

Battle of Ideas: The Social Responsibility of Intellectuals in Building Counter-Hegemonies

Intellectuals pride themselves as producers of knowledge. They are also articulators of ideologies, a role they do not normally acknowledge. Respectable universities worth the name call themselves sites of knowledge production. I say “respectable” because these days many neo-liberalised universities have abandoned the role of knowledge production in favour of packaging disparate information and branding their “products” (students) to make them saleable on the market. That is a story for another day. Today I don’t want to talk about packaging factories. Today I want to address those intellectuals who still consider themselves producers of knowledge rather than assembly line supervisors of packaging industries.

In a capitalist society divided into classes, you have broadly two types of intellectuals. There are those who produce rationalizations, justifications and mystifications to maintain and reproduce the *status quo* of inequality and inequity in favour of capital. These are the producers and purveyors of what we call hegemonic ideologies. Then there are those who question and challenge dominant knowledge and try to demystify and debunk hegemonic forms of knowledge and ideologies. Some go further to produce and articulate alternative forms of knowledge and ideologies to propel the struggle of the ruled, the oppressed and the downtrodden. They are involved in constructing counter-hegemonies. Thus there is a battle of ideas. One of the foremost sites of the battle of ideas is the University. Battle of ideas precedes battle at the barricades.

Hegemony by definition means acceptance of an ideology voluntarily, by consent as opposed to, by coercion. It was Gramsci's great insight that the bourgeoisie rule by mobilising consent through its ideological apparatuses, both in the state (for example, courts) but – and this is important to note – also in civil society, for example, institutions of education, media, CSOs, art, literature etc. The wheels of ideological apparatuses are always churning. They generate and refurbish hegemonic ideologies and make it the 'common sense' of the time. During normal times, therefore, the coercion of the bourgeois state does not appear on the surface. It is there – but always in the background. This is the case in normal times. What happens in times of crisis – in times when the underlying capitalist system itself is in the crisis of reproducing itself? It is the crisis that interests me most because, I believe, we are currently in such a crisis of the global imperialist-capitalist system. I will not go into the details of the economics of the crisis because I want to focus more on its ideological expressions.

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Today we are witnessing an upsurge of fascism, narrow nationalisms and parochialism (for short, I'll call them "new nationalisms") both in the Centres (the global North) and in the Peripheries (the global South). In the North, rightist parties and formations wave the flag of racism and nationalism against immigrants. Given the electoral victories of the right in recent times, even mainstream center and centre-left parties, fearing the erosion of their electoral base, buy into the anti-immigrant rhetoric. Brexit is one such example; the other is Trump's laughable but tragic Mexican wall project.

In the South, there is a rise of demagogic and populist leaders who wave the flag of narrow ethnic, racist, religious and parochial patriotism. Modi of India, Duterte of Philippines and Bolsonaro of Brazil, well illustrate populist

and demagogic languages. Modi waves the flag of Hindutva which is nothing but an assertion of Hindu supremacy. Inevitably this unleashes street violence against minorities – Muslims, Christians and Dalits. Bolsonaro deploys his populist slogans against Blacks, women and LGBT communities. In Latin America, another Bolsonaro is in the making. This is the gentleman called Juan Guaido who has “democratically” declared himself the president of Venezuela. He is supported by the “champions of democracy” in America and Europe and recognised, among others, by the only “democracy” in the Middle East – Israel. [Please note the term “democracy” and all its derivatives here are in inverted commas.]

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I'd suggest that the upsurge of “new nationalisms” is a backlash to neoliberalism gone wild. Ironically, neo-liberalism itself paved the path for the rise of “new nationalisms”. Neo-liberal ideologies did not have a long staying power but for some four decades of its rule it caused havoc. Market and monetarism were its mantra. Neo-liberalism attacked bourgeois liberalism in the Centres and assaulted post-colonial, radical and progressive nationalism in the Peripheries. Socially, it rested on *individuation* as opposed to bourgeois *individualism*. The best description of individuation comes from Margaret Thatcher who rhetorically exclaimed: ‘Society, what society! There is no such thing as society!’ There are only disparate individuals. Bourgeois individuals stood for rights and obligations. Neo-liberal individuates don't stand for anything – except for self-enrichment and aggrandizement. They will sell their rights and trample on others' rights so long as they can “move on”. And ‘obligation’ has no place in their utterly self-centered mindsets.

On economic level, neo-liberalism is based on the endless

creation of fictitious commodities and their privatisation. So public goods – education, health, water, energy and air are commodified and owned; so also flora and fauna, mountains, rivers and forests; bio resources and genetically modified life organisms become private property to be owned and traded for profit. Even languages and cultural practices get patented and owned. (Recently Walt Disney took out a patent on the Kiswahili phrase: *Hakuna Matata!*) Debt, including sovereign debt, becomes a commodity and is traded. Financial oligarchies offer cheap credit – so every one from individuals through households to states borrow heavily becoming indebted. Debt slavery has become a new kind of slavery. We all exist in debt to financial sharks, literally and figuratively. Descartes' famous saying, "I think therefore I am" becomes "I am indebted therefore I am". Underlying it all is rampant primitive accumulation by a small financial oligarchy overshadowing 'accumulation by expansion' in the productive sphere. Financialisation becomes the name of the game. Fictitious economy takes leave of real economy and begins to believe in self-regulation and self-reproduction. When the hiatus between the real and fictitious economy becomes unsustainable, the bubble bursts like the 2007-2008 prime mortgage crisis in the US that spread like wild fire to other countries. But the state pumps in trillions of dollars to save financial institutions, which duly resume their nefarious transactions. The outcome of the crisis is further concentration of wealth and power in fewer hands.

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Inequality, unemployment, poverty, despair and hopelessness rise as wealth concentrates in a small minority. Angry masses become cannon fodder on which rising fascist and right-wing feed. In the absence of a feasible alternative, this is the way the masses hit back at neo-liberal excesses.

Neo-liberalism was primarily an ideological assault on radical nationalism and its relatively independent policies. It devastated our social fabric and the neo-liberalisation of our universities destroyed counter-hegemonic, progressive discourses and debates. The University structures were corporatized. Courses lost their integrity as they were semesterised and modularised. Short courses proliferated. Basic research was undermined as policy consultancy overwhelmed the faculty. Knowledge production was substituted by online information gathering. A few resisted but many surrendered. Voices of resistance from staff and students were stifled and suppressed. University authorities spent more on surveillance gadgets to keep students in check rather than on sanitation facilities in dorms to keep students healthy. This campus, once known for its intellectual salience, is today cited for its selective silence. The kind of discourse that I'm indulging in today, I bet, must sound Greek and Latin to our neo-liberal generation of both students and faculty. This is the story of many African campuses.

As a consequence, the rise of "new nationalisms" caught intellectuals by surprise. Neither did they anticipate it nor do they know how to react to it. The knee-jerk reaction on many African campuses – not all of course – has been to join the bandwagon either out of choice or because of lack of choice.

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"New nationalisms" across the global South share certain

characteristics, albeit manifesting in different forms and languages, depending on concrete conditions. Some manifestations are undoubtedly progressive but are invariably eclectic.

Firstly, populism speaks in the name of the poor against the poor. *Secondly*, it privileges 'God and country' instead of peoples and nations. *Thirdly*, it concentrates power and destroys other potential centres of actual or potential power. *Fourthly*, it seeks legitimacy in "gods and ancestors" rather than its people. *Fifthly*, it makes fetish of "industrialisation-as-development" while marginalising agriculture and pillorying "development-as-freedom". In Africa, no doubt, we need industrialisation to develop but development is more than industrialisation. Development, as Mwalimu Nyerere used to say, is a social process of enlarging the terrain of freedom and constricting the tyranny of necessity.

Sixthly, "new nationalism" mounts a concerted assault on veritable centres of thinking, especially universities. My Indian friends from Jawaharlal Nehru University tell me that Modi's regime has repeatedly tried to destroy radicalism at JNU, by slapping criminal charges on radical faculty and students, by mounting direct attacks by police on the Campus and by appointing regime's stooges as vice-chancellors, and so on.

The upsurge of "new nationalisms" is a backlash to neoliberalism gone wild

Seventhly, the anti-imperialist rhetoric of "new nationalisms" is eclectic and selective. It is couched in the language of "they", the foreigners, and "we", the indigenous, rather than as an *anti-systemic* project.

Finally, in Africa, the "new nationalism" is singularly bereft of the Pan-African dimension. This is very much unlike the

first wave of nationalism, which was born of Pan-Africanism and tried to keep it on the political radar in spite of its problems and shortcomings. Paraphrasing Mwalimu Nyerere, I would say that African nationalism could only be Pan-Africanism otherwise it becomes “the equivalent of tribalism in the context of our separate nation states.” (Nyerere)

Under the circumstances, it is squarely the social responsibility of intellectuals to construct a counter-hegemonic project that would resonate with the lives of the vast majority. Instead, African intellectuals have reacted to “new nationalisms” by falling back on the ideological rhetoric of bourgeois liberalism, which they know best but which, in my view, falls far short of giving the people a vision and a cause to fight for. The liberal language of political pluralism, social diversity, ideological identity and party politics is, in my view, inadequate and does not touch the hearts and minds of our people. We must always remember that it is liberalism constructed on capitalist foundations that created the soil for the rise of neo-liberalism and its offshoot “new nationalisms” in the first place.

One cannot construct a counter-hegemonic project in the abstract and I do not intend to do so. Such alternatives are built in the course of struggle. By way of conclusion, though, I'd like to suggest for our consideration that any counter-hegemonic project must be based on four building blocks. These are: *popular livelihoods*, *popular participation*, *popular power* and *popular rights and freedoms*.

‘Popular’ is used in two senses: one that it is anti-imperialist and two, that it is based on a ‘bloc of popular classes’, which together I call working people. The term popular helps us to distance ourselves from populisms emanating from the term ‘people’. The term *popular livelihoods* does not require any further explanation. Needless to say it has to be based on a people-centered development. (And by ‘people’ I mean working people.)

Popular participation is meant to interrogate the limits of parliamentary and party politics and rethink the institutions of the state. The idea is to posit a new mode of politics. Politics are where the masses are. And masses are in villages and urban ghettos and neighbourhoods. So *popular participation* and *popular power* is meant to re-locate power and politics from the state to villages and neighbourhoods.

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In *popular rights and freedoms* I include two fundamental rights and four fundamental freedoms. The fundamental rights are *right to human existence* to live life with dignity and *right to organise* means that an organised working people are able to defend their interests themselves through their own organisations – whether these are trade unions, workers' associations, working women's organisations, peasant co-operatives or peasant parties. Forms of organisation arise from concrete conditions. People have always been innovative in organising themselves for resistance and for fighting for alternatives.

Four fundamental freedoms are: *freedom from want*, *freedom from fear*, *freedom from violence* (both state and social violence) and *freedom from enforced silence* – in other words, right to speak out. Time does not allow me to elaborate further on the building blocks of an alternative Project. My aim was simple: to jolt us from the slumber of silence. My hope is – and I'm eternally hopeful – that this type of discourses will morph us from the *state of unthinking* to the *state of thinking*.

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This article adopted from a *Keynote address at the University*

of Dar es Salaam was first published in Sauti ya Ujamaa on February, 2 2019.