

## BOOK REVIEW

### Decolonizing Africa and African Development: The Twenty-First Century Pan-Africanist Challenge

Anthony Victor Obeng, Lucy Melville and Peter Lang (2017). AG  
International Academic Publishers, Bern, 278 pp ISBN: 978-3-0343-0758-1.

REVIEWED BY FRANKLIN OBENG-ODOOM

Development economics struggles to account for the colonial question in Africa. It typically ignores the colonial question. MIT economist Daron Acemoglu and Harvard University economist James Robinson try to address this challenge in the book, *Why Nations Fail* (2012), but they end up simply using colonial experiences to make quotidian economic arguments about Africa's 'failed states'. The problem is not just about the limitations of econometrics or the unreliability of the statistics as Morten Jerven argues in *Africa: Why Economists Get it Wrong* (2015). Rather, as political economists such as J.K. Galbraith and Poly Hill respectively show in *The Nature of Mass Poverty* (1979) and *Development Economics on Trial* (1986), the dominant methodologies and ontologies in development economics are deeply problematic. Not only do they misunderstand their core subject matter, they are also fraught with mistakes in transcending the challenge of African development.

*Decolonizing Africa and African Development* is a refreshing departure from this methodological dead-end. Yet, this book will frustrate undecided readers who need systematic problem diagnosis, systematic examination of existing solutions, and systematic defence of alternatives. Critical thinkers are likely to give the book the nod, however, because it provides a fitting challenge and a radical alternative to the work of polemicists such as Bruce Gilley's recent essay in *Third World Quarterly* that claims that colonisation was the best thing that happened to Africa.

A denunciation of neo-colonialism, bourgeois co-operation, and neoliberalism, the mimicry of the West, the continuing humiliation of Africans, and the

creeping neo-colonial mindsets of some Africa elites, *Decolonizing Africa and African Development* presents a fiery account of development. The book shows no compunction in its criticisms of ‘abused Pan-Africanism’ such as the Global African Diaspora Summit, which is a specific form of Pan Africanism (see, for example, pp. 206-215). This so-called Pan-Africanism, the book contends, is limited not only because of what it includes (e.g., Western visions of development, typically imposed with aggression, economically and militarily) but also what it excludes (e.g., Africans living in the diaspora especially those in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas and those diasporic Africans with limited resources to invest in continental Africa).

This colonial and colonising version of Pan Africanism, the book argues, is part of the problem. By seeking to put African faces to capitalist and neoliberal processes (e.g., calling on Africans in the USA to replace Chinese, American, or European land grabbers with African-led land grabbing), it does not, and cannot, create any major social change. Rather, this version of Pan Africanism drives a wedge between Africans, as illustrated in the ‘Joseph Project’, which was ‘sold’ as a pan African venture but, in fact, was merely a business venture to generate revenue from returnee Africans in the diaspora.

The book is written by an experienced thinker on African development, so its insights carry particular weight. Indeed, readers would be loath to dismiss such intriguing accounts, particularly the author's perspectives on ‘frenemy’ institutions such as the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development that seek to substantially depoliticise the Pan African project as a mere business enterprise.

What, then, could be Africa’s strategy for genuine progress? A different kind of Pan Africanism is the book’s answer (p.4). This new pan Africanism must reject both capitalism and neoliberalism because of their joint role in keeping Africans in ‘their place’, at the margins. It must seek to unite all Africans (whether within or outside continental Africa), and it must use this unity to shape collective bargaining and collective decision making outside organisations such as the African Union. In short, Africa should re-embrace the future it has left behind in its haste to catch up.

These arguments are made in six chapters. Africa and the World from 1914 to the present (chapter 1) sets the stage by providing the background and overview of the arguments. The lessons of Haiti provides an empirical illustration of the processes and prospects of resistance (chapter 2), while

chapters 4 and 5 provide strategies for liberation by offering a critique of and alternatives to current approaches of pan Africanism. Chapter 6 brings the story to an end by highlighting the problems of the orthodoxy (thesis), showing why the alternative (antithesis) is in fact even more orthodox, and providing an original synthesis by advocating a new pan Africanism above all else defined by solidarity in ways that challenges the destructive forces of the market system (see, pp. 125-127).

This treatise is evidently well-supported and admirably complements Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango's recent book *How Africa Developed Europe* (2018). However, unlike the work of Archie Mafeje and Samir Amin which inspired the author (see pp. xvi-xii), the arguments developed in the book under review are neither systematic nor systematically compelling. Solutions are given before diagnoses, and when solutions are being argued, the book returns to critique. For example, chapter 4 correctly analyses three types of strategies (Nkrumah-style Catching-Up, Nyerere-type Forced Self-Reliance, and Mandela-inspired faux Co-operation), but the lessons from these strategies (listed as 14 bullet points on pp. 174-177) do not follow from the models. Lessons 4, 6, and 7 have some vague connection to the cases but – like the eleven others – are in bullet points and appear undigested. To compound this problem, chapter 5 returns to problem diagnosis and critique rather than systematically demonstrating how the 14 lessons can be further developed. Problem diagnosis is, of course, important but not when it cannot inform systematic action other than quotations of past statements – some of which are over two pages long (e.g., pp. 135-138 and pp. 169-171).

Yet, it is never the intention of the book's author to convince the “ideologically bankrupt”. Rather, his book seeks to return ‘fire’ to the work of those without conscience who gloat in the colonialism of Africa and desperately seek to keep perpetually anew the fog of neo-colonialism (pp. xvi-xviii). Suggestions on developing stronger congruence between the vision of revolutionary leaders and the practices of the masses, that is, ‘making Pan-Africanism a mass movement rather than a movement for the masses’ in the pursuit of social and economic justice ( pp. 228-235), reconceptualising the United Nations and the World Bank as part of Africa's problems rather than as solutions, and world-wide African solidarities are considered concrete alternatives to mainstream thinking. In these respects, Obeng's book does not only provide a critique but also food for thought and concrete alternatives.

Overall, then, this book succeeds in providing a brutal assault on bigoted claims about Africa, in laying the wreath for Pan Africanism commodified, and in making the case that, if they would act collectively and decisively, Africans would succeed in meeting the twenty-first-century challenge of *Decolonizing Africa and African Development*.

### About the reviewer

**Franklin Obeng-Odoom** is Associate Professor at the Department of Political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland. He is the author of *Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Labour, Capital, and the State in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana* (Routledge, 2014), the substantive editor of *African Review of Economics and Finance* and, Associate Editor of the *Forum for Social Economics*. Dr. Obeng-Odoom is a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

### References

- Acemoglu D and Robinson J, 2012, *Why Nations Fail*, Crown Business, USA.
- Galbraith J.K., 1979, *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Hill P, 1986, *Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological Case for a Prosecution*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Jerven, M, 2015, *Africa: Why Economists Get it Wrong*, by Morten Jerven, African Arguments series, London, Zed Books.
- Mhango, N. N., 2018, *How Africa Developed Europe: Deconstructing the His-story of Africa, Excavating Untold Truth and What Ought to Be Done and Known*, Langa RPCIG, Cameroon.