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Africa

# The marginalization of sub-Saharan Africa

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**The neoliberal structural adjustment imposed on the sub-Saharan African states from the 1980s onwards, aimed at dismantling the underdeveloped or dependent welfare states established in the first decades of independence, aroused popular opposition in a good number of sub-Saharan countries. The loss of legitimacy of the traditional neocolonial regimes allowed a relative "democratic opening" in the areas of freedom of expression, a multiparty system and change of government by electoral means rather than military coups. Meanwhile, in South Africa, the regime of constitutional apartheid was ended.**

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In general, this "democratic opening" did not lead to political pluralism, because it was ultimately controlled by the neoliberal elites. These elites are linked in different ways to international capitalist interests, in whose service they manipulate ethnic, national and religious rivalries. "Democratization", that is, the passage from a single party to a multi-party system - about which Jacques Chirac was famously dubious [1] - favoured above all the recomposition of the neocolonial political classes. Democracy was understood as a multiparty system plus the market economy or a process of neoliberalization organized by the IMF and World Bank. This allowed a certain legitimating of neoliberalism, facilitating structural adjustment, which initially met with popular opposition.

## Pauperization

The sub-Saharan African economy remains dependent and under imperialist domination, although in a different manner. The vicious circle of the payment of the foreign debt serves as justification for the so-called structural adjustment policies, the privatization of the most profitable state enterprises [2] economic disengagement by the state and liberalization of markets to the benefit of the multinationals and at the expense of small local producers. These policies can only increase pauperization in the rural agricultural milieus, now deprived of state aid and more exposed to the fall in the price of basic products on the world market. They lead to a sharpened deterioration in the terms of trade, brought about by the priority accorded to exports under structural adjustment policies.

Countries like Congo-Brazzaville (rich in oil), the Ivory Coast (the main economy of the West African Economic and Monetary Union), Nigeria (the 6th biggest producer in OPEC and the main economy of the West African Customs and Economic Union) - once classed as "medium income countries" - are now candidates for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, with 70% of their populations living below the poverty threshold. Estimated average life expectancy was 58 in 1950, 56 in 1992 and 51 in 2000. Countries like Kenya, the Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe [3] and Zambia have a life expectancy below 50, indeed below 45. There is massive unemployment in urban areas, resulting from the privatization of state enterprises, job freezes and layoffs in the civil service and little or no access to education for youth, above all girls, in the pauperized layers. There has admittedly been a resumption of growth in Africa in recent years (at least 3% since 1995), but this has not led to prosperity for the majority (from the employed middle classes to the lumpen-proletariat).

Pauperization and poverty have led to the development of a traffic in children in central and western Africa; 200,000 per year in Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Togo according to UNICEF, condemned to work in the coffee or cocoa fields, for example in the Ivory Coast. Children are exploited with the consent of their impoverished and immiserated parents. [4] In 14 sub-Saharan countries the indices of human development show an obvious regression. Among them is South Africa, which has also in recent years experienced massive layoffs, following the privatization of public enterprises and the neoliberal "restructurings" of big private companies like Toyota.

Sub-Saharan African growth (down slightly to 2.6% in 2002 as against 3.2% in 2001) is largely attributable to mining and oil and not to the growth of agricultural production, where falling prices on the world market have in recent years been the rule rather than the exception. This is the consequence of organized overproduction in the name of giving priority to exports and a fall in household consumption in the importer countries.

Oil production is increasingly important with the discovery of new oilfields (Congo, Gabon, Nigeria), and the entry of new countries into the oil producers club (Equatorial Guinea, Sudan, Chad) has led to a consolidation of the imperialist presence in sub-Saharan Africa. The US in particular, but also Japan and indeed China, are openly displaying their interest in the natural wealth of sub-Saharan Africa. They are assured of making neocolonial super profits, since the return on investment is considered more rapid in Africa than everywhere else, thanks to the Codes of Investment and Labour (free exploitation of very cheap labour and contempt for universal social rights). These Codes have been dictated to the governments by the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) and the OECD. The "democratically elected" parliaments [5] merely implement the transformation of sub-Saharan Africa into a free trade zone, in accordance with the wishes of European imperialism, within the framework of the agreements between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific states.

## Inter-imperialist rivalry

In 1996 the then US secretary of state for trade, Ron Brown, said that: "Countries on the African continent are about to have a strong influence on the world's political and economic climate... My country is challenged to invest its human and economic resources in bringing about Africa's rebirth... Africa offers extraordinary outlets for leaders of American business... In this sense, American business can compete with Africa's usual trading partners like France and Portugal... In the future, the USA will no longer leave business dealings with Africa to European firms... [6]" Whatever Colin Powell says, it is oil, rather than the war on terror, which explains this new interest in Africa. The US is interested in a greater presence in the oilfields of the Gulf of Guinea, so that it can increase Africa's share of US oil imports from 17% to 25%, thus reducing its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The Bush team is also anxious to see Nigeria (the US' fifth biggest supplier) leaving OPEC. [7]

## Rentier elites

Certainly US investment in Africa can be considered insignificant, but it is not negligible; US exports to sub-Saharan Africa rose from \$5.6 billion in 2000 to \$6.8 billion in 2001, with transport equipment accounting for 42.4% of this, chemical products 11.6%, electronic products 10.4% and machine tools 9.9%. Nor is it negligible that France's economic relations with Africa result in a positive balance of 3.2 billion euros. [8]

This inter-imperialist rivalry works to the benefit of the African elites, who find their role in the aggravated reproduction of dependence/domination and in the rentier status of the African states. The struggle for control of this rent - paid even in wartime - and the conservation of certain imperialist privileged positions generates fraudulent elections and new military coups (Central African Republic, Congo, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Niger) and wars (supposedly ethnic or religious) between local neocolonial fractions (Angola, Congo, Ivory Coast, Niger, Sudan). [9] These elites, in addition to their status as rentiers, link up with the multinational companies in wars for the monopolization of mining resources, carving up countries (Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone) so as to establish fiefdoms of pillage and export of mining resources by the warlords, whether government or rebels. The heads of the private militias recruit massively among the lumpen-proletarianized youth and rely on mercenaries of every stripe who behave barbarically. The increasingly open participation of the rulers of the sub-Saharan countries (Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso

in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Angola) in these barbaric enterprises of capitalist accumulation allows them to participate more fully in the neoliberal restructuring of the world capitalist economy. [10]

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The economically motivated cynicism of the sub-Saharan neocolonial elites has culminated in the murderous carve up of Somalia into oilfields coveted by US imperialism, the genocide of the Tutsis and "moderate Hutus" - a great human tragedy of the late 20th century, virtually reduced to banality - and the three million victims, direct and indirect, of the wars for diamonds, copper, colombo-tantalite/coltan (used in cellular phones), gold and so on in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The criminality of sub-Saharan lumpen-capitalism, although reminiscent of some aspects of the capitalism of past centuries is nonetheless thoroughly contemporary. Capitalism seems condemned by necessity to be very hideous, very irrational in sub-Saharan Africa. [11]

The promise of progress through structural adjustment has proved false. The investment, jobs and prosperity promised have not materialized. According to the official figures, sub-Saharan Africa, not including South Africa, continues to transfer to the West more than it receives in capital. [12] And these figures do not take account of the natural resources pillaged and processed in the West, the public funds placed in western banks and unaccounted for. Thus, the neoliberalization of sub-Saharan Africa has led to a permanent worsening pauperization for the African people.

## NEPAD at the service of multinationals

The would-be enlightened fraction of the African neoliberal elite, preoccupied with the "African Renaissance", has set up the African Union (1999), modeled on the European Union, [13] created in July 2002 out of the ashes of the neo-colonial Organization of African Unity (OAU). The African Union is supposed to conclude a project of continental integration, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. However, at the same time the founding states are pursuing xenophobic policies, making immigrants from other sub-Saharan countries scapegoats for the failure of their neoliberal social policies: expulsion and destruction of small fishing villages in Gabon; affirmation of "Ivoryness" against those originating from Burkina, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Mali in the Ivory Coast; violence against sub-Saharan Africans in Libya; national preference against Mozambican immigrant workers (an important labour force under apartheid) and other sub-Saharans in South Africa. Not to mention wars between neighbour states (Ethiopia-Eritrea, Guinea-Liberia, Chad-Central African Republic, Rwanda-Democratic Republic of Congo).

This African Union has as its economic programme the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). A programme "conceived by Africans, for Africans" but whose legitimacy has not been submitted to any popular consultation. It is rather imperialism that has been consulted; multinationals meeting in Dakar (April 2002) and the G8 at Kananaskis (Canada), where the G8 Plan of Action for Africa was adopted. The heads of state of the NEPAD have also adorned the recent summits at Davos and the G8 at Evian. The French state has its own delegate to the NEPAD, former IMF director Michel Camdessus. The only African consultation has been with "private entrepreneurs" who are supposed to represent civil society in Africa.

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NEPAD's goal is to establish the bases of an African economic takeoff, with a projected annual average growth in GDP of more than 7% over the next 15 years and the reduction by half of the percentage of people living in extreme poverty over the same period. [14]

NEPAD raises no demand for the unconditional and global cancellation of the foreign debt whose repayment is asphyxiating state social budgets. There is no halt planned to the process of privatization of strategic public enterprises. On the contrary, in pursuing "partnership" with private enterprise, the states show increasing zeal in this process of privatization. Thus, in Nigeria, for example, which has received more investment in recent years, the reelection of Obasanjo (2003) has impelled the privatization of the country's most strategic state enterprises. Moreover, responsibility for the economy has been entrusted to a high-ranking Nigerian functionary of the World Bank. Also omitted from the programme are the restoration of universal social rights in general and the rights of wage earners in particular undermined by the new neoliberal Labour Codes, adopted everywhere in the context of structural adjustment. There is no question of restoring the mechanisms of protection for small producers in relation to the multinationals. Investment codes establish equality between multinationals and small local entrepreneurs. The key movers behind the NEPAD (Bouteflika of Algeria, Mbeki of South Africa, Obasanjo of Nigeria, Wade of Senegal) expect a significant participation from the multinationals in the financing of the programme. But support from the multinationals is conditional on guarantees of security and profitability.

## Hierarchical submission

It all adds up to a project of neoliberal reproduction of imperialist domination from which fractions of the African bourgeoisie expect a significant profit, conscious that under capitalism partnership can only be hierarchical, even between imperialisms, whose complicities and rivalries will be in this framework more determinant for the future of Africa than the ambitions of this undemocratic African Union. Imperialism, of course, will not finance a programme that would annihilate its grip on Africa's wealth. Thus, South African private capital aspires to a position of mini-power in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, in the whole of Africa in general. The end of apartheid was, for the enlightened part of the South African bourgeoisie, necessary to improve access to the continental market, previously limited because of the OAU's boycott. Since then, South African capital, through privatization of state enterprises and the liberalization of markets, finds itself in competition in certain sectors (port infrastructure, mining and so on) with non-African capital. The "African Renaissance" promised by Thabo Mbeki above all represents this continental expansion of private South African capital.

In fact, under the NEPAD the economy should be essentially private and in the hands of the multinationals. All the talk of African national economies or the African economy amounts in practice to "western" capital invested in Africa exchanging with "western capital" elsewhere.

Despite its constantly proclaimed "African-ness" there is no popular consensus around NEPAD. The lack of consultation of national civil societies has been heavily criticized by development and human rights NGOs. These critiques often propose amending the programme without challenging the underlying neoliberal paradigm. Such was the case with nearly all the African interventions on NEPAD at the Summit For Another World held as part of the counter-G8 activities at Evian this year. However, there is an as yet very minority current, symbolized by Jubilee South (Africa) which bases its radical critique of the NEPAD on unconditional cancellation of the foreign debt and a rejection of the Washington Consensus. Privatization and the ending of price subsidies for basic staples are being opposed in some countries, while trades unionism is experiencing a kind of reawakening. An example is Nigeria, where in the space of two years the oil unions have staged two general strikes in reaction to price increases. The price hike in June-July 2003 virtually paralyzed the country for a week, until a compromise was struck with the Obasanjo government on the eve of George Bush's visit.

However, in nearly every sub-Saharan country, a pole of political radicalism that can converge with the progressive sectors of "civil society" and the trade union movement is lacking. The "democratization" which accompanied the "end of communism" favoured a certain revival of anti-neocolonial consciousness which was exploited by political parties limiting their ambitions to alternation of power within the neocolonial state. Thus degradation of the social conditions

of existence coincided with the proliferation of neoliberal oligarchical parties.

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[1] During his visit to the Ivory Coast in February 1990 - a period of popular mobilizations for a multiparty system and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa in general and its French-speaking countries in particular - Chirac publicly declared his support for the Houphouët-Boigny regime's view that a multiparty system was a luxury for Africa: "I think that the developing countries should concentrate their effort on economic expansion, which is not always easy in a multi-party system. There are multi-party regimes where democracy is not respected and single party regimes where democracy is perfectly respected, for example the Ivory Coast..." (Le Monde, February 27, 1990). Thus, it is logical that he continues to support the Togolese dictator Eyadema.

[2] Privatization, which was and is presented as a source of income for the public treasury, has in fact brought in practically nothing. (Loïc Rivière, "Privatisations: un bilan en demi-teinte", Marchés Tropicaux et Méditerranéens, July 18, 2003).

[3] Nearly all the critics of the detestable regime of Robert Mugabe forget that from 1990 the Zimbabwean state reorganized its economy in general and its agriculture in particular according to the recommendations of the IMF and the World Bank.

[4] This phenomenon brings to mind Marx's comment that "a great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday, in England, the capitalized blood of children".

[5] In the process of neoliberalization sponsored by the World Bank and IMF, states are obliged to revise their legislation concerning the circulation of capital and the exploitation of the labour force, which are considered to be comparative advantages.

[6] Jeune Afrique, number 1836, March 13-19, 1996.

[7] This push for withdrawal by Nigeria is related to the attempt to overthrow Chavez in Venezuela. The existence of OPEC is considered to be incompatible with neoliberalism in Washington or Houston.

[8] Rapport 2003 du Conseil Français des Investisseurs en Afrique, "Les entreprises françaises et l'Afrique", LE MOCI, number 1579, December 31, 2002. In 2001, France's trade surplus with sub-Saharan Africa was more than 2 billion euros.

[9] See Jean Nanga, "Ethnisme néo-libéral", Inprecor 468-469, March-April 2002.

[10] See François-Xavier Verschave, La Françafrique, Stock, Paris, 1998; "Noir Silence", Les Arènes, 2000; UNO, "Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo", April 2002; Human Rights Watch, "Back to the Brink. War Crimes by Liberian government and rebels. A call for Greater International Attention to Liberia and the Sub-Region", May 2002; Pierre Baracyetse, op. cit.; Bonnie Campbell, op.cit.

[11] See Aimé Césaire, "Discourse on colonialism", Monthly Review Press, 2000, the work of Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman on Rwanda and Congo (ex-Zaïre) and Marc Ferro (dir.), Le livre noir du Colonialisme, Fayard, 2002.

[12] According to UNCTAD, concerning the inflow and outflow of short term capital in sub-Saharan Africa, without South Africa, the cumulative net outflow for the period 1980-1998 was 38 billion dollars and the cumulative inflow 30 billion dollars. (Capital Flows and Growth in Africa, UNCTAD, 2000).

[13] For example, the executive organ of the African Union is its Commission, structured like the Commission of the European Union.

[14] New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development, official document, Abuja (Nigeria), October 2001.