

NEOLIBERALISM AND INTERVENTION PHILOSOPHY IN AFRICA: MYTH OF UNDERDIFFERENTIATION

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Abstract

A plethora of topics has been examined within the neoliberal discourse. In Africa, most of these bear, in one way or another, on the adverse consequences of the neoliberal turn. But the neoliberal impact can never be understood separate from contextual and socio-historical configurations. Through a critical reading of both empirical and theoretical literature on neoliberalism, this paper shows that, ultimately, it is the same old intervention philosophy—motivated by the same old social evolutionary thinking—that still drives the neoliberal policy thrust. We lean on the complexity theory to contend that the failures of neoliberalism in Africa are neither due to lack of adequate knowledge of how to implement it nor the political will to do so, but to the fact that the programme is being deployed, without due modification, to social settings for which it is not suited. Development anthropologists are convinced that the best strategy for change is to base the social designs on the local social form in each target area. There is no alternative to basing the plans and policies for progress across African societies on the economic peculiarities of the different local settings. One-size-shoe-fits-all short cuts have never worked anywhere.

Key words: intervention philosophy, neoliberalism, underdifferentiation, complexity theory

Introduction

Decades after implementing neoliberalism, many African countries have yet to make any considerable progress. Most African economists, inspired by the Bretton Woods institutions and the Paris and London Clubs, presume that African societies are experiencing similar problems, and therefore require a similar solution. The International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and scholars who favour the neoliberal policy thrust continue to insist that there is no alternative to

neoliberalism, even in diverse African societies with different eco-cultural realities from the Western provenance of this programme.

Recent years have been marked by several studies on neoliberalism. A plethora of topics has been examined within the neoliberal discourse – health, education, labour, prisons, corporations, finance, history, cultural production and so on (Hilgers 2012). Despite this diversity, most of these studies bear in one way or another on the place of the state in the neoliberal turn. Some authors have approached the issue in terms of the reduction of the state in people's everyday life (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Ferguson, 1994; Haque, 2008; Prasad, 2006). Others have approached it in terms of how neoliberalism has produced poverty and pestilence (Bayart, 2007; Cerny, 2008; Dardot & Laval, 2009; Hildyard, 1997; Laval, 2007; Lee & McBride, 2007; Navarro, 2007; Ong, 1999, 2006; Peck, 2003; Plant, 2009; Siddiqui, 2012; Wacquant, 2009). This latter theme is obviously predominant today, although it is in the researchers' epistemological and theoretical approaches that one notices variations.

As Hilgers (2012) notes, however, neoliberal impact can never be understood in radical separation from historical configurations and has to be evaluated differently depending on context. Several studies have examined the consequences of the neoliberal turn in different African contexts, not all of which can possibly be recounted here. Snijders (2012) investigated how the neoliberal policy thrust enhanced land-grabbing and impoverishment of South African peasants. Using various case studies across Congo and Sudan, Daley (2013) considered how celebrities flowed with the neoliberal tide, framing humanitarian crises in ways that enhanced corporate exploitation. Konings (2011) did an extensive exploration of how neoliberalism enabled Cameroonian state and some civil society actors to achieve capital accumulation for themselves at the expense of the public good. Beyond previous traumas such as unequal trade, trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, Ingwe, Ikeji and Ojong (2010) showed how the global North had used neoliberalism to contrive multiple crises that continue to hamper Africa's progress. Ezeonu (2008) contended that the dynamics of neoliberal market economics has "criminogenic" (or social harm) effects – especially in economically-challenged regions like the sub-Saharan Africa – that push many into crime. Several other studies focusing on different African settings, such as Harrison (2005), Fridell (2006), Sundaram (2008) and State (2010), have recounted the injustices in the global, state- and civil-society-centered political economy of neoliberalism. What this paper sets out to do is not necessarily to recount the consequences of neoliberalism in Africa; several other scholars have already done that as seen in the studies cited above. The paper aims to use a number of ethnographies on the neoliberal impact on African societies in order to make sense of a common thread that underpins its failures across the content. Leaning on the complexity theory, we argue that the failures of neoliberalism in Africa are neither due to lack of adequate knowledge of how to implement it nor lack of the political will to do so but because no one policy thrust can work across different environments with peculiar eco-cultural realities. A way forward is then suggested.

Methods

The study is based purely on desk research. We did a critical reading of relevant empirical and theoretical writings on neoliberalism that focused on Africa and on other parts of the world. A detailed recounting of the consequences of neoliberalism in Africa is not within the scope of this paper because that would be reinventing the wheel, given that several other studies have already extensively dwelt on that. Making sense of that trend from an anthropological standpoint is the aim of this paper, and we drew from a number of ethnographic accounts on different districts and localities across Africa for this purpose. Among several other possible theoretical options, complexity theory is what we adopt to anchor our position.

A brief excursus on the neoliberal discourse

With an increase in international contacts from the nineteenth centuries, there has been an ideological justification for (Western) outsiders to guide diverse local peoples in specific directions. This is known as intervention philosophy. The ethnocentric predispositions driving this philosophy always results in the fallacy of underdifferentiation, which is a tendency to view and categorise societies of the global South as more alike than they are, ignoring cultural diversity and adopting a uniform approach in development plans. It is this mode of thinking that motivates a pursuance of the neoliberal policy thrust in Africa.

The roots of neoliberalism can be traced to the writings of Friedrich August von Hayek whose attempt to reinvent classic liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s has remained increasingly influential since the last few years of the cold war and beyond (Kingfisher & Maskovsky, 2008). The definitive statement of the concrete policies advocated by neoliberalism, though, is always taken to John Williamson's Washington consensus – a list of policy proposals that appeared to have gained consensus approval among the Washington-based international organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. However, neoliberalism is a new form of the same old economic liberalism enunciated by such early writers as the French economist, Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), and the *physiocrates*, which Adam Smith later expounded in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), published during the industrial revolution in Europe that began in the 1750s. Those writers' ideas were 'liberal' in terms of favouring *laissez-faire* policy thrusts (Kottak, 2014). For example, Smith held that the best way for a nation's economy to grow was for the government to stay out of its nation's economic affairs – there should be no restrictions on manufacturing, no barriers to commerce, no subsidies and no tariffs.

However, the great depression that engulfed much of the West in the 1930s resulted in a turn to Keynesian economics which opposed liberalism. John Maynard Keynes (1927, 1936) insisted that governments and central banks should intervene to increase employment, and that government should promote the common good (Soludo, 2008). The belief that government should advance the common good later became widely accepted. But again the capitalist crises over the last three decades, with its shrinking profit rates, inspired the corporate elite to revive

economic liberalism. That is what makes it '*neo*' or new. With the globalisation of the capitalist economy, we have come to see neo-liberalism on a global scale.

The difference between neoliberalism and those older economic ideas is that the former is only a hyper-liberalism, a heightened form of the view that government should not regulate private enterprise and market forces. Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) summarise the basic tenets of neoliberalism to entail (i) privatisation of state enterprises (ii) open international trade and investment, without any barriers or tariff; and (iii) profits sought through lowering of costs whether through improved productivity, seeking workers who accept lower wages or laying off workers.

Accompanying the belief in free markets and the idea of cutting costs is a tendency to impose austerity measures that cut government expenses. This will mean reduced public spending on social services such as healthcare, education and so on. The world over, neoliberal policies have promoted deregulation, removal of subsidies on social services, and privatisation. One of the major arguments of the neoliberals is that free markets are a way out of the overwhelming problem of corruption in state-controlled industries. Neoliberalism had its origin in the West, but has become an internationally prevailing economic programme, driven by the IFIs and their Southern collaborator public officials.

Neoliberalism in Africa, in brief

Trends in diverse African societies show a wholesale borrowing of the neoliberal policy thrust. The objectives of neoliberalism are largely the same for most African countries because the underlying assumption is that African societies are the same, experiencing similar problems and require similar solutions. Neoliberals identified the reasons for the economic failure of most African states to include the overvaluation of local currencies, state regulation of the import licensing system, subsidisation of oil products and various social sectors of the economy, inefficient state-owned enterprises and corruption. It was claimed that the primary cause of the failures was over-regulation of the African economies, which did not allow the interplay of market forces to efficiently allocate resources (Konings, 2011).

Given the reasons that the IFIs gave for African economic failures, the policy thrust of the neoliberal programme became the reduction in the role of the state through a reliance on market forces. The conditionalities have been applied rather uniformly and mechanically by various African countries regardless of prevailing socio-cultural conditions within each country. Externally introduced neoliberal policies have been put forward as the only credible recipe for African progress. Despite the fact that for some three decades, the implementation of the neoliberal programme instruments has resulted in worsening economic woes in most African societies, the proponents of the programme insist that there are no alternatives to it. State (2010) explains that even when the flaws of the neoliberal programme are acknowledged, most of the blame is instead placed on African countries, which are accused of either not having the

‘political will’ or creating the ‘enabling environment’ necessary for the successful implementation of the programme. But we hold that the failures of neoliberalism in Africa are neither due to lack of adequate knowledge of how to implement it nor the political will to do so, but because the programme is being deployed, without due modification, to social settings for which it is not suited. We invoke the complexity theory to anchor our position that only a pathways approach, based on local social form, holds the promise for any progress, not just in the global south but anywhere else.

Theoretical anchor

From the 18th century Western scientific revolution, the linear view of the world prospered not only in the natural sciences but also in the social. Surrounded by the marvels of the scientific and industrial revolutions which were founded on a Newtonian vision of an orderly, clockwork universe, driven by immutable laws, it did not take much of an intellectual leap to apply the assumptions of the physical sciences to the social sphere (Geyer, 2004; Haralambos & Holborn, 2015). Influenced by the Newtonian frame of reference, modern social scientists assumed that social phenomena were primarily linear and therefore predictable. Based on this thinking, they assumed that society and social institutions had an ‘end-state’ towards which they were evolving. The French economist, Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), and the *physiocrats* modeled a mechanical-clock economic system. Adam Smith and David Ricardo later set it out in finer details, believing, like Quesnay, that some economic laws were as certain as the principles of gravitation (Geyer 2004). Karl Marx also claimed to have discovered the immutable laws of socio-economic transitions. Hence, economic interaction, political systems and fundamental social orders all had final stages towards which they were progressing. Nation states and societies could be positioned along that trajectory, and policies could be devised to help them towards the next level (Stiglitz, 2007).

The absolutism of this viewpoint was later to be challenged by the postmodernists who contended that those grand narratives were hegemonic in their shutting out of other views. Jean-François Lyotard argued that there were different views in society, and that all should be accepted as equally valid, with none privileged over the others (Haralambos & Holborn, 2015). But for stretching relativism to what has been seen as an extreme extent, postmodernism came to be condemned and branded “paradigm of disorder” (Geyer, 2004: 5).

However, it is to be noted that the shift in social science analysis from absolutism to context-specificity has not found its way into the realm of policy making across the world. In fact, it is absolutism that has continued to drive the neoliberal policy thrust in the South. The view has been that there is an ultimate economic strategy with which the global North made its progress and that with that strategy, any other part of the world that desired economic progress could attain it. This attitude is what has made neoliberalism a dominant policy thrust across Africa.

It is the ensuing debates that have shifted the social sciences into a complexity paradigm. Complexity theory does not disprove the rationalist paradigm or its antithesis (postmodernism), but creates a new framework which bridges the two positions. Complexity theory holds that physical and social reality is composed of a wide range of orderly, complex and disorderly phenomena. Consequently, the theory demands a broad and open-minded approach without universalizing particular positions or strategies. What this means is that even at the most fundamental level, some phenomena do conform to the classical framework, and others do not (Leach, Scoones & Stirling, 2010). This is why we find theoretical position an appropriate anchor for this paper.

Some ethnographic examples

In a presentation as limited as what the space allowable for this paper can take, it is not possible to cite all the field-based studies that have reported about how several communities across Africa are faring in the neoliberal turn. Those reviewed here are, however, thought to be okay for illustrative purposes. In his seminal work on Lesotho, *The anti-politics machine* (1994), Ferguson revealed how international aid agencies redefined that small southern African country, which largely depended on migrant labour, into an isolated, subsistent, peasant economy in order to fit it into a picture that is amenable to their (aid agencies') neoliberalist 'development' interventions. He demonstrated that the foreign aid programmes in Lesotho failed to achieve their stated objectives because the neoliberalist paradigm that anchored such programmes had little connection with the realities in Lesotho. Snijders (2012) investigated the privatisation and commercialisation of wildlife in KwaZulu-Natal and argued that the unfolding property regime being intensified by the neoliberal tradition led to a heightened form of 'green grabbing' that caused increasing deprivation and poverty among ordinary rural South-African peasants. Using various case studies (Product RED, 50 Cent's SK drink, Save Darfur Campaign, Kony2012, Raise Hope for the Congo and the Eastern Congo Initiative), Daley (2013) examined celebrities as neoliberal subjectivities who framed humanitarian crises for public consumption. She contended that even humanitarianism itself had been commodified in neoliberal Africa, arguing that this had a dangerous impact on African agency and on international solidarity against corporate exploitation. Davis (2006), who studied neoliberal restructuring in Morocco, observed that from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, parts of the public sector there had been privatized: state services such as health care and education were reduced, tariffs lowered and exports heavily promoted. In the dry-land agricultural areas, the neoliberal goal of land privatization was implemented. He noted that land degradation in the dry-land agricultural areas of Morocco was commonly blamed on overgrazing by local pastoralists despite existing documentation which suggested instead that intensified ploughing of marginal lands and over-irrigation due to commercialization were the primary causes of land degradation in the region. Drawing on data from a number of African states that included Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa, Tobias (2012) has shown that because of the widespread implementation of neoliberal economic policies, these states had now become subject to many of the same incentives and constraints

that operate in the global North, without commensurate opportunities to absorb immigrant labour as obtains in much of the global North. Political and economic elites who continue to reap the rewards of an increasingly competitive and privatized economy in those societies, he notes, continue to scapegoat migrants as the cause of the middle and working classes' economic decline. Other several studies that cannot all be reviewed here show that it is a smorgasbord of failures across the continent, which is explained by one simple fact: the diverse target eco-cultural settings and neoliberalism mismatch. In all the cases cited here, it is clear that the resulting failures were because the neoliberal policy thrust did not jive with prevailing realities in the target societies.

Discussion and conclusion

It might be relevant to recall the seminal writings of Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) on anthropology and economic theory. Generally, he referred to those who held that different economies were different systems that operated on diverse rules as *substantivists*, and those whose theories were based on the clockwork market factor for which universal applicability was claimed he called *formalists* (Hann & Hart, 2011). In current economic discourse, equivalent of Polanyi's formalists are those who hold the heterodox view. Driven by the myth of underdifferentiation, they aim to craft a unified economic programme for different groups across the world (Stiglitz, 2007). Human societies could not have progressed along a similar path. Because each has its own peculiar ecological and social realities, they have devised social systems in reaction to those realities, and not necessarily in reference to what other groups were doing in their own different environments. Although borrowing may sometimes be needful, experience has shown that unconsidered borrowings of external systems have always undermined the receiving societies.

The neoliberal policy instruments are typically dictated from Washington and shaped by the short mission during which its staff members pore over numbers in the finance ministries and central banks and make themselves comfortable in five-star hotels in the capitals (Stiglitz, 2007). "There is more than symbolism in this difference", Stiglitz explains: "one cannot come to learn about, and love, a nation unless one gets out to the countryside" (p.189). Stiglitz corroborates the anthropologists' position that an understanding of the long-standing local economic organisations and practices cannot be avoided for any introduced programmes to work anywhere. And, notes Ekeh (2010), it is always in the countryside and not in the demographic mosaic of the cities that these organisation and practices are found.

Simply, formulations based on information from a particular society will not work if imposed on a different society without due modifications, if at all they will be applicable in the first place. Aniako (2011) has suggested that an uncritical reliance on foreign knowledge is ill-advised because the owners of the know-how may give out only the much that will not allow the receiving society to compete with them.

Our short ethnographic survey above demonstrates that no single socio-economic system can be successful everywhere in the world. Neoliberalism continues to be unable to work across Africa because the implementers look to override the long-standing local socio-economic patterns. But certainly, local realities determine people's approach to the 'modern' institutions they encounter in the globalisation process. As Kottak (2014, p. 362) puts it, Many changes are possible if the aim is to preserve local systems while making them work better. Successful economic development projects respect ...local cultural patterns. Effective development draws on indigenous cultural practices and social structures. Development anthropologists have therefore come to favour a pathways approach to development plans. This approach is informed by complexity theory, which demands an approach that is open and ready to base social plans on local peculiarities. Complexity theory stands against a one-size-shoe fits all policy posture, which is what has been observed with the neoliberal paradigm in Africa.

A change of environment (e.g. from traditional to plural, complex setting) may require a change of knowledge, as Karl Mannheim wrote; but it is not in all cases that such a change of environment requires a total replacement of the existing knowledge and social systems. Sometimes, only some modifications that take context into account may be necessary (Ezeh 2011). In the plan for the progress of any human society, there is no short cut. To understand the plural African societies of today and plan for their progress, there seems to be no alternative to a thorough study of the different social groups. It is on the information garnered in that process (and not on those generated elsewhere) can locally meaningful economic plans be based. This principle goes beyond the economic and applies to every other social programme. Development anthropologists are convinced – from observation – that the best strategy for change is to base the social design for innovation on local social forms in each target area. They take it to be a miracle if any borrowed social system works where local peculiarities were not allowed to drive the process.

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