

2012

Beyond the 'Posts' in African Development Discourse: Exploring Real Solutions to Africa's Problems

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Abstract

This special issue attempts to further a line of critical inquiry in African politics, administration and development discourse, which we refer to here as the 'posts'. In our terminology, the 'posts' constitute a body of narratives, which critique the heterogeneous assortment of orthodoxies in the mainstream African development discourse. The 'posts', although part of the mainstream thinking, interrogate themes within that discourse for their disingenuous intellectual and policy approaches to African problems (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999 for a general discussion of the subject). The 'posts' charge that mainstream discourses, far from being beacons of enlightenment about Africa, often reflect a broad intellectual inertia, manifested in failed policies to address poverty-alleviation, the region's main development challenge.

Keywords

African and African American Studies, African politics, poverty-alleviation, political economy

Disciplines

Geographic Information Sciences | International Relations | Urban, Community and Regional Planning | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

This manuscript is an article from *Progress in Development Studies* 12(2&3) 2012: 93-98. doi: [10.1177/146499341101200301](https://doi.org/10.1177/146499341101200301). Posted with permission.

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Revised copy of this paper is published in *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol 12, No 2&3, pp93-98, 2012

Introduction

This special issue attempts to further a line of critical inquiry in African politics, administration and development discourse, which we refer to here as the ‘posts’. In our terminology, the ‘posts’ constitute a body of narratives, which critique the heterogeneous assortment of orthodoxies in the mainstream African development discourse. The ‘posts’, although part of the mainstream thinking, interrogate themes within that discourse for their disingenuous intellectual and policy approaches to African problems (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999 for a general discussion of the subject). The ‘posts’ charge that mainstream discourses, far from being beacons of enlightenment about Africa, often reflect a broad intellectual inertia, manifested in failed policies to address poverty-alleviation, the region’s main development challenge.

Perhaps, the most significant ‘post’ narrative in African development is Fanonian post-colonialism, a post-modernist approach borrowed from the humanities (Ashcroft et al., 1998; Gandhi, 1998). This post-colonial narrative, finds fertile ground in political economy where it is used to engage a broad range of issues. One of its main focuses is to problematize the globalization agenda for its perpetuation of intellectual, political and resource hegemony by the north on the peoples of the south, including Africa (Wisner et al., 2005; Logan, 2002; Fisher and Christopher, 2007). A second important line of ‘post’ inquiry is post-structural adjustment, also

associated with a post-Washington Consensus orientation. This theme often involves a theoretical and policy search for mechanisms by which African economies can recover from the negative impacts that the multilateral lending agencies had on the continent during the 1980s and 1990s, for example, through NEPAD; and or by establishing new non-Western political economy alliances with countries like China, India, Brazil and Indonesia (Tull, 2006; Schoeman, 2007; Klare and Volman, 2006; Alden, 2007). A third, and increasingly important 'post' problematique is post-sustainable development, a rejection of the sustainability paradigm in a number of ways (example, Lele, 1991; Moseley and Logan, 2004; Sneddon et al., 2006); for prioritizing intergenerational equity over existing north-south resource distributions and southern poverty (Cline-Cole and O'Keefe, 2006; Guyer and Richards, 1996); for interpreting Africa's poverty dilemma, primarily in terms of a poverty-overpopulation nexus in which poverty is viewed as a vicious, closed loop without external impulses (Faasen and Watts, 2007; Idemudia and Ite, 2006; Moseley and Logan, 2004); and for relegating community resource autonomy to a non-issue (Arnold et al., 2006; Baxter, 2010; Lloyd, 2006). 'Post' narratives take a post-political ecology view on these resource-related issues, for example, by critiquing participatory paradigms, employed either as field research methods or as policy instrument. As a field method, 'participation' is excoriated for being an empty metaphor for condescending inclusion of rural communities as subjects of research (for example, being asked to play kindergarten games to satisfy the researcher's frame of reference); while as a policy instrument, it is critiqued for treating rural communities as targets or beneficiaries of preconceived so-called bottom-up, grass roots, community-based etc. programs, in which 'community is viewed as a homogenous social unit with uniform goals (Blaikie, 2006; Cornwall, 2003; Kamanga et al., 2009; Jones, 2006).

Above all, ‘post’ narratives have exposed the naked emperor of mainstream African development discourse as being antithetical to actual poverty-alleviation in Africa. Although these narratives have been useful for expanding our horizons, they have not gone far enough because they do not inquire about the fundamental disconnect between epistemology and ontology in the mainstream discourse. Additionally, ‘post’ narratives have unwittingly exposed themselves to co-optation by what they seek to critique and replace. For example, they critique neo-liberalism for poverty creation and perpetuation and yet rely on a neoliberal agenda for poverty alleviation; likewise, they impugn the mechanisms of global trade for extending colonialism into the twenty-first century, while relying on the WTO, UN, World Bank, IMF, and NGOs to extricate Africans from poverty, and they suggest that community resource autonomy and community empowerment can be obtained through institutions like the World Wildlife Fund.

‘Beyond the Posts’ refutes these fundamental assumptions. In different ways, the articles in the collection seek to make a case that mainstream epistemology does not merely create a distortion but a caricature of African reality; that it is not merely antithetical to real poverty alleviation, but actively hostile to that overriding goal. Both the hostility and caricature are nuanced as they are framed in elegant paradigms; theories and practices which eradicate African reality by replacing it with an epistemological, philosophical and policy phantasm, which include national land reform agendas that do not concede to local land conceptualizations; ‘national economic sectors’ that do not capture the economic production of a large proportion of the citizenry; political structures and institutions that refuse to acknowledge traditional institutions; and a lexicon in which the activities of the majority of Africans are termed ‘informal’ while those of the few are ‘formal’ only because they are linked directly to the interests of the northern hegemony. In this context, the special issue extends ‘posts’ argumentations by revisiting the

fundamental dimensions of poverty in Africa, in its various manifestations. The main objective of the issue will be to deliberate ‘outside the box’ of existing ideological and policy agendas. By ‘thinking outside the box’ we mean to suggest empirical, theoretical, and conceptual contributions that will interrogate existing scholarship and policy prescriptions and offer solutions that are meaningful for addressing the poverty dilemma for people ‘on the ground’ in Africa. In this context, the papers in the issue are guided by the simple question: what will this mean for the people on the ground in rural areas and towns of Africa?

This special issue covers two main broad themes: politics and administration; and pressing development issues. Indeed, it is alleged that political (in)stability and development are intertwined and strongly correlated. For instance, countries and time periods with a high propensity of government collapse tend to have significantly lower growth rates than otherwise (Alesina et al., 1992), and political stability also influences the rate of economic growth and sources of capital accumulation in a country (Younis et al., 2008). Moreover, without a stable foundation for peaceful political and economic management in a country, its development will be elusive (De Loach, 1999). The papers by Kraxberger, Mehretu, Owusu, and Kalipeni et al. fall under the politics and administration theme while the papers by Logan et al., Zulu, Kerr and Kyem tackle some pressing contemporary development issues.

Politics and Administration

The papers under this theme examine political instability and administration performance in a range of African countries. Kraxberger's essay focuses on state failure in post-independence Africa, a phenomenon that is both a key cause and symptom of underdevelopment on the continent. The paper provides a geo-political perspective on the reasons for state failure in

Africa, and explores solutions for dealing with this phenomenon. Kraxberger argues that quick post-conflict democratization has not necessarily resulted in political stability in many African countries and urges local and external actors to first prioritize state building and order over quick democratization. He proposes solutions, which are consistent with the 'Beyond the Post' orientation by suggesting that in rare cases the principle of national sovereignty should be overridden in the interests of security and development. Kraxberger also argues that some Westphalian states cannot be saved and that without necessarily reverting to the wild days of colonialism, state death should be orchestrated through international governmental action in some stubborn cases of state failure.

Mehretu offers an intriguing case of Ethiopia's ethnic federal politics and the dismemberment of the Ethiopian state by its current rulers. The paper explores the architecture of hegemonic governance used by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the current governing body, to dismember the Ethiopian state by gerrymandering ethno-linguistic territorial enclosures called *killils*. He also examines alternative narratives to de-balkanize Ethiopia by using a regional development theory of territorial and functional integration. He concludes that the last three decades have amply demonstrated that the ethno-linguistic separatist agenda has produced serious political and economic problems. As a solution to the political quagmire, Mehretu aptly suggests a paradigm shift for redemptive and emancipatory regrouping of the peoples of Ethiopia as well as those of the Horn of Africa to avert the region's slide into nihilism and to advance compatible cultural and economic geographies for the entire Horn.

Owusu examines organizational culture and performance in the public sector of Ghana. He discusses reasons for the persistent poor performance of Africa's public sector in spite of

years of reforms. According to him, this persistent failure can be attributed to two related factors: external interests have dictated the definitions of the “African public sector problem”, and reform policies have tended to ignore the experiences of organizations in those countries. Using the case of Ghana, Owusu argues that in order for African governments to foster better organizational culture and performance, public sector reform policies should be based on the experiences of organizations within countries rather than the externally imposed one-size-fits-all approaches that have become the norm. In a similar vein, Kalipeni et al. focus on the international mass exodus of physicians and nurses trained in the Western biomedical tradition from Africa and offer solutions to ameliorate the loss. Specifically, they discuss the flows of physicians and nurses from African countries to Europe and North America offering a geographic perspective of the magnitude and flow of the skilled health care professionals. The paper concludes by noting that while Africa cannot do much about the pull factors, it can mitigate the push factors by creating working environments that will retain its health care professionals.

Pressing Development Issues

The remaining four papers in this issue interrogate pressing development issues with reference to access to resources and their management. Logan et al. examine the reorientation of land reform in South Africa in the post-apartheid era; Zulu interrogates the conundrum of community based natural resources management in Malawi in an era of neo-liberalization and decentralization; Kerr draws lessons from the "Old Green Revolution" using Malawi as a case in point for agricultural change in Africa; while Kyem addresses the digital divide as a major hindrance to Africa's advancement into the new millennium.

Where land reform has been genuinely implemented throughout the world, the results have been success stories of agricultural productivity (see Lappé and Collins, 1986). Logan et al. offer the case of South Africa's attempts at land reform. He argues that national, market-led, land reform plans are infeasible and that land reform should shift to a locality-driven approach. Specifically, the paper assesses the implementation of the country's Land Restitution Program in the Polokwane District and argues that the contemporary mega-narratives which inform the program have created a disconnect between the state and the landless. As a solution to this problem, Logan et al. propose a reorientation in which local narratives will replace theoretical mega-narratives at the center of land reform programs.

Zulu's paper reviews the paradoxical gap between theory/policy and reality from 16 years of community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) in Malawi's fisheries, forestry, and wildlife sectors, focusing on the influences of imported neoliberal blueprints. The paper argues and illustrates the fact that the government's and donor's choice of CBNRM institutions in Malawi have created shifting institutional hybridities combining neoliberal principles and modern institutions with neo-patrimonial institutions which, in the long run, have produced more challenges than opportunities. The outcomes of this process have included unaccountable committees, elite capture, and multiplication and hybridization of institutions resulting in competition and struggle over authority mainly between traditional and modern institutions. This has ultimately undermined representation, citizenship, public domain, and ecological and institutional sustainability. As a solution to this conundrum, Zulu suggests that measures that balance the exercise of power among CBNRM actors, minimize elite capture, and provide adequate CBNRM incentives are necessary to enhance broad-based community empowerment,

leadership skills among chiefs and CBNRM organizations and their transparency and accountability.

While Zulu deals with Malawi's experimentation with CBNRM, Kerr uses Malawi to take a look at the lessons learnt from the "Old Green Revolution" for the new social, environmental and nutritional agenda of agricultural change in Africa. Kerr notes that recent efforts for an 'Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa' (AGRA) which promotes fertilizer, hybrid seeds, pesticides, and biotechnology to increase agricultural production are in many ways similar to the old Green Revolution. According to Kerr the evidence suggests that unless social inequalities and environmental concerns are taken into account, these technologies will intensify inequalities, increase environmental degradation and exacerbate malnutrition for the rural majority, while benefitting the urban poor, larger-scale farmers, agro-input dealers and transnational corporations involved in agribusiness. She cautions that efforts to address hunger in Malawi in the long term will need to address social inequality, both at the household level and at the national level. The landless, women, AIDS-affected households and youth are all groups that have limited access to land, income, credit, agricultural inputs and education to address their long-term food security. She concludes that unless these are seriously taken into consideration, the input subsidy program in Malawi is not a 'revolution' in the making, but rather further entrenches inequalities in the country.

In the final paper, Kyem examines the digital divide between Africa and parts of the highly developed world. He notes that, the explosion in mobile phone subscription notwithstanding the full benefits from information and communication technologies (ICT) deployment are far from being realized in sub-Saharan Africa. Kyem alerts us to the failures in technological innovation in the region and then explores ways that sub-Saharan African countries

can manage ICT given its proven value in advancing political and economic development. The effective use ICT in organizing the recent political upheavals in some North African countries is a testimony to this potential.

Conclusion

In sum, the papers in this issue individually and collectively challenge and push the limits of the ‘post’ discourses with suggestions of "out of the box" solutions for Africa's problems. For instance, while both Kraxberger and Mehretu challenge ‘post’ colonial narratives of states in Africa, they offer different alternatives – the former warns against privileging democracy and holding onto state boundaries in failed states and favors a case by case approach, including the possibility of state death in some cases; but the latter warns of the dangers of ethno linguistic identity politics which can lead to national disintegration and calls for strategies that reinforce national identity to facilitate regional integration. Similarly Owusu and Kalipeni et al discuss the limitations of post-SAP neoliberal-informed solutions in African countries and stress the importance of African solutions. However, while Owusu favors public sector reforms based on the experiences of organizations in each country, Kalipeni et al draw attention to the limits of African countries in stemming the flow of their health care professionals. The papers of the various development issues collectively offer critiques of ‘post’ SAP (market-based solutions) and ‘post’ sustainable development narratives. These papers stress the need for locality/community driven solutions. As Zulu argues in the case of Malawi, “local actors selectively adopt, ignore, or alter institutional choices imposed by governments and donors, creating institutional hybrids that are not purely modern, neoliberal, traditional or patrimonial...”

Clearly, ordinary Africans are more adept at combining the new with the old than the timid researchers and policy makers who continue to tinker at the edges of bankrupt theories.

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