

Michael Goebel: Anti-Imperial Metropolis. Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015. 344 pp. – ISBN 978-1-107-42135-6.

Fredrik Petersson
Åbo Akademi University
Turku, Finland

With his book, Michael Goebel aims to write and restore a social history of interwar anti-imperialism as part of what has been labeled “global intellectual history.” By locating his narrative in the temporal and spatial setting of Paris, one of several colonial metropolises in interwar Europe, Goebel argues that the relations and contacts among numerous anti-colonial activists that either lived in or passed through the French capital provided them with life-lasting experiences, which in hindsight should be perceived as the “seeds of Third World nationalism”, a process which later bore into fruition the era of postwar decolonization. Goebel’s book is, however, not the first account of Paris as an anti-colonial, or for that matter, “colonial metropolis” in the interwar period. Jennifer Anne Boittin’s *Colonial Metropolis* (2010) investigated the spatial scenery and urban grounds of anti-imperialism and feminism of interwar Paris, and thus made an important contribution in assessing the different layers of everyday activism taking place in the French capital.¹ What distinguishes Goebel’s analysis from Boittin’s portrayal of Paris is, however, his constructive and thoroughly detailed account of the city as a place that experienced a multitude of different political, cultural and social developments forged in the vein of anti-imperialism.

Above all, this is distinctly clear in the introductory chapter where Goebel points out that he is not “the first to note the exhilarating cosmopolitanism of Paris’s intellectual life”, or its crucial role in exchanging ideas, patterns and movements in the 1920s and 1930s. However, what Goebel contributes with this book is an account of a place that vibrated with anti-imperialist activity, a journey that ultimately (in some cases) ended in political consciousness and maturity. Further, in the introduction Goebel details and shows theoretical insight into the global phenomena of anti-imperialism and its logical relation to nationalism. The reason for Goebel’s focus on “anti-imperialism” rather than defining it as “anti-colonialism” is connected to various entry points. Accordingly, he argues that the political travels conducted by the majority of the book’s protagonists (which assumed leading positions in the nationalist struggle and decolonization process, such as Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh, Messali Hadj) either ended in or lead through Paris in the interwar period. Hence, the travels were and should be interpreted in terms of migration. Even more, Goebel states that colonialism “often proves too reductive a term,” and therefore, basing his argument on Jürgen Osterhammel’s discussion of imperialism, he prefers not to make a connection between imperialism and capitalism. Instead, he points out the distinction between imperialism and colonialism, and analyzes the differentiated character of international relations and imperialism in Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century. However, similar anti-imperial metropolises in the Western hemisphere existed, for example, Berlin and Hamburg, as well as London, Manchester, or Rotterdam. Based on a rich reading of previous research and theoretical framework, such as

¹ Jennifer Anne Boittin: *Colonial Metropolis. The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2010.

the seminal works of Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, Goebel lays bare a view of Paris in the interwar period that housed numerous anti-imperial connections, collaborations and interconnectivity, but also competitions and hierarchical relations.

Additionally to the introductory and conclusive chapters, Goebel has divided the book in eight thematic chapters. It attempts to capture, restore and infuse the historical aspect of “the social” in the study of twentieth century anti-imperialism. Goebel aims to write the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) of anti-imperial Paris, and he does this by assessing different layers of anti-imperialist activism and connectivity in the French capital. The first chapter traces “the seeds of Third World nationalism” by surveying various intersections of the global migrations in the city, while the following chapter explores how these flows of migration assisted in creating multifaceted anti-imperial communities that were divided along race and ethnicity. These communities lived side-by-side in factual spaces (quarters, blocks), for example the tightly knit Vietnamese community in the Latin Quarter *Salle des Sociétés*, or the Chinese, Algerian and Latin American communities. The book continues with a social history of everyday life in Paris, where the protagonists had to adopt to the local routines, while at the same time professing anti-imperial activism or at least identifying themselves as anti-imperial activists. A crucial aspect of this process was learning and education, something Goebel assesses in the fourth chapter dedicated to the colonial student community as one of the migration flows that formed the anti-imperial milieu in Paris.

Moving beyond the everyday life framework, the book then sets out to discuss the role of Paris in becoming a “clearinghouse” of world politics in the interwar period. Taking a departure in the Versailles Peace Conference and the expectancy of the renowned “Wilsonian moment” and its treatment of “the colonial question” in 1919, which Ezra Manela’s influential study *The Wilsonian Moment* (2007) aptly has outlined in detail,² Goebel provides an account of Paris as a venue for expectations and engaged hopes among anti-imperialists from around the globe. However, the disappointment and disillusion caused by the failure of the conference even to listen to the demands of the delegates from the colonies turned Paris, in a longer perspective, into a hotbed of anti-imperialist activity. This was highlighted, as Goebel points out, in various campaigns, for example, against the Rif War in 1925 and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the ensuing Abyssinian crisis in 1935. The reference to Paris as a “clearinghouse” should therefore be understood as the perception of Paris as a center and hub of world politics and international relations, consisting of individuals of non-European origin that constituted vital nodes in anti-imperial global networks. The connectivity and migratory patterns thereby assisted in spreading and disseminating information or individuals in different anti-imperialist trajectories. In the following chapter, Goebel tries to connect this with the activities and networks of “communist intermediaries” in Paris, and their relation to the Communist Party of France (PCF), and above all, the pivotal role of the Communist International in engaging with and attempting to construct a wide range of anti-imperialist enterprises. However, the chapter constitutes one of very few weak points in Goebel’s comprehensive study, as it does not rely on or even include any documents from the Comintern Archive in Moscow. Further, it could have gained from a closer reading of the recent research on topics connected to international communism and anti-imperialism as a global and transnational phenomenon between the wars. Yet, this empirical dilemma is

² Erez Manela: *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

solved by Goebel's thorough examination of other archives (in Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, and other places) while trying to find an answer to his ambition of portraying Paris as an "anti-imperial metropolis." The closing two chapters offers the reader with an understanding of how anti-imperialism was used to formulate and construct agendas potent enough to advance the idea of national independence and the right to self-determination.

Goebel's book is an important contribution to the research field on twentieth century resistance movements, especially for its ambition to cover not just all kinds of aspects and levels of anti-imperialism as a global movement, but also connecting them to a local setting. It is, in its purest form, a study of the global in the local. As mentioned above, Goebel has consulted and made use of a large selection of archives and collections to paint a picture of Paris as a vibrant place of anti-imperialism, and its lasting imprint on the trajectory of the decolonization process in the postwar period. Goebel's concluding remark is, nevertheless, an attempt to take a stand on the recent increase of interest in "global moments." According to the author, the primary focus should be on answering the questions of *why* and *what*, regardless of perceiving the research as something that can be labelled as "global moments." Goebel's account of Paris as an anti-imperial metropolis is nonetheless, for sure, a contribution that fits in the category of catching a global moment that stretched itself over two decades. The book highlights and details a wide variety of trajectories, ruptures and connections that belong to the broader historiographical canvas of twentieth century history of anti-imperialist movements, migration, and political discourses.