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RETHINKING AFRICA INTO THE FUTURE: TOWARDS A TRANS-DISCIPLINARY DEBATE

Oshita Osang Oshita

The mention of Africa often elicits contrasting ideas in the minds of people, Africans and non-Africans alike. For many people, the dominant cognitive and visual representations of Africa are those of violent conflicts, hunger, poverty, corruption, disease, deprivation and multidimensional images of gloominess and doom. Obviously, to say that governments of African countries have lived far below the expectations of their populations since political independence, some dating up to more than half a century, is an understatement. A familiar conspiracy theory attributes Africa's underdevelopment to the deliberate permutations of erstwhile colonial powers. The claim goes that Africa is manipulated by former colonial powers to perpetuate colonial-style exploitation, framed in the logic of the imperialist business model of global capital.

Among other disorders, some of the more recent thematic reflections on Africa have tended to prioritise the continent's rising population, the youth budge and the migration crises as early warning pointers to an impending apocalypse. Yet, for many intellectuals an understanding of the multiple factors that account for the continued underdevelopment of Africa remains a matter of dispute, conjectures and refutations. Indeed, whether the dominant and growing youth population in Africa becomes a blessing or a curse to the continent and, by extension, the international community depends on how key geopolitical players address the issue of economic justice. Growing inequalities within and between nations remain a global issue with severe negative transnational effects. There is an urgent need to create a more justifiable global sociopolitical and economic order that prioritises human values, accountability and transparency in governance in the years to come. This would require an intense re-examination of our cognitive infrastructure and putative ideas about

human nature through reflexive education, language, culture and tradition within the framework of a multidisciplinary dialogue.

Concerned with positively impacting the development discourse on Africa, the Centre of Global Studies (CGS) at the Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, in partnership with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London hosted an international conference on *Africa in a Polycentric World: The African Youth and Civil Society*, which was held at CGS in Prague, 17-18 June 2019. Dedicating an international conference organised in Europe to fundamental issues of the African condition, in order to examine some of the dominant perceptions and realities of Africa, was an auspicious opportunity for robust transdisciplinary exchanges regarding order and disorder in Africa. The paper presenters focused on interrogating and rethinking the complex dynamics shaping Africa from educational, technological, humanitarian and ecological viewpoints in a geopolitical environment that tends to visualise the continent's crises from the exclusively transactional perspectives of colonialism and imperialism.

With the subtitle "Asixoxe – Let's Talk!" the conference setting served as a platform for open and frank interdisciplinary discussions about some of the core issues of concern for the continent and the people of Africa. The conference featured scholarly papers from African, African diaspora and European academics and practitioners with an appropriate keynote titled "A framework for intergenerational knowledge exchange network and the role of information technology." The presentations traversed topics related to philosophy, education, technology, history, literature, peace, security, climate change, agriculture and population as these relate to sustainable development in Africa. Apart from reflections on past and present struggles, the presentations provided glimpses of future scenarios and how these may impact Africa and the global community. The keynote speaker, Berhanu Beyene of the African Institute of Governance at the Ethiopia Civil Service University in Addis Ababa, during a session chaired by Marek Hrubec, underlined the importance of inclusive information technology education in mobilising the youth population in Africa to deepen digitalisation in order to boost development processes in Africa.

Beyene highlighted the poor institutional memory of African governments, owing to a reliance on oral culture, which incentivises corruption due to the paucity of records-keeping capacity and thereby reinforces a systematic dysfunction across institutions. Without a cosmopolitan infrastructure, including guaranteed electricity, efficient transportation and high-speed internet, Africa cannot compete in a cosmopolitan global community. Thus, in a cosmopolitan world order, Africa can only effectively engage through the digitalisation of its governance infrastructure, particularly its development planning and its bureaucratic and educational systems. Unless Africa possesses what it takes to participate in the global cosmopolitanism of the twenty-first century, dominated by the language and cognitive tools of techno-science, she will remain on the fringes of global conversation. Without being part of the creative and mutually intelligible language of global business Africa cannot be involved in a beneficial engagement with data collection and management for planning at the national, bilateral, geopolitical and multilateral levels.

The keynote speaker stressed the limitations of the dominant oral culture in Africa and how these have increasingly manifested themselves in the failure of critical institutions to retain aspects of the past and comprehend the present in key areas of development planning and implementation. Violent conflicts, though predominantly fuelled by the externalities of geopolitical calculations, remain intractable due to diminishing resources of oral-based traditional conflict resolution infrastructure. Owing to its dependence on orality, Africa is losing the traditional epistemological heritage and information that hinged on folklores, including the repertoire of grievance handling techniques, traditional medicine, ethics, morality and ecology – all of which were founded on the overarching principle of Ubuntu. In a number of African countries, including Nigeria, there are ongoing battles between the tendencies of corruption and efforts towards anti-corruption linked to the digitalisation of accounting systems. Contemporary examples of the dogged resistance against the Integrated Personnel Payment Information System (IPPIS), E-voting and E-governance serve to illustrate the challenges of digitalisation and digitising in African countries. In Nigeria, for instance, IPPIS is gradually translating to some degree of transparency in the governmental accounting system.

According to the World Bank, about 42% of the African population is under the age of 15 (World Bank 2019). The overall population of the continent is projected to maintain a steady increase (United Nation Population Division 2019). Based on this, and considering the dysfunctioning of African economies, a combination of population growth on the one hand, and poverty and violent conflicts on the other, may have explosive outcomes for the continent and the rest of the world. This would incapacitate Africa to compete in the global scene. These dynamics were highlighted and their possible implications analysed by Marek Hrubec of the Centre of Global Studies in his paper “From communities to the world parliament: Africa’s relations to other macroregions of the world.” A majority of the presentations acknowledged the need for locating autochthonous sources for African philosophy as indigenous canons for ordering African studies in general. This perception intersected much of the discourse covering language, literature, gender, migration, youth, civil society, peace, decolonisation, politics, philosophy, political economy and development issues. The need was perhaps most audibly stressed in the paper by Alena Rettova of the School of Oriental and African Studies, aptly titled “Philosophy and Genre: Creating a texts basis for African Philosophy.”

The roles of the youth in peace and security were eloquently emphasised in “The Youth and the clans – the Somali society and al-Shabaab” by Viktor Marsai of the National University of Public Service, Budapest, and by Albert Kasanda in “African youth and peace searching: Case study of The Lucha platform (DRC).” Both papers point to the critical role of the youth in peacebuilding and security provisioning, noting the delicate nature of managing youth energies as these could be channelled for good or for bad at different times. Viktor Marsai concluded that people-to-people rather than a military solution is what is required in silencing the guns and restoring constitutional authority in Somalia. For Kasanda, the example of the Lucha platform and, in particular, the symbolism of its “broom revolution,” shows that young people have the potential of sweeping away the dirt and corruption of past regimes in the DRC and, by extension, elsewhere in Africa.

By focusing on knowledge development practices and retention matrices of Africa in a technologised world the conference effectively flagged the imperative of prioritising an epistemological revolution

in the continent beyond the unidirectional trajectory of north-south, centre-periphery and aid-dependent interrelationships. The conference noted that in order to be competitive, African countries must strive to satisfy basic tangible and intangible requirements of cosmopolitanism, including physical infrastructure and cognitive systems that are at once autochthonous and mutually intelligible with the empirical principles of techno-science. It is assumed that this is the basis upon which Africa can become a beneficial member of bilateral and multilateral transactions in a polycentric world.

The benefits of the conference are not easily quantifiable as they resonate with scholars from the disciplines represented in diverse ways. Literarily, the energy level at the two-day conference remained optimal, indicating that the theme of the debate is of binding interest and that the trans-disciplinary methodology adopted provided each presenter an entry point of mutual intelligibility. The organisers may consider alternating the hosting locations of the conference between Europe and Africa as this is likely to trigger interest and expand institutional partnerships across Europe and Africa. In addition, scholars from Europe and Africa will have the opportunity of experiencing some of the contexts in which they carry out research and be better involved as participant observers in an intellectual conversation that has the potential of impacting the political economy of future relations between Africa and Europe.

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