Did Decolonisation Stall in the Global South? A Conversation with Ian Taylor: Symposium Introduction

By:

Amaka Vanni
James Thuo Gathii

October 19, 2020

2020 marks sixty years since the Year of Africa – the year when seventeen African countries gained political independence from European colonial rule. The term Year of Africa was coined by Dr. Ralph Bunche, then-UN Undersecretary for Special Political Affairs, to recognise the importance, even if symbolic, of rapid decolonization on the continent and elsewhere that year. In doing so, he sought to underscore the year 1960 as a turning point in the self-confidence that Africa could make its own decisions. With these decolonisation processes emerged a compelling picture of the continent – a vision of a better future with endless economic opportunities; national self-determination and governance; end of foreign occupation, Pan-Africanism and eventual

continental unity. Globally, this rupture resulted in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, directly challenging the internationally and legally entrenched racialized hierarchy of colonial rule that considered non-European parts of the world as unready for self-government. That Resolution, among others, dethroned the Eurocentric consensus that non-European countries must develop under European tutelage to qualify for self-government.

Sixty year on, the trajectory of African decolonization, according to Professor Ian Taylor, seems to have stalled. In his article titled 'Sixty Years Later: Africa's Stalled Decolonization,' he argues that most African countries continue to be entrenched in an ongoing cycle of poverty and under-development. Recalling Kwame Nkrumah's key text on neo-colonialism, Taylor admits Africa elites in power tried to build their nations via state projects in the first few decades of independence. However, these development endeavours were not far-reaching because these projects involved the agency of the state or state-aided private bourgeoisies (in this case, monopolistic corporations) and revolved around domesticating -perhaps rather than breaking out of- the process of capitalistic accumulation (pg.48).

Drawing from various dependency theories to exemplify his points, Taylor notes that export of primary commodities means Africa will remain in a weak and peripheral position in the global economy. Further, that Africa will remain susceptible to volatile commodity prices and declining terms of trade (pg. 42). This is because Africa integrated into the global capitalist economy in a subservient arrangement that caters not 'to the needs of the native populations, but by the demands and concerns of the economy of the metropole and its ruling class, often under monopoly conditions' (pg. 43). In other words, sustainable growth and development in Africa continues to be blocked by the domination of external economies. This unequal exchange, Taylor continues, ensures that any nationalistic policy or development intervention failed. Thus, by the 1980s when imperialism regained the offensive in the form of neo-liberalism, African states were already vulnerable (pg. 50). Taylor concludes by noting the current visionless crop of African leaders are not only apathetic to interrogating the position of the continent within global capitalist economy, but also uninterested in doing the deep work of untethering

their respective countries from neo-colonial ties and other generalised foreign domination.

In this symposium, our contributors react to Prof Taylor's paper by interrogating embedded structures of knowledge generation and creation, economic development in Latin America, international law, disadvantageous investment agreements, and continental integration. In particular, the essays explore how these arrangements reshape traditional centre-periphery relations. From the posts in this symposium, our contributors emphasize the salient point that under-development in Africa (or elsewhere) should not be understood in simplistic economic terms alone, alluding to Taylor's heavy focus on political economy in his analysis. But also, via social, cultural, legal lens to better understand the multi-layered and complex factors that continue to asphyxiate pro-poor development opportunities of the Global South.

In this first post of the symposium, a thought-provoking piece by Lily Mburu invites us to explore the question of decolonisation through the lens of knowledge creation and language. Mburu argues that over the years, the language of neoliberalism (and attendant exploitation of both labour and capital) has metamorphosed into new shapes that continues to advance exploitative tenets of imperialist capitalism. The 'new' language endorses indigenous capitalism, which is nothing but 'the same extractive DNA of imperial capitalism' that fetishizes entrepreneurship instead of interrogating structural transformation and bad polices. In this respect, the current ways of being and doing are not only steeped in colonial epistemology, but obstructs any form of continental development -- one which external donors and corporations continue to exacerbate. As a result, it is fundamental to confront the realities of neo-colonialism by 'engaging in critical decolonial pedagogy and fostering discourse on decolonization that is grounded in contemporary realities.'

The second post is reflective piece by Foluke I. Adebisi who interrogates the state of play in decolonisation of knowledge systems of production in the Global South. Here, Adebisi argues that 'decolonisation of knowledge production and transmission is caught in a bind.' With a focus on language in education, institutionalisation and certification, Adebisi offers a compelling analysis of

stagnation of the decolonial project, noting that ‘schooling is often done in European languages, which not only erases indigenous languages and modes of learning, but also stifles knowledge production. Consequentially, ‘learners struggle with the [colonial] language and text doubling the mental effort required to learn.’ Ending on a hopeful note, Adebisi concludes that while it seems decolonisation has stalled in many spaces, however, there is an ongoing decolonisation process underway in the informal sector which grew out of local and community circumstances and positively influencing health, the arts, finance and environmental conservation.

The next two posts focuses on neoliberalism in Latin America. Penning the third post in the symposium, Jimena Sierraexplores the reality of Latin American states to achieve a genuine self-determination. In this piece, Sierra notes that although Latin American States have been ‘independent for more than one hundred years, they still remain in a peripheral position in the north-south dynamics of the global economy.’ With this point, Seirra argues that the problem is not with Latin American (or African) states per se, but with the unequal position of postcolonial national states in the global capitalist market. Recalling the different economic policies that emerged within Latin America (cepalistas”, “dependentistas” and “decolonial thinking”), Sierra argues that these theories did not do enough to generate long-term transformations as Latin American countries still maintain a subordinate position in the global capitalist economy. However, Sierra concludes by reflecting on decolonial thinking, which she believes provides a better option for achieving economic development as it goes beyond questioning the public / private dichotomy to interrogating ethnic and racial hierarchies built during the European colonial expansion, which remain in the dynamics of the global economy.

The next post by German Sandoval is a powerful personal and analytical reflection of the stakes of developing alternatives to colonially inherited and imposed economic paradigms in Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. Sandoval concludes that the aspirations of emancipation from third world such as liberalism, socialism, communism, dependency theory, neo-liberalism and anarchism have always reproduced European discourses and realities. For this reason, he proposes revolting against modern thought as the predicate for imagining alternative futures.

Moving our focus toward international [economic] law, the next two posts in the symposium interrogate the constitutive role of law in reaffirming and legitimating neo-colonial structures and underdevelopment in Africa and elsewhere. In the fifth post, Ntina Tzouvala reflects on how international law undergirds the process of incomplete decolonisation and economic dependency. She argues that law is 'deeply implicated in the construction and reproduction of the global political economy, particularly its complicity with colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism.' Using the expropriation of the land of white farmers in Zimbabwe as an example, Tzouvala brilliantly demonstrates how difficulties that emerge 'when complex social antagonisms at home are 'translated' in the realm of the 'international' as struggles between, say, foreign investors and postcolonial states.' As a result, international law becomes a powerful tool 'for the reproduction of unequal integration and, importantly, for the taming (or crashing) of efforts to push against this economic order.' The stifling role international [economic] law has played in the decolonization, Tzouvala reminds us, is not 'a matter of the law's content, but also of its very form' born out of the erroneous assumption that the state represents the social body as a whole. This not only invisibilises complex social struggles, but constitutes the most fundamental and enduring way in which international law contributed to a 'toothless' decolonization of Africa.

In the sixth post of our symposium, Kimani Goddard deepens the analysis on the role of law in sustaining neo-colonial structures in the Global South. Focusing on intellectual property (IP) law and international investment law (IIL), Goddard argues that Taylor misidentifies the underlying problem of post-colonial economic underdevelopment. Instead, she contends the focus should be on the impact of development policies and international economic treaty obligations in national and international economic relations, which positions African and many developing countries in '***peripheral economy trap***'- a detrimental legal and regulatory position of LDC and developing countries in international economic treaty making and implementation, which diminishes the impact of their development policies while stagnating growth.' Concluding her compelling analysis, Goddard suggests a policy programme targeted at transforming the regulatory environment around creation, ownership and control of knowledge assets through IP rights, and the rules underpinning

capital inflows and foreign investment partnerships as a possible route out of the peripheral economy trap.

In the final post, Babatunde Fagbayibo provides alternative view of looking at the decolonisation process in Africa. Evoking the twin project of Pan-African solidarity and continental unity which emerged with African decolonization struggles, Fagbayibo reminds us the many obstacles facing the continent are not enough to dampen the mood and drive towards deepening African integration. In so doing, he highlights a 'cohort of contemporary publics that are providing counter-narratives through progressive and positive actions.' These publics comprising of activists, civil society organisations (CSOs), research institutions, dedicated transnational bureaucrats, artists, and the private sector, Fagbayibo argues, are driven by the zeal for concretising African unity. However, for these current developments on enhanced regional integration to take root, he advises 'an overhaul of the state-centric approach to continental integration.' This would require not only a conscious and pragmatic approach, but also nuanced and strategic measures that 'looks beyond the conundrum of expecting all 55 AU member states to be onboard as well as a flexible approach that allows able and willing member states, and RECs, to proceed with special arrangements.'

In another reflection of the Year of Africa in the New York Times, Adom Getachew notes that decolonization represented a critique of colonial rule whose "vision of equality that insisted self-government is not just for the educated, the elite and the white." Post-colonial African international legal intellectuals like Taslim Elias Olawale invested heavily in recovering the erasure of African history and agency embedded in colonial rule. Other African international lawyers have traced how international law today continues to reflect the structural and economic inequalities produced by colonial rule, including the European form of the State whose legitimacy in an African context is illegitimate and co-related with high levels of post-colonial violence. Ian Taylor powerfully marshals dependency analysis of Africa's place in the international division of labor, and in his response acknowledges that "[c]olonialism 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." Like Ian Taylor, Third

World Approaches to International Law, (TWAIL), scholars have traced the contemporary continuities of those colonial continuities. For example, Bhupinder Chimni traces how international economic institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization are part of a new global state in which "the transnational fractions of the national capitalist class in advanced capitalist countries with the now ascendant transnational fractions in the Third World [are] playing the role of junior partners." Ian Taylor focuses on these themes in his response post to end the symposium. He emphasizes that "since the 1980s at least, [Africa has] been under pressure to deal with increased inequality generated by neoliberal policies and Western capitalist development models that have been imposed on the continent." We are grateful to him and to all our responders for agreeing to debate what decolonization means 60 years later. We must now all together continue to imagine and work towards what Africa and indeed the Global South should look like in the next 60 years. We hope our readers will engage these essays on their own terms as well as in identifying the gaps and assumptions embedded in discourses about Africa's place in the global economy. For example, we would like to observe that this symposium does not engage in the gendered politics implicated by the various discussions of decolonization, how and whether it has stalled and the various critiques contained in the excellent responses.

Contributors

Lily Mburu: Knowledge Creation: An Imperative for Africa's Decolonization

Foluke I. Adebisi: Decolonisation of Knowledge Production and Knowledge Transmission in the Global South: Stalled, Stagnated or Full Steam Ahead?

Jimena Sierra- Carmargo: Discussing 'Africa's Stalled Decolonization' among "Cepalistas", "Dependentistas" and "Decolonial Thinking

German Sandoval: Niños Neoliberales: Un Diálogo Silencioso Con Ian Taylor; Neoliberal Children: A Silent Dialogue with Ian Taylor

Ntina Tzouvala: International Law and Decolonisation in Africa: 60 Years Later

Kimani Goddard: The Importance of Intellectual Property and International Investment Agreements for Overcoming the “Peripheral Economy Trap”: A Response to Ian Taylor’s “Sixty Years Later: Africa’s Stalled Decolonization

Babatunde Fagbayibo: Of *Integracidaires* and the Contemporary Publics of Continental Integration in Africa

Ian Taylor: Revisiting Africa’s Stalled Decolonization

View online: Did Decolonisation Stall in the Global South? A Conversation with Ian Taylor: Symposium Introduction

Provided by Afronomicslaw