

*Anti-Imperialist Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism.* By Michael Goebel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) Pp.344. Cloth, \$120.00.

Michael Goebel takes a popular topic – Paris during the interwar years – and breathes new life into its history by acknowledging the significant intellectual and political accomplishments of the anti-colonial migrant groups who inhabited France’s capital. In his own words, “this study explores the politics of non-Europeans in interwar Paris in order to arrive at a broader argument about post-World War II decolonization and the origins of an anti-imperialist notion of the united Third World.”<sup>1</sup> Goebel’s “broader argument” is that “anti-imperialist nationalism in what came to be known as the Third World was neither a European transplant nor a natural and deep-rooted homespun reaction against foreign meddling.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, he believes “it was through contact, networks, and connectivity that later Third World nationalists dreamed up a post-imperial world order.”<sup>3</sup> Goebel applies this thesis to a host of diverse participants, including migrants from Vietnam, China, North Africa, and Latin America, who form the central cast of the book’s eight chapters. Each details how Paris acted as a “crossroads” for these cultures via shared communities, intimate relationships, and educational opportunities, as well as a “clearinghouse” of world politics through organizations like the Communist Party, the Intercolonial Union, and the ideology of the French Republic itself.

The uniqueness of this work lies not in its subject matter, however, but rather in its methodology. Instead of employing the common research techniques of intellectual or political history to approach the topic of anti-imperialism, Goebel utilizes social history as his main investigative tool to probe the subject of migration. Selecting a social basis for his study thus allows him the freedom to construct a more holistic picture of the everyday events of these groups and illustrate their interactions with and influences upon one another. This is an enlightened strategy and one that makes *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* a truly engaging read. It is important to note, however, that Goebel’s monograph does not discount the value of intellectual history entirely. The author merely “aims to restore the social to what is now being called ‘global intellectual history’” in order to show the *Alltagsgeschichte* of these players. Further, by making migration the backdrop for his analysis, Goebel effectively explains “that many of those who later took leading roles in the political and intellectual lives of their home countries became politicized during their stay in imperial centers” and not before as many contemporary scholars suggest.<sup>4</sup>

Goebel grapples with several well-known academes in making this argument. Notably, he addresses the assertions made by Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm, both of whom have cited nationalism as being an “imported” concept that developed among Third World countries (specifically Asia and Africa) only *after* a heavy amount of European influence.<sup>5</sup> According to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Goebel, these so-called “modernists” have “argued that nationalism was a ‘modern’ invention” that originated in the West “rather than being based on ancient symbols, myths, popular customs, and deep-rooted ethnic loyalties.”<sup>6</sup> Goebel takes a different approach that seeks “to steer attention to the pre-history of the Third World, built by non-European actors.”<sup>7</sup> By focusing less on the standard history of Europe and more on the *cultural* history of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the author skillfully refutes this modernist ideology and effectively proves that there were seeds of homegrown nationalism in these countries as early as the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Anti-Imperial Metropolis* also takes issue with the beliefs of anti-teleological scholars, such as Todd Shepard and Frederick Cooper, who portray “the proliferation of the new nation-states after 1945 as a highly contingent, almost accidental event.”<sup>8</sup> In Shepard’s opinion, “it was only the Algerian war, and [...] a more particular moment in 1961, that foreclosed viable imperial citizenship and, with it, exhausted options for affiliation short of national independence.”<sup>9</sup> Cooper, on the other hand, “interprets the French Union [of 1946] and African support for it as evidence that ‘the enemies of empire did not necessarily aim to carve out nation-states but reform imperial polities or seek other forms non-territorial political affiliation.’”<sup>10</sup> From the opposite stance Goebel keenly observes that these philosophies are faulty. In his view, “the fact that the nations that interwar anti-imperialists imagined did not always coincide with the postcolonial states emerging after 1945 is not a good enough reason to treat these discourses as nationalist.”<sup>11</sup> This is a bold assertion, but one that is thoroughly supported thanks to the author’s skilled use of source documents.

Michael Goebel synthesizes a variety of primary and secondary sources in this monograph, including numerous periodicals, pamphlets, diaries, memoirs, and political treatises. Yet, he has a tendency to rely too heavily on one particular batch of archival materials that (in his own opinion) “presents notorious issues of reliability and bias.”<sup>12</sup> Goebel quite cleverly utilizes police records as a means to extrapolate information about the various immigrant groups living in Paris during the interwar years. Unfortunately, he seems to use these sources as a crutch in several chapters despite acknowledging their untrustworthiness. Even what he refers to in his introduction as “throwaway lines” might contain certain prejudiced undertones that could potentially undermine the impartiality of his text.<sup>13</sup> His thesis would have been more persuasive if he incorporated more firsthand writings taken from the numerous

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<sup>6</sup> Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. Also see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of Independence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Frederick Cooper, “Decolonizing Situations: The Rise, Fall, and Rise of Colonial Studies,” *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 20, no.2 (2002): 46-76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper, “Decolonizing Situations,” 66-7 qtd. in Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 251.

<sup>11</sup> Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 251.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Communist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperial newspapers in circulation at this time so as to provide a contrasting viewpoint to go along with the French police's accounts.

There are other faults with this study as well. The most glaring issues are with the text's organization and scope, which at times appear to be disjointed and confusing. This book's structure suffers from two major deficits: trying to convey too much information at once and treating the timeframe as a single block rather than an evolutionary period. As such, the author has a tendency to jump around in the chronology, often returning to points he already addressed in previous chapters. Goebel is also not fully clear in his examination of radical anti-colonialists adopting tenants of French Republicanism as part of their "revolutionary lingua franca." He states that although these younger generations scoffed at this idea, many "appeared remarkably Jacobin in some respects."<sup>14</sup> This statement is problematic because Goebel never explicitly mentions, much less proves, whether or not this association was intentional. Granted, these groups tended to employ rhetoric that was closely associated with the French Revolution; however, that could have merely been a choice to use words and phrases that would garner the public's support. Since many of the individuals affiliated with such movements, as well as their audience members, had learned about the Revolution during their time in the French educational system, it is not surprising that they would utilize the most commonly understood comparison example available. The question that remains to be shown is if they themselves believed the dialogue they were professing.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.