

The Interrelationships between Western Imperialism and Underdevelopment in Africa

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Received date: June 14, 2015, Accepted date: August 06, 2015, Published date: August 12, 2015

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Abstract

This research work studies 'The Interrelationships between Western Imperialism and Underdevelopment in Africa'. The developed countries of the Northern hemisphere of the world especially Western Europe and the United States of America (USA) have been at the gaining end of the parasitic and asymmetrical relationship between the North and the impoverished South, this asymmetric relationship is what is today known as imperialism. Thus this study focuses on discovering how imperialism has led to economic, socio-cultural and political underdevelopment in Africa. This work is guided by a mix of the dependency theory and an analysis of Rostow's five stages of economic growth from a structural-functional perspective. This work hence discovers that underdevelopment in Africa is the direct consequence of continued imperialism of the Western capitalist nations on African states and the weak economic, political and socio-cultural structures created by colonialism and sustained by imperialism-in-continuum. This work finally concludes by making recommendation on how the adverse impacts Western imperialism can be combated on the long run.

Keywords Interrelationships; Imperialism; Socio-cultural; Political; Western capitalist

Introduction

The developed countries of the Northern hemisphere of the world especially Western Europe and the United States of America (USA) have been at the gaining end of the parasitic and asymmetrical relationship between the North and the impoverished South, this asymmetric relationship is what is today known as imperialism. Imperialism which is the process of extending a nation's authority by territorial acquisition or by the establishment of political and economic hegemony over other nations [1] has been the bane of many underdeveloped nations of the world especially in Africa, thus while a part of the world build empires both home and abroad, another part continually spirals down the drain of poverty, peril, stagnancy, impoverishment and underdevelopment. This According to Spiegel [1], is because "Regardless of time or place, whether they were continental or extended over water, empires served the same basic functions: they represented the extension of one people's control over another, the extension of one state's hegemony over others' territory, the opportunity to extract goods cheaply without concern for local costs, and the chance to extend values (religious, moral, cultural, and social)". Thus imperialism is a dialectical relationship among a party (usually states) in which there is disequilibrium in the distribution of gains and losses, hence, what counts as loss for one party becomes gain for the other.

The Western imperial powers have devised so many means to maintain such asymmetrical relationship at all cost even post colonially. It is the employment of these methods that some scholars call Neo-colonialism, Post-colonial imperialism and what I personally call imperialism-in-continuum. This paper thus traces many of the developmental crises in Africa to the negative consequences of imperialism. Neo-colonialism refers to the indirect control of the

nations of the south by their former colonial masters socially, politically and economically. Neo-colonialism started immediately after the decolonization of African and Asian nations. The colonial administrators' interest would not be jeopardized by the transfer of power. One of the methods was to prepare ground for creation of puppet leaders by involving leaders of national movements into colonial government. This ensured that the emerging leaders were groomed to up hold the existing exploitation relation.

Neo-colonialism is the geopolitical practice of using capitalism, business globalization, and cultural imperialism to influence a country in lieu of either direct military control or indirect political control, imperialism and hegemony. The term neo-colonialism was coined by Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, to describe the socio-economic and political control that can be exercised economically, linguistically, and culturally, whereby promotion of the culture of the neo-colonist country facilitates the cultural assimilation of the colonized people and thus opens the national economy to the multinational corporations of the neo-colonial country.

The Political Science term "Neo-Colonialism" became popular usage in reference to the continued European economic, political and cultural control of African countries that had been decolonized in the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-45). Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana (1960-66), coined the term "neo-colonialism" in the book Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism (1965) [2].

Imperialism and Underdevelopment in Africa: A Background

It is pertinent to point out at this juncture that imperialism not only has material dimensions but also cultural aspects. Colonial Imperialism not only created structurally weak nations in Africa and beyond but also exploited indigenous populations, thus breaking up the material make-up of these societies and culturally destabilizing

them. The political aspects of this menace have been deeply asphyxiating, being that these weak political structures created by the western imperialist nations received politico-economic functions at independence, which they are not developed enough to handle. Judging from Rostow's five stages of development, one will begin to see the strength of this analysis Rostow [3], posits five stages of development; Traditional society, Preconditions to take-off, Take-off, Drive to maturity, Age of high mass consumption:

Traditional society

- Characterized by subsistence agriculture or hunting and gathering; almost wholly a "primary" sector economy
- Limited technology
- A static or 'rigid' society: lack of class or individual economic mobility, with stability prioritized and change seen negatively

Pre-conditions to "take-off"

- External demand for raw materials initiates economic change;
- Development of more productive, commercial agriculture and cash crops not consumed by producers and/or largely exported
- Widespread and enhanced investment in changes to the physical environment to expand production (i.e. irrigation, canals, ports)
- Increasing spread of technology and advances in existing technologies
- Changing social structure, with previous social equilibrium now in flux
- Individual social mobility begins
- Development of national identity and shared economic interests

Take off

- Urbanization increases, Industrialization proceeds, Technological breakthrough occurs
- The "secondary" (goods-producing) sector expands and ratio of secondary vs. primary sectors in the economy shifts quickly towards secondary
- Textiles and apparel are usually the first "take-off" industry, as happened in Great Britain's classic "Industrial Revolution"

Drive to maturity

- Diversification of the industrial base; multiple industries expand and new ones take root quickly
- Manufacturing shifts from investment-driven (capital goods) towards consumer durables and domestic consumption
- Rapid development of transportation infrastructure
- Large-scale investment in social infrastructure (schools, universities, hospitals, etc.)

Age of mass consumption

1. The industrial base dominates the economy; the primary sector is of greatly diminished weight in economy and society
2. Widespread and normative consumption of high-value consumer goods (e.g. automobiles)
3. Consumers typically (if not universally), have disposable income, beyond all basic needs, for additional goods [4]

Even though the stated process is not sacrosanct as some societies leap, the point in Rostow's argument is that every society at a point develop structures that enable them go into a new stage of development which comes with new functions. The beauty of this argument is that when societies develop structures, they know the functions these structures are supposed to perform, hence societies take on functions based on the structures they have been able to develop so far, the Igbo society in pre-colonial Africa is a very good example, even though many igbo societies lacked central authority and ran an egalitarian socio-political system, peaceful coexistence and social security were the order of the day because the people were socialised into a gerontocratic system where respect for elders was sacrosanct, achievements and honour were respected above material wealth and the extended family system was encouraged so that everyone became his brother's keeper; this traditional social order became distorted with the coming of the western colonial powers. Hence the big question becomes what if functions are imposed from without? Most societies in Africa were at the traditional and the preconditions to take-off stage before the coming of the western colonialists, the inherent structures in these societies were left as they are so as to impede resistance and enable the success of the exploitative intentions of the westerners.

At independence, most African states were exposed to and incorporated into a world system that they are not matured enough to advantageously play the politics inherent in it and thus are left at the mercy of the imperial-capitalist nations of the West who own and run the system in their national interest. This explains why Japan isolated itself from world politics and western influence until it was matured enough and structurally ready to take on the turbulent waters of world politics. This readiness was demonstrated in Japan's immediate involvement in imperialist and expansionist politics and thus annexed Taiwan and Korea in 1895 and 1910 respectively.

Theoretical Framework

Dependency theory

The Dependency theory arose out of the quest by Latin American and African political scholars (Paul Baran, Walter Rodney, Claude Ake, Kwame Nkrumah, Dos Santos, Andre Gunder Frank, Helio Jaguaribe e.t.c.) to explain the underdevelopment in these regions or what may be called the third world, and possibly proffer solutions to the problem. The Dependency theory which is a product of their research, adopted to a great extent the economic approach in its analysis of underdevelopment.

These scholars contend that development and underdevelopment are two different sides of a universal historical process. To this extent, western capitalist countries developed in the process of under developing the present day underdeveloped nations. This formed the crux of Walter Rodney's argument in his book 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa'

They further contend that this dialectical relationship started with the mercantilist epoch around the middle of the sixteenth century and continued till the end of the nineteenth century. The era witnessed numerous economic activities that were of great benefits to only the western capitalist countries. Some of these activities included the slave and free trades, colonial conquests and annexation of the present day third world, all of which had economic motives. These in turn paved the way for the incorporation of the economies of these overseas

territories into what Ake [5] (1983) termed “The main stream of world capitalism”.

This process, they argued, had many consequences. First, it led to one sided transfer of the economic wealth from the overseas countries to the colonizing countries, thereby resulting in capital accumulation in the latter, and the depletion of economic surplus generated in the former.

Secondly, it promoted complementarity and dependence whereby countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America became the producers of primary products for the industries in the advanced industrialist west and importers of manufactured goods. This led to an international division of labor skewed advantageously in favor of the West.

Thirdly, it resulted in the decimation of local manufacturing industries through the process of flooding the markets of the colonized territories with foreign goods at cheaper rates, resulting in the withering away of local industries that were previously producing the goods.

Summarily, one comes to understand that the dependency theorists are of the opinion that the underdevelopment in the third world can be traced to the pursuance of the economic interests of the western developed nations.

Dimensions of Imperialism in Africa

The developed countries of the North employ various methods to exploit developing countries of the South. These methods include inter alia economic, social as well as political methods.

Economic dimension

The imperialist nations of the west invest much in the developing countries of Africa through multinational corporations (MNCs). These companies exploit market area and cheap labour. To prove the above, Haag [6], opined that “countries from Europe and America have been able to get inexpensive natural resources from the poorer countries in Asia and Latin America including oil for power ores and minerals.” The industrialized or imperialist nations also used their MNCs (Multinational Corporations) or even Transnational Corporations to further plunder the resources of the third-world till today.

As a classical example, North-America and European corporations have acquired control of more than three-fourths of the known mineral resources of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Such multinational corporations invest in countries with cheaper labour markets U.S corporate foreign investment grew 84 percent 84 percent from 1985 to 1990, the most dramatic increase being in cheap labor countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Nigeria.

Transnational’s have developed a global production line. General motors’ has factories that produce cars, trucks and a wide range of auto components in Canada, Brazil, Venezuela , Spain, Belgium, Yugoslavian, Nigeria, Singapore, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea and a dozen other countries.

Another economic method is world market control. Europe and America control the world market by fixing price of African cash crops and by keeping the prices low, they make Africa remain dependent on their aids. Thus these nations are perpetually kept in a situation of unequal exchange. This is why Haag [6] went on to opine that

“imperialist nations have mandate to fix price of Africa cash crops and other raw materials in addition with conditions”

Another economic tool utilized by the west against Africa is the giving of loans and grants. Imperialist nations make use of financial institutions such as World Bank, IMF, IFC to give the developing countries loans and grants accompanied by very high interest rate and unrealistic conditionality. This proves hard for African nations to pay back in the long run, which results to debt burden and hence underdevelopment and dependence; for many years, Nigeria groaned under the heavy weight of debt burden until some were cancelled under the Olusegun Obasanjo civilian regime (1999-2007). The IMF operates as a United Nations specialized agency and is a permanent forum for consideration of issues of international payments, in which member nations are encouraged to maintain an orderly pattern of exchange rates and to avoid restrictive exchange practices. The IMF was established, along with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, or World Bank, at the UN Monetary and Financial Conference held in 1944 at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire with the sole aim of rebuilding the war-torn Europe (thus, an institution of the West, run by the West for the good of the West and practically the West alone). The IMF began operations in 1947. Membership is open to all independent nations and included 184 countries in 2004. Imperialism has come to predominate. Control is exercised informally and less overly. The U.S.A, for instance exerts considerable influence over certain Third World nations as a result of its national economical financial organization such as World Bank and IMF.

Technology is another economic tool of northern dominance. There is a minimum technology transfer from the rich countries of the west to the poor countries of Africa even in a situation of import substitution. For example, in Nigeria, the Coca Cola Company brings machinery but do not allow the staff members from Nigeria to access the technological knowhow of the manufacturing process of soft drinks. This makes it that money is made in these countries, but is spent outside it, because money for the purchase of the machinery and expertise returns to the developed countries of the west.

Socio-cultural dimension

The west also utilize the mass media in the maintenance of an asymmetrical international order. Through worldwide mass media such as BBC, CNN, VOA, DW, the imperialist west disseminate information that psychologically justify their activities in Africa.

Education is also used by the neo-colonialist to exploit developing countries. In the developing countries, the curriculum is informed by imperialistic rather than practical education. Hence the imperialists through colonialism have instituted a system of education that is not based on creativity, productivity and solution finding, but on paper works and theoretical explanations. Thus while the states of the west are busy producing and innovating through practical education, most scholars in the impoverished Africa are busy gathering certificates. It is this kind of situation that prompted Claude Ake’s book Social Science as Imperialism published in 1982.

Cultural indoctrination is another way the west maintain their exploitative grip on Africa. Through the use of the mass media, books, magazines and the internet, people of the west inculcate their cultural values which include the mode of dressing and food into Africa. Through the adoption of western cultural ideals, new markets are established because of the induced demand in Africa where the people

now want to appear like the people in the West. There is a very good and blossoming textile and foot wear industry in Aba, Nigeria but the government seem oblivious of these industries and the people many a time prefer made-in-U.S. and made-in-UK products over these local but very good products, the same goes for food items as people prefer foreign rice over the locally produced and more nutritious ones.

Political dimension

Politically, the west establishes cordial relations with the ruling class in Africa. This is done so as to make it easier for these leaders to be used as local agents of imperialism. By installing and supporting puppet leaders (especially at independence), the imperialists are able to exploit these nations with the support of these petty bourgeois leaders who embezzle national funds and bank them overseas, thereby creating more capital in the north. Thus the leader benefits individually with the imperialists while the country remains impoverished. It is common in developing countries for leaders to be stupendously rich while the citizens wallow in abject poverty.

Also, the advanced states of the north especially the U.S.A arbitrarily encroach into the territories of the southern states and topple leaders who are perceived to be working against northern imperialist interests. This informed the U.S.A invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime the same scenario also played out in Libya in 2011 when Col. Muammar Gadhafi the leader of the Libyan state was killed by pro-U.S.A local rebel forces.

Conclusion

So it is clear now that there are two classes on earth. One is the rich west and another is the poor third-world. The rich are expanding their wealth by exploiting the poor. The rich countries have been dominating the poor countries from the colonial era till now. They straightly exploited the colonial countries for their profit in the colonial period, but from the post-colonial era they have changed their strategy to indirect exploitation. Globalization, capitalism and

developmental concepts developed by them are just modified versions of colonialism, just like old wine in a new bottle or divorce with alimony.

This paper has also been able to show that the continuing underdevelopment in Africa is as a result of the structural weakness of the African societies in the face of the modern world. Hence the incursion of the Whiteman into Africa and the exploitation that followed distorted the developmental process in Africa by directly linking these societies to the western imperial empires as producers of raw materials and buyers of manufactured goods, thus removing a very important aspect of development from these societies, which is the drive for autarchy.

A veritable solution to this situation is for the third-world countries to delink from whatsoever link they have with the imperialist nations. But immediate delinking may be fatalistic. So a slow process delinking occasioned by a revolutionary and patriotic leadership, formulation of home grown economic and socio-political policies which reflect local realities, and a revision of the educational curriculum to reflect African as against western thought system will be advised so as to combat imperialism and underdevelopment in the third-world.

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