Interview - Adom Getachew

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Adom Getachew is Neubauer Family Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. She is a political theorist with research interests in the history of political thought, theories of race and empire, and postcolonial political theory. Her work focuses on the intellectual and political histories of Africa and the Caribbean. Her first book, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* , reconstructs an account of self-determination offered in the political thought of Black Atlantic anticolonial nationalists during the height of decolonization in the twentieth century. Adom holds a joint PhD in Political Science and African-American Studies from Yale University. She is on the faculty board of the Pozen Center for Human Rights, a fellow at the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory, and a faculty affiliate at the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see myself working broadly in Black Political Thought, postcolonial theory, and theories and histories of empire. On the third front, which is connected most with IR, I am excited by the renewed interest in Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) and to new conversations between TWAIL and Critical Race Theory. TWAIL scholars have chronicled the hierarchies embedded within a purportedly universal international law since the mid-twentieth century, while critical race theorists have focused on the reproduction of race and racial difference in the law. I think of these conversations as generating new ways of thinking about race and the law in a comparative and global context.

In the field of postcolonial political theory, I am very excited by work that seeks to reconstruct the distinctive postcolonial experiences of central political ideas like democracy, popular politics and sovereignty. Most of this work is admittedly occurring outside of political theory in fields like anthropology, but I think more political theorists are taking up this perspective.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Like many people, my first foray into anticolonial thought came through a reading of Frantz Fanon's*Wretched of the Earth*. The analytical and political clarity, as well as the rhetoric was immediately gripping. In many ways reading that text and working on Fanon for my undergraduate thesis shaped my interests as I went to graduate school, even though I didn't continue to work on Fanon. Fanon led me to the wider world of anticolonial political thought and practice, and particularly to those committed to internationalist solidarity. I was also very influenced by early scholars of race and international law such as Siba Grovogui and Antony Anghie, whose imprint is definitely visible in my book. Finally, I would say I aspire to be a politically engaged scholar and in this respect I look up to mentors like Barbara Ransby and Cathy Cohen. Though their intellectual work is far from my own interests, they are engaged in political projects within and beyond the academy.

How do the aims of Black History Month speak to the discipline of IR? What can we do to forge a more

equal discipline?

I take Black History Month to be an effort to draw attention to the contributions of African descended peoples to the country and to the ongoing struggles for equality and justice. I would say that IR can relate to this by rethinking what and who counts in the discipline. By this I don't just mean 'expanding the canon.' I think it's really important that we don't just add new names to our list, but we try to take up and reconstruct the questions that animated these thinkers. We should use the incorporation of new thinkers to reconceive what we take to be the central questions of a field.

Why did anticolonial thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois argue that racial hierarchy was central to the creation and maintenance of the modern international society?

Du Bois's account of a global colour line stemmed from two claims. First, he located the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery as a central founding moment of the modern world. This is a moment of unequal integration in which African labor is conscripted into producing for a global market. The plantation economies of the Americas contributed directly, as Eric Williams argued, to the rise of industrialization. Race and racism, Williams also noted, was born from the experience of slavery. Second, Du Bois argues that the 19th century Scramble for Africa inherits the legacies of slavery. Historically, imperial expansion coincided with emancipation, serving as a new strategy for maintaining cheap labour and raw materials. Structurally, colonialism conscripted natives into regimes of forced labour which he amounted to "virtual slavery of a majority of the world's labourers" (1949: 3). This rise of 19th century new imperialism occurred alongside a wider racialization of international society. As scholars of international law like Teemu Ruskola have noted, racial categories, and in particular analogization to African colonies and states became pervasive in this period such that China could be rendered analogous to the Congo. In my book, I trace this process of racialization by describing the place of Liberia and Ethiopia—both independent states and members of the League of Nations.

How did anticolonial thinkers reconcile their nationalist movements with internationalist demands for a more equitable international society?

What I try to argue is that it was less a reconciliation of nationalism and internationalism than a way of posing the problem of national independence that entailed particular kinds of internationalist commitments. Take for instance the arguments for regional federation by Kwame Nkrumah and Eric Williams. Both are dealing with questions about how to achieve national independence in a context of economic dependence. They are faced with a postcolonial predicament of de jure independence and de facto dependence. In this context they argue that securing national independence will require creating larger political and economic units through regional federal institutions. Here a particular kind of internationalism, one that seeks to realize the promise of national independence, is thought to be a necessary counterpart to the nationalist commitment.

In your book, you highlight ways in which postcolonial states attempted to unify and resist the power of Western states in the 1960s and 70s, including through regional federalism and the New International Economic Order (NIEO). Why did these forms of solidarity ultimately fail? Are you optimistic about the development of alternative spheres of anti-imperial resistance?

The projects failed for a number of internal and external reasons. First, each of these projects illuminated a key tension in the internationalism of anticolonial nationalism. Was it an internationalism that reinforced and stabilized the nation-state or an internationalism that sought to transcend it? For instance, the NIEO both reinforced sovereignty in the form, for instance, of permanent sovereignty over natural resources at the same time it called for quite expansive international regulation and direction of economic policy. The federal project illuminated this tension in another way—namely the models of federation that William and Nkrumah called for sought to aggregate sovereignty at the regional level, raising anew regional questions about hierarchy and inequality among the state. Finally, the rise of authoritarianism and humanitarian crises in many postcolonial states generated a wide range of critiques about the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the anticolonial project. This critique pointed to a gap between professed commitments to international equality and domestic departures from this ideal. The critique would gain currency particularly at the moment at which the fallout of the oil crisis in the 1970s undermined the bargaining position of third

world states.

I am optimistic about the various protests and mobilizations we are seeing around the world, from the United States and Chile to Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. Some of these are very specifically drawing on the histories and legacies of 20th century anti-imperial thought. While others are reckoning with the failures and limits or partiality of decolonization, they often challenge the postcolonial state. It is important that we follow closely the languages, analysis and demands of these mobilizations, avoiding the urge to assimilate them to a tradition of struggle so that we can assess them on their own terms.

Much of your work brings forth original contributions to political thought by non-Western thinkers that have often been misread as merely appropriating existing Western concepts. Why has this been the case and how can we continue to uncover sites of non-Western political and conceptual innovation?

Read sympathetically, narratives of appropriation are efforts to endow non-Western or subaltern thinkers with some agency. That is, if principles like self-determination end up becoming global, the emphasis on appropriation allows scholars to transform peripheral actors into agents of globalization. The problem with this reading however is that it makes appropriation merely a moment of replication and expansion. As I try to show, appropriation can be an instance of innovation. I want to suggest two ways of uncovering sites of non-Western political and conceptual innovation. One is to engage in a form of reconstruction that takes seriously the questions and animating conundrums of non-Western thinkers. It is by attending to the specificity of these questions that we can uncover innovation even in contexts where the same principles are being articulated. Second is to attend more closely to the specific trajectories and experience of politics in the postcolonial world. Exemplary of this approach are works by Partha Chatterjee, Mahmood Mamdani, and Sudipta Karviraj who each theorise the divergent paths of postcolonial politics. Chatterjee, with his concept of political society, and Mamdani with his account of the bifurcated state are engaged in generating new concepts to analyse and explain these specific trajectories.

In your article *The limits of sovereignty as responsibility*, you argue in favour of re-evaluating sovereignty as responsibility by re-defining the concept of sovereignty as non-domination, developed in the mid-20th century by decolonial thinkers. How can sovereignty as non-domination help us re-think the balance between sovereignty and international responsibility?

In this piece, I draw attention to what I call the normative diminution of sovereignty of which R2P is exemplary. By this I mean that a functional, conditional and paternal definition of sovereignty not only generates the conditions for destabilizing interventions, but also that it sets our sights too low about what international responsibility means and requires. R2P describes international responsibility as a backup responsibility that steps in when a state has failed. But it ignores how the international order might actively contribute to state failure. I try to use non-domination as a way of signalling a more expansive vision not only of sovereignty, but also of international responsibility. International responsibility in this context would entail a more proactive approach that seeks to create international conditions that support and reinforce self-government, most significantly by overcoming the hierarchies and inequalities that structure the international order and contribute to state failure.

You're currently editing a book entitled *W.E.B Du Bois's International Writings*. What are some of his key contributions to international political theory?

I take three lessons from Du Bois's international writings. First, Du Bois highlights the enduring significance of race as a structuring feature of the international order. This did not mean that the meaning of race was stable and given. Instead, he traces the permutations of the meaning of race over time, particularly drawing attention to late 19th century moment in which he locates the "discovery of personal whiteness" (Du Bois 1920: 29). Second, he holds empire to be an institutionally flexible structure of domination. That is, while its dominant form took the institutional form of colonies, especially in his attention to Liberia he traces non-colonial modes of what I call unequal integration. Even in the colonies, Du Bois illustrates that the experience of unequal integration takes a variety of forms. Finally, Du Bois eschews a neat disaggregation of domestic and international. He is interested in how race and empire generate unexpected political alliances and produce unintended moral and political reverberations that cannot be easily

contained in either the domestic or international sphere.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars?

It's an exciting and daunting time to be embarking on an academic career. I think for graduate students, postdocs, and early career scholars, I would stress the importance of building peer to peer networks—through everything from reading groups to unions. These have been and continue to be lifelines for me in both developing my research agenda, generating new questions, and participating in struggles for a more just academy. I also encourage everyone to read widely, to not feel trapped by or beholden to your discipline. Reading beyond political theory has very much shaped my thinking.