

# From Racial Capitalism to Revolutionary Junctures? – A Theoretical History of Mid-Twentieth Century Decolonization in East Pakistan/Bangladesh

## Extended Abstract

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the discourse of development was articulated in a civilizational register. Anti-colonial and national liberation movements across Asia and Africa questioned the political nature of this register as a ruse for deferring claims to self-determination. However, the nationalisms animating such movements also reworked the civilizational register. By disenfranchising some, such a register secured the political-ideological bounds of new nation-states while legitimizing the majoritarian bases of their popular sovereignty. Moreover, by displacing civilizational imperialities with national societies in the progression of developing to developed countries, new discourses on *economic* development did little to challenge this earlier content, even as the form in which it was articulated opened possibilities of international reordering and redistribution (Duara, 2004; Gotachew, 2019). Accentuating structural inequalities and political crises in the postcolonial world today have reanimated critical questions – was the revolutionary juncture of mid-twentieth century decolonization transformative at all? If so, how and in what aspects of political life?

In this paper, I examine the case of one such revolutionary juncture – the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 – to argue that several transformative aspects of decolonization were apparent within the shifts in development discourse. Specifically, I examine three – a) the critique of *racialized* understandings of ‘development’ inherent within the civilizational register; b) an emphasis on *global analogies and connections* in lieu of a ‘clash of civilizations’ perspective (also, paradoxically, internal to this discursive register); and c) an emergent language of genuine democratic recognition, including claims of redistribution ‘from below.’

The paper draws on the archived correspondences of Ford Foundation functionaries and their interlocutors during Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. The private philanthropic agency played a crucial role in Pakistan's development and postcolonial nation-building during the 1950s and 60s, serving as a clearinghouse of ideas, projects, and personnel between the US and South Asian countries. A critical reading of these archives illuminate how skepticism and ambivalence towards the liberation movement's tactics, claims, and intellectual basis – informed by the development discourse – gave way to crucial shifts and renegotiations at a revolutionary juncture.

Conceptually, the paper mobilizes the Gramscian notion of 'passive revolution' and the 'time of decolonization' as a temporal analytic to counter the presentism that takes the afterlife of decolonization to recall a process of unmitigated failure (Scott, 2004; cf. Melas, 2014). It also challenges a historicism where 'what really happened' reveals a continuum by eliding fractures or shifts that illuminate the unfinished nature of decolonization (Tomba, 2013). My objective is to recount a sociologically informed history of decolonization and intervene in recent debates on 'racial capitalism.' Building on earlier debates regarding 'race and development' the paper moves beyond conceptualizing racially stratified systems and ethno-racial domination as either contingent or logical necessary to capitalist development, by examining their conjunctural determinations along historical-material, symbolic, and political-strategic registers of analysis (e.g. Levenson & Paret, 2023; Paret & Levenson, 2024). Revolutionary junctures offer paradigmatic cases for such a study. Instead of reifying ideal-typical distinctions like "genuine race-divided societies" and "societies with race" (Wacquant, 2023), the task here is to indicate avenues for a historical sociology where these distinctions emerge historically and are therefore both contingent on critical junctures/moments, and structurally conditioned by (the first order)

dynamics of global capitalism's uneven and combined development. Such an approach leaves rooms for studying transitions, 'reversals', and transformative dynamics that constitute the alternate temporality of decolonization vis-à-vis the time of nationalism.

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