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Africa

Is Africa rising? A critical perspective (2)

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The narrative about Africa in the international media, in particular the economic press, as well as in academic journals, is changing. It is no longer dominated by what is frequently labelled “afro-pessimism”, which allows development NGOs especially to dedicate themselves to the civilising, neo-colonial mission in Africa. Now we are faced with “afro-optimism”, which has a strong tendency to supplant the “afro-pessimist” discourse, based on the roughly 5 per cent average GDP growth rate for all of Africa over the past 10 years. By bourgeois economic logic, this effectively makes it the world’s second economic driving force after Asia, at a time when a significant number of economies in the traditional capitalist centres oscillate between an end to recession and fears of a fall back into one.

Among additional signs of Africa’s economic awakening is the growing visibility of African billionaires and millionaires, as well as the growth of the African middle class, which is deemed to be exponential. According to the African Bank for Development (ABfD), one out of three Africans currently belongs to the middle class. We are told this will only get better with time, and the “trickle down effect” will eventually take care of the poor. This “afro-optimism” even veers into “afro-enthusiasm”: How can we not rejoice at the imminent emancipation of Africa?

Of course, despite these perceptible changes in virtually all African societies, this much-lauded growth is far from being the path that leads to such emancipation. On the contrary, it resembles instead a makeover of the mechanisms of domination and social injustice.

There is no denying the average growth of Africa’s GDP, including even double-digit figures for some countries, which cannot be found anywhere in the centres of capitalism at present. However, the growth of Burkina Faso’s GDP (7,9 per cent in 2010, 4,2 per cent in 2011, 9 per cent in 2012, 7 per cent in 2013) or Ethiopia’s (12,6 per cent, 11,2 per cent, 8,7 per cent, 10,4 per cent over the same period), for example, does not, in terms of (social) “development” allow for comparison, let alone comes close to growth figures in Denmark (1,4 per cent, 1,1 per cent, -0,4 per cent, 0,4 per cent) or Switzerland (3 per cent, 1,8 per cent, 1 per cent, 1,9 per cent).

The current praise African growth receives from the praise singers of capitalism essentially lauds the profitability of investments no matter their source. Africa is considered to be a “leading space” for returns on investment. Such growth, sometimes involving African capital, indeed benefits mostly transnationals that primarily invest in extractivism, which is still the continent’s main driving force of growth – an old “specialisation” inherited from colonial times.

In Ghana, oil extraction nearly doubled GDP growth in a few months after its initiation: from 7,7 per cent in 2010 to 14,4 per cent in 2011. Leaving aside its contribution to global warming, this boom has left workers behind, and Ghanaian oil workers were recently on strike over the meagre salaries they receive compared to their “expat” colleagues.

The new capitalist land grabbers who benefit from this growth – among them some local bourgeois – effectively push hundreds of thousands of farmers not towards the middle class – said to be in extraordinary expansion – but into an over-exploited agricultural proletariat, working land that yields mainly for export. This includes children such as those in West Ethiopia who are thus deprived of primary education. This pattern reinforces traditional food dependence, which continues to grow, costing Africa at least USD30 billion even in these times of GDP growth. In the meantime, local small-scale production is choked, which will worsen with ratification of Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU.

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Meanwhile, seed transnationals promote Africa's greater dependence on patented seeds, whether genetically modified or "pirated" from communal heritage. The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the African Bank for Development (ABfD) are the main puppets of this harmful business conducted by these seed transnationals, such as Monsanto. One of the major stockholders is none other than the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation which, in the name of philanthropy, develops its influence on supposedly African elites, in charge of relaying its propaganda.

Profits are repatriated from Africa on a massive scale, by legal or illegal means, with the complicity of African governments. This explains the attempt by sub-regional godfather of FrançAfrique, Blaise Compaoré, to tamper with the constitution and cling to power – but for each Compaoré swept away by a popular movement, how many similar individuals are on the lookout, hoping to succeed where he failed? The autocratic and plutocratic Robert Mugabe prepares his dynastic electoral succession through his wife Grace Mugabe. Another, in Congo, does not hesitate to stir the spectre of a blood bath in case of objections to his tampering. Africa is a fertile ground for capitalist vampirism as the South Sudanese factions, under the spell of the petro dollars, prove. A further case in point is the massacre of miners in Marikana, South Africa, seemingly encouraged by a former trade union leader turned billionaire.

The current celebration of GDP growth in Africa is in fact the celebration of the on-going project that neoliberal imperialism had concocted for Africa. It had started with the Structural Adjustment Programmes, imposed as a cure-all to the public debt crisis in which states of the so-called "Third World" found themselves – with "help" from the international financial system.

Even while entertaining economic relations with African states that differ from the imperialist tradition in Africa, these emerging powers are in no way opposed to the advancement and consolidation of global capitalism. They want to gain better positions in the hierarchical structure, including taking over positions of traditional powers, allied and rival at the same time. "south-South relations" with Africa are an asset on the road towards realising this ambition. Due to its wealth of natural resources, Africa proves to be a prerequisite destination for consolidated and emerging powers.

African capitalists, billionaires and millionaires, increasingly coming "out of the woods", certainly benefit from this growth and are by no means less criminal than the others. Meanwhile, it is not very beneficial to the African people in general and wage earners in particular. Let us not speak about the youth, affected by very high unemployment, leading to such outcomes as, for example, joining the criminal sect Boko Haram. In the CAR, with its 3 per cent growth rate preceding the political crisis, juvenile poverty divided itself along confessional lines, split between Seleka and anti-Balaka militias. Guinean societies organised alongside an actual general interest, the improvement of the lives of peoples, with their sovereign participation, would not have furthered the Ebola tragedy in Guinea, Liberia, and in Sierra Leone. The latter two cases also illustrate the meaninglessness in human terms of double digit growth rates: in Liberia: 15,7 per cent, 10,5 per cent, 13,8 per cent, 10,2 per cent, and 11,3 per cent GDP growth in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012 and in 2013; in Sierra Leone: 15,2 per cent and 20,1 per cent in 2012 and 2013. All of this without positive effect on the poor and the public health services.

A new middle class, associated with jobs in computer sciences, finance and business is indeed emerging. Its key quality for the praise singers of neoliberal growth lies in its boundless, stupid consumerism. However, it merely constitutes a minority of the middle class, its "superior" bracket, according to the African Bank for Development. The percentage of the African population within this "superior" bracket, added to the so-called "low" bracket of the middle class, is not more significant than prior to the imposition of neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programmes – characterised by the freezing of wages, liquidation of enterprises, redundancies, etc. The bracket is labelled "floating" – that is to say, always in danger of falling back into poverty – still very prevalent in African societies – which constitutes the majority of the so-called "middle class".

The living standards of a big part of the middle class today, in Cape Town like in Cairo, in Accra and elsewhere, is hit by the increase – imposed by local governments – of fuel prices, which has led to a rise of other basic commodities.

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Worse, this so-called increase of the middle class does not go hand in hand with the capturing of serious social data collection. It is more like pure and simple disinformation. However we can believe the African Bank for Development, and other similar types of dispensaries, when they affirm that African economic growth comes with growing inequalities and estimate that the poor still make up nearly or more than half of the African population. And thus it will be for decades to come, following this criminal socio-economic logic.

It is, however, not a fatality. It is far more necessary now than in the past, to put an end to Africa's status as a springboard to accumulate capitalist power, even if it were for the future foundation of Africa as a capitalist power. No real emancipation can derive from the exploitation, the domination or oppression of others, part of progressing ecocide. Having to take a seat in the cockpit of that crazy vehicle driving capitalist growth should not be a requirement. Today, far more than yesterday, at the risk of being too late tomorrow, a change of mode of transport is required towards another destination than the capitalist development of African societies, which is fiercely non-egalitarian, unjust, oppressive, harbinger of wars, ecocides.

Those who are exploited, oppressed and opposed to the ecocide will unite in local and regional struggles for the emancipation of Africa, in solidarity with those facing similar struggles elsewhere. Nobody will emancipate them in their stead – certainly not the partisans of capitalism, be they from Africa or elsewhere, from the North or the South, and even if they wear the trade union mask, or that of the glorious struggles of the past.

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