WHERE (AND WHAT) IS THE archive of decolonization? Given the tenor of scholarship on the history of archives, it may seem counterintuitive even to pose this question. Historians and anthropologists have painstakingly detailed the vagaries of colonial archival production.1 But sources pertaining to the dismantling and reconfiguration of imperial power—as opposed to its creation—have received very little attention.2 Earlier versions of this essay were delivered as talks at Columbia University, the Institute for Historical Research, Harvard University, and the Graduate Center at CUNY; I thank the audiences for their insightful questions and comments. I learned a great deal from the other participants in this roundtable, as well as from the astute readers' and editors' reports from the American Historical Review. For their enormously helpful readings of this essay, I thank Stephanie Camp, Lynn Thomas, James Vernon, and most of all, my intrepid co-organizer of this roundtable, Sarah Stein.


My own work on and with such sources has led me to meditate on the following questions: What is decolonization? Where and when do we believe that it took (or is still taking) place? Where do we look to find out about it, and how might our options be changing?

Historians of European empires have often tended to assume that we all know—and agree upon—what “decolonization” means, and how to measure its outcomes. But the extraordinarily diverse challenges to European empires cannot be reduced to a singular process. Even for a single empire, there were always multiple decolonizations, taking place on different timelines for varied populations. Our inattentiveness to the archival dimension of decolonization has created a false certainty regarding the meaning of decolonization itself. Conceiving of decolonization as an archival event can enrich our understanding of its diverse histories and give it a new multidimensionality.

I wish to delve more deeply into the question of why certain sources pertaining to decolonization are or are not available, and how their availability is organized. Through working on some of my own “archive stories,” which speak to the complex dynamics of secrecy and openness in Britain during the reconfiguration of imperial power, I have learned why some elements of decolonization have been so difficult to see. The politics of archival access have shaped how decolonization has been defined (as a diplomatic process rather than a social one), as well as where we think it took place (overseas rather than in Britain) and to whom we think it mattered (policymakers rather than ordinary citizens).

The longstanding distinction between the high politics of decolonization overseas and its domestic aspects needs to be called into question. This distinction has not been merely conceptual in the minds of historians, but rather has been embedded into the structures of archives upon which histories of decolonization have been based. From a metropolitan vantage point, the National Archives’ files on domestic social welfare reveal a more diverse history of decolonization and its actors: one that is social and familial rather than exclusively political.

Mapping more precisely where and when the theme of decolonization shows up in the National Archives can aid us in understanding not only the unevenness of decolonization’s own historiography, but also some of the broader dynamics of secrecy and openness in Britain’s culture of information and the category of the intimate in postwar British history. Moreover, these sources can help us reevaluate the impact of decolonization on individual and social experience.

In thinking through the relative absence of a historiography of archives and de-

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4 Todd Shepard invites scholars to consider this question in “History Is Past Politics?”; see also Jordanna Bailkin, The Afterlife of Empire (Berkeley, Calif., 2012).

colonization, the exceptionally rich body of work on colonial archives provides both guidance and caveats. How can we explain the industry of attentiveness to the colonial archive, the ongoing proliferation of scholarship about archives in colonial eras and locales? Why have its counterparts in later eras been largely ignored? And how has this oversight entrenched certain historiographical divisions?

Many scholars have argued that colonialism was archive-dependent from its earliest manifestations. The first European colonial explorers perceived detailed recordkeeping as a vital matter of life and death: a mechanism to recalibrate the demographic balance of power between rulers and ruled. We might say the same, of course, about most systems of governance. Yet some have proposed that colonial states are more closely allied with archives than are other state forms, because colonialism relies on the upholding of classificatory systems (for example, of racial difference) that require elaborate archival apparatuses.

Colonialism—with its complex cycles of acquisition and loss—is a key element in the story of how documents came to be where they are. Antoinette Burton has charted how the physical space of the British Library’s India Office, with its “portraits of ‘Oriental despots’” and “residual clubland feel,” is “marked by the trappings of colonial rule.” Colonial archives, she warns, are not merely repositories of documents, but also “whispering galleries, land mines, and crime scenes.” The anthropologist and historian Nicholas Dirks sees colonial archives as uniquely opaque. He vividly describes his sense of anxiety upon entering a space that mirrors and amplifies colonialism’s own distortions. For him, the colonial archive emblematizes everything wrong with state archives—their imbalances and silences, intertwined with their claims of objectivity.

This assertion of the uniqueness of the colonial archive has been widely echoed, especially with regard to the histories of sexuality and family life. Ann Laura Stoler

6 For an exploration of these themes with regard to early modern France, see Jacob Soll, The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s Secret State Intelligence System (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2009).
proposes that we attend not only to colonialism’s archival content, but also to what she describes as its peculiar form. For many scholars, colonial archives dramatize a larger story of archival injustice. Theirs is the prototypical archive story, and their shortcomings and failures are those of all archives writ both small and large. Thus the colonial archive becomes both representative and distinctive. I would ask whether colonial archives truly are so peculiar, and what relationship they bear to other moments of archival practice.

Scholarship on colonial archives often cuts off abruptly with the transition to independence, as if archives became more straightforward at this juncture. But decolonization prompted a variety of new archival crises and opportunities, generating its own forms of knowledge and agnotology. The process of closing down imperial administrations, a key moment of decision-making about provenance, brought tremendous archival demands. As independence struggles raged, files flooded into London; officials in Cyprus inquired whether they should send their fifteen tons of paper or have an archivist from London sort through it abroad. In Cape Town, after South Africa left the Commonwealth, the Colonial Office planned to destroy 75 percent of its records. Any papers that might embarrass Her Majesty’s Government were to be sent directly to London. In Botswana, local archivists were forbidden to view “sensitive” files; this labor-intensive rule required that each document be scrutinized to determine its destination. The archivist Daphne Gifford reported that her office was “chaotic, a mad tea party with everyone screaming ‘No room; no room’ from morn till night.” Embassy officials’ wives were paid £40 per month to weed through the South African records; these women were accused of

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“wanton destruction.” In Uganda, eight months before independence, the departing British regime loaded three Land Rovers full of confidential records and dumped them into Lake Victoria.

Like so much else about decolonization, its archival torsions could not be fully anticipated or controlled. One striking element of this history is its unevenness. Individuals who worked for colonial governments could not legally remove administrative papers, but “personal” papers, such as diaries or records of their academic research, were less readily tracked. For missionaries, medical workers, or employees of international companies, their papers might be deposited centrally in the archives of their employing organizations, or simply retained privately. Destruction of some records was countered by other instances of hyperdocumentation; papers pertaining to imperial violence and decline could be salvaged and preserved as well as buried and burned.

Nor were these torsions limited to the postcolony. The metropole, too, functioned as a live site of knowledge production about imperial decline. Decolonization registered its presence in Britain—and in British archives—in unexpected ways. What, then, did the collapse of formal imperialism look like from the perspective of metropolitan lives and archives?

These reflections are based on questions that arose for me while I was conducting research for my 2012 book *The Afterlife of Empire*. The book explores how decolonization transformed British society in the 1950s and 1960s. Other scholars had charted decolonization’s military and diplomatic details, but I wanted to show that it could also be deeply personal, lived through daily routines, social interactions, and individual experience. Specifically, the book considers how decolonization aided in the transformation of that other behemoth of post-1945 history, the welfare state. The end of empire and the rise of the welfare state have long been treated as separate chapters of modern British history. I sought to bring these fields—often juxtaposed, but rarely integrated—into closer conversation by showing how the distinctive forms of welfare that took shape in 1950s and 1960s Britain in the domains of mental health, education, child welfare, and criminal law were shaped by decolonization and its perceived demands.

Trained as a Victorianist, I found the process of shifting to the 1950s and 1960s to be charged with unforeseen problems and possibilities. The opportunity to con-

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16 Gifford to Cheeseman, March 2, 1967, ibid.
18 In 1972, Dr. Shitla Prasad, director of the Indian National Archives, proposed that Colonial Office records should be returned to “developing” countries. The prospect of repatriation is complicated by the fact that many of the records were organized along subject lines (such as defense or social services), and cannot be split up purely along geographic lines. Proponents of retention have argued that all these documents are part of the history of Britain, and their relocation would destroy the chain of custody. Banton, “‘Expatriate’ or ‘Migrated’ Archives”; Colonial Office to Veale, February 1955, TNA, Colonial Office Files, CO 554/1363.
19 See the contributions to this roundtable by Caroline Elkins and Sarah Stein.
20 On the isolation of the postwar era in British history, see Philippa Levine, “Decline and Vitality: The Contradictions and Complexities of Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Twentieth-Century British History* 21, no. 3 (2010): 396–404; in the same roundtable on “Twentieth-Century British History in North
duct oral histories was juxtaposed with new concerns about the mechanics of declassification. This project was fueled by the unprecedented (though not uniform) availability of post-1945 files from the National Archives, in particular the files from social welfare departments, such as the Children’s Department, National Insurance, and the Metropolitan Police. These departments have not typically been included in narratives about the collapse of imperial power, partly because of their particular dynamics of confidentiality. Many welfare files have been retained beyond the conventional thirty-year rule because of the presumed sensitivity of personal information. Typically, access to these files is granted when the individuals involved have no traceable descendants: a fairly random process of declassification. For this reason, many files from the 1950s and 1960s are just now becoming publicly available. Although I was excited to be the first scholar to gain access to some of these files, I had trepidation about the haphazardness with which they were released.

Scholarship on the impact of decolonization in Britain has divided into two camps, with competing definitions of where, when, and how decolonization occurs. Political historians have insisted that the end of empire was largely ignored in Britain. This thesis was forged in the 1980s, in the days of the Falkland War and the twilight of the Cold War, when the idea that imperial decay could take place without

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ill effects in the metropole seemed especially appealing.23 John Darwin argues that Britons were distracted from the pangs of imperial loss by Britain’s special relationship with the United States and the popularization of the Commonwealth: “It was like a man in the dentist’s chair, soothed by smiling nurses and laced with pain-killers, while a dentist with a manic grin probed his jaw. Only later does he find that all his teeth have gone.”24 On this view, decolonization is driven by states, but state action is limited to the diplomatic push and pull between nationalist independence movements and the former colonial powers—who are constrained to a limited set of players: Cabinet, the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office.25 The timeline is focused on identifying exactly when the British state woke up and acknowledged the sea change taking place around it.

Cultural historians have been more prepared to take the end of empire seriously, at least in terms of registering its impact in the metropole.26 Bill Schwarz argues that memories of empire did not magically disappear with independence; rather, they seeped into the wider cultural dramatizations of ethnicity stirred by black migration. Critics of the welfare state evoked parallels between whites in Rhodesia, who had been “abandoned” by Westminster, and English whites, whose interests were “sacrificed” for those of migrants.27 At the same time, migrants of color became agents for imagining Britain’s postcolonial future. If one considers decolonization in terms of its cultural manifestations, Schwarz suggests, then it long outlasted the period of independence struggles and is still ongoing.28

Schwarz’s argument draws on mass media and popular culture, looking mostly outside of state archives. But state archives, too, have an important tale to tell about how decolonization mattered. The welfare files of the National Archives suggest that

25 The British Documents on the End of Empire Project, for example, was established in 1987 to publish an annotated selection of documents from the National Archives pertaining to the policies of successive British governments toward the ending of colonial rule. Philip Murphy, “Censorship, Declassification and the History of End of Empire in Central Africa,” African Research and Documentation92 (2003): 3–26.
the micropolitics of decolonization constantly marked personal and social life in Britain, influencing metropolitan debates about youth, education, marriage, health, childrearing, and crime. In this sense, decolonization was a deeply social process, one that affected former colonizers along with former colonial subjects. Yet social definitions of decolonization are not necessarily richer than political or cultural ones. It may be less helpful to crystallize a single definition of decolonization than to recapture the cacophony that has taken place around this process of definition, and to think through the implications of this discordance.

My argument that decolonization shaped the making of the welfare state originated in the mundane process of noticing where particular files were located. Searching at Kew for “Nigeria” in 1960 or “Jamaica” in 1962, one finds not only policy discussions about transfers of diplomatic power, but also debates about Nigerian children fostered by white English families and the repatriation of African Caribbean mental patients. To use the British historian’s alphabet soup, decolonization looks different in the CO and FO files than in BW or MEPO: those who worked in child welfare or policing understood decolonization very differently—and often saw it as much more significant—than policymakers at the Colonial Office and Foreign Office.

These quotidian issues—the minutiae of archival work—have had dramatic consequences, structuring entire fields of inquiry and interpretation. Calling attention to these archival logistics illuminates both the structure of archives as their creators imagined them and the contingent shape of the historiography that followed. Looking anew at the National Archives can reveal how decolonization transformed personal and familial life. These sources have the capacity to prompt new scholarship—for example, about gender and emotion in decolonization—that has long been absent. We need not simply cast the history of decolonization in the stamp of its colonial predecessors, which were so attentive to the study of intimacy, identity, and emotion. But decolonization had its intimacies, too, which we overlook to our detriment.

As Ann Laura Stoler suggests, the question of where certain themes reside could be as vital as what they contain. Commentaries on European nurseries might be expected to turn up in reports on education, but the fact that they consistently showed up elsewhere (for example, in reports on white pauperism) suggests that what was “out of place” was often sensitive. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

CO, FO, BW, and MEPO are the departmental abbreviations used by the National Archives for the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office, the British Council, and the Metropolitan Police, respectively.


Several scholars have charted how political independence galvanized the refashioning of selves in the former colonies, often through the idioms of nationalism and socialism. My point here is that former colonizers, too, were remade by these same transformations. Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago, 2002); Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth,
Thus we can begin to see that “inner life” of decolonization, the traces of which have been so difficult to locate, and to globalize the intriguing vein of scholarship about the history of emotional life in postwar Britain. This era figures prominently in the memoirs of Britain’s most influential social historians, marking the dawning of a new awareness of relations between states and selves that generated new modes of historical inquiry. Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) charts the powerful psychic effects of an era in which the state’s intervention in children’s lives was “highly visible, and experienced, by me at least, as entirely beneficent . . . I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn’t told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something.” Frank Mort suggests that accounts of the making of the self are especially important for the historiography of postwar Britain, to counter the “purely public” histories that have characterized the period. Compellingly, he proposes that the psyche be retrieved from the “dead space” of other narratives of postwar Britain.

The full enlivening of this psychic space requires a renewed sensitivity to the role of global transformations, including those of decolonization. The welfare files of the National Archives reveal that both decolonization and welfare were powerfully emotive phenomena, even if this element of their histories has not yet become a scholarly preoccupation. These files depict the diversely unpredictable relationships that were galvanized and intensified—rather than concluded—by independence. There is violence, certainly, but also friendships, mentorships, and family ties that spurred and were spurred by the new world order.

Oral history is often characterized as a means of rectifying gaps in the documentary record and mitigating the archival losses of migration and colonial regimes. But oral histories may sustain archival conventions rather than disrupting them, revealing their underlying categories of thought. For *The Afterlife of Empire*, I interviewed key experts of the 1950s and 1960s: psychologists, psychiatrists, and—


34 I take this phrase from Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires*.


thropolists, and sociologists who worked in the then-incipient field of migration studies and race relations. One of my interviewees was Michael Banton, who wrote numerous texts on migrants of color in Britain. A prominent sociologist of race and migration, he had also conducted anthropological fieldwork in Sierra Leone prior to independence.38 I met Banton in 2008, and he graciously shared troves of unpublished material with me. But we hit a snag when I asked how his training as an anthropologist informed his later research. Specifically, I asked him about the connection between his work with migrants in Sierra Leone, who had moved from rural areas to towns, and his work with migrants of color to Britain, many of whom were actually from Sierra Leone. There was no connection, he said. An awkward silence ensued. What were the differences? There were no differences, he countered. There was simply no way to think about these moments or these groups as having anything to do with each other.

This interview was frustrating, but also illuminating. It revealed how experts from the 1950s and 1960s tried to articulate distinct terrains for their interventions, resisting any integration of the fields that they strove to keep separate. There was a fundamental clash between the question I was asking and the remarkably durable narratives—which insistently divided migrants from indigenes—that Banton and others established.39 It is worth working creatively with (and between) archives to interrogate these segregations. If postwar experts discounted certain populations as migrants, then we need to examine how their choices were archivally enshrined rather than replicating them.

The welfare files reveal that thinking about migrants in Britain was powerfully shaped by British understandings—though these were hardly unified—about how independence was progressing in the migrants’ countries of origin. Thus the relationship between migration and decolonization was far more complex than can be expressed by treating migrants as the lone survivors of colonial history, a thesis produced by postwar expertise.40 By the 1950s, welfare workers understood West Africans in Britain primarily in terms of the trajectories of independence in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone—and Britain’s investment, economic and otherwise, in

38 Banton studied social anthropology at the London School of Economics, later teaching anthropology and sociology at the University of Edinburgh and Bristol.
39 Indeed, Banton is still routinely cited in histories of migration to Britain. I am indebted to James Vernon for pointing out that historians of postwar Britain continue to treat experts of the 1950s and 1960s as a vital source base, even as these same experts serve as the objects of our critiques.
managing those trajectories. These individuals were not conceptualized as true migrants, but as temporary sojourners destined to lead their new nations. This assumption prompted a hypervaluing of West Africans in Britain as a conduit to controlling Africa’s future. West Indians, who during these same years were caught up in the complex process of federation, were never afforded this same value—partly because of British officials’ relative absence of engagement in postwar Caribbean development.

These hierarchical systems of thought had high stakes, shaping health, education, and childcare provisions. As British social workers debated childcare practices for West Indian and West African children in Britain, they drew on colonial knowledge about childrearing in both sites, metropolitan definitions of parenthood, and their idiosyncratic visions of how independence should look in Africa and the Caribbean. Individuals from decolonizing countries also challenged these expert definitions, promoting their own view of how welfare in Britain supported (or thwarted) independence abroad. The relevant history was not only the deep colonial past, but also Britain’s ongoing economic, political, and cultural engagements with multiple paths of decolonization and the recalibration of colonial taxonomies in the context of metropolitan welfare.

These imbalances help to explain the uneven ground on which multicultural Britain emerged, along with its fragmentation of black communities. One rich source that interweaves the histories of welfare and decolonization is the CO 981 series: 139 welfare files on individuals from Africa, Asia, and the West Indies who traveled to Britain for higher education. These files include high-profile figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere (the future leaders of Ghana and Tanzania, respectively), offering fascinating snapshots, literal and figurative, of diverse metropolitan experiences: successes and failures, illnesses, debts, crimes, and political activity. We might ask not only where and when decolonization took place, but also who its agents were: young Ghanaians and Nigerians who studied in Britain, certainly, but also the white working-class women who fostered their children in Kent and Sussex. Such files incorporate new actors into the narrative of decolonization. Just as an earlier generation of historians reoriented our understanding of colonialism’s protagonists, we can diversify our sense of the key players in the histories of decolonization—not only diplomats and nationalist politicians, but also social workers, social scientists, and the ordinary individuals with whom they worked. Moreover, some (though by no means all) of the people who worked in the realm of overseas student welfare had enjoyed careers as colonial officials, raising questions about why some forms of expertise survived the transition to postcolonial politics while others came to seem hopelessly out of date. Bringing the theme of decolonization to bear on 1950s and 1960s Britain can transform its cast of characters, as well as globalize its familiar themes.

THINKING ABOUT WHAT ESCAPES the researcher’s eye, and about archival secrecy, can encompass divisions of geographic subfields and disciplinary orientation as well as the powerful mechanisms of state coercion. Colonial archives, Stoler suggests, were built upon a changing collection of conventions about what should be classified as secrets. In the era of decolonization, the notion of what constituted a “secret” was transformed. The violence of imperial collapse was one prized secret, which generated its own mechanisms of archival suppression. But other obfuscations were less expected, taking place not only in Kenya, Cyprus, and Malaya, but also in Britain. Their contours involved not only military and paramilitary violence, but also the destruction of families, the warping of diagnoses, and the falsifying of crimes. And their actors included not only the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office, but also the wider panoply of departments associated with the rapidly expanding provisions of social welfare.

It was during the era of decolonization that the British state became most explicit about its role as an object and a creator of archives. The record-generating activities of two world wars and the expanding welfare state exposed weaknesses in the earlier system of selection and destruction. The Public Records Act 1958 created a standard preservation policy for state documents, mandating their transfer to the public domain within fifty years; this rule was amended to thirty years in 1968. The narrative of the state’s increasing transparency regarding its own secrets was thus itself an artifact of the postwar years, gaining strength from the Freedom of Information (FOI) campaigns of the 1960s. Decolonization catalyzed these campaigns, as the Suez crisis of 1956 increased public demand for the dismantling of secrecy around imperial wrongs. Decolonization prompted new demands for transparency while generating new modes of confidentiality, creating a distinctive tension between secrecy and openness that has structured its own historiography.

Newly independent countries debated whether they should adopt Britain’s

43 Colonial officials held no consensus about what knowledge was considered “confidential.” Often, what was described in these terms was not really secret at all. The presence of poor whites in colonial locales, for example, was surely no “secret” to those who inhabited these sites. But documents regarding their presence were “confidential” precisely because there was official dissension about how to interpret and respond to them. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.


47 There were numerous exceptions to both the fifty- and the thirty-year rule, mostly pertaining to national security. Colin Holmes, “Government Files and Privileged Access,” *Social History* 6, no. 3 (1981): 333–350; see also Christopher Moran, * Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

emerging (and constantly shifting) practices of confidentiality or craft their own. One Kenyan archivist considered whether retaining documents for fifty years made sense for a “new” African country: “it is not easy to follow European practice partly owing to the comparatively short period of recorded history in Kenya and partly to pressure on the appointment of scholars to study it almost down to the present day. It has seemed desirable, therefore, to depart somewhat from UK practice, where the 50 year rule is generally in force, but where numerous ‘ad hoc’ exceptions are made, often, it must be admitted, on a somewhat arbitrary basis.”

He successfully proposed a thirty-year rule that was then still five years away in Britain.

In Britain, FOI campaigns did not end with any particular independence movement. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 granted the right to members of the public to appeal governmental decisions to withhold information, and exposed the security services (many of which were deployed to manage—or instigate—the violence of decolonization). Publicity has focused on intelligence files, assuming that it is the Special Branch’s closely guarded secrets that will prove most enlightening. But after five decades of activism, the privacy of information about individuals has gone relatively unnoticed, and received much less critical attention than information produced explicitly by and about the state. Enshrined in both FOI and the Data Protection Act 1998, the confidentiality of “personal” files (i.e., files that contain details about individual marriages, child welfare, or sensitive criminal cases) in the National Archives has long outlasted that of most diplomatic files.

What ensues is a troubling asymmetry about where we look to understand the thought and practice of decolonization. In hundreds of National Archives files, the violent wrongdoings of the decolonizing state are readily apparent—from the framing of Irish migrants for terrorism charges to the forcible repatriation of West Indians who were labeled mentally ill. Only twice in the process of researching my book was I denied access to files because of section 27 of the Freedom of Information Act—that is, on the grounds that the information in the file could damage relations between Britain and another state. But denials under section 38 (the file could damage an individual’s mental or physical health or safety) and section 40 (which protects sensitive personal information when an individual had no reason to think this information would be disclosed) have been much more common.


A. J. Peckham to Philip Curtin, September 30, 1959, TNA, CO 927/705; Curtin to Peckham, October 5, 1959, ibid.


Bailkin, The Afterlife of Empire.
formation would become public) were far more common. In this sense, the National Archives have become more forthcoming, more quickly, about state secrets than about personal ones.\textsuperscript{54}

The key point here is not that exemptions for personal information should be withdrawn. Rather, I wish to illuminate the process by which we make determinations about which documents pertain to individuals and which pertain to states, and how “personal” documents may hide ways of seeing the state as well.\textsuperscript{55} The state, it seems, is still making its own call about where we can locate its presence.\textsuperscript{56} These evolving rules of access have structured the analytic frames in which decolonization has been understood.

Our ability to know about decolonization remains circumscribed by the archival structures put into place in the postwar years, which spoke (no less than those of their colonial counterparts) to the fantasies of their creators. What, then, were these fantasies? One, at least, was that the effects of decolonization could be confined to the realm of high politics. This illusion has been sufficiently powerful to constrain our interpretive lenses, to shape the historiography of decolonization, and to interact in complicated ways with the paths of declassification.

It is in the welfare files that the complexities of decolonization reside. Here we can see the scope and diversity of the state’s efforts to manage the process of decolonization far beyond the diplomatic realm: from Children’s Department files crafting divergent policies for the care of West Indian and African children in London, to National Insurance files on polygamous wives’ lawsuits to obtain widows’ benefits from insurance tribunals. Perhaps this is simply a more elaborate way of saying that we find decolonization where we think to look for it, or are allowed to look for it. Delving into the social welfare archives reveals that the British hardly lost their empire in a fit of absence of mind. Decolonization mattered in the metropole, deeply: to social workers, childcare professionals, mental health experts, and the people who embraced and challenged them. These files illuminate the depth and breadth of decolonization’s impact, while also revealing (through their structures of confidentiality) why this impact has gone unrecognized.

At first glance, welfare and decolonization might seem to bear diametrically opposed relationships to secrecy and openness of information. Thus, we might expect them to be archivally—as well as historiographically—divergent. One might assume, for example, that the welfare state overproduced information about individuals and families, and thus increased demands for the free transmission of this information, whereas the often violent contractions of the imperial state required secrecy. But the relationship between secrecy and openness for these two twentieth-century phenomena was considerably more complicated. As David Vincent has noted, the dawn of social democracy in Britain was greeted with a full-scale restatement of the approach to secrecy. Information leaks were regarded as amateur errors; the professional welfare worker resolved the tension between secrecy and transparency through personal

\textsuperscript{54} On these categories, see Vincent, \textit{The Culture of Secrecy}.

\textsuperscript{55} David Anderson has shown how individual privacy exemptions have been used to cloak the wrongdoings of the colonial state in Kenya. David Anderson, Huw Bennett, and Daniel Branch, “A Very British Massacre,” \textit{History Today} 56, no. 8 (2006): 20–22.

\textsuperscript{56} I am speaking primarily of the National Archives; local archives may have very different relationships to secrecy. Cohen, \textit{Family Secrets}. 

\textit{Where Did the Empire Go?}
discretion. Social Security pumped out more information than any other sector of government, but also attracted the most acrimonious criticism about its failure to divulge information to the same public that required this information in order to be successful claimants. At stake was the issue of whether welfare benefits were seen as democratic rights or updated poor-law handouts, to be shrouded in mystery.57

Local authorities often treated the increasing volume of information about homes and family life produced by expanding social services with “culpable carelessness,” and it was not until the 1960s that the social services began to respond to some of what we might call the archival contradictions of welfare: welfare professionals needed to exchange confidential information freely, yet also keep it confidential. The growth of bureaucratized welfare, reinforced by information technologies that created new options for linking records, revamped confidentiality. Confidentiality was a vital condition of communication between welfare workers and clients, yet caseworkers were increasingly required to share client information in a newly formalized culture of the structured exchange of private details.58

Thus multiple departments of the British state were engaged in ongoing debates about how to grant access to their own documents. The twinned cultures of secrecy and openness in Britain must be understood as being generated by the thought and practice of welfare and decolonization simultaneously. Both produced tremendous numbers of documents, as well as new mechanisms for thinking about their categorization, dissemination, and suppression. Moreover, these two phenomena were not operating separately, but were part of each other’s systems of thought and archival production.

Such sources begin to explain what was previously obscured: the interaction of local and global demands in the making of the welfare state. The impact of the end of empire has been embedded in these long-classified files from the departments conventionally associated with welfare, masking the globality of the conditions that forged postwar society. We can use this new vein of sources (the release of which is fitful, but ongoing) to give the welfare state a new geography and genealogy, charting its proximity to, but also its unseen dependence on, the end of empire. At the same time, we can break up and diversify the locations of the welfare state’s construction and map them onto the former empire and the new world order that emerged in its place. The longstanding divide between decolonization and welfare is all the more striking, and all the more necessary to overcome, when we recognize their archival intimacy.

Where, then, did the empire go? Thinking archivally, it did not reemerge only in the postcolony, but also remained vital in the metropole, bound up in the avalanche of paper that accompanied welfare, and hidden in welfare’s own contentiously evolving systems of classification. Where is the archive of decolonization? Ulti-
mately, it is to be found in locations even more diverse than the sum total of the empire itself.

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