

Africa's Development Post 2015: A Critical Defence of Postcolonial Thinking

by

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Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972, pp. 102), Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1968, 183 pp.), Cooper, Frederick. *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014, 130 pp).

Abstract

Drawing on three postcolonial texts, this essay offers a critical defence of postcolonial thinking in the debate about Africa's development experiences. It argues that this approach is fundamental in appreciating, analysing, and transforming the post 2015 development agenda, especially if it is revised to take neoliberalism more seriously than simply regarding it as 'neocolonialism'.

Key words: Africa, Postcolonialism, Underdevelopment, Development

Context and Contest

For many critics: (1) the postcolonial approach exaggerates the effects of colonialism on current material conditions of Africans; (2) postcolonialism remains a cocoon of backward thinking and the romantic and idealised African past societies; and (3) postcolonialism emphasises only colonialism and neocolonialism at the expense of class analysis within the capitalist world system. The preferred approaches for these critics stress 'proximate causes' such as corruption and conflict which characterise the development experiences of some African countries. Yet, the dismal performance of this mainstream approach which has become even more evident in the aftermath of the much criticised United Nations Millennium Development Goals, makes it necessary to revisit the over six-decade claim, sustained by much research in this journal and others, that postcolonial thinking is a bulwark in making sense of and transforming social, economic, and human development in Africa in the post 2015 development agenda.

By analysing, in turn, three major postcolonial texts titled *Discourse on Colonialism*, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, and, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State*, this essay shows that the argument of postcolonial thinkers is not entirely materialist. Postcolonial thinking is about the complex interaction of the psychosocial and the material which, in turn, generate outcomes that critics confusingly style as ‘causes.’ This thinking is not about returning to the past, but rather diagnosing, evaluating, and correcting various misrepresentations and ramifications of the past as a basis for animating fresh negotiations for a future society. More fundamentally, postcolonial analysis is not only about colonialism but also about capitalism and how it has been moulded by colonial and neocolonial structures. It views Africa not as an aberration outside the world but as organically integrated with the world temporally and spatially. Postcolonial thinking then is fundamental to understanding and transforming Africa’s experiences in the ‘post 2015 development agenda’, especially in its revised form that takes neoliberalism seriously.

Postcolonial Thinking: Early Exposition

Césaire’s three-part book titled *Discourse on Colonialism* is one of the corner stones of postcolonial thinking like Fanon’s *Black Skin; White Mask* (1952[2008]). The first part of the book (pp.7-28) is R.D.G. Kelley’s brilliant introduction which exposes the reader to the background and context of the book. The second (pp.31-78) is Césaire’s book itself, and the third (pp.81-94) is an interview with Césaire aimed at further drawing out how diverse forces and friendships influenced him and providing some clarifications about important concepts (e.g., Negritude and surrealism) that he put forward, substantially developed, or affirmed.

Discourse rests on two major concepts: analysing and evaluating the ‘colonial’ and ‘proletariat’ problems. For Césaire, both arose from and are maintained by European civilisation. The first task, focusing on colonialism, is sub-divided into two: a focus on colonialism and the colonised and the second on the coloniser. In assessing the record of colonialism, Césaire looks carefully at the nature and claims used by the coloniser to justify colonialism. In this sense, he identifies the characteristics of this process and contests many of the so-called achievements of colonialism: infrastructure, civilisation, and social progress. While not disputing that some infrastructure was provided during the colonial era, he shows that its extent was (a) exaggerated (b) minuscule compared with the looting that took place alongside infrastructure provision (c) arose because of the persistence of the demand and struggle for these by the colonised peoples themselves while the colonisers tried to hold them back and (d) in the light of point ‘c’, Africa might have developed much superior infrastructure had it not had a parasitic force restraining it.

In regards to the coloniser’s justification of colonialism as a civilising process, Césaire shows that Africa had much advanced and thriving civilisation before colonialism. While not denying that the colonial places had their own types of ruthless leaders, what colonialism did was to develop friendly alliances with or embolden such leaders who, in turn, helped the coloniser to subjugate colonial spaces.

Colonialism, then, was not a benevolent act as the coloniser would have us believe. Instead, it was aimed at elevating the coloniser's race as superior, while systematically making the colonised's race *appear* inferior not only in the eyes of the so-called superior race but also in the minds of the so-called inferior race. The result is a deliberate and calculated attempt to draw back and dig deep into an abyss the colonised peoples and their 'third world'.

The other aspect of Césaire's first task focuses on the coloniser, specifically on how colonisation made the coloniser barbaric and brutal. To make colonialism work, the coloniser had to lie, kill, rape, maim, deceive, mystify, and incite brother to fight brother and sisters to go against sisters, families to hate one another and ethnic differences to be rigidified, frozen, and turned into bases of conflict. This colonial ideology and strategy was applied differently to diverse colonial peoples. What it did, however, was not only to destroy Africa but it was invoked, notably in Germany and Italy against White People too when it operated as Nazism and Fascism. For Césaire, without accepting this characterisation, the global condemnation of this assemblage of internecine race hierarchy and political-economic suppression was not on the grounds that it was evil but because that evil was being meted out to other White people. While the claims in political economy that Nazism and Fascism only arose in reaction to growing progressive forces or excessive marketization and therefore have to be condemned on those grounds are matters worthy of careful consideration, they are limited without Césaire's postcolonial characterisation from which it can be argued that dictatorship, fascism, racism, authoritarianism, centralisation and Nazism are birthed or nourished by European colonialism, or patterned after it.

Finally, Césaire shows how European civilisation created the proletariat problem of massive exploitation, expropriation, and alienation. European civilisation developed a class working in horrible conditions, an exploited and expropriated class torn away from what it loved to do and totally destroyed and oppressed by a minority class that colonised and monopolised the mode of production. The accompanying relations of production characterised by inequalities, poverty, ill health, and mental destruction are all to be pinned down to this civilisation.

What Césaire does is to connect this proletariat problem to the colonial problem in two key ways. One, Africa was both 'ante-capitalist and anti-capitalist' in the sense that it was not capitalist until the coming of colonialism but that the people also had values that were opposed to capitalism. Second, using the same colonial ideology, the black people in the working class suffered at least twice the amount of humiliation that other workers suffered. As a condemned race, it had peculiar challenges which, while connected with the general proletariat problem, had to receive attention in its own terms. Césaire's logic was that even if capitalism were reversed and socialism or communism took its place, the racism against the "Negroes" would not automatically disappear. It is much like the racism we see today in certain left wing circles. So, it was in Césaire's day.

In his interview with René Depestre (pp.81-94), Césaire explains that Negritude is part of the struggle for a good society, but the problem is not only materialist or be blamed totally on capitalism.

Césaire does not prescribe a return to the past, regardless of his praise for it. As he put it:

It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave that to those who go in for exoticism. Nor is it the present colonial society that we wish to prolong...It is a new society that we must create with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days (p.52).

Césaire later resigned from his leadership in the Communist Party, his most important reason was because the Negro problem was not simply a derivative of a materialist analysis. In other words, simply focusing on capitalism and hoping that it is overthrown and will liberate and animate the struggle for a new society in his opinion was naïve.

For Fanon(1952; 1965), it is not only the psycho-affective factors which turn attention to continuing tendencies of destructive colonial relations but it is also possibilities for human agency to turn socio-economic and ecological relations into benefits for postcolonial societies. However, even more than psycho-affective factors, colonialism established structures, desires, and expectations in Africa that the promise of socialism alone does not sufficiently uproot. The limitations of this leap from colonial capitalism to anticolonial socialism is nowhere better demonstrated than in Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* to which I now turn.

Colonialism, Anticolonialism, and Socialism

Ayi Kwei Armah's book is one of the most widely read novels about Africa. The novel is cast in the railway hub of Ghana's Sekondi-Takoradi and told from the perspective of a railwayman critically observing social change in the city, his country, and his continent over time. Brilliantly narrated, written, and structured into 15 chapters, the novel is also one of the most widely reviewed, albeit misunderstood novels. Most reviewers view the book as a searing criticism of corruption in Ghana during the late 1950s to the late 1960s, the era of the Kwame Nkrumah presidency. Indeed, the reviews printed at the back of the book by the publisher make this point: 'What is impressive about *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, is the way in which it expresses the disillusion and cynicism engendered in Ghana in the last years of Nkrumah'; '...his central story of an upright man resisting the temptations of easy bribes'; 'A fine treatment of the theme of corruption'. Others writing more recently about the book, especially its use of linguistic tools, have similarly stressed the books expose on corruption: 'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is a novel in which Armah expresses his disgust on the level of corruption prevalent in Ghana during its first republic under Nkrumah. Corruption was so rampant and deep that every nook and cranny of Ghana showed it' (Chukwueloka, 2011, p.71).

While it is correct to find corruption as a theme in the book, it is the least important theme. Instead, the book is about colonialism, its economic and psychosocial legacy, and the destruction of a country by the growing commodification of life, expressed in part through corruption but also through growing social hierarchies, the desire to be like the coloniser, and the impotence of a coup d'état focused in curing the system by purging it of personalities instead of the structural determinants of the social, moral, political, and economic decay of the country.

This ongoing critique of colonialism and neocolonialism and its effects on society is demonstrated in three ways. First, in the desire to worship European and modern commodities such as cars, washing machines, and other electronic gadgets; the urge to consume and act as the coloniser by drinking bottled drinks; the broadcast of messages about buying and selling – all this while trying to appear 'African' through dress, but also empty in talk about Africanism. Second, is the title of the book explained only on the last pages of the book (pp. 182-183) where the story is told of a lorry driver who is stopped by the police in the post-Nkrumah era. The officer appears to be doing things differently, but then retains nearly all the features of corruption by accepting a bribe from the driver – much like what pertained before the coup. As the car speeds away, the words *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* are seen by the railway man who keeps thinking about their import: the solution to the structural problems that have birthed all these social problems is not yet born. So, overall, the book's emphasis is not on the symptom in the Nkrumah regime but deeper causes. The final 'proof' that the book is about a bigger picture is that the book contains stories before 1957, the period that saw the desire to break away from colonial control, independence and the new regime (1957 – 1966) and the period just after the coup (post-1966).

Throughout the book, we learn how the coloniser segregated Sekondi-Takoradi as a city, reserving the best and flourishing part to the Whites with the Bungalow culture pitched on the hills of the city where there was an abundance and even waste in terms of fruits that hanged but never touched by Black people who had to make do with unripened fruits in a culture of 'servants', 'security guards', and racism/hierarchies. The maltreatment of blacks by whites (e.g., how ex-servicemen were either never employed or taken care of in terms of the psychological traumas of war and hence making some of them social deviants, mad, or sick) or the deliberate award of precarious and risky jobs to blacks while limiting the rights by black workers (e.g., few veterans who got jobs were in the risky sectors and when they got injured they were never compensated). Hopelessness at the time led people to take to the smoking of marijuana to forget about the problems of the society.

The book shows how the movement to overthrow colonialism was caught in a paradox of let us vote out the whites because we can behave like the whites ourselves, even act 'whiter'. Eventually, someone else appears on the scene – this person is not known or mentioned by name – but his message is better accepted. The person sounds true; pan African, knowing that power really lies with the people and hence not pretending to speak like the coloniser. This person organises the common people...on the veranda and elsewhere occupied by the ordinary people of society. So, eventually this person and his people win power.

Yet, the change in *personalities* does not fundamentally change the *system*. Rather, new forms of social breakdown occurs, as the black now in the privileged position tries to mimic the coloniser. New things to purchase and use emerge as do new desires to be 'modern'. Added to the raciness of life, a sense that things should change overnight, to become 'modern' and be seen as modern, leading to new social hierarchies as party people are overnight promoted to positions of power and they, in turn, try to transform overnight their and their relatives' social position. Envy ensues; others try to follow; coupled with poor pay – much like the colonial era - growing commodification, social spending and position the country hits rock bottom: corruption becomes one way to 'fit in' and most people are in it so it becomes quite 'normal'. But, all the time, espousing 'socialism' in words, party, ideology, while living none of it.

As the society tumbles, soldiers step in to – note – change the personalities; not the system. A second 'independence' is obtained but much like the first it is a change of personalities not the system or the structures that mould the system and hence the title: *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. Cooper's book, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State*, helps to think about these questions, the bigger picture, and lessons for Africa and Africanists outside the railways, the postcolonial city, and Ghana where Armah's novel is cast.

On the Dangers of Pigeonholing Africa

The major contribution of *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State*¹ is both historical and historiographical. Historically, it demonstrates the organic connection within and across Africa, and between Africa and the world in the process of the formation of capitalism and its development. Indeed it, as well, unearths historical evidence that shows how Africa has moulded and, in turn, it has been moulded by the world system and capitalism as a particular mode of production. Additionally, it provides a careful and systematic investigation of the roots of social conflict and deprivation in much of Africa, conscientiously distinguishing between 'aboriginal poverty' and modern social conditions called 'poverty'.

Furthermore, unlike other books that are satisfied with analysis of the nation-state in Africa as a harbinger of conflict, disease, corruption, and repression, and hence offer description as causal analysis, Cooper digs deeper into the complex processes that saw the nation-state, the least preferred option for social organisation, becoming the mainstream and the anointed option of African countries. Demonstrating how the coupling of 'nation' and 'state' is itself a source of exclusion, repression, and tension, he shows how federation and confederation not only among Africans but between African countries and others were all possible routes for organising the African society in different parts of Africa, but notably French West Africa. Indeed, the arguments for the different forms of political organisation (confederation, federation, and nation-state) are all carefully developed and analysed.

¹ My review of this book first appeared in *Africa Today* (vol. 61, no.3). I thank Rev. Prof. A.B. Asensoh, Book Review Editor of that journal, for helpful comments.

Historiographically, the book concretely demonstrates how to study Africa, why study Africa as a major part of the story about capitalism, and hence why it is incomplete to study capitalism without paying serious attention to how Africa contributed to, has experienced, and shaped capitalism as a world system. To see the contribution of this book, one must look at other existing works, from articles that appear in the mainstream magazines as well as scholarly work and some progressive scholarship. In 2014, *The Economist* magazine wondered: “Why don’t more people love capitalism?” Expecting that capitalism lies everywhere but Africa, it was shocked at the results of a survey: when it claimed that “in America, capitalism’s spiritual home, a survey in 2013 found that just 54% had a positive view of the term... Support for capitalism, on average, was higher in poor countries like...Ghana than in the advanced world” (*The Economist*, 2014, p.64).

Among scholars in mainstream economics, especially, Africa is studied without a context and certainly with a view that capitalism has developed entirely outside of Africa’s economies. In turn, there have been hasty attempts to re-mould institutions in Africa after the image of the West which is singularly equated with capitalism. Progressive scholars have done much better, but a few have tended to consider Africa to be untouched by capitalism, and hence advocate the freezing of African institutions in ‘traditional’ or aboriginal mode. However, in this book, Cooper’s analysis challenges this orientation too.

The book feeds into recent research by Agozino, which shows the enormous debts owed by Marx and Marxists, who study capitalism, to the struggles of Africa and Africans for example through how the liberation of slave labour gives inspiration for the liberation of workers from capitalists, a point that Marx makes in ‘hundreds of references’ in such Marx’s work as *Das Kapital*. Hence Marxism does not only contribute ideas to the study of Africa, Africans, and Capitalism but also it should acknowledge “what African struggles did contribute to the thinking of Marx himself” (Agozino, 2014, p. 175). If Marx was so influenced, then Cooper has offered a detailed account of the story in time and in place.

This compelling analysis is spread over 130 pages divided into an introduction and three chapters. The introduction sets the scene as well as highlights the analytical approach of the publication and, also, summarises the key arguments on how the book proceeds. The first chapter places Africa in the capitalist system, while Chapter 2 examines empire building by Africans and, in Africa, by Europeans, with the remaining section of the book (Chapter 3) carefully unpacking the evidence about how the nation-state became the dominant political institution in Africa, although -- among others-- confederation and federation were more prominent options in the decolonisation process.

Certainly, Cooper’s book clearly and concretely achieves what it sets out to do: demonstrating that Africa was subjugated by the aggressors in ways which continue to hold it back even today, but not without putting up a fierce and brave resistance for the most part, just as the Maroons (who were of African descent) did in the Caribbean to get their emancipation long before the Haitian revolution and America’s Emancipation Proclamation.

Indeed, Africa's pre-colonial period, together with the colonial and postcolonial eras, interspersed, hence with courageous struggles, acquiescence of elite Africans, both conscripted and elicited, and imposed colonial practices have collectively produced and continue to shape the nature and course of capitalism and, very importantly, demonstrate a world without capitalism.

The Neglect of Neoliberalism

None of the books under review engages neoliberalism, which is commonly discussed in contemporary analysis of political economy of development. If the history of neoliberalism starts in the 1980s, then it is Cooper's book that had the best benefit of historical timing and hindsight to deal with neoliberalism, as the others were written from a much earlier vantage point, although this omission is not unique to the three texts under review, as a recent authoritative interview² with Achille Mbembe shows.

This neglect in postcolonial thinking is regrettable. However viewed, neoliberalism arose to destroy collective living and extend the market and capitalism. If so, postcolonial approaches seeking to critically examine African ways of life before, during, and after colonialism cannot shy away from doing a serious and systematic engagement with neoliberalism. There is no doubt that much has been written about neoliberalism, but most of this writing is 'colour blind'. In turn, the rise of the Nazi's is attributed solely to over growing market competition – without any connection to its symmetries with colonialism, how colonialism served as a thought experiment for the Nazis, and why missing this colonial precursor to Fascism and Nazism leads to a colour-less explanation of a 'coloured' ideology. The limited or no engagement with neoliberalism, therefore, denies students of history a fuller picture of world history of the current world system and how contemporary political economy is patterned both on this past and expectations for the future.

Conclusion: Towards a Postcolonial Political Economy

Another community gathering is being called to set goals and ponder Africa's future post 2015. It will be a grievous mistake to miss the lessons of postcolonial thinking. While diverse, as this essay has shown, a thinking about Africa from its own vantage point and experiences, not as unique but as related to the world in both history and place, and the resulting and continuing ramifications not only in material but also psychosocial terms will have to take centre stage with a thinking that names and aims at capitalism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism as interlocking systems will need to become front and centre in a post 2015 development agenda.

² 'What is postcolonial thinking?' *An interview with Achille Mbembe Interview by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur and Jean-Louis Schlegel* Published in *Eurozine Magazine* in 2008-01-09
Original in French Translation by John Fletcher Contribution by Esprit.

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