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**Review: “Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism” by Michael Goebel**

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# **Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism**

By Michael Goebel, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 344, Hardback \$120.00, ISBN: 978-1-107-07305-0

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## **REVIEWED BY BENINIO MCDONOUGH TRANZA**

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In the European and American cultural imagination Paris is symbolic of cosmopolitan modernity. This status is not unfounded for interwar Paris held a magnetic appeal to cultural travellers, it attracted writers and artists from across the world, and served as the central hub of migration and transit across Europe. Yet the French capital was not only the site of cultural but also of political innovation—the home of Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh as well as Josephine Baker and Ernest Hemmingway. Michel Goebel’s *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* explores the everyday lives of these migrants and unearths the web of inter-cultural contacts and cross community transfers through which diverse movements collaboratively forged an anti-imperial consciousness. Despite the fact that Paris played host to a remarkable array of individuals who would go on to lead anti-imperial struggles across the world, many of whom identified their experiences in Europe as a crucial formative period in the development of their political thought, the role that migratory networks and the migratory experience played in the intellectual development of anti-colonial movements remains surprisingly underexplored. Recently, however, a number of exciting works, such as Stovall’s *Paris and the Spirit of 1919* (2012) and Boittin’s *Colonial Metropolis* (2010) have begun to examine anti-imperial thinkers as migrants and to explore their relationship to the social and political currents of the metropole. Goebel’s *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* is a major and original contribution to this emerging field, which is in many respects an advance on current scholarship.

Goebel makes two key arguments. Firstly, he maintains that the experience of migration played a key role in the political development of anti-imperialism. Goebel’s argument is not merely that contact with Western intellectual currents helped promote anti-imperialism and nationalism but that the lived experience of ‘everyday ethnicity’ in the French capital helped expose the contradictions of colonialism and that local community politics proved a ‘training ground’ for burgeoning anti-imperial leaders. Figures like Ho Chi Minh are conceptualized as ‘ethnopolitical entrepreneurs’ (a term borrowed from Rogers Brubaker) who

honed their political skills in the context of community activism. Consequently, Goebel's methodology differs significantly from traditional intellectual history in foregrounding a detailed study of the social practices and community organizations which structured migrant life in Paris. Indeed, as he acknowledges at the outset, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* is 'much more of a social history of migration than an intellectual history of anti-imperialism'. This social historical focus undoubtedly provides an important corrective to the often dematerialised intellectual histories of anti-colonial nationalism. Goebel's primary achievement is to have situated key figures in the history of anti-imperialism in a history of migrant community formation inspired, to some extent, by the ambitions of *Alltagsgeschichte*. The early chapters, which describe the negotiation of 'everyday ethnicity', the function and institutional nature of immigrant community organizations and the mediating political role played by the PCF and other French political institutions are very well researched and cogently argued.

Goebel's second significant, and most original, claim is that a process of cross community intellectual transfers between different migrant networks played a critical and unacknowledged role in the development of anti-imperialism. The majority of studies which, like *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, have argued that the experience of life in the metropole provoked a consciousness of racial injustice and helped inspire anti-colonial activism have tended to focus on particular ethnic groups as, indeed, have most migration histories. Goebel, however, insists that anti-imperialist politics in Paris was a transcultural phenomenon which was collectively forged by a multitude of different ethnic communities. His work employs a very broad definition of 'anti-imperial' migrants which includes immigrants from across the French empire (principally Vietnamese, Algerians, West Africans and Antiguans), Chinese citizens and Latin Americans. In support of his argument Goebel clearly documents several ways in which different anti-colonial political movements built alliances and forged common anti-colonial strategies through a process of intercultural learning. The wide-angle focus does occasionally lead to overgeneralization, however, Goebel's emphasis on transcultural interaction undoubtedly represents a triumph of the global historical perspective which guides his work and a major advance on current scholarship.

Yet, despite undeniable achievements, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* ultimately fails to adequately bridge the gap between social and intellectual history. Goebel's social historical focus is at the same time the primary strength and weakness of *Anti-imperial Metropolis*. If we accept that the experience of migrant life played a crucial role in the development of anti-imperialism it is in the sense that key individuals, who would later shape anti-colonial movements and, in many cases, lead their nations to independence, were influenced by the experience of migration. However, Goebel consistently privileges the study of institutions and social practices at a community wide (and even intra-communal) level over a detailed study of the differentiated histories of social experience and ideological development at

the level of the individual. While key figures like Ho Chi Minh frequently recur in the narrative, the references are usually anecdotal and only serve to illustrate wider community-level trends. The problem, of course, is that this form of argument works only one way and we cannot simply infer the ideological development of key individuals from a history which focuses at the level of the group.

Goebel's work is good at providing a view of the social experiences of migrants across a broad period but not of the key particular individuals within migrant groups who actually shaped anti-imperialist thought. A history more attentive to individual microhistories of anti-colonial intellectual development would lead us to question the structure of Goebel's work and some of his key claims. Goebel's tendency to overgeneralise at the group level affects the structure and temporal focus of the study. Although he includes an interesting discussion on the significance of "global moments" (such as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia or the Rif War) to the development of anti-imperial consciousness, he generally treats the "interwar period" as a simple and clearly definable temporal unit. *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* is structured thematically (chapters may focus for instance on 'Private Life and Work' or 'Students in the Latin Quarter') with little appreciation for chronology. This is a major weakness since the anti-imperial migrants Goebel studies were not, as he claims, 'part of one generation' but were in fact resident in Paris at different times across a 20 year period which witnessed huge social and political transformations. Ho Chi Minh and Zhou Enlai, for example, were almost exact contemporaries (they lived in Paris from 1920-1923 and 1920-1924) but they experienced a very different Paris and a very different Europe from George Padmore (resident in Paris in the 1930s). The social experiences they were shaped by and the political conditions of their eras varied greatly.

A keener attention to individual biography would also lead us to question the centrality of Paris to the study. Goebel treats his "ethno-political entrepreneurs" as representatives of particular cultural communities in Paris in which they were rooted. However, as he admits, many anti-imperialist leaders led a transient life and were not only often resident in many European cities aside from Paris but were frequent travellers connected to anti-imperialist networks across the continent. Ho Chi Minh, for example, lived in New York, Marseille and London before moving to Paris (from where he moved to Moscow). However, the significance of these previous European residencies or of frequent travel between European cities is left entirely unexplored by Goebel. In this key respect, as in many others, it is obviously clear that the experience of political leaders in the migrant communities Goebel discusses were very different from the vast majority of migrants.

Finally, as would be expected, Goebel's failure to engage with intellectual biography leads to a lack of nuance when discussing the specifics of different currents in anti-imperialist thought. Goebel does highlight differences in the forms of anti-imperialist consciousness between cultural groups and sometimes offers

interesting and plausible explanation for these differences (for example he suggests that the nature of the work-study programme by breaking down the distinction between intellectual and physical labour and leaving many Chinese students in penury may have encouraged the popularity of Communist ideas). However, a history which focuses on groups is incapable of explaining the specificities of anti-imperialism for individuals. It is possible to reach interesting conclusions about what social experiences encouraged a sense of alienation and fostered the development of anti-colonial politics in a general sense but it becomes much more difficult to see how social life in Paris encouraged individuals to develop specific forms of anti-imperial consciousness without examining in detail what particular individuals, rather than cultural groups, actually believed. Yet *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* contains no comprehensive exposition of the political thought developed by key anti-imperialist political figures and the complex variations between different forms of anti-imperialist and nationalist thought are only examined in detail in one chapter (Vernacularising Nationalism).

Although there are some significant limitations to Goebel's work, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* is undoubtedly a major contribution to the study of nationalism and to anti-colonialism. There is every reason to believe the migratory experience was, as many key anti-colonial leaders claimed, and as Goebel has convincingly argued, a major factor in forging an anti-colonial consciousness. Further study of this neglected topic has the potential to radically affect our understanding of non-European nationalism and anti-colonialism. Moreover, the study of nationalism in the non-European world has been far too often dematerialized. A history attentive to the social experiences of nationalist and anti-colonial leaders will prove essential in correcting this. It is to be hoped that future histories will be far more attentive to individual intellectual biography than Goebel. However, they will have, in *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, an impressive and immensely useful social history to draw upon which will prove invaluable in the development of a truly transnational history of anti-imperialism and migration. Goebel's work could well become seen as a milestone in years to come and is undoubtedly essential reading for all historians of 20th century migration and anti-imperialism.