

A DECOLONIAL TURN FOR AFRICA

Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity.

By Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni.

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Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity is part of a wave of intellectual positions making the argument that there is a need to make a ‘decolonial turn’ in the understanding of nation-building, development, and postcolonial reality and thought at large. The notion of a decolonial turn emerged in exchanges between intellectuals from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. These exchanges were informed by postcolonial intellectual production, anti-racist scholarship, and theories of decolonization in various parts of the world, including Africa. Part of the importance of Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s monograph is that it makes the connection between key African intellectuals and politicians such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, the contemporary reality of Africa, and theorization about the decolonial turn. An important accomplishment of the book is that it takes seriously these past and present, and South to South encounters, rather than solely European and more standard American formulations of the problem of development as the main sources or as the most significant theses to consider.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni quickly establishes his epistemological base and point of departure by clarifying that the ‘empire’ to which he alludes in his text is not the concept of Empire that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have made famous. He refers to their conception of Empire as ‘phantasmagoric’ (p. 8), and opposes to it an understanding of empire as something ‘real’. Here is where the other two terms invoked in the title of the book come in. By ‘real’ empire, Ndlovu-Gatsheni does not mean classic or modern imperialism. The point is rather that the construction of the African subject provides evidence of continuity in the forms of control and subordination between the colonial period and now. The African subject was and continues to be represented as ‘lacking substance, lacking being, lacking soul, lacking history, lacking writing, lacking rationality, lacking civilization, lacking democracy, and lacking human rights’ (p. 104). These varied absent dimensions that are posited as part of the human experience, point to mechanisms at the level of power, knowledge, and meaning or being that have their roots in colonial ideologies and practices that established a fundamental difference between colonizers and the colonized. Empire, then, is not some rarified form of power that affects all subjects equally or similarly, therefore leveling conditions and struggles; rather it subsists through a divide between communities that can readily claim full humanity and others that do so only with extreme difficulty and without guarantees. The operations at the level of knowledge, power, and meaning or being that perpetrate those differences can be referred to as ‘global coloniality’.

The book is divided in three parts. In the first part, ‘Global Imperial Designs and Empire’, the author defines his use of ‘empire’ and ‘coloniality’ and links Pan-Africanism to African development. Ndlovu-Gatsheni concludes Part One with a proposal of two

practical steps in this direction: to speed up the pace of pan-African unity and to strengthen South to South collaboration (p. 98). Part Two, entitled 'Subject, Subjection and Subjectivity', challenges the universality of the postmodern conception of the subject in conditions of late capitalism. Here again, recognizing the reality of coloniality, as reflected in the ways in which subjectivity remains colonized in the postcolonial world, makes it possible to elaborate a more productive approach to the questions of the subject, the nature of its subjections, and forms of liberation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni engages Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau, using part of their views of the subject, but at the same time indicating the extent to which the lack of a proper account of the colonial dynamic renders those views of the subject fundamentally incomplete from the perspective of African subjectivity. The author includes two chapters in which he focuses on national discourses in South Africa and Zimbabwe in order to shed more light in the unfolding drama of African subjectivity.

Part Three, entitled 'Coloniality, Knowledge and Nationalism' focuses on the coloniality of knowledge. Ndlovu-Gatsheni discusses the extent to which African universities remain bastions of Eurocentrism. The author proposes that universities should take seriously African critical theories, knowledge, and indigenous knowledge systems to encourage the production of alternatives to critical discourses that pathologize as mere 'victimhood' African subjectivities and African nationalisms. Instead, the author proposes the search for new nationalist and pan-Africanist discourses that are democratic, embrace gender parity, and foster South-South collaborations and encounters. Overall, the book stimulates an interest in transformation in directions other than those premised on globalization, liberal cosmopolitanisms, and development.

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A LOST ARCADIA

Achebe and Friends at Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite.

By Terri Ochiagha.

Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2015. Pp. xiii + 202. \$80, hardback (ISBN 9781847011091).

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Key Words: West Africa, Nigeria, arts, biography, education, intellectual, literature, modernity.

Achebe and Friends in Umuahia: The Making of a Literary Elite, author Terri Ochiagha explains, takes its title from *Swami and Friends* by the Indian novelist R. K. Narayan. This beloved fictional work concerns the formation of a middle-class intellectual elite. The central goal of her own book, Ochiagha asserts, is to reconstruct 'the institutional genesis of Government College Umuahia, its changing ideological and intellectual nature, the humanistic and literary ambience in the period of 1944–52, its legacy in the mid to late 1950s, and the *primus inter pares* generation's shared intellectual life après Government College'. The book is about the factors that stirred the inaugural moments of African