**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 25: Decolonization in Global Perspective**

**Decolonization as global restructuring**

In the thirty years or so from the independence of India (1947) to the fall of the Portugese empire in Africa (and the US withdrawal from Vietnam, also in 1975), a large number of colonies in Africa and Asia gained independence. It is hard to think of any earlier process of such short duration that has had a comparable impact on the global political order. But there are various ways of interpreting the process. The most conspicuous disagreement is about who should take credit for it: was independence the gift of enlightened and principled Western powers, or the achievement of mass struggle which brought colonial rule to its knees? But it is more important to clarify the character of the process than claim credit for it. On this point, the former colonizers and the colonized are often in agreement in seeing decolonization as getting rid of a relationship of dominance that was external to the societies involved. In reality, colonialism impacted in every aspect of the global order, and decolonization was a complex restructuring of that order. The world did not return to what it was before colonialism; the societies formed by centuries of colonialism were integrated into a global order that had never existed before.

**How did decolonization restructure the global order?**

1. Decolonization marked the point at which military coercion was no longer the main instrument for drawing Africans and Asians into the global capitalist market. Newly independent states were controlled not by colonial governors and armies, but by the flow of investment, trade, modern technology and commodities such as oil. After the debt crisis of the 1970s, the World Bank and IMF became an increasingly important instrument in controlling the Third World.

2. A universal system of states emerged in which territorial expansion was no longer a generally accepted principle. States could increase their wealth or power primarily by economic competition rather than military conflict. Military conflict did not necessarily decrease as a result, but could mostly be contained by the Cold War superpowers and outsourced to proxies.

3. The ideal of development (often understood as increased GDP per capita) became central to global politics, taking the place of the ideology of civilization that had previously justified colonialism. But development took place on an unequal basis, with the former colonial world mainly providing raw materials and the West dominating the global provision of capital goods, new technology, etc.

4. Formal equality of states, nations and races was established alongside sustained and even growing material inequality. Each state had the same formal trappings of independence (flag, anthem, army, government, seat in the UN General Assembly, etc.) but the effective power they wielded was very different. Within states, an ideology of racial equality (ideological in the sense that it masks real inequality) became generally accepted.

**How did decolonization restructure political and ethical life?**

1. Decolonization ends the “civilizing mission” of the colonial powers. It does not entirely deprive them of their coercive powers, although it changes the form and rationale for military or police intervention. But it transfers responsibility for the welfare of their former colonial subjects to new governing elites in the former colonies, who in effect become responsible for conditions created by colonialism (including national borders, “gatekeeper” state).

2. Although decolonization ends the civilizing mission of the colonial powers, it does not affirm that the process of civilization has been completed or was mistaken in the first place. Instead it replaces that mission with a universal goal of economic development, which often ensures that the slur of backwardness remains. This often creates a syndrome of victimhood in the former colonies; it is in the role of victim that they relate to Cold War superpowers and the former colonial powers.

3. In the context of the Cold War, decolonization creates a system in which the capitalist West and the Soviet bloc each bid for the support of the Third World, and the Third World itself produces no global vision of its own. It remains in the role of the child (continuing the metaphor of colonialism) in the global context, although its relation to the Cold War superpowers is one of patron and client.

4. Hypocrisy becomes an integral part of political and ethical argument in a post-colonial world, where both the former colonial powers and the colonized are required to retain the pretence of equality and pay lip-service to norms that must be manipulated to favour their own interests. This is not to say that colonialism was free of hypocrisy, but only that it had the option of telling things as they were.

**Western political thought after decolonization**

Our main focus during for the next weeks of this course is on South African responses to decolonization, which changed dramatically the way in which South African history was to be located in the narrative of global history. Although it is somewhat outside the scope of this course, it is worth pointing out the impact of decolonization on Western political thought, primarily that of the Anglo-American world. For Western political thought had for a century or more provided the terms in which South Africans located their political situation in global context. The period of decolonization also produced a major reconfiguration of Western political theory:

1. Political theory comes to focus mainly on conceptual questions, and to treat conceptual clarity as an important goal in its own right. From the perspective of political theory, conceptual confusion is the main obstacle to political ends and proper ends are distinguished by their conceptual clarity.

2. Conceptual clarity is treated as unity and distinctness of meaning, diversity of meaning as a sign of conceptual confusion. Collective goals are necessarily capable of more diverse meanings, and hence unclear, subject to emotion and easily manipulated. The social process that produces meaning is downplayed and the distinctness of the individual mind preferred.

3. In this context, Anglo-American liberalism often equates itself with the defence of individual goals against collective, as in Berlin’s defence of negative liberty against positive or Rawls’s arguments for a concept of justice as the choice of the rational individual from behind a veil of ignorance.

4. In practice, this kind of political theory results in a theoretical endorsement of the regime of individual rights characteristic of the capitalist West and an implicit rejection of the collective projects that might challenge Western hegemony. It does not (need to) defend colonialism or global inequality, but treats any challenge to it as theoretically incoherent.