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The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology (Hamblin, 2021)

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Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

Abstract

In *The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology* (2021), Jacob Hamblin tackles the concept of peaceful nuclear energy by arguing that the promise of atomic energy was deeply intertwined with Western postcolonial policies and was always linked to the United States nuclear weapon industry. Based on rich archival work, the book tells the telling story of the development of atomic energy from the Manhattan Project to recent decades.

1 Based on the first line of the lyrics of *The Internationale*, the collected essays of the Caribbean island of Martinique-born psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon were entitled *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. In these essays, written in the context of the Algerian struggle for independence, Fanon links the concept of mental and personal health to the impact of language on colonial power relations. The use of terminology such as “colonizer” and “colonized” creates the power relations that make colonial exploitation possible by distinguishing between natives and colonizers, according to Fanon. In doing so, the language used establishes an important condition for then transforming this distinction into a relationship of “slave” and “master”, a class distinction intrinsic to colonial domination. For Fanon, this insight prompts him to argue for a connection of the local intellectual and revolutionary elite with the lumpenproletariat, a term derived directly from Karl Marx’s description of the stratum of the population that itself lacks the class consciousness necessary to initiate a revolution, to provide punch to the broader anti-colonial revolution.¹

2 Since the publication of Fanon’s work and its first English translation in 1963, his essays have inspired a wide variety of activists, intellectuals and revolutionaries around the world. Also, historian Jacob Darwin Hamblin takes explicit inspiration from Fanon’s work in his recently published book *The Wretched Atom: America’s Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021). Already in his introduction, Hamblin acknowledges Fanon’s work by referring to his quote “they are given bouquets of flowers. Invitations. To be frank, everyone wants a piece of them”.² The framing of technological promises as “little more than a sales pitch, at best playing on naïve dreams that hundreds of years of economic evolution could be skipped and at worst providing

an in-road to other forms of paternalistic influence, leaving such countries forever ‘wretched’ or ‘damned’ to continue the structure of colonialism” by Hamblin, perfectly underpins his aim to reframe the history of peaceful atomic energy as a (geo)political and strategic constructed framework created by Western and Soviet governments, and Western-dominated international organizations, to sell the interests of these governments in forming postcolonial dependencies from countries in the Global South, but also less apparent countries like Japan and Israel, to the manufacturers of atomic energy.³

In his book, Hamblin tracks the history of peaceful atomic energy in its broadest sense, including the use of radioactive isotopes for medicine and agriculture, from the conclusion of the Manhattan Project in the detonation of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 almost to the current decades. Hamblin’s main argument is that there actually never was such a thing as “peaceful” atomic energy. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet governments used the promise of civilian atomic energy as “a tool of state power” by taking “advantage of social aspirations, anxieties, and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in the developing world”.⁴ Here, Hamblin alludes to the cornucopian promise that nuclear energy would solve all kinds of future problems in the world, from sorting food shortages to offering inexhaustible energy, and from environmental benefits to making innovative future technologies possible. This promise was actively sold by the United States and Soviet governmental agencies and diplomats and was framed as an intrinsic willingness to further science and prosperity in other countries. Hamblin convincingly shows, however, how actual policies, focused on creating relations of dependency with countries in the Global South to lure them under the Western or Eastern Cold War umbrella and creating markets for selling rest products of the nuclear weapon industry, lurked under the rhetoric veil of the nuclear promise.

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

² Quote from Fanon in Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *The Wretched Atom: America’s Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

- 4 In the first of the three parts *The Wretched Atom* is divided into, Hamblin sketches an overview of how the promise of nuclear energy was developed by United States governmental agencies since the Second World War, culminating into the 1953 Atoms for Peace speech by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In his speech, Eisenhower showed the world a cornucopian vision of the peaceful atom. A future of prosperity and abundance, driven by the limitless possibilities of peaceful nuclear energy, especially in medicine and agriculture. Although this speech was widely regarded a gigantic step away from nuclear proliferation and towards a better future, Hamblin argues that the famous speech actually was more a product of post-colonial developments during the previous years. Already since the Manhattan Project, the United States had actively tried to get worldwide access to deposits of uranium and monazite sands – resources needed for the production of atomic weapons. By urging countries with access to these resources, like India and Brazil, to focus on developing peaceful application of the atom in agriculture and medicine based on radioisotopes and offering their technological help and supplies of radioisotopes in exchange for uranium, the United States tried to ensure that these countries would not turn toward developing nuclear electricity or weapon production, which would need the use of uranium. In this way, the United States government wanted to both get access to strategic minerals, distract the world from focussing on threatening applications of nuclear energy, and get rid of their stockpiling amounts of radioisotopes, the waste products of the United States weapon industry. The 1953 Atoms for Peace speech was then a way to convince the world to focus on developing research based on these isotopes.
- 5 In the second part, Hamblin turns to the countries on the receiving end of the previous described policies. Here, the author breaks away from the book's main actors – the, mainly, Western governments, especially the United States' and their policies – to focus more on the actors one would expect to be central in a story referencing Fanon's work in the title. In these chapters, Hamblin does a good job showing that the governments of, often recently decolonized Asian and African states, were neither passive nor irrelevant. Many of the governments were well-aware that they were being played and kept consistently trying to get access to nuclear technologies with more strategic and technological potential, like nuclear weapons and the production of atomic electricity. Hamblin illustrates the complex and shifting attitudes towards the United States' atomic promises within the different countries by making use of some elaborate case studies, for example showing how atomic energy was used as a tool for sub-Saharan pan-African movements in the 1960s and pan-Arabism in the 1970s. In both cases, atomic weapon and electricity production were actively pursued, sometimes successfully with the detonation of the first "coloured bombs" in China in 1964 and India in 1974. These cases show for Hamblin how "wretched countries" would try to resist the nuclear extortion by the United States and other Western countries, bringing the Western governments to find new strategies for creating relations of nuclear dependencies by means of investments in uranium mining or selling nuclear power plant technologies, for example the French uranium mining enterprises in former colonized countries. In this context, Hamblin also refers again to the essays of Fanon to show that "the waves of independence" – meaning the, sometimes hard fought, decolonization projects – did not mean the end of exploitation by white people and industries.⁵
- 6 The third part returns to the main actors of the book. The United States government had to adjust their nuclear policies to the increasing access to non-United States' nuclear power plants around the world, the emerging nuclear weapon programs in countries like India and China, and the loss of access to strategic resources like oil in decolonized countries. To make sure that these countries would halt their nuclear weapon development and would stay dependent to United States' nuclear technologies, the government decided instead to actively promote their model nuclear reactors and try

5 *Ibid.*, 109-110.

to sell them to other countries, keeping them dependent on United States' enriched uranium and nuclear know-how. In this way, nuclear energy also became an asset to other geopolitical and market goals. Whether it was recouping oil money by convincing OPEC countries to buy back nuclear reactors or justifying its own growing weapons arsenals, Hamblin convincingly argues that by creating these new dependencies, Fanon was right in stating that industries and former colonizing countries would continue to try exploiting former colonized ones. In this way, the promise of peaceful atomic power as inexhaustible source of clean energy, actively promoted in United States' official rhetoric, was not at all peaceful and was actually an active act of postcolonialism.

7 Overall, Jacob Hamblin clearly succeeds in telling a captivating and empirically rich story in which he fundamentally challenges the concept of peaceful atomic energy by showing its direct ties to policies related to the United States nuclear weapon industry and the use of the atomic promise as geopolitical and strategic weapon during the Cold War. *The Wretched Atom* especially stands out in uncovering a wide variety of sources, ranging from the IAEA archives in Vienna to the CIA archives in Washington D.C., and the FOA archives in Rome. This includes sometimes, relative new sources, such as the FOA archives, combined with more commonly researched sources published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes, which are presented in a refreshing way, telling a new story of how the peaceful atom was in fact a postcolonial project.

8 By making use of these Western orientated sources, Hamblin offers us, as Western readers and scholars interested in the history of atomic energy, a mirror in which reflection we can distinguish how the cornucopian promise of inexhaustible and clean nuclear energy was from the start always foremost a rhetoric strategy to keep dominating a rapidly decolonizing world in the context of the Cold War. *The Wretched Atom* is a well-researched reflective work, forcing us to think about the status of peaceful atomic

energy. In this way Hamblin surely makes up for the explicit references to Fanon's work, in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's reflection in his 1961 preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* that "Fanon explains you to his brothers and shows them the mechanism by which we are estranged from ourselves; take advantage of this and get to know yourselves seen in the light of truth, objectively".⁶

9 Although, Hamblin also shows how the countries on the receiving end of the United States policies made up their own minds on how to deal with emerging nuclear technologies, even elaborating how the atomic promise played an important role in creating new identities for previous colonized countries, the main focus of the book clearly is on the Western strategies and rhetoric. In this way, *The Wretched Atom* is more a history of the Western promotion of atomic energy than the explicit references to Fanon's work seem to indicate on the first glance. Where Fanon by focussing on the colonial and postcolonial struggles, argued for an activist revolution to cut the ties of exploitation more severely by mobilizing the "wretched of the Earth" and by letting go of Western stories, literature and rhetoric, and re-establishing an own language, Hamblin's history is foremost focussing on the policies of the wrenching Western governments instead of mainly focussing on the psychological effects of these policies on the waged struggle to break free from colonial ties. Even when Hamblin goes into more detail on the debates in the "wretched countries", these are mainly viewed through the lens of the documents collected in the CIA archives.

10 This focus on Western sources influences the role the atom plays in the story. Although, one could argue that the atom itself is an independent actor in Hamblin's story too, given that it does play a role in creating new pan-Arab and pan-African identities, the story of the atom remains one from a Western perspective. In his introduction, Hamblin does refer to scholars in Science and Technology Studies (STS) focussing

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface" in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 12 (cf. note 1).

on the characteristics of the atom as a driving force behind nuclear developments, like Itty Abraham's research on Indian nuclear energy and Gabrielle Hecht's work on the African uranium trade.⁷ In this way, Hamblin combines the fields of STS and International Relations. In *Being Nuclear* (2012), Gabrielle Hecht introduces the concept of "nuclearity", a technopolitical, geographical, personal, and temporal phenomenon that is constantly shifting and determines when something is regarded as "nuclear".⁸ By focussing on mainly Western policies and rhetoric however, these aspects only appear in *The Wretched Atom* when relevant for those policies. The geographies of uranium deposits in countries like Brazil for example, only become relevant when the United States Atomic Energy Commission recognized the existence of those deposits. The stories of the role the existence of these deposits of radioactive minerals played for the local environment and residents are not told.

- 11 Choosing his Western perspective on the role of the atom does then raise the question why Hamblin deems the atom itself "wretched", as the title does suggest. Although, the atom does play a role as actor in Hamblin's research and one could argue the atom in itself is not

knowledgeable on class distinctions, the atom mostly seems to be a tool for Western governments to exert power. The atom does not provide the "punch" for a successful revolution from the colonized countries deemed necessary by Fanon to cut all the ties between colonizer and colonized, but keeps playing its role as rhetoric promise used to accomplish colonizing geopolitical goals.

In conclusion, Hamblin's *The Wretched Atom* 12 offers a telling, and very rich, insight into the history of Western, mainly United States, policies regarding peaceful atomic energy. The book offers both a great overview of the development of Western atomic energy policies since the Second World War, and successfully contests the notion of "peaceful" atomic energy. The main contribution of the book, however, is to show how the history of nuclear energy from Western perspective is inextricably linked to the history of postcolonialism, the concept of race, and the division between "the West" and "the rest". In this way, *The Wretched Atom* will be of interest to everyone willing to learn more about the history of atomic energy, decolonization, and United States' geopolitical strategies during the Cold War.

⁷ Itty Abraham (ed.), *South Asian Cultures of the Bomb: Atomic Publics and the State in India and Pakistan* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010); Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

⁸ Hecht, *Being Nuclear*, 15.

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