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REVIEW

Africa Development, Quarterly Journal of Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), 2022, vol. XLVII, no. 1. Special issue from the Post-Colonialisms Today project: ‘Lessons to Africa from Africa: Reclaiming Early Post-Independence Progressive Policies’; guest editors: Tetteh Hormeku-Ajei and Adebayo Olukoshi. <https://doi.org/10.57054/ad.v47i1>.

A new calendar year ushers in the usual array of tropes on Africa. They include why the continent is failing, what it should be doing better and why it has so much resilience in dealing with its own frailty. One recent take that does little more than repeat tired mantras of the international financial institutions (IFIs) comes from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). Displaying limited astuteness, the EIU in its *Africa Outlook 2023* notes the challenges ahead for Africa in terms of internal and external shocks, although most of the continent will ‘weather the storm and continue to grow’ (EIU 2022, 3). It seems that the limited number of resource-rich economies will benefit from high commodity prices, but that the usual list of chaotic consequences for the continent remains – somewhat undifferentiated – high debt-servicing costs, political instability because of election cycles, geopolitics and war, and food insecurity ‘caused by conflict and adverse weather conditions’ (*ibid.*).

It is a great pity that the EIU, and other Western organisations, ignore the analysis of African scholar activists and the historical backdrop to the continent’s contemporary crises. Wilful neglect of such analysis leads to the failure to understand why and how different African countries are in the mess that they are and why the mess has structural continuities and conjunctural discontinuities. The antidote to Western ‘think tanks’ is the superb collection of essays in last year’s quarterly bilingual journal of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). The issue emerged from the Post-Colonialisms Today project that is a research and advocacy initiative ‘recovering insights from early post-independence Africa, and mobilizing them through a feminist lens to address contemporary challenges’. The project began in 2017 with a collective of African activist intellectuals from across the continent. There were six in the working group, six advisors, eight researchers and three in the secretariat. The outcome of the collective, its range and insight is difficult to capture in a short review but there are two continuous themes among contributors: the importance of revisiting the historical past and the significance of sovereignty, or the absence of it.

The collection challenges ‘the continued hegemony of neoliberalism in policymaking in Africa’ (Hormeku-Ajei et al. 2022, 4). The detailed and expansive introduction notes the amnesia about how early post-independence leaders tried to secure the ‘newly-won freedom of their countries through policies that were designed ... to promote autonomous development processes anchored on the demands and needs of a home market’ (*ibid.*, 1). Julius Nyerere, for example, rebuked the IFIs when they accused him of failure, noting

that at independence Tanzania had just two trained engineers and 12 medical doctors, and that 85% of the country were illiterate – after 43 years of British colonial rule. Tanzania under Nyerere’s leadership, in contrast, ensured 91% literacy, that all children were in school and that per capita income grew dramatically. After reluctantly accepting IFI diktats, key social and economic indices plummeted. Nyerere had asked the IFI representatives to have some humility yet, as the authors here remind us, the heart of the neoliberal project is to discredit the first 20 years of African post-independence development. In discrediting the early policy and strategy of many African states, the IFIs provided a narrative to explain the importance of what became the ruinous years of structural adjustment. The IFIs critiqued the foundational values of autonomous and autochthonous development. Yet while the neoliberal project discredited African strategy and practice, often to try and disengage from the deleterious consequences of post-war international capital, this collection highlights that the idea of African post-independence failure was manufactured and ‘deliberately misleading’ (*ibid.*, 2).

Compared to the lost development decades of structural adjustment in 1980s and 1990s, the first 20 years of post-independent Africa had promise and were influential in trying to reverse the colonial inheritance. African, mostly radical, leaders Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Ben Bella, Kenneth Kaunda, Hastings Banda and Jomo Kenyatta were often successful, although sometimes for only a brief period of time, in addressing political and economic fragmentation and especially reliance on primary commodity exports for income generation. The authors in the six chapters of this collection explore how several African leaders recognised their country’s subordinate position in the global system and understood the importance of assembling African agency to address and change that relationship. A unifying theme in the collection is that ‘[d]ecolonisation across Africa brought about historical changes; it was a moment of solidarity, optimism, and radical rethinking of political and economic systems’ (Salem 2022, 160). That contemporary rearticulation of colonial relationships has reproduced the problem of earlier independence leaders. The early leaders deployed different approaches to reduce dependence upon former colonial powers and to do so by promoting nation building, industrialisation, economic and agricultural diversification, pan-Africanism and the development of a new economic order. Ultimately, however, as Nkrumah noted, the new ‘independent’ state may have had the trappings of power but it was independent only in theory. It did not have meaningful sovereignty that could confront the externalisation of policymaking and prevent the stalling of industrialisation. The newly independent states were hollowed-out vehicles for the extraction of Africa’s wealth and resources to enrich the global North.

One vehicle to challenge Northern economic and continued imperial domination was the emergence of a pan-African agenda. This theme is examined by Jimi Adesina, who reviews variations and similarities of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah in their approaches to socialism, pan-African unity, nationhood, economic development, epistemology and democracy. He concludes that there is the need in the early post-independence period, and now, to develop and mobilise the full range of domestic resources to reduce dependence on external interests. In doing this it is crucial to generate a ‘macro vision’ to coordinate resources and maintain sovereignty. In their different ways the three African leaders that Adesina reviews try to do this, with variable success. Adesina’s review is important and necessary. He reminds of the crucial Nyerere leitmotif ‘unity’ (Adesina 2022, 49) and the obstacles to it. These include the variable capacity across the continent to challenge imperialism. He reminds of the importance of not reifying African leaders, of the importance of the ‘diversity of postcolonial imaginations’ (*ibid.*, 52) and that, quoting Nyerere again, ‘the sin of despair would be the most unforgivable’ (*ibid.*, 54). But so too would be an equally

foolish optimism that is not grounded in material analysis of existing radical social forces and the power of imperialism. This latter is not a much-used term in African studies but it is clear that unless imperialism is understood and challenged, new agendas for pan-Africanism or the reconstitution of sovereign national projects and policy autonomy will wither on the proverbial vine.

Attempts to formulate a national project that might challenge imperial interests is explored by Kareem Megahed and Omar Ghannam (2022). They review Nasser's attempts to industrialise Egypt's economy. Despite many achievements they argue that the project was limited by the amount of cultivated land and the needs for increased investment. Much of the undeveloped industrial sector needed to be built from scratch and the capitalist class was weak. They do concede that Nasser's land reform and new tenancy laws transformed large sections of rural Egypt, empowering the *fellahin*, even though the reforms did not erase the power and influence of old feudal elites. Their main argument, however, is that while the new incumbents of Nasserist state often used words like 'socialism' and 'planning', they 'did not actually, as is commonly believed, implement a central planning nor a socialist approach' (*ibid.*, 67). Capitalist property and the rights for the bourgeoisie were untouched. That was despite, or rather because, the domestic capitalist class was weak in the pre-1952 period, dominated as it was by imperialism. The failure of the local capitalist class to make long-term investments in productivity accelerated a state-led strategy to industrialise. Megahed and Ghannam provide a useful reflection on the external and internal limitations of Nasser's postcolonial project. They note Samir Amin's observation regarding the difficulties of effective planning if there are a number of 'independent centres of power and the various centres of decision-making, resulting in the prevalence of different criteria of implementation and quality' (*ibid.*, 88). The inherited and restricted industrial base limited the development of broad-based industrial strategy and there was only a limited stock of skilled cadres. The biggest critique, however – and probably the most controversial, although not entirely new – is that Nasser 'attempted to give workers a measure of economic freedom and progress without giving them the political means to protect these very gains' (*ibid.*, 89). One of the reasons why the project fell apart, despite many gains in productivity and improvement in the well-being of the poor, 'was the lagging of democratic workers' representation, which allowed the project to be hijacked' (*ibid.*, 92). But perhaps here was a catch-22 – improvement in living standards and in farmer and industrial working-class security might not have been possible at the pace at which it was achieved without the strong, disciplined arm of the Egyptian state, especially in a challenging military, global and regional context that threatened Nasser's Egypt. Nasser tried to break from the imperialist system but he failed. Upon his death in 1970, economic liberalisation accelerated and this leads to an important conclusion: 'if we seek to overturn or to merely reshape the capitalist totality, created and maintained by imperialist powers, we cannot fight it piecemeal' (*ibid.*, 91).

Akua Britwum (2022) draws attention to the still under-researched importance of agricultural transformation in challenging uneven incorporation into global capitalism and in trying to plot a strategy for sovereignty. She explores this topic in the cases of Ghana and Tanzania, reflecting on the need for national self-sufficiency and development planning as a mechanism linking all sectors of the economy. She reminds readers of not only the historical significance but also the contemporary relevance of the key strategic potential of the state in production, distribution and employment creation. She notes the problem in Ghana and Tanzania, that stretches across Africa, of dependence upon cash-crop production for (limited) income creation and the marginalisation of women. The contrast between Nkrumah's seven-year development plan and Nyerere's Arusha Declaration raises questions of what was seen to constitute development. It also begs the question of the rhetoric deployed by both leaders

– that viable development alternatives were possible based on ‘a brand of socialism that they identified as African’ (Britwun 2022, 110).

Britwun’s analysis goes beyond her detailed case studies. She makes important observations about contemporary constraints on development in Africa. She effectively notes how the absence of sovereignty continues, and this is evident in the ‘failure to fully de-link national economies from the global capitalist political economy that had positioned African countries as primary producers’ (*ibid.*, 128). This meant there was no end to the dependence on ‘earnings from cash crop exports to finance development expenditure’ (*ibid.*), and any influence the state might be able to exert over productive resources was limited by the way national economies were part of the broader capitalist system and impacts of foreign direct investments. Britwun is scathing about the failure of independence to reduce patriarchy and how the Ghanaian and Tanzanian development plans failed to recognise that gendered stratification is ‘inimical to national development’ (*ibid.*, 133). She does make clear that there were positive lessons for development planning that resulted from the Ghanaian and Tanzanian experiences. The strength of the development plans was ‘their sturdy ideological focus that led them to prioritise domestic needs’; the state was a ‘principal economic actor’; and ‘development planning grounded the two national economies on agriculture’ (*ibid.*, 130). Nkrumah and Nyerere’s imperatives of African socialism provided an important, although not-long lasting, ‘ideological grounding in the imperative for African socialism’ (*ibid.*, 131).

This collection of outstanding essays is constantly grappling with the question of how was it possible to promote development plans in a postcolonial Africa dominated by imperialism. The limitations of beginning from scratch or dealing with the hand that colonial exploitation had dealt is noted in the Egypt case, in Tanzania and Senegal, and Ghana in the context where political leadership became a substitute for limited means of production to liberate states from imperialism. In Tunisia, Chafik Ben Rouine (2022) reminds us of how before the neo-liberal hegemony the country’s central bank helped mobilise resources to facilitate post-independence agrarian reforms and industrial strategy. They highlight the historical experience of a central bank succeeding in mobilising, controlling and channelling credit to the needs of the national economy. Ben Rouine notes how the 1960s was a period when the state tried to develop a vision of decolonisation and self-centred development, with its Ten-Year Plan which ultimately foundered on ‘trust in external financial support, an overly centralised bureaucracy’ that did not understand the specificity of Tunisian agriculture, and ‘a vision of development too focused on the West’ (Ben Rouine 2022, 156). Tunisia’s limited, but important, attempt at greater autonomy from the world capitalist system foundered after structural adjustment in 1986 and neoliberalism’s tenet of central bank independence – or, rather, securing the interests of capital.

The volume is tied together with Sarah Salem’s excellent contribution on radical regionalism, feminism, sovereignty and the pan-African project. She argues that sovereignty in the immediate post-independence period was seen as a regional, pan-African and internationalist project of decolonisation. As we have noted, however, and as the volume instructs, the capacity of newly independent African states to generate a sovereign identity and practice was, and continues to be, shaped by their subordinate position in the world economy. Salem highlights the role that African feminists had in shaping policy that challenged colonial structures of global capital, including policy of industrialisation and nationalisation to promote independent development. She highlights the important role that ‘regionalism’ played in doing this, which is a term she deploys to ‘refer to a state policy of continentalism across Africa’ (Salem 2022, 160). Regionalism for Salam refers to ‘the Third Worldist belief in various decolonised regions coming together to confront colonial capitalism’ and is part of

emerging pan-Africanism (*ibid.*, 160–161). Salem creates an analysis that pushes the debate about pan-Africanism to explore ‘radical regionalism’ and feminist contributions to ‘conceptualise agency and sovereignty and incorporate gender into debates around African independence’ (*ibid.*, 162). Here she addresses concerns about methodology – how to access what it was that women and women’s organisations said, approaching archival material to ‘look for clues between the lines’ (*ibid.*, 163). Salem explicitly addresses and problematises formal sovereignty or legal decolonisation, noting as other contributors do that sovereignty actually requires economic and political independence.


The lessons revisited in this collection apply to understanding the constraints and opportunities for meaningful African sovereignty in the twenty-first century. They are salutary and somewhat depressing, reflecting on the ways in which attempts at autonomous postcolonial development were constantly knocked back by the forces of imperialism. Yet they also provide the tools for understanding and confronting contemporary imperialism, reminding us of the need to interrogate the foolish mantras of the IFIs and the triad of the US, EU and Japan. Contemporary crisis of global capitalism offers the opportunity to challenge imperial hegemony and to do so with radical political and social mobilisation by farmers and workers in Africa.

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