, *Metropolitan Revolution*, 1997, pp. 67, 80, 92.
58. M. M. Cruzeiro, *Melo Antunes: O Sonhador Pragmático*, Lisbon, Notícias, 2005, p. 70.