



The Myanmar radical tradition: revolution, reaction, and the changing imperial world order

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Abstract

This article historicizes and conceptualizes the Myanmar radical tradition: a tradition of thought and practice that has animated radical politics across Myanmar's twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From anti-colonial struggle to decolonization, and from communist insurgency to left feminism, ethnic rebellion, and today's revolutionary upsurge following the 2021 coup d'état, this radical tradition is best understood not as something bounded or solitary. Rather, it names a productive conjoining of radical thought and practice from within Myanmar, as well as from other times and places, beginning in the imperial world order of the early twentieth century. Revisiting scholarship on transatlantic and transpacific radicalisms, we argue that attention to imperialism offers important insights into Myanmar's modern history and contemporary dynamics, including the Myanmar radical tradition. Yet, the Myanmar radical tradition—heterogeneous and internally conflictual, a site of historical dispute—also sheds light on the changing imperial world order, which we show has a fundamentally reactive, counter-revolutionary quality. Today's late imperialism, we argue, can be seen as a retaliatory response to the long arc of decolonization, a story within which Myanmar's contemporary revolutionary struggle renders the Myanmar radical tradition very much a living tradition.

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Introduction

On the first of February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power in a coup. The post-coup junta then nullified the results of the November 2020 election and detained Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior members of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD). The country's decade-long "democratic transition" was over. As news of the coup spread, factory workers in the industrial zones around Yangon became apprehensive. "With the military taking power," said a young woman garment worker a day after the coup, "it'll be like it was before, and employers will oppress the workers and reduce their wages. That's what I expect" (quoted in Campbell 2021a).

Factory workers recognized that a return to direct military rule threatened their livelihoods and ability to organize. They mobilized for collective action, struck work, and led mass anti-coup protests in downtown Yangon on 6 February. In so doing, these workers—most of them young women from rural areas—catalyzed further strikes in other sectors, inspiring a nation-wide protest movement (Ko Maung 2021). The military response was merciless. Soldiers and police fired live ammunition at protesters and bystanders on the street and even into nearby vehicles and homes, killing children and adults alike. In night-time raids, police seized activists and protest organizers from their homes, taking them away to undisclosed locations. Recognizing the critical role of industrial workers in igniting the protests and in mobilizing the general strike, the military leadership declared sixteen unions and labor rights groups illegal (GNLM 2021). Then, on 14 March, police and military forces shot and killed at least sixty-five protesters in the working-class township of Hlaingtharyar (Human Rights Watch 2021). The next day, the military declared martial law across Hlaingtharyar and several other industrial townships around Yangon. Within three months of the coup, oppositional momentum had shifted from street protests to a dispersed armed militia movement (Narai 2022). This is the enduring context in which we write. It is a context of popular struggle over Myanmar's political future, wherein the post-coup junta has overseen the killing over 4000 civilians and the arrest of over 25,000 others (AAPP-B 2024). At the same time, manifold "People's Defence Forces" and pre-existing ethnic resistance organizations contest, or outright control, much of the country.

What to make of this conjuncture? It is full of suffering, even despair, yet also full of possibilities for radical transformation. It is a revolutionary conjuncture, in short—one widely understood as such in Myanmar. Within this revolutionary moment, three notable developments are pertinent for this article's analysis. First, the social basis for initial anti-coup organizing was an interconnected mesh of worker, student, peasant, and other grassroots networks that ordinary people across the country had built up in the years preceding the coup. "Had workers not previously organized unions inside their factories," argues Myanmar labor activist Ko Maung (2021), "the protests that catalyzed the Spring Revolution would not have happened." It is thus ironic that the pre-coup "democratic transition" was dominated by an imperial development agenda, pushed by international financial

institutions, foreign consultants, and US-trained Burmese advisors, in which Myanmar's elected governments, including the NLD, endeavored to *restrict* worker, peasant, and student organizing (Campbell 2023: 17–18). In curtailing such mobilizations from below, the aim was to create “a stable and welcoming environment for foreign direct investment” (Moe Thuzar and Chachavalpongpun 2020: 72). The effect was to limit the growth of the very mass base that emerged after the coup as the primary bulwark against the reassertion of military control.

Second, mass rural dispossession and deagrarianization, which began in the 1990s but continued throughout the “transition” under the legitimating rhetoric of foreign-investment-driven capitalist modernization, increased the proportion of Myanmar's population radically dependent on precarious employment or other off-farm livelihoods (Campbell 2022; Mark 2023; Woods 2020). One consequence is that, while hundreds of thousands of factory workers fled to their hometowns to escape post-coup violence (Frontier Myanmar 2021), almost all of these individuals were compelled by their need for a wage to return shortly thereafter to the industrial zones, despite martial law and enduring military and police repression, or to otherwise flee the country in search of waged incomes abroad (Campbell 2023: 19).

Third, the revolutionary upsurge that has followed the coup has reignited interest in long-standing debates over theory and practice on Myanmar's radical left. Resistance fighters, newly formed left organizations, militant sections of student and trade unions, and an emergent left media ecology have returned to and re-examined concerns that animated leftist discourse during Myanmar's twentieth century—from peasant millenarianism to decolonization, and from communist insurgency and feminist struggle to rebellion in the minoritized ethnic borderlands (Narai 2023). These concerns include questions about the mass strike and peasant insurgency, which is also a question about the varied trajectories of Leninism and Maoism in Asia; class structure and political leadership (that is, which class or class fraction, if any, can or should provide revolutionary leadership?); the national question and communal attachments, including those of ethnicity and religion; the intersections between capitalism, patriarchy, and their potential abolition through revolutionary struggle; and the nature of imperial power, wherein imperialism exists in a vexed political present rather than any simple historical past. These questions, long familiar to diverse radical struggles in Myanmar, are newly prominent in today's revolutionary conjuncture.

In this article, we propose the “Myanmar radical tradition” as a capacious umbrella term for conceptualizing these varied emancipatory currents, past, and present. Thinking with the Black radical tradition (Robinson 1983), as well as radical traditions in anti-imperial, feminist, and Indigenous thought, we propose a notion of Myanmar radical thought that is internally heterogeneous. It is forged not only in the production and circulation of ideas in Myanmar and beyond—with and through, for instance, the translation of Marxist thought across the colonized and postcolonial world—but also from beyond intellectual life, in historical and material forms of grounded political struggle. We argue that the Myanmar radical tradition, more than a discretely intellectual phenomenon, is an effort to enunciate the real movement of popular struggle in Myanmar, drawing from theory and practices that link precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experiences of subjection, exploitation, and revolt. Intellectuals and political groupings are only ever

“radical” to the extent that they are able to articulate the revolutionary dynamics and potentials of existing emancipatory struggles. Cedric Robinson (1983) suggests as much in conceptualizing the Black radical tradition. His discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright is well known. But the Black radical tradition, for Robinson, was not the creation of these individuals, however brilliant they may have been. It was, rather, “an accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle” (Robinson 2000: xxx). Tradition also need not signify something conservative or unitary, “immune to conflict and change, and intolerant of diverse perspectives,” as David Scott (2013) reminds us in his reflections on the Black radical tradition. That would accept a false opposition, inherited from the Enlightenment, between progress and custom, between reason and tradition. On the contrary, one might best think tradition as “a socially embodied and historically extended discursive terrain on which the identity of a community is *argued* out.” Scott continues, “Who are ‘we’? What pasts have made ‘us’ who we are? What ‘events’ make up our common story? What projects can make us who we might be in the future?”.

This is how we conceptualize the Myanmar radical tradition. Our thesis is twofold. First, attention to imperialism—the imposed transnational transfer of value—offers, we argue, important insights into Myanmar’s modern history and contemporary dynamics. Much has been written on colonial Burma. And in the early post-independence years, domestic critiques of enduring neocolonialism were prominent. Yet, in contemporary scholarship on Myanmar, attention to post-independence imperial dynamics is marginal. Herein, we follow Kwame Nkrumah (1965: ix) in defining neocolonialism as a geopolitical arrangement in which a subjected State “is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty [but where] in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.” Second, we argue that the Myanmar radical tradition—heterogeneous and internally conflictual, a site of extended historical dispute—offers critical conceptual resources for grasping these enduring imperialist dynamics.

We proceed below by first historicizing the Myanmar radical tradition. We then present an overview of imperial dynamics from the early post-independence period to the post-coup moment—a late imperial present, we argue. By beginning with radical thought and struggle and then following with imperial dynamics, we stage a dialectical inter-relation between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary theory and practice. Foregrounding revolution prior to reaction, we deliberately figure the Myanmar radical tradition as the conditional ground upon which imperialism, belatedly, unfolds as a crucially reactive formation. In this way, we suggest that imperialism—as Mario Tronti (2019) once argued of capitalism—cannot be understood as a neutral historical development. It can only be understood within a field of historical political struggle waged in theory and in practice. Neither of us are historians. Yet, as anthropologists, we follow an established tradition in our discipline that foregrounds the importance of bringing together anthropology, political economy, and history (Roseberry 1989). In Myanmar, we argue, attention to the dialectically intertwined history of revolution and reaction is critical for understanding the post-coup present.

Historicizing the Myanmar radical tradition: origins and trajectories

Historical origins in the imperial world order

The Myanmar radical tradition is a dialogically constituted formation. A relational process of discursive construction, “born between people collectively...in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin 1984: 110), it has entailed a productive conjoining of political thought and political struggle from within Myanmar, as well as from other times and places, beginning in the imperial world order of the early twentieth century. In this sense, the Myanmar radical tradition is not something bounded or isolated, something set apart from radical thought elsewhere. It names a site and process of convergence, rather, that has included a critical reworking and revision of European Marxist thought, as well as contributions to radical exchanges and transformations within the colonized and postcolonial world. So understood, the Myanmar radical tradition presents a manifestly creative process. This fact has often been lost on less sympathetic observers. Historian Robert Taylor (2008: 6), for example, caricatures Burmese leftisms as “mere nuances on a theme of Marxism-Leninism.” And he dismisses twentieth century Burmese leftists as not “actually understanding the details of Marxist doctrines.”

Such characterizations of Burmese Marxism, and of Burmese leftism more generally, miss how radical movements and critical intellectuals in Myanmar have engaged with, translated, and reinterpreted radical ideas and practices originating elsewhere. In so doing, the Myanmar radical tradition developed as a situated praxis, and as a body of critical thought and politics that offers important insights for radical traditions elsewhere. It is thus more than what Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas decried as the “captive mind”—an uncritical assimilation by Asian intellectuals of dominant Euro-American concepts and analysis without regard to the specificity of the colonial and postcolonial world. At stake as well is Robinson’s (1983) dual account of surplus with respect to the Black radical tradition. While Atlantic colonialisms produced surplus land and labor for the brutal expansion of racial capitalism—in Ireland, the Americas, Africa, and the Caribbean, for instance, from new world plantation slavery to the factory complexes of industrial Britain in the age of empire—so too did marronage, revolts, rebellions, and nationalisms issue forth as “something more than” racial capitalism’s intolerable cruelties (Robinson 1983: 308). This surplus, moreover, is something that racial capitalism struggled to contain as a threat to its order and structure of reproduction, not only in the transatlantic world but in and across the transpacific as well (Lumba 2021). Like the Philippines radical tradition that the historian Allan E.S. Lumba (2021, 2022) invokes, the Myanmar radical tradition presents a formation of theory and practice that originates with the colonial racial capitalism (Koshy et al. 2022) of the imperial world order, even as it imperiled and imperils that very world order. From millenarian uprisings to anti-colonial revolution and communist insurgency, the Myanmar radical tradition presents a surplus formation that is more than, that has long been in rebellion against, colonial racial capitalism’s historical and material conditions, whether at the level of theory or practice.

By most accounts, Marxism became part of political life in Burma in the 1920s. It was, however, only in the 1930s that Marxism became a dominant influence in the country's anticolonial struggle. For it was in 1932 that Dr. Thein Maung, later to become independent Burma's ambassador to Japan, distributed English-language Marxist books that he had brought back following a trip to London (Taylor 1983: 98–100). This led, in turn, to Thein Pe (later Thein Pe Myint), future secretary-general of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), but at the time a student in Calcutta, to seek out members of India's burgeoning communist movement in 1936. On his return to Burma, Thein Pe Myint joined other anticolonial activists in establishing the Nagani Book Club in 1937 for purposes of translating, publishing, and disseminating Marxist and other left-wing and anti-imperialist texts. Amid intensifying anti-capitalist and anticolonial struggles by workers, peasants, and students across Burma—from the Saya San peasant rebellion to militant student and trade union activities—explicitly leftist political ideas gained broad traction. It was under these conditions that a handful of student radicals, including independence hero Aung San, founded the CPB in Rangoon in August of 1939.

Concurrently, a strain of Buddhist-Marxist syncretism took shape beginning in the 1930s, according to historian Emanuel Sarkisyanz (1965: 166). The widespread influence in Burma of this religious-political alloy troubles Taylor's (1983: 95) further dismissal of Burmese Marxists as being singularly fixated on achieving ideological alignment with Comintern policy. The seminal figure here is Thakin Kodaw Hmaing—poet, journalist, and unwavering opponent of imperialism—who, in popularizing Marxism for the anticolonial movement, coined the term *lawka neikban*, or “worldly nirvana,” as a Pali Buddhist rendering of socialism/communism. In his 1935 tract, *Thakin Tika*, Kodaw Hmaing laid out a revolutionary politics in a Theravada Buddhist idiom—offering an overcoming of colonial political economy that would usher in a social order recalling a “primeval egalitarianism” (Aung 2019: 199–200). Shortly thereafter, CPB cofounder Thakin Soe published his influential book, *Socialism*, in which he employed the Pali Buddhist terms *aññamañña* and *anupaṭiloma* to render into Burmese the Hegelian Marxist notion of dialectics. Popular leftist author Bhamo Tin Aung later elucidated dialectics by invoking the Buddhist notion of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, or “dependent arising” (Campbell 2021b: 374). The politically fecund moment of 1930s Burma thus established a certain alignment between Buddhist teachings and the ideas of Hegel and Marx—a sense of compatibility accepted by Burmese leftists for decades to come (e.g., Paragu 2014 [1964]). That Marxism, on the one hand, and Buddhism, on the other, had certain affinities as complementary emancipatory projects, was an argument that, in neighboring India, Dalit scholar and activist B. R. Ambedkar (2004) likewise advanced. Tellingly, one of the most prominent attacks on this line of thinking from “within” Burma came in the form of a 1952 self-published polemic, *Buddhism Answers the Marxist Challenge*, written by a visiting Englishman named Francis Story. Subsequently, the Burmese military's psychological warfare department issued regular polemics along such lines as part of its wider anti-communist counterinsurgency strategy (Tharaphi Than 2014: 5).

In a more secular idiom, but also reworking Marxist theory and practice through situated forms of Myanmar political thought and ideas,

post-independence Burmese leftists embraced the pre-colonial notion of *bon sanit* (literally, “communal system”) as an indigenous conception of communism relevant to a contemporary leftist politics. Sino-Burmese author Kyay Ni, for instance, called in 1950 for the redistribution of privatized inland fisheries as *bon* (communal) property, thereby putting these resources under the collective self-management of fishers themselves (Campbell 2019: 14). Kyay Ni’s proposal for community self-management over natural resources is significant for its contrast with the more authoritarian tendencies of the assorted political parties that dominated twentieth century Burmese politics. Additionally significant is that *bon sanit* endures into the present as an aspiration among dispossessed fishers in the Ayeyarwady delta (ibid.).

Burmese terminology is also admirably effective at capturing Myanmar’s enduring political economic heterogeneity. This is evident in the Burmese word for proletariat, *pyitsimé lutansà*, which translates into English most directly as “propertyless class.” With this capacious notion of the proletariat, dissenting leftists in early post-colonial Burma pushed back against a narrow orthodoxy that privileged industrial wage laborers as bearers of a revolutionary telos, over workers in assorted unfree, unwaged, or otherwise “non-standard” arrangements. Kyay Ni is again illustrative—in particular, in his defense of poor, debt-bound fishers as exploited laborers deserving of leftist solidarity. Of his more “orthodox” contemporaries, by contrast, Kyay Ni (2001:33) had this to say: “Those intellectuals who oppose class discrimination nonetheless turn up their noses at fishers.” Bhamo Tin Aung similarly highlighted political economic heterogeneity in Myanmar—a political economic unevenness between the uplands and lowlands, specifically. And he wrote of the role of upland forced labor in the extractive capitalism that marked British colonial rule. This colonial racial capitalism, Bhamo Tin Aung points out, did not overcome but rather reproduced and deepened racialized ethnic difference in Myanmar (Campbell 2021b: 11–12).

The expansiveness of such “non-standard” labor arrangements is conditioned, in part, as Walter Rodney (1990: 1) observed in Guyana, by a peripheral relationship to metropolitan capital. In like manner, Syed Hussein Alatas (1977: 2) argued that “semi-free” labor in the colony was characteristic of a specifically colonial form of capitalism—a social formation marked by a ruling class alien to, and insulated from, the native population, and a dominance of export-oriented extractivism. In fact, Alatas’ landmark analysis of the “myth of the lazy native” showed how such insulated colonial officials saw “natives” as essentially backwards, producing a race-like understanding of innate, local difference that structured capitalism in the colonial period, and which continues to structure agro-industrial expansion in Indonesia today (Li and Semedi 2021). In colonial Burma, too, activists and worker organizers argued that capitalism was a specifically imperialist formation. Bhamo Tin Aung, we have noted, situated the forced labor of upland populations in the extractive capitalism of colonial forestry (Campbell 2021a: 11). But it was Thakin Po Hla Gyi, a manual laborer on the oil fields and a key organizer in the most significant worker strike of the colonial era, who delivered the most electrifying denunciations of colonial capitalism. “The imperialist capitalists who have us in their grip,” railed Po Hla Gyi (2012: 9, 29) in 1938,

are subjugating us politically, decapitating our social potential, and strangling us economically... The profit and riches that the imperialist minority are oppressively and completely taking away, are our fat, blood, flesh, and skin that have been transferred as commodities to the capitalists.

The thrust of Po Hla Gyi's larger polemic is that capitalism and colonialism are interconnected social formations that divide and reproduce the colonizer and the colonized. The workers' struggle is thus inseparable from the struggle against imperialism. So, it was imperative, Po Hla Gyi argued, for anticolonial activists to support workers' collective actions, and, reciprocally, for workers to take their struggles beyond the workplace to join the wider anticolonial movement. Hence the striking oil workers' march in 1937, which Po Hla Gyi helped lead, from the oil fields of Chauk to join striking university students in Rangoon—a key instance of student-worker solidarity against imperialism in colonial Burma. Notably, the striking oil workers' most far-reaching demand was for the oil fields to be handed over to the workers themselves (Po Hla Gyi 2012: 47). This demand, made against the British-owned Burmah Oil Company, which had monopoly control over the oil fields, echoes Kyay Ni's later proposal for the redistribution of privatized inland fisheries, to be administered under fishers' collective self-management. Thakin Po Hla Gyi's radical legacy would go on to inspire a major oil workers' strike in 1974, and a resurgent oil worker union movement in the post-2011 reform period (Campbell 2022: 26; Htun Khaing 2017).

Radical trajectories: left feminism and ethnic politics

It is important to emphasize that the Myanmar radical tradition exceeds the theoretical reflections and practical struggles noted thus far. The roots of Burmese feminism, for instance, also lie in left-wing politics. In the upheavals that followed the second World War, the Burma Women Congress (BWC)—which “can be regarded as the first feminist organization in Burma” (Tharaphi Than 2014: 102)—was founded in July 1946 by women active in the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Led by Khin Kyi, the wife of Aung San, and Khin Kyi Kyi, a woman soldier who was part of the former Women's Army, the BWC had its headquarters at the home of Ba Hein, a key communist leader, and their objectives reflected those of the CPB. The BWC sought to incorporate women into the interconnected struggle against colonialism and capitalism. They provided clothing for free to women who could not afford it, called for equal employment opportunities for single and married women, and pushed for the institutionalization of maternity leave. Newly formed women's unions, formed by women communists, intertwined with the activities of the BWC, which in protests and demonstrations, also called attention to land politics among farmers, and social welfare provisions among workers. Communist women later exited en masse from the All Burma Woman Independence Group, a party grouping led by a prominent businesswoman, which focused on welfare, rehabilitation, and health more than direct actions, union organizing, and protests against the return of British rule following the war (*ibid.*). The party was not addressing the root problems faced by Burma's women, as the columnist Pegu Ma Khin Lay would argue in the CPB's

People's Journal. For her, capitalism, labor exploitation, and the exploitation of women were inextricable. Without addressing these problems together, the conditions of women would not progress.

Yet, the communist milieu also presented serious difficulties for women radicals. Yebaw Ngwe, or Comrade Ngwe, a decades-long CPB member from a poor rural background, wrote of being convinced at a party rally that only the CPB saw women and men as equals (*ibid.*). But she came to learn that, for the party, women's liberation was epiphenomenal to the class struggle, something secondary to genuine revolutionary politics. She also wrote about rape and sexual harassment in underground communist circles; about committed communists losing babies to simple illnesses in the party's remote jungle camps; and about a pregnant woman's miscarriage while traveling by elephant with the CPB through the forest. Women communists risked everything for the party, yet the party often betrayed their revolutionary contributions. Still, Yebaw Ngwe emphasized a class split in Burmese political life since the late colonial period. Women in nationalist organizations like the GCBA and the *Dobama Asiayone* came from Burma's urban elite; they could balance household responsibilities with public political activity. But the rural poor women who joined the communist struggle faced harder choices, such as abandoning their families altogether—Yebaw Ngwe left her family to join the party—or trying to maintain family life in the harsh environment of the communist insurgency, based in remote, mountainous areas.

This left feminist politics insists on joining the struggle for women's liberation to struggles against capitalism and colonialism. This insistence resonated beyond the explicit communist milieu of the early postwar period. In the 1980s, echoing wider feminist struggles over social reproduction, care work, and household labor, the public intellectual and prominent communist sympathizer Ludu Daw Ahmar (2021 [1987]) argued that society profited immensely from women's unwaged domestic labor. As a result, this unacknowledged work deserved to be recognized as such, and either financially compensated or substituted with a collective approach to social reproduction beyond the gendered "private" sphere of the home.

Despite this rich left feminist history, contemporary feminist discourse notes a range of challenges to feminist struggle in the present (Tharaphi Than et al. 2018). These include problems of mistranslation and negative labelling, which make for a disregard for, or even fear of, feminism in Myanmar; the abiding patriarchal power of the military and the *sangha*; and a broader Buddhist worldview that sanctions and sustains inequality between men and women. First gaining traction among Burmese exiles on the Thai-Myanmar border in the 1990s, and expanding inside the country after 2011, an emergent liberal feminism linked Western-funded civil society spaces and representative parliamentary politics, tending towards a discourse of women, gender, and human rights rather than a feminism tied to and in struggle against the material conditions of women's exploitation. On the other hand, women-led garment worker unions—consisting mainly of young, single women from poor, rural areas—played leading roles in building up popular resistance to the 2021 coup through mass demonstrations and a general strike. Within these unions, however, women tend to see gender discrimination and women's struggle as being subordinate to worker's struggles in and against capitalism (*ibid.*). This echoes earlier concerns

around women's struggles being seen as secondary to or epiphenomenal in relation to revolutionary struggle within the CPB.

In leftist attention to ethnicity, ethnic difference, and ethnic politics, one also finds a creative, productive rethinking of Marxist ideas. When the CPB collapsed in 1989, it was due to a mutiny of its non-Burman rank-and-file—largely Wa, Kokang, Kachin, Chinese, and Shan—against the party's Burman leadership. The collapse led some to associate the fall of the CPB with a shift away from genuine leftism across ethnic difference towards the reassertion of the primordial, identitarian ethnic politics of ethnic resistance organizations (Campbell 2021b). To return to Bhamo Tin Aung, however, himself ethnic Chin and a committed communist, *Yoma Tai-tpwe* suggests something else: a politics of ethnic solidarity that can only ever be realized by working through (not transcending) historically and materially produced (not primordial) categories of ethnic difference. Hence Bhamo Tin Aung's careful handling of the making of cross-ethnic solidarity between the Burman communist underground and Karen rebels in the highlands against Japan's wartime fascist occupation. Thus, too, his attention to the culturally constitutive character of the highland agrarian labor process—swidden agriculture—and the extractive nature of colonial forestry in the highlands, which grounds his understanding of political and economic unevenness between the highlands and the lowlands, as discussed above. Bhamo Tin Aung points to a conception of ethnic difference that is far from justifying any primordialist account of ethnic politics, much less excluding ethnic politics from a “proper” sense of Marxist class politics (*ibid.*).

Moreover, Bhamo Tin Aung's conception of ethnic solidarity—grounded in respect for ethnic difference and in struggle against capitalism and colonialism—resonates with critical anti-imperial understandings of universalism, such as those of the Black radical tradition. Therein, universalism stands not for the arbitrary transcendence of a “spurious infinity” over a set of particulars, but rather a dialectical grasp of the universal as something enriched by the particular—the universal as a site or figure of the co-existence of all particulars. Such was the universalism of Aimé Césaire, who proclaimed, “my conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars” (Césaire 2010 [1957]: 152). As Campbell (2021a, b) argues, this dialectical reasoning is also suggestive for Angela Davis' critique of American liberal feminism, in which Davis calls for solidarity across spatial, gendered, and racialized lines against the ravages of racial capitalism. “The leaders of the women's rights movement,” Davis (1983: 66) writes, “did not suspect that the enslavement of Black people in the south, the economic exploitation of northern workers, and the social oppression of women might be systematically related.”

In Myanmar, of course, Bhamo Tin Aung was not alone in articulating a Marxist understanding of ethnic politics that called for negotiating solidarity across racialized ethnic lines. In a speech in 1975, for instance, the Karen leftist leader Mahn Ba Zahn famously criticized “a narrow nationality attitude” based on fundamental enmity between Burman and Karen people. The Karen struggle is against the Burman government, he argued, which is oppressing not only Karen people but also Burman workers and farmers, who thus “were also going through the same condition

as us.” As a result, he called for a “close relationship and union with the Burman laborers and farmers, and the need to enter our struggle together” (cited in Metro 2021: 66–67). Mahn Ba Zahn’s position was considered threatening enough by imperial powers for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to issue a classified report about the prospects of the CPB being joined by the National Democratic Front (NDF), led by Mahn Ba Zahn, and other ethnic resistance organizations (see Metro 2021: 64–65). China’s public acknowledgment of that joint struggle was described as “perhaps the most significant development of all” in the wake of the anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon in 1967. Even the Panglong Conference of 1947, where Shan, Kachin, and Chin leaders famously secured an agreement for “full autonomy in internal administration” from Aung San, saw leftist criticism of traditionalist ethnic politics. The Shan leadership in particular found itself beset by other Shan groups calling for more democratic arrangements (Walton 2008). Aung San’s relationship was with the Shan *saobwas*, or hereditary leaders, who had retained power under British colonialism in a context of indirect rule in Burma’s so-called frontier areas. The *saobwas* represented a non-Western, culturally defined, native form of rule that directly aligned with, and indeed had put into force, imperial power. The main group that opposed *saobwa* dominance at Panglong was the Shan State Peoples Freedom League, a socialist organization with widespread support that actively called for the *saobwas* to be stripped of all political power (Silverstein 1958: 50).

Postcolonial contradictions: cultural reclamation versus unconditional decolonization

With Burma’s independence in 1948, divergent conceptions of decolonization emerged, following two lines of argument. On the one hand, a critique of European capital’s imperialist role developed into vocal domestic opposition to enduring neo-colonial extraction. On the other hand, a nationalist movement calling for “cultural reclamation” sought to purge the country of “Western” ideas and practices (Tharaphi Than 2014: 34). In this milieu, state-led decolonization emerged as a highly contradictory project. Prime Minister U Nu—nominally socialist, but deeply anti-communist—advocated a statist developmentalism whose triple objectives were industrialization, nationalization, and Burmanization (Brown 2013: 169–170). Yet, Nu’s *Pyidawtha* plan, which set the terms of postcolonial economic transformation as a would-be decolonizing project, was drafted in English by Knappen Tippetts Abbett, a US engineering firm, and printed in London (Aung 2019: 201). And despite persistent domestic calls for land redistribution to rectify colonial capitalism’s unequal agrarian political economy, land reform under Nu remained limited and tended to benefit wealthier peasants (Taylor 2009: 280).

Under these conditions, cultural decolonization played out alongside enduring extraction by Euro-American capital. Highlighting the contradictions of the moment, Tharaphi Than (2012) points to the practices of the Burmah Oil Company, which continued operating unchanged under British ownership following independence. Confronting demands for, if not workers’ self-management, then at least the nationalization of industry, the British-owned Burmah Oil Company offered, in lieu,

decolonization in cultural terms. Specifically, the company proceeded to market its products domestically with stereotypical images of Burmese culture and traditions. This was a recuperative measure, argues Tharaphi Than (2012: 34), meant to “circumvent a rising tide of economic nationalism.” And as Nu’s government was unable or unwilling to address popular economic grievances, it instead sought to channel decolonial desires into moral reform. Such was the impetus for a restructuring of marriage law, whereby Burmese women were invested with a nationalist duty to defend race, religion, and culture against foreign contamination (Tharaphi Than 2014: 124–126). A logic of moral reform also informed Nu’s criticism of sex work as an enduring post-independence social ill. Nu argued that the prevalence of sex work in post-independence Burma indicated cultural corruption from entrenched Western values (Tharaphi Than 2014: 141). He thus called, in response, for a state-led assertion of Burman Buddhist culture and values to counter young Burmese women’s inclinations to take up this form of livelihood.

Nu’s conception of decolonization-as-Burmanization also informed his efforts to replace Indians in the civil service (Holmes 1967). And it led, in 1961, to the Prime Minister promulgating the State Religion Promotion Act, which established Buddhism as the country’s national religion—an atavistic move that antagonized the country’s non-Buddhist minorities, and in turn justified, the military would later claim, its 1962 seizure of state power (Taylor 2009: 293).

Unpersuaded by Nu’s culturalist, moralistic agenda, radicals, like CPB theoretician H.N. Goshal, pointed instead to the impact of post-independence poverty and livelihood vulnerability, tied to the deleterious legacy of colonial capitalism and ongoing neocolonial relations of dependency. An extractive neocolonial political economy, argued Goshal in the so-called Goshal thesis of 1948, endured in postcolonial Burma under a veneer of juridical independence and cultural decolonization. Yet, across the country, popular emancipatory movements were challenging this neocolonial arrangement. “Imperialism,” insisted Goshal (1988 [1948]: 84), “knows that its plans to tighten its grip over Burma’s colonial exploitation behind the facade of fake independence will not succeed unless it is able to disrupt and then crush the rising mass resistance of the people.” To this, the CPB added that, on the matter of sex work, the prevalence of this occupation in post-independence Burma could more accurately be explained as stemming from the country’s “dysfunctional” capitalist system, which exacerbated the precarious economic conditions that compelled so many women to take up this form of livelihood (Tharaphi Than 2014: 146). Post-war precarity, moreover, was bound up with widespread landlessness resulting from the colonial era’s concentration of rural landholdings under private ownership. This political economic analysis informed Goshal’s (1948: 101) support for peasant land occupations and government land redistribution—measures aimed at undoing post-independence Burma’s entrenched neocolonial political economy. Indeed, the Goshal thesis calls for “land to the tiller,” the abolition of landlordism, the takeover of British monopolies, the cancellation of debts, and full self-determination for national minorities—well beyond Aung San’s promise of ethnic autonomy at Panglong.

This split between cultural reclamation and the critique of neocolonialism is far from unique to decolonization in Burma. In the Philippines, worker and peasant organizations in the upheavals of the 1930s envisioned new worlds that would

unsettle—that would suggest something more than—the enduring coloniality of racial capitalism and US empire. Their calls for “unconditional decolonization,” as Lumba (2022) puts it, threatened US empire with far-reaching revolutionary possibilities, going beyond the more measured, conditional decolonization associated with Filipino elite nationalism. The CPB’s critique of the incoming government led by Nu—with its “fake independence,” per Goshal, that accommodated and collaborated with ongoing Euro-American extraction—suggests a parallel vision of unconditional decolonization. It was forged out of the worker and peasant revolutionary activities that would soon, only weeks after the CPB formally adopted the Goshal thesis’ call for armed struggle, transform into the decades-long CPB insurgency against, first, Nu’s parliamentary socialism and then the authoritarian socialism of General Ne Win. This anti-capitalist, anti-imperial decolonizing struggle was little invested in questions of culture, religion, and moralizing norms—the culturalist agenda compatible with indirect colonial rule. Instead, the push for unconditional decolonization sought a Fanonian “disordering of the world” so radical that successive postcolonial Burmese governments, backed by Western imperialism, scrambled to manage, contain, and stamp out the revolutionary new worlds promised by the emancipatory movements of the postwar period. It is to these imperial activities that we now turn.

Counter-decolonization, or a changing imperial order in Burma/Myanmar

This discussion has led with the theory and practice of the Myanmar radical tradition. But the varied revolutionary struggles that make up that tradition are dialectically intertwined with imperial reaction and counter-revolution, with imperialism not simply a given historical formation but rather a reactive phenomenon best grasped within a field of historical political struggle. That history of struggle includes wars, insurgencies, and counter-insurgencies. In the nineteenth century, British aggression established colonial rule in Burma following three wars, culminating in the elimination of the Burmese monarchy in 1885. A key motivation was inter-imperial rivalry between Britain and France over natural resource extraction in Southeast Asia (Callahan 2003: 22). With the British conquest of Burma, now administered as part of British India, pacification campaigns soon confronted a wave of peasant insurgencies against the colonial occupation. These counter-insurgencies never entirely defeated this resistance, yet they achieved enough control for a relatively thin, makeshift colonial state to take shape. Much of its character, such as its legal code, was adapted from Britain’s colonial state in India.

Like colonial sovereignty elsewhere (Karuka 2019), British rule in Burma was a fundamentally reactive project. It was grounded in an implicit—frequently muted, sometimes displaced, often limited—recognition of, the better to dismantle, the sovereignty of political, economic, and social life in Burma. Following the eradication of the monarchy, Burma’s colonizers separated religious affairs from government, which degraded the status of the *sangha* while denying it state patronage. Chief Commissioner Charles Crosthwaite, who had engaged in a detailed study of

precolonial local administration in Burma, replaced the indigenous social unit of central Burma (the *myo*) with the territorial unit of the village, imported from India. The Village Act—at the core of “the destruction of the social and cultural fabric of late-nineteenth century Burma” (Callahan 2003: 23)—sought to defuse local concentrations of power that had given rise to and sustained peasant resistance against colonial rule. Foreign control of the economy was also clear. Timber extraction, petroleum production, and mining combined with the making of an enormously productive rice frontier in the Irrawaddy delta, so that primary commodity extraction and rice exports dominated British colonial capitalism. A colonial state that was thin yet singularly coercive and divisive, akin to extended martial law (Trocki 1992), organized itself almost solely to expand a rapacious colonial capitalism. Hence J.S. Furnivall’s remark about the pervasive economic orientation of the colonial state in Burma: “Normally, society is organized for life; the object of Leviathan was to organize it for production” (Furnivall 1991 [1939]).

Colonial capitalism, moreover, was “racially” segmented. Recognizing the divisive nature of colonial rule, Furnivall (1948: 304, 311) foregrounded the “cleavage along racial lines” that characterized colonial capitalism in Burma. Hence his famous description of colonial Burma as a “plural society” where people “mix but do not combine,” not least people of British, Burmese, Indian, and Chinese descent. Imperial interests had a “stranglehold” (Brown 2013: 15) on the economy so strong that Burmese people found themselves largely excluded—not only from a vast colonial trade surplus, but even from quotidian commercial activity. Indeed, a keen sense of the convergence between imperialism and capitalism would fire anti-imperial, anti-capitalist imaginations in the revolutions to come. Even the millenarian *Saya San* revolt of 1930–1932, sometimes dismissed as an atavistic call to reclaim the lost social worlds of precolonial Burma, can be traced in no small part to land concentration in the Irrawaddy delta among Chettiar moneylenders with roots in Madras, to whom Burmese rice cultivators lost some 1.9 million acres of land beginning in 1930 (Scott 1976; Brown 2005).

One company prominently bridged the colonial and postcolonial periods: the Burmah Oil Company (BOC). By the first decade of the twentieth century, petroleum products made from the BOC oilfields of Burma’s dry zone—kerosene, paraffin wax, candles—were second only to rice, albeit a distant second, in their total value of Burma’s seaborne exports (Brown 2013: 9). Here too Burmese exclusion predominated. In 1904, for instance, some 80% of BOC employees were Indian and roughly 14% Burmese. Thein Pe Myint, the later CPB general secretary, dramatized this exclusion in class terms in a short story titled “Oil.” It opens with the protagonist, an oil worker, gazing out from his home at night: “Away in the distance, the BOC buildings were brightly lit by electric lights, but in the small village where the workers lived, everything was in darkness” (Thein Pe Myint 1973 [1938]). After Burma achieved independence, the Nu government’s accommodation of Western capital meant the BOC first avoided nationalization, offering instead that cultural decolonization at the level of symbolism and advertising discussed earlier. But in 1963, the newly installed military government finally nationalized it, creating the Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) based on BOC assets (U Kyaw Nyein 2011). With its roots in imperial extraction, MOGE became a financial lifeline for

the Myanmar military when, otherwise largely isolated from Western capital by the 1980s, its joint activities with companies such as Total and Chevron resulted in highly lucrative gas exploration and then pipeline construction. The pipelines in Myanmar's southeast were one of few revenue sources for the military regime's state-led capitalist transition in the 1990s.

If colonial sovereignty is at its core a reactive project, a counter-sovereignty that recognizes in order to dismantle indigenous sovereignty over political, economic, and social life, then so too can late-colonial and postcolonial imperialism be grasped as reactive forms of counter-decolonization. Counter-decolonization refers to attempts to contain, displace, and suppress the revolutionary world-making of anti-colonial struggle, not least through collaboration and accommodation between imperial powers and nationalist elites (Lumba 2022). This precisely was the CPB position on the Nu-Attlee Agreement of 1947, which, in settling financial disputes between the British government and the Burmese nationalist leadership, paved the way for Burmese independence just months later. According to the CPB, the Nu-Attlee Agreement reflected the nationalist leadership's fear of rising emancipatory movements in the 1930s and 40 s. Nu, Bo Let Ya, Kyaw Nyein, and Tin Tut, quite prominently—the latter responsible for financial affairs—negotiated independence on terms largely favorable to Western capital, aiming to forestall and avert more thoroughgoing calls for unconditional decolonization. Repudiating the notion that the agreement represented any serious concession to nationalist demands, the CPB proclaimed that “what has happened in Burma was that the revolutionary mass upsurge was not led but betrayed by the national leadership which was at that time also shared by the Communists. Afraid of the rising forces of the revolution and of the growing strength of the working class and the toiling peasantry under the leadership of the Communist Party, it turned to the path of collaboration with imperialism to damn the forces of the revolution” (1948: 90). Under these conditions, argued the CPB, an independent Burma “would now serve as a reliable base for the perpetuation of colonial rule in a new form.” It was against this neo-imperial order that the CPB rose up in anti-capitalist, anti-imperial armed struggle.

The USA swiftly occupied an essential place in that order. In 1950, US President Harry Truman authorized clandestine military assistance to Kuomintang (KMT) forces that had crossed the border from China into Shan State in north-eastern Burma. Routed through the CIA, that assistance sought to induce what Burma aimed to avoid: a PRC attack on Burma (Chow Bing Ngeow 2023: 3). Such an attack would force Burma into the Western camp, away from the non-aligned, anti-imperial position soon associated with Burma's contributions to the 1955 Bandung Conference, for instance. KMT and US interventions in Shan State also played decisive roles in the Burmese military's development, providing an early yet crucial catalyst for institutional consolidation as the military sought to avoid Cold War inter-imperial rivalries (Callahan 2003). While the US strove to covertly undermine the Nu government's officially neutralist foreign policy, the US otherwise backed the Nu government due to its bitter counter-insurgency against the CPB—making Nu, in fact, an important anti-communist US ally, despite the neutralism his government formally espoused. In addition, the Nu government's positions on Korea aligned with that of the capitalist bloc.

Nu's government voted in favor of the US motion at the UN to recognize Syngman Rhee's government in Seoul in 1948, and two years later, the Nu government fully endorsed the UN Security Council's declaration of North Korea as the war's aggressor. Nu's "prompt support for the anti-communist cause" led to international surprise and domestic criticism given Burma's neutralist foreign policy (Selth 2004: 1–2).

The US also funded social science research that could inform the American security state's committed anti-communism in Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group (SEADAG), for instance, was created by USAID and the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Asia Society. Among the work that SEADAG sponsored was research aimed at furthering counterinsurgency in Thailand (Ingersoll 1968), Manning Nash's Walt Rostow-informed fieldwork on possibilities for capitalist modernization in Burma (Nash 1965), and more critical work such as James C. Scott's research on peasant subsistence, which fed into his landmark study of the Saya San rebellion in Burma (Scott 1975, 1976) (Price 2016: 130). A range of prominent social scientists, including several anthropologists—Cora Du Bois, Gregory Bateson, Robert Ekvall, and Robert Blum—even worked directly on Burma for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, either during World War II or shortly afterwards.

Burma suspended US aid programs after learning about the US' covert activities in Shan State—despite the US' fervent denials about those activities. But with the Nu government in the throes of counter-insurgency against the CPB, hence still greatly aligned with US anti-communism, the aid program quickly restarted in 1956. It lasted through the military caretaker government (1958–1960), the 1962 coup d'état that established the long-term military regime, and the early stages of the Ne Win-led regime, which continued the counter-insurgency against the CPB. US-Burmese diplomatic relations mutually broke off only in 1964. According to a former US diplomat, this was "because of rigid socialist policies and disagreement about projects," including a proposed road project to Mandalay (Steinberg 2006: 224). In the 1970s, however, US backing of the Ne Win regime—still fighting the CPB insurgency—began anew after the regime changed course to seek foreign assistance again, with the US ready to oblige. US support, including an aid program for "basic human needs," continued unabated until the coup of 1988. It was only a year later that the CPB insurgency collapsed following the mutiny of its rank-and-file against its Burman leadership.

For most of the Cold War, in other words, US activity in Burma involved active support for successive Burmese governments, including a military regime often described as a pariah state. This activity aimed among other things to repress a communist insurgency, undermine Burmese non-alignment, provoke the PRC, and contain, more generally, the revolutionary possibilities unleashed by decolonization. In its counter-decolonization efforts, mediated by a postcolonial ruling class, US empire made itself the inheritor of British imperial power, itself a power forged between counter-sovereignty and counter-decolonization in an earlier imperial order.

Revolution and reaction across a late imperial world order

In 1989, the collapse of the CPB marked the end of a historical cycle in Myanmar in which communism and anti-communism provided the organizing terms of an especially important contradiction. This was a contradiction shaped by US imperialism in the Cold War more broadly—while shaped in specific ways by US intervention in Myanmar more directly, as discussed. This contradiction also existed alongside a more diverse series of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies in Myanmar's borderlands. Meanwhile, the period of Myanmar's outright authoritarian socialism—arguably best understood as state capitalism (Campbell 2023: 5), this was the period from the early 60 s through the late 80 s, during which the US remained largely supportive of the dictatorship for its anti-communist counter-insurgency—saw a contraction of the revolutionary world-making that so characterized the late colonial and early postcolonial period, when the Myanmar radical tradition had its origins in the imperial world order. Worker, student, and peasant struggles continued, albeit in muted form, with upsurges in particular in the mid-1970s before the 1988 uprising exploded to open a new historical cycle. Remembered largely as a student-led popular insurrection calling for human rights and democracy, the '88 uprising provoked a coup leading to a new military dictatorship. In part to contain popular unrest, the new military junta dismantled the socialist economy, embarking on a highly state-mediated process of economic liberalization. Although this restructuring deepened Myanmar's integration into capitalist circuits of extraction, accumulation, and production—especially in oil and gas, agroindustry, the garment sector, and construction, with investment mainly from China, Thailand, and Singapore—the 1990s and 2000s saw Myanmar treated as a pariah state by Western imperial powers, especially the US. Not until the 2010s, amid more thoroughgoing political and economic reforms, did imperial powers re-engage in Myanmar before dis-engaging again following the 2021 coup.

From the late 80 s, a state-mediated process of capitalist restructuring responded to, while aiming to manage and displace, unrest from below. The Gramscian notion of passive revolution—a “revolution without a revolution,” or a limited program of reforms carried out from above to contain popular unrest—captures much of this process (Soe Lin Aung and Campbell 2016). Unrest included not only the uprising of '88, but also concentrated surges of discontent in 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2007, followed by worker, student, and peasant struggles that regained shape and power in the 2010s. Yet, the national scale of passive revolution—revolution from above in one state—risks framing out wider imperial dynamics. The 90 s and 2000s in particular saw the formation of two dynamics that would merge in the 2010s. First, imperial powers formed a post-Cold War, liberal-imperial consensus in the 90 s around identifying and cultivating civil society, seen as a vector for liberalization that would provide, from beyond the state, a counter-power to residual authoritarian regimes after the fall of the Soviet Union. Hence the Western interpretation of the '88 uprising as a *de facto* color revolution that could and should presage the emergence of a liberal public sphere

set against the reconstituted junta. Second, after 9/11 and through the 2000s, the Bush doctrine foreign policy of forceful democratization—a “new imperialism” (Harvey 2003) that remade a “colonial present” (Gregory 2004) through US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance—resulted in substantial political and economic support for Myanmar’s opposition movement, now seen indelibly as a movement for democracy and human rights.

With the post-2011 liberal reforms, these two dynamics converged. Imperial powers and donors based in the imperial core steered a wave of financial resources—alongside broad technical support in the form of trainings, workshops, and research activities—into newly conceptualized civil society organizations, as well as a range of new, technocratic think tanks and research institutes.¹ Civil society became a privileged domain that captured funding, expertise, and broad attempts to reformat relations between state, market, and society. Rather than confronting state or capital, civil society organizations tended towards market-friendly policy development and the advancement of liberal values, from human rights, democracy, and rule of law to principles and ideas related to local governance and natural resource management (Aung 2018). Recall, for instance, left feminist concerns over the liberal feminism that flourished during the reform period (Than et al. 2018). That liberal feminism’s political imaginary—oriented around a discourse of women, gender, and human rights—contrasts sharply with the left feminism of the early postcolonial period, which focused on and rebelled against the material conditions of women’s exploitation. In stark echoes of colonial indirect rule, imperial relations have been sustained and reproduced through the cultivation of a domestic elite that, while mediating unequal exchange, advances a political order that leaves fundamental hierarchies of power intact.

Struggles from below continued during the reform period. Strike waves convulsed Yangon’s industrial zones; farmers rose up to reclaim land and livelihoods in the face of deepening dispossession, most strikingly in Letpadaung; and students radicalized around repressive education policies (Aung 2018; Prasse-Freeman 2023; Campbell 2023: 15–19). These worker, peasant, and student struggles carried forward important elements of the Myanmar radical tradition. They maintained political struggle in the face of imperial extraction and exploitation, carried out from above—while centering a critique of capitalism in their activities, much in contrast to liberal-reformist civil society organizations. At the same time, policy-making itself—the key domain of civil society groups’ government engagement, in theory—was increasingly rendered technical, effectively removed from democratic deliberation. Senior military officers and prominent domestic capitalists, joined by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank, among other international organizations, pushed an inter-elite pact geared towards inserting Myanmar deeper into global supply chains through foreign investment,

¹ Some emerged earlier, such as the Myanmar Egress think tank, founded in 2006. A key actor within the so-called “third force” reform groups that aimed to reconcile with the military in the late 2000s, Egress and similar groups were reinforced and strengthened by imperial powers in the post-2011 reform period. See for instance Lall (2012) and Aung Kaung Myat (2022).

resource extraction, and export-oriented, low-wage manufacturing (Campbell 2023). The World Bank imposed its policy agenda through a hallmark of structural adjustment programs across the South: conditional loans—as the promise of a new market could hardly be ignored (Prasse-Freeman et al. 2020: 1). The Western financial press proclaimed “a gold rush” (Pasick 2013); *Forbes*, for one, declared Myanmar a “last frontier” for windfall profits (Kent and Connect 2012). Inter-imperial rivalries continued. To counterbalance Chinese influence, Western countries built closer relations with the Myanmar military through arms trade dialogues and police training; Australia stationed a warship in the Yangon port for the first time since the 1950s; and the US, UK, and their allies, including Japan, generally sought to transform Myanmar into a strategic location amid rising inter-imperial tensions in Asia (Nakanishi 2020).

Indeed, Myanmar’s “transition” was an imperial project. It consisted of resource plunder, the super-exploitation of peripheral labor, and the intensification of unequal exchange, all of which facilitated value transfer to the imperial core (cf. Cope 2019). More than simply profitable foreign investment, however, this project was enforced from above against ongoing worker, peasant, and student struggles, describing precisely a neocolonial set of relations (Nkrumah 1965). Domestic elites, meanwhile, not only so-called “crony capitalists” but also many with roots in Myanmar’s political opposition, helped drive forward this imperial project from some of those recently formed think tanks, such as the Myanmar Development Research Institute (MDRI) and the Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD). Within those think tanks, a key group of Myanmar reformers who studied at Harvard, for instance—like the “Chicago boys” who made Chile a laboratory for neoliberalism after the removal of Allende (Edwards 2023)—spearheaded in 2012 the development of a framework for policy reforms that, upon being accepted by the new, formally civilian government, guided early economic liberalization efforts (see Tin Maung Maung Than 2015). At the core of the framework, which the World Bank vocally welcomed, was expansive deregulation. The framework aimed to boost Myanmar’s economic productivity by “removing barriers throughout the supply chain and promoting demand-oriented market support mechanisms” (quoted in MOAI n.d.).

The imperialism of these maneuvers notwithstanding, they might best be described not as fixtures of an unchanging imperial present, but rather within what can be called late imperialism. Like late liberalism (Povinelli 2011, 2016), late imperialism constitutes a market-oriented redistribution of life and death, hope and harm, specifically in reaction to earlier gains made by anti-colonialism, decolonization, and related social struggles. It responds to, even as it remakes and seeks to capture, social difference at large in a world of enduring capitalist disparity. Like late capitalism (Mandel 1976; Jameson 1991; Arboleda 2020), late imperialism marks not a break per se from the intrinsic antagonisms that came before it. Deepening those antagonisms, rather, it marks a clearer, more distilled version thereof—like how late capitalism “is, if anything, a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it” (Jameson 1991: 3). Like the counter-sovereign, counter-decolonizing imperial relations that came before it, late imperialism is essentially reactive, a formation thrown up by imperial powers’ attempts to respond to the

long arc of decolonization. In this sense, late imperialism presents “a story of the unraveling and rebraiding of the social fabric and political and economic relations of global capital in a broad retaliatory response to decolonization” (Tadiar 2022: 24). Importantly, this “latest phase of imperialism” seizes on and cannibalizes the “unruly detritus” of earlier rounds of accumulation in order to extend and reshape extraction today. “Among those unwanted byproducts for the United States has been the very postcolonial state regimes...that it had sponsored as proxies during the Cold War but that had since grown and morphed into their own monsters” (30). These proxies include regimes in the decolonized world that, with imperial backing, fought dirty wars that protected capitalist interests, such as the Myanmar military’s decades-long, US-backed war against the CPB.

Like other attempts to understand new or late imperialist relations (e.g. Amin 2019; Foster 2019), this notion of late imperialism accepts those emphases on the centralization of monopoly-finance capital in the post-World War II period (the consolidation of the US, and US-backed, military-industrial complexes; and the rise of multinational corporations, including those of the financial sector, which penetrate the periphery more effectively than ever before), as well as the fragility of US hegemony in a post-9/11 age of imperial over-extension, inter-capitalist competition, and proliferating conflicts. What this notion of late imperialism adds is the emphasis on its reactive, counter-revolutionary quality vis-à-vis the world-historical arc of decolonization. Late imperialism is an attempt to claw something back from anti-colonial gains the world over (see Prashad 2017). It names a structure of global power that is at once deeply capitalist, yet reliant on extra-economic coercion; it is enforced through financial institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the IMF, and the World Bank, as well as their capture of postcolonial capitalist elites. Fundamentally, late imperialism seeks to sustain and intensify the transfer of value to the imperial core, while aiming to encompass and reabsorb the wreckage of imperial pasts into present processes of valorization. The Cold War’s imperial proxies became targets for a new round of accumulation. In today’s Myanmar, radical struggles have taken new shape against one former imperial proxy—the Myanmar military, back in power—in an enduring fight for revolutionary new worlds.

Conclusion: a living tradition

The Myanmar radical tradition is a living tradition. Born in struggle against the colonial racial capitalism of the imperial world order, the Myanmar radical tradition, we argue, is a tradition of radical struggle that sheds light on a changing imperial order’s reactive character. Thus, while attention to imperialism offers critical insights into Myanmar’s modern and contemporary history, the Myanmar radical tradition itself—not isolated or solitary, but a point of convergence between political thought and struggle from within Myanmar and beyond—also helps illuminate imperial dynamics across time. Between theory and practice, from a syncretic Buddhist Marxism to anti-colonial struggle, communist insurgency, left feminism, and ethnic rebellion, the Myanmar radical tradition has conjoined a critique of capitalism to visions of unconditional decolonization. These radical struggles called forth

over time a counter-sovereign, counter-decolonizing, and eventually late imperial structure of power that, in the present, continues to be imperiled by those struggles that are prior to and in excess of that structure itself.

Today, the Myanmar radical tradition is alive in the revolutionary upsurge that has followed the Myanmar military's 2021 coup. Brutal repression transformed the initial urban insurrection, grounded in the mass resistance of Yangon factory workers, into a largely rural armed struggle. Armed resistance groups—"People's Defense Forces," or PDFs—are now in many cases fighting alongside long-standing ethnic resistance organizations to contest and control as much territory as possible (controlling up to 78% of Myanmar territory as of mid-2022) (Naw Show Ei Ei Tun and Joliffe 2022).

In this context, many of the questions that animated radical discourse in Myanmar's twentieth century have returned to prominence. Tactical debates weighing the relative merits of the mass strike and peasant insurgency, restaging the question of Leninism and Maoism in the present; the debate over which class or class fraction can or should provide revolutionary leadership; the counterposing of the national question to communal attachments, especially those of ethnicity and religion; the problem of capitalism's intersection not only with patriarchy, in the abstract, but with specific patriarchal institutions, from the military to organizations on the left; and indeed the question of imperialism's contemporary form as a threat to this revolutionary conjuncture—all of these concerns are circulating within armed resistance groups, new and resurgent left organizations, militant student and trade unions, and a growing left media ecology. The CPB, for instance, its leadership exiled since its collapse in 1989, has crossed back from Yunnan into Myanmar, reviving its cadres and re-establishing its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (Morning Star 2021). The Revolutionary Marxism group and the Social Democratic United Front (SDUF) group are two new organizations associated with Trotskyism and democratic socialism, respectively, and they publish their own journals—*The Struggle* and the *Social Democrat*. Online, a plethora of Signal groups, Telegram channels, and Facebook groups, like the Autonomist Telegram channel and the Libertarian Marxist Facebook group, provide digital platforms for leftist discussion and debate. Sections of the Federation of Garment Workers-Myanmar and the University of Yangon Students' Union have put workers and students at the forefront of this revolutionary upsurge. Still, these theoretical concerns and institutional groupings are only radical insofar as they reflect, at the level of practice, ongoing revolutionary struggle. Crucial here is strike activity, from the industrial zones around Yangon to the civil disobedience of civil servants and health workers; the autonomist activities of resistance groups, which are seizing and administering territory; gendered practices of social reproduction, which have sustained armed struggle through emotional, physical, and material labor (Hedström et al 2023; cf. Hedström 2016); and no doubt the armed struggle itself, widely described as a people's war that is reimagining Maoism's relevance to revolutionary struggle in the present.

A key theoretical debate that informs this revolutionary conjuncture connects this moment to Myanmar's long arc of decolonization. That is the debate over who is the revolutionary subject. A polemic between Revolutionary Marxism and SDUF played out in their journals (see Narai 2023). In the *Social Democrat*, SDUF argued

that after the military crushed the working class-led urban insurrection, the working class lacked the power needed to overthrow the state. Within a necessary turn to armed struggle, only a cross-class alliance, a revolutionary front that would link the revolutionary national bourgeoisie to the working class and small farmers, could win. This is today's dominant position on the Myanmar left, a position to which Revolutionary Marxism offers an exception. Revolutionary Marxism holds that what the initial strike wave lacked was a vanguard party that could extend the insurrection into the working class more broadly. What was necessary now was for the working class to regroup, form that vanguard party, lead the working class, and draw behind them the wider masses, such as small farmers and ethnic minorities, to smash the junta's new military-state.

Implicitly, both groups ask the same question: what kind of revolution is possible when the working class does not, in itself or for itself, appear to present an obvious, unified political subject? The Revolutionary Marxism group holds that the historical task of the working class is truly to become that subject; SDUF argues for a tactical cross-class alliance that would lead, effectively, a peasant insurgency. Meanwhile, recall the state-mediated capitalist transition pursued by the military junta beginning in the late 80 s and early 90 s, which deepened Myanmar's integration into capitalist circuits of extraction and accumulation while suppressing unrest from below. Recall as well the post-2011 liberalization reforms, an extractivist, inter-elite, imperial project imposed from above by the military, domestic elites, and international institutions, while worker, peasant, and student struggles continued. The US government has also frozen 1 billion USD of Myanmar government funds held in the US, denying to Myanmar revolutionaries these funds that, critics argue, rightly belong to the people of Myanmar (Maung Zarni 2023). In asking what kind of revolution is required now, today's revolutionaries seek alternative futures beyond—in excess of, surplus to—this changing imperial world order, mediated by Myanmar's ruling class. At the same time, the junta's counter-revolutionary violence aims to destroy the revolutionary upsurge and reconsolidate imperial extraction.

In fact, the Goshal thesis of 1948 posed a similar question about revolution. It asked what form revolutionary struggle should take at a time when an incoming postcolonial elite—the parliamentary government headed by U Nu—appeared set to crush the revolutionary forces and sustain neocolonial extraction. The thesis ultimately issued a call for immediate armed struggle. It was adopted by the CPB at the famous mass meeting in Pinyinmana of that year, after which the first shots of the CPB's long insurgency were soon fired. An acknowledgement, effectively, that no conventional working-class subject could lead the revolution—that no Leninist mass strike could win in these conditions—the thesis called for a peasant war that would seize the countryside, encircle the cities, and smash the new state led by U Nu. And that is the war the CPB fought: an attempt to overthrow a postcolonial state whose ruling class, they argued, would only reproduce and intensify the predations of an enduring imperial order.

That call would be familiar to many of today's resistance fighters, left organizations, and union militants. It would be familiar not in the sense that the Goshal thesis is directing revolutionary activity—although the CPB has re-armed, and the polemics on Myanmar's left have some commentators frustrated with attempts, as they see

them, to simply reanimate, ready-made, the Leninism and Maoism of decades past (Hein Htet Kyaw 2022). Rather, the call's familiarity would lie in parallel material conditions. No unified working class appears ready or able to assume revolutionary leadership, while rapacious imperial extraction continues to be mediated by a domestic ruling class whose state—the new military junta's, today—is ripe to be smashed. Then as now, a people's war appeared necessary, promising revolutionary futures beyond the imperial world order. That precisely is the long-standing promise, alive and well today, of the Myanmar radical tradition.

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