

Mind the Gap: Notes on Neoliberalism and Africa in the new world disorder

It is virtually impossible these days to have a discourse on public affairs, without a ritual flogging of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, writes Daniel Rogers (Dissent Magazine, Winter 2018) “is the linguistic omnivore of our times, a neologism that threatens to swallow up all the other words around it.” He postulates that the (anti) neoliberalism narrative is a blowback from the 2007 financial crisis. As evidence, he cites a seventeen-fold increase of academic and media references as captured by ProQuest database from less than 2000 hits in the decade preceding the financial crisis to more than 33000 since. This should give the many African intellectuals and activists that have jumped on the anti-neoliberalism bandwagon cause to pause. Is this our war?

But first, and for the benefit of the uninitiated, what is this beast neoliberalism? After scouring the online dictionaries, I find the that *Encyclopedia Britannica* provides a sufficiently elaborate but still succinct description of its salient elements:

“Neoliberalism [is] an ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition. Although there is considerable debate as to the defining features of neoliberal thought and practice, it is most commonly associated with laissez-faire-economics. In particular, neoliberalism is often characterized in terms of its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital.”

Of essence, I think is the observation that neoliberalism is an ideology. The sage from Dar, Prof. Issa Shivji in his essay [*Battle of Ideas: The Social Responsibility of Intellectuals in Building Counter-Hegemonies*](#), published in this Review distinguishes it from *bourgeois liberalism*, associating neoliberalism with “individuation” and bourgeois liberalism with “individualism.” This is getting complicated.

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My reading of distinction is that Prof. Shivji associates neoliberalism with the ideology commonly referred to as libertarianism. Libertarianism and conventional liberalism are distinguished by their conception of the State vis-a-vis freedom. Libertarianism posits the State as a malevolent freedom devouring Leviathan, in the spirit of Locke. It is, according to Libertarians, the duty of freedom loving citizens to defend the private sphere from encroachment by the overbearing state. Conventional liberalism conceives the State as an enabler of freedom in the spirit of Rousseau.

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The two ideologies can be helpfully related to Isaiah Berlin’s “two concepts of liberty” thesis, namely negative liberty (“freedom from”) and positive liberty (“freedom to”). Libertarians champion negative freedom (from interference) which corresponds to fundamental political rights and civil

liberties i.e. freedom to mind one's business as long as the business does not interfere with the business of others. Liberals privilege positive freedom which speaks to what we now call empowerment, that is freedoms that accrue from belonging to community, in the spirit of Amartya Sen's idea of "development as freedom." Education is a positive freedom. If a literate society leaves people free to choose to educate their children or not, some children will grow up and fail to enjoy the freedoms that come with literacy, including being severely disadvantaged in participating in civic and political life.

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These freedoms can conflict in interesting ways. Bridge International Academies, an enterprise that prides itself for providing affordable quality private "slum schools" in this part of the world, is a prime target of the anti-neoliberal advocacy, accused of being the beachhead of a neoliberal conspiracy to commercialize basic education. It glosses over the fact that the poor parents actually choose to send their children and to pay fees in Bridge Academies instead of free public ones. The middle classes and wealthy do the same thing (yours truly included). Only when the poor make the same choices does it become a neoliberal conspiracy. It seems that in the pursuit of the belief that education must be state provided, itself a socialist dogma, the equality rights of the poor get the short shrift. Recently, it has been suggested that the way to ensure that the government provides quality services is to compel public officials to use the same said services. This amounts to the proposition that in pursuing the positive freedoms of the many, it is justifiable to violate

the negative freedoms of the few. Of course the unintended consequence of such a policy is that many talented and highly skilled people who the public service needs, would shun it.

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Neoliberalism's political ascendancy is traced back to the Reagan-Thatcher era of deregulation and rolling back of the state. It is said to have arrived on these shores via the "Washington Consensus". The term Washington Consensus was coined by John Williamson, a World Bank economist and Senior Fellow at the Petersen Institute, a Washington think tank, who in 1989 framed structural adjustment into a 10-point reform agenda. The "Washington Consensus" moniker is arguably the first victim of the linguistic cannibalism of neoliberalism that Rogers talks about. For years, Williamson has maintained that the Washington Consensus was mischaracterised but to little avail, as in this 2002 paper *Did the Washington Consensus Fail?*:

"It is difficult even for the creator of the term to deny that the phrase "Washington Consensus" is a damaged brand name. Audiences the world over seem to believe that this signifies a set of neoliberal policies that have been imposed on hapless countries by the Washington-based international financial institutions and have led them to crisis and misery. There are people who cannot utter the term without foaming at the mouth. My own view is of course quite different. The basic ideas that I attempted to summarize in the Washington Consensus have continued to gain wider acceptance over the past decade, to the point where Lula has had to endorse most of them in order to be

electable. Some of the most vociferous of today's critics of what they call the Washington Consensus, most prominently Joe Stiglitz (whose recent book, for example, specifically endorses gradual trade liberalization and carefully done privatization), do not object so much to the agenda laid out above as to the neoliberalism that they interpret the term as implying. I of course never intended my term to imply policies like capital account liberalization (as stated above, I quite consciously excluded that), monetarism, supply-side economics, or a minimal state (getting the state out of welfare provision and income redistribution), which I think of as the quintessentially neoliberal ideas. If that is how the term is interpreted, then we can all enjoy its wake, although let us at least have the decency to recognize that these ideas have rarely dominated thought in Washington and certainly never commanded a consensus there or anywhere much else except perhaps at meetings of the Mont Pelerin Society."

The Mont Pelerin Society conspiracy features frequently in the pages of *The Guardian* including in an interview published last week featuring Winnie Byanyima and Rutger Bregman's exploits at the World Economic Forum last month that went viral on social media. Named for the Swiss alpine resort where its founders first convened in 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society, a liberal/libertarian think tank describes itself as a society of persons "who see dangers in the expansion of government, not least in state welfare, in the power of trade unions and business monopoly, and in the continuing threat and reality of inflation."

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If neoliberalism is the outgrowth of the Mont Pelerin Society, it is very bad karma, in view of its unleashing of the very ultra-nationalist political dynamic that brought the fascists

to power, for in addition to being the 20th century's intellectual giants, the society's founders—Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises—were themselves Jewish emigres who had fled persecution. But it should not entirely surprise. If we go back to history, the decades leading up to WW I feature many elements reminiscent of the current wave of globalization. This was the era of the Gilded Age, a communication revolution (telegraph and telephone), a transport revolution (from steam to the internal combustion engine), aviation and poignantly, the 1885 Berlin Conference that carved up this continent for plunder, all leading to the crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the fascist ascendancy. But for these conflagrations, colonialism would have very likely lasted a while longer.

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Which brings me back to the question, is this our war?

Fifty years ago, Samuel Huntington opened his definitive study of "Third World politics" *Political Order in Changing Societies*, with a sobering contention that I think deserves to be quoted at length:

"The most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government. Communist totalitarian states and Western liberal states both belong generally in the category of effective rather than debile political systems. The United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union have different forms of government, but in all three systems the government governs. All three countries have strong, adaptable, coherent political institutions: effective bureaucracies,

well-organized political parties, a high degree of popular participation in public affairs, working systems of civilian control over the military, extensive activity by the government in the economy, and reasonably effective procedures for regulating succession and controlling political conflict. These governments command the loyalties of their citizens and thus have the capacity to tax resources, to conscript manpower, and to innovate and to execute policy. If the Politburo, the Cabinet, or the President makes a decision, the probability is high that it will be implemented through the government machinery. In all these characteristics the political systems of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union differ significantly from the governments which exist in many, if not most, of the modernizing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These countries lack many things. They suffer real shortages of food, literacy, education, wealth, income, health, and productivity, but most of them have been recognized and efforts made to do some thing about them. Beyond and behind these shortages, however, there is a greater shortage: a shortage of political community and of effective, authoritative, legitimate government. "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men," Madison warned in *The Federalist*, No. 51, "the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." In many modernizing countries governments are still unable to perform the first function, much less the second."

Huntington called this dichotomy the "political gap." Five decades on, it is as yawning as ever.

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Islamic hegemony is unravelling in Sudan. In Ethiopia developmental autocracy—the so called benevolent dictatorship has run into the headwinds of ethnic nationalism. Post Mugabe Zimbabwe is rudderless, and leaderless. Uganda and Rwanda wait for their trysts with destiny upon the exit from the stage of the reigning strongmen. Ditto Cameroon. DR Congo has successfully transferred power for the first time ever through an election – but not to the winner. Plunder can continue. Nigeria has postponed the general elections—the grapevine says, there was not enough time to pre-mark ballots. Here in Kenya, the political class has thrown in the towel on competitive politics, and is now preparing the ground for an eat-and-let-eat grand ethnic coalition. In summary, “shortage of political community and of effective, authoritative, legitimate government.”

As they would say in London: Mind the Gap.