Revisiting Africa's Stalled Decolonization – A Response

By:

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I would like to thank the commentators for their views on my piece 'Sixty Years Later: Africa's Stalled Decolonization'. The genesis of that article comes from a module I have been teaching at the University of St Andrews, entitled "Modern African Political Thought" which seeks to engage with all the great African and Africanist intellectuals. I have been struck by the hopes and aspirations of these thinkers but when compared to 21st century Africa, it seems that much of what they discussed and warned about has been ignored.

Thus, Kwame Nkrumah's counsel about the dangers of disunity and neo-colonialism (later articulated also by Thomas Sankara) remains prescient. Neo-colonialism replaced direct physical subjugation with continued subjugation (Koshy 1999: 1) and trade became (or continued to be) a vector of global domination (ibid). With increasingly unmanageable nationalist struggles, the imperialist powers 'granted' independence whilst concurrently crafting new methods to achieve the same results that were once won with naked conquest (Nkrumah 1965). While with the same breath speaking of 'freedom,' the

colonial powers and their allies in Africa lay foundations for a continuation of the processes of domination.

Further study of Amilcar Cabral's insistence on the need to restructure the inherited state and its institutions and Walter Rodney's deep analysis of the historical roots of Africa's underdevelopment (1973) has convinced me of their relevance as ever (something I will return to below) when discussing the continent. Writing in response to scholars from a different field has made me think about the importance of inter-disciplinarily and how our respective academic silos often blind us to the systemic and organic nature of things. So, it has been a great exercise to think through how to respond.

Most of the commentaries seemed to agree with my argument, so I will restrict my responses to those that differ. I completely agree with Lily Mburu with regard to psychological decolonisation. This is what WEB DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko all argued and is an indispensable element of a successful postcolonial future which has not been realised thus far. Colonialism did not merely exploit the African peoples economically and politically, but also produced subjective categories, such as "the colonized," that intrinsically dehumanized and disempowered them. Colonialism created a type of man who was subservient, exploited and whose culture and history were devalued, dismissed and disregarded. What Fanon et. al called for was a process of decolonisation that would construct a "new man", a New African, by initiating the opportunity for Africans to transit from bring dehumanized commodities to empowered people with agency. Decolonisation then was not only a fight for economic and political freedom, but also the psychological struggle for self-liberation and the possibility to create new subjectivities. In the context where, sixty years later, *La Françafrique* is very much alive, where African leaders look for outside approval (to Paris, Washington, increasingly Beijing etc.), can we not state that at the psychological level there is still a long way to go?

Moving from the superstructure to the structure, in her commentary, Kimani Goddard asserts that:

I suggest that what Taylor sees as economic underdevelopment, fuelled by the persistence of lingering neo-colonial economic relations, in reality is a

phenomenon sustained in part, by a more generalised diffusion of specific normative economic philosophies, into the drafting practice of international economic treaties. These normative philosophies on the regulation of the global economy, now constitute the accepted rules of the international economic system, to which all countries are subject.

The argument of my paper was precisely that specific normative economic philosophies drafted outside of Africa and then brutally forced onto the continent in the post-independence period in the guise, first as SAPs and now as PRSPs, perpetuate lingering neo-colonial economic relations and embed Africa in a structurally weak position within the global economy, forever bound to export primary products. The normative economic philosophies of neoliberalism see Africa's "comparative advantage" in Ricardian terms. This philosophy elides the criticality of the colonial experience, slavery etc. to the early European involvement in "free" trade with the continent, which established the continent's broad economic profile (Watson, 2017).

Here, I would like to make a point about history. It has become fashionable to suggest that all of this was so long ago that really, what can it tell us about contemporary Africa? The slave trade? Why, that was decades ago! Here, I would like to point out the research of Nathan Nunn (2008) from Harvard University (hardly a hot bed of radicalism). In his study, Nunn demonstrates that If the slave trade had not occurred, then 72% of the average income gap between Africa and the rest of the world would not exist today and that 99% of the income gap between Africa and other developing countries would not exist. This is the context.

And this brings me to the issue of African agency. Since independence, it is true that Africa has had its fair share of Idi Amins, Emperor Bokassas and Mobutu Sese Sekos, with attendant disastrous policies. But these are caricatures and whilst "[c]ondemnation there must be; but compassion too, for those who talked so boldly about freedom…had so little room for manoeuvre' (First, 1982: 465). What was inherited at flag independence and what space was there in the global context? In addition, as history has repeatedly shown, if and when an African leader does seek to strike out on an independent path inimical to perceived capitalist interests, a price is invariably paid—as the fates of Lumumba, Nkrumah, Cabral, Sankara, and others attest.

The actual theft of African bodies, the unintentional advantages of Britain and other Western economies, coming from feudalism (an exceptionally regressive form of the tributary mode of production that typified all initial civilizations) led to the rise of capitalism first in such countries, which then generated a global split with the uncompromising outward enlargement of capitalism and colonialism (Amin, 2009). Consequently, British rule (in India, for example) possessed ‘a kind of built-in mechanism which extorted resources out of a low-level colonial economy; and the surplus thus generated through a complicated process was drained out of the economy through the process of external trade, the dynamics of which was supplied by the unilateral transfer of funds in an equally complicated kind of way’ (Ganguli, 1965: 85). This has been described as the “free lunch” enjoyed by the colonial powers at the expense of the colonised Indians (Patnaik, 2006). Globally, it was the pillage of the “Third World” (Jalée, 1968).

Certainly, history shows that underdevelopment in the periphery is in large part the result of past—and continuing—economic (and other relations) between the core and the periphery economies and that these relations are an indispensable part of the global capitalist system (Frank, 1972: 3). This has its roots in the way in which capitalism was diffused from (initially) Western Europe outwards, whereby:

The mode of production that was substituted in these countries [the colonies] had its origin in the sphere of capita list production in the home countries of the colonialists. But despite its origin in the sphere of capitalist production the aim of this mode of production was not the reproduction of the capitalist mode in the colonies. Rather, it aimed at throwing the burden of capital accumulation in the mother country on the shoulders of the colonies through a policy of relentless and ruthless exploitation of their surplus (Chaudhuri, 1984: 24-25).

In the case of India, Paul Baran’s summary of this corruption of the sub-continent by the British ruling class pithily captures this reality:

There can be no doubt that had the amount of economic surplus that Britain has torn from India been invested in India, India's economic development to date would have borne little similarity to the actual sombre record…India, if left to herself, might have found in the course of time a shorter and surely less tortuous road toward a better and richer society (Baran, 1957: 150).

Given the history of Africa's encounter with Western capitalism, I am concerned that a legal positivism inherent in Kimani's analysis naturalises African underdevelopment. A liberal version of international political economy that relies on such analysis cannot construct innovative normative practicalities that might decouple it from the deeply illiberal and oppressive economic processes embedded in history. The laws of the international trading regimes are crafted, not by Africans, but by economists and policymakers in the Global North, with the interest of the elites of the Global North at the heart of any prescriptions. That is why neoliberalism and the "free market" is sold as the panacea for Africa's developmental impasse.

Neoliberalism has been described as 'an owner's revolt against the class and international compromises of corporate liberalism' (Van der Pijl 1998: 130). By doing so, 'neoliberalism [has] lent a politically reactionary quality to the technologically highly innovative round of capital accumulation [via globalisation] which made the re-imposition of capitalist discipline possible in the first place' (ibid.). In short, 'neoliberalism has become the predominant ideology legitimating the privatisation of the state-controlled economy and the substitution of the market for the social provision of basic welfare' (Overbeek and Van der Pijl in Overbeek 1993: 1). Only by locating contemporary "international law" within this wider context can we make sense of the specific normative economic philosophies that are at the heart of international economic treaties. The kernel of these treaties is a comprehensive concept of control which Henk Overbeek (1990: 26) defines as transcending 'narrowly defined fractional interests and which combine mutually compatible strategies in the field of labour relations, socio-economic policy and foreign policy on the basis of a class compromise'. It was neoliberalism that emerged as the new hegemonic concept of control and that led it to becoming the dominant ideology of the contemporary period. This was essentially centred on an idealised notion of the market 'in which progress is defined in terms of the subordination of labour to capital [while] the state role is limited to a Lockean

night watch’ (Van der Pijl 1989: 30).

These policies represent an ostensible return to the classical economics of Adam Smith, though this project has gone beyond what Smith envisaged. However, it is an order adapted to an age of increased globalisation and first rose to prominence with the “Chicago School” and the theories of Milton Friedman. Based on the quantity theory of money, which balanced the economy and secured the durability of prices, stability was seen as only being realised if the market was allowed to function freely and without the monetary interventions of the state, tempted by populist pressures. In essence the welfare-nationalist architecture of the post-war era had to be demolished if capitalism was to recover from the recessionary crises of post–1971 and regain its growth track. The main points of the neoliberal project can be summarised as including the “rule of the market” and the liberalisation and de-regulation of the economy so as to facilitate unfettered private enterprises to develop and—in theory—grow, thus allowing a “trickle down” effect to the less advantaged. In order to do so, a reduction in labour costs is envisioned while greater openness to international trade and investment is privileged; cuts in social services and the “roll-back” of the state are in order to cut government expenditure and further take the state out of interfering with the “natural” mechanisms of “the market”—the state being the “enemy of freedom”; and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors, thus freeing government from having to expend on services that can—in theory—be better managed by private concerns while justifying a reduction in taxation that had formerly been collected to operate such enterprises.

Capital ‘compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode a production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst’. (Marx and Engels, 1848). As will be shown, the ideological discourse of neoliberalism does indeed assign to itself the common sense of a “realistic” civilisation in its organising principles. Such a scenario puts governments at the mercy of capital and accountable not to their electorate but to faceless speculators in New York, London, Beijing and so on. In short, spatial territories have had to (re)structure themselves as a means to attract capital while competing with rival territories for investment. To do so requires an almost complete break from any redistributive aspirations regarding social equity,

which is subordinated to the imperatives of monetary stability. This has obviously intense implications for Africa with deep structural inequalities.

In discussing neoliberalism, it is useful to look at it as an evolving ideology, otherwise we are in danger of evaluating the normative economic philosophies that underpin international economic treaties as if they are God-given. In doing so, Gramsci's notions of ideology is particularly insightful. Gramsci's ideas regarding ideology differ from the somewhat crude notions of "false consciousness" that can be found in *some* readings of Marx and Engels. According to Gramsci (1971: 165), ideologies are not illusions but are "real" in the sense that when they obtain the status of widely held beliefs they play a distinct component in social history: 'popular beliefs…are themselves material forces'. They do not exist in some sort of space above the political, but have material existence in the practical activities surrounding this arena. Their material existence is manifested in the social practices of individuals and in the institutions within which social practices play out.

Furthermore, ideologies possess their own agents i.e. intellectuals who specialise in the development of organic ideologies and in the duty of moral and intellectual movement. What the proponents of neoliberalism have been remarkably successful at is in advancing 'a sea change in the intellectual zeitgeist: the almost universal acceptance by governments and markets alike, of a new view about what it takes to develop' (Krugman 1994: 28). This development has 'set free-market ideas up as the only sensible response which political leaders and policy-makers [can] possibly make to a wide range of economic problems' (Berger 1999: 454). This is not to say that such a process was simply "top-down" imparting of the received wisdom. The process was dialectical where certain groups of intellectuals 'inspired by the promise or actual achievements of global capitalism, articulate[d] what they perceive[d] to be its essential purposes and strategies' as the material conditions of globalised capitalism underwent a transformation (Sklair 1997: 515). Hence, Kimani asks 'how well placed are African and Caribbean post-colonial economies in order to harness the benefits of the laws and treaties of the international economic order?' rather than the more apposite question as to what precise "benefits" exist for Africa (and how these might be quantified) in the current laws and treaties framing the neoliberal international economic order. Given the masses of studies that argue forcefully that the global

economic system is stacked against Africa, an appeal to the very same legal structures that guarantee and patrol this system cannot resolve anything.

Towards the end of her commentary on my article, Kimani Goddard then shifts to suggest that:

Failure to implement municipal legislation or draft treaties which comply with obligations and norms established by the WTO Single Undertaking, the International Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), the WIPO Treaties, The World Bank Treaties, and several other international economic agreements, will often result in legal consequences that reinforce the "peripheral economy trap" and reduce economic development policy choices even further.

This is rather like blaming the victim! It is precisely the neoliberal policy demands that perpetuate the neo-colonial situation and the perpetuation of Africa's weak structural position in the global economy. Africa has, since the 1980s at least, been under pressure to deal with increased inequality generated by neoliberal policies and Western capitalist development models that have been imposed on the continent. This has been the epitome of Kwame Nkrumah's 1965 description of neo-colonialism, whereby 'the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside'. And as Nkrumah goes on, 'The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world' (ibid.). However intricate the legal provisions may be, this fact is unaltered.

Walter Rodney's argument here is relevant. Colonial rule disrupted the natural evolutionary course of Africa socioeconomic and cultural development and thereby undermining their economies (Rodney, 1973: 278). Before imperialism, parts of Africa were more developed than parts of Europe and the introduction of European rule led to the decay of African institutions, making them unworkable and twisted. The colonial institutions manoeuvred Africans through

their traditional leaders and socially isolated communities from one another. In Africa today, countries like Nigeria have been “independent” since the 1960s, but they continue to have a subordinate and dependent relationship with the Global North (and increasingly countries such as China). These countries, termed “post-colonies” by Achille Mbembe, have undergone a process of decolonization, but still colonial powers still exert a powerful influence (Feldner, 2018: 516).

Globally, the rolling out of neoliberal policies has led to a plethora of harmful socioeconomic consequences, including increased poverty, unemployment, and the deterioration of income distribution. The normative prescriptions of international law as exemplified by economic treaties preclude industrialisation, even though industrial development is self-evidently the indispensable driver of economic development. . It is ‘not necessary to claim that neo-colonialism is a conspiracy on the part of imperialist powers’ because the outcome of domination would have been the same regardless of whether there had been a single unified effort behind it (Stoneman and Suckling 1987: 516-517). Ex-colonies, once moulded to serve as extractive sites for commodities for the imperialist metropoles now do the same while contending against other African economies, with the effect of reducing prices, to the advantage of global corporations (ibid). Appealing to law does not answer or explain how and why the continent’s stalled decolonisation has occurred. Historical work á la Walter Rodney, grounded in political economy, does as Rodney’s systematic interrogation of the African problem identified European capitalism as a primary agent in underdeveloping Africa (Bly, 1985:122). It is from that starting point that other analysis (legal or otherwise) can to be situated.

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