Justifying the role of imperialism in Africa

Aid to Africa: So Much to Do, So Little Done, by Carol Lancaster

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The thesis of Carol Lancaster's book is that Africa's present poverty and economic backwardness are due not to centuries of exploitation, but rather to the policies of post-independence African governments.

Lancaster is a one-time deputy administrator of the US Agency for International Development and a former deputy assistant secretary in the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs.

She argues that "African socialism" has prevented the continent from developing, because it has led to a huge growth of the state, the provision of expensive welfare measures and overly ambitious construction projects. This policy is ascribed to leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, whose Pan-Africanism represented a cross-class appeal for the unity of all Africans.

According to Lancaster, state-led economic policies encouraged Africa's new leaders to consolidate power in their own hands—diverting resources that could have been used for profitable investment to political patronage and the personal enrichment of the ruling clique.

Lancaster's book reveals an appalling level of ignorance, not to say inhumanity and arrogance, in the face of a social catastrophe resulting from protracted wars, famine, poverty, deaths from curable illnesses, and now the spread of AIDS in an already ravaged continent. Thirty years ago Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank, could declare, "The rich and the powerful have a moral obligation to assist the poor and the weak." Lancaster's book reflects the change in attitudes that has taken place since then.

In the mid-twentieth century there was a widespread sense that aid was intended, in some degree, to redress the effects of colonialism. Lancaster now asserts, "By the mid 1990s—nearly half a century since the beginning of African independence—theories attributing African development failures to colonialism retained little credibility among scholars."[1]

Lancaster is expressing what has become the consensus view not so much of academics, but of Western governments, the IMF and the World Bank, which are attempting to impose free market economic policies in Africa. Like them she insists that African governments must become "transparent" and "accountable". She does not mean that their activities must be open to the scrutiny of the mass of their populations or democratically accountable to them, but that they should be answerable to international institutions that represent the interests of global finance capital and responsive to their demands for profit.

To blame "African socialism" for Africa's failure to develop is a convenient fiction. Any serious examination of the continent's history shows that the reasons for Africa's backwardness lie in the centuries of foreign domination it suffered, dating back to the time of the slave trade. This helped to fuel the development of capitalism in Europe, but deprived Africa of millions of able-bodied people and fomented predatory wars that disrupted its economy.

Over half a century of direct colonial rule followed. While most of the African colonies gained formal independence in the 1960s, they could not break free from the political domination of the former colonial powers, nor from the economic exploitation of the giant corporations that controlled the trade in African commodities and control finance. This system of exploitation has continued to the present day. Indebted African countries are net exporters of capital although they are among the poorest in the world. Debt relief has had very little effect, despite the fanfare with which it was proclaimed.

To understand why the imperialist powers were able to continue to exploit Africa, it is necessary to look more closely at the relationship between the West and leaders like Nyerere and Nkrumah. The regimes Lancaster blames for all Africa's problems came to power with Western backing. Western governments also encouraged them to provide limited welfare measures, particularly health care and education. The World Bank underwrote their schemes for industrialisation and agricultural development. The colonial authorities had, in many cases, drawn up plans for these projects before independence was granted. Tanzania under Nyerere became one of the largest recipients of World Bank loans. Without this support the Pan-Africanist regimes could not have survived.

Western governments and the international institutions they financed were prepared to support the so-called African socialist leaders because they feared that social unrest could lead to popular uprisings, and that the Soviet Union would take advantage of this to gain control of the continent's strategic resources. This had been the guiding principle of British policy in Africa since the end of the World War II, when Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin warned Prime Minister Clement Atlee, "sooner or later the Russians will make a major drive against our positions in Africa."[2]

Africa's strategic importance increased in the post-war period as world trade grew, since so many sea-routes went past its shores. General Alexander Haig, Reagan's Secretary of State, explained in 1979: "In a geopolitical sense, Africa has become increasingly important as definitive limitations on raw material are beginning to have such profound influence on the industrial and economic well-being of the industrialised states ... 70 percent of raw materials providing for our sustenance circumvent the continent. With the world in a state of flux and non-aligned states unfortunately becoming targets of east-west competition, Africa now is a vitally important area."[3]

The West had two complementary policies in Africa. The CIA financed and armed movements like UNITA that fought against the Soviet-backed MPLA in Angola and supported the apartheid regime in South Africa. At the same time, African governments that were willing to remain in the Western camp were rewarded with aid, whether they were of an overtly right-wing character like Mobutu's in the Congo or declared themselves to be African socialists like Nyerere of Tanzania. The West's ultimate objective in this conflict with the Soviet Union was to overthrow the nationalised property relations and open up the USSR to capitalist exploitation.

When the socialist revolution failed in the more advanced countries, the

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economic backwardness and isolation of the Soviet Union encouraged the growth of a bureaucratic layer personified by Stalin. Before his death Lenin aligned himself with Trotsky to wage a struggle against this tendency, but a combination of unfavourable circumstances led to the defeat of the Marxist opposition and the Stalinisation of the Communist Parties on a world scale.

The Stalinist bureaucracy rejected the international programme on which the Russian revolution was based in favour of the policy of building socialism in one country. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Stalinists rejected a perspective based on the independent political mobilisation of the working class and revived the two-stage theory of revolution, according to which the working class could only struggle for socialism after the bourgeois democratic revolution had been achieved. Over time, the bureaucracy's growing scepticism in the possibility of socialist revolution was to be transformed into a conscious opposition to what they correctly viewed as a threat to their own privileged existence in the Soviet Union.

It was Stalinism's political disarming of the workers' movement, combined with its opportunist shifts in policy before the Second World War, that did the most to encourage the growth of Pan-Africanism. In an attempt to make an alliance with the fascist powers, Stalin had sold oil to Mussolini when he invaded Ethiopia and had signed a pact with Hitler. When Stalin later tried to make an alliance with Britain against Hitler, he ordered Communist Party members to drop their support for anti-colonial movements. This discredited socialism in the eyes of broad masses, having its greatest impact in India where the Communist Party supported the war effort while the Indian Congress Movement maintained its opposition to British rule.

The betrayal of the Indian anti-colonial struggle had an indirect effect on the Pan-African movement, then still largely an American based organisation. George Padmore, a leading West Indian Communist Party member, quit and then joined the Pan-African movement. He successfully turned it into an African-based movement by presenting it as the only consistent opponent of imperialism.

In Africa, the Stalinists repeatedly showed their willingness to coexist with capitalism. One of the most outstanding examples of their counterrevolutionary role was in Sudan, which had the largest Communist Party, with 10,000 members, in Africa outside of South Africa. It helped the nationalist Numeiry to power in 1969. The Soviet Union made no protest the following year, when, having used them to defeat his Islamist opponents, Numeiry expelled all the Communist Party ministers from his government and imprisoned and executed Communist Party members.

Stalinist policies in Africa were entirely consistent with the way in which the Soviet bureaucracy had stifled the revolutionary movements that had broken out in Europe after World War II, thus allowing capitalism to be restabilised. That same revolutionary wave was expressed in Africa in the form of a series of strikes and protests, heralding the possibility of revolutionary upheavals.

Faced with revolutionary movements in Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia, and insurrection in Malaya and Indo-China, the British and French governments feared that the poverty to which they had condemned millions of Africans would prove to be even more fertile ground for revolutionary ideas. This was borne out when their attempts to increase the level of exploitation in Africa evoked widespread opposition amongst a population radicalised by their experiences of the war.

Rural layers had been swiftly proletarianised during the Second World War. Many were recruited to the armed forces, or conscripted to labour on sisal and rubber plantations. Britain sent 100,000 forced labourers to work in the Nigerian tin mines where hundreds died as a result of the bad conditions. In South Africa the war provided a large market for industry and mining. Manufacturing output increased by 116 percent and the industrial labour force grew by 53 percent, the majority made up of black workers.

The African working class emerged from the war numerically stronger and increasingly militant. There were major strikes by tens of thousands of workers in Nigeria, French West Africa, Guinea, Zambia and South Africa in the next 2-3 years. Rural areas were not exempt from these movements. Post-war evictions in Zimbabwe to make room for more white settlers led major strikes in 1945 and 1948. European plantation owners' demands for more forced labour in the Ivory Coast led to mass protests. In Kenya, the Mau Mau movement attacked both native chiefs and the white settlers who had dispossessed peasant farmers.

Thousands of ex-servicemen returned to Africa with new ideas and expectations. It was an ex-servicemen's demonstration in 1948 that precipitated moves to independence in Ghana. The police opened fire on the crowd killing two people, and riots followed. The British government determined, in the words of the British reformist Fabian Society, “to remove the causes of discontent which alone would make a Kremlin putsch conceivable”.[4]

A committee of 40 African notables was appointed to look into the causes of the disturbances, and recommended that African ministers should be selected from a legislative assembly partly elected by adult male suffrage. Although the real power remained with the governor, this was an unprecedented move in an African colony.

The British had cultivated a layer of government appointed chiefs and their educated supporters in Ghana. It was to this wealthy layer that the Colonial Office envisaged gradually handing power over local matters, but the continued development of popular opposition both to British rule and to this entrenched privileged layer forced a change of plan. In 1951, the Convention Peoples Party under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah put itself at the head of popular protests and won a majority of the seats in the Legislative Assembly. Governor Sir Charles Arden-Clarke summoned Nkrumah from prison and invited him to be Leader of Government Business.

Nkrumah was the first of the Pan-African leaders to come to power. His journey from prison cell to government was a pattern that was to be followed in an increasing number of colonies, as the British sought to maintain their power in Africa through a system of indirect rule. Their suspicion of the Pan-Africanists, whose socialist rhetoric had led the British government to fear that they would ally themselves with the Soviet Union, diminished as a result of Nkrumah's cooperative attitude.

Recently released documents from the time show how Britain and the United States discussed the situation in Africa in the context of the Cold War and concluded that independence under Pan-African leadership was the only way to protect their interests. The British Foreign Office feared that too rapid a move to independence might “expose volatile and unsophisticated peoples to the insidious dangers of Communist penetration”. Alternatively they recognised that intransigence would run the risk of “provoking the African states...to turn more readily towards the Soviet Union”.

In this situation they realised that they must rely on the Pan-African movement to control the growing protests. The Foreign Office pointed out that “Pan-Africanism, in itself, is not necessarily a force that we need regard with suspicion and fear. On the contrary, if we can avoid alienating it and guide it on lines generally sympathetic to the free world, it may well prove in the longer term a strong, indigenous barrier to the penetration of Africa by the Soviet Union.”

A necessary part of this perspective was to provide the independent African regimes with aid. “If Africa is to remain loyal to the Western cause, its economic interests must coincide with, and reinforce, its political sympathies; and one of the major problems of the relationship between the West and Africa will be to ensure an adequate flow of economic assistance, and particularly capital, through various channels to the newly emerging States. On any reckoning the amounts required will

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be considerable; and, if the Western Powers are unreasonably insensitive to the economic aspirations of independent Africa, the Governments of the new states may be compelled to turn to the Soviet Union for the assistance that they will certainly need..."[5]

Within two months, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made his "wind of change" speech to the South African Parliament, in which he stressed that "the great issue of this second half of the twentieth century is whether the uncommitted peoples of Asia and Africa will swing to the East or to the West. Will they be drawn into the Communist camp?"[6]

The focus of the fears of all the Western powers in Africa was the Congo. The Congo was vital not just to its colonial power Belgium, but to key figures in the British ruling class who had major investments there. Even more significantly, it was of global strategic importance since it produced 60 percent of the world's cobalt, a mineral used in aircraft production, 8-10 percent of the world's copper, and was the main supplier of uranium for the US atomic bomb project. The British and American governments were particularly concerned that the USSR might get hold of the uranium mines. As a result, the Congo became one of the most intense theatres of the Cold War.

The ferocity of the West's response in the Congo is not explained by any action of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Unlike the former colonial powers, the USSR had no military bases from which to launch an offensive operation so deep into Africa, in a country that could easily be blockaded from the sea. Only in the mid-1970s did the Soviet Union develop the capacity to sustain military operations in Africa. Nor had they any political support in the Congo. In a country the size of Western Europe, the British secret service was only able to find four people who had any contact with Moscow.

The USA had just suffered the humiliation of the Cuban revolution, which had been belatedly backed by the Soviet Union, and Washington wanted a show of force against the USSR. But that is not the whole story, since the European powers were equally disturbed by events in the Congo. The real fear of the West was of a working class uprising.

The mines in the Belgian Congo had experienced a boom in the post-war period, making this vast colony more profitable than ever. This also meant a growth in the number of workers. By 1959 the working class was a million strong—making it the largest outside South Africa. In the late 1950s the mineral boom ended, plunging the colony into a recession and many workers into unemployment. In 1959, the Belgian authorities lost control of the African townships and realised that they could no longer contain this sizeable and restive working class. They moved precipitately to grant independence in the hope of maintaining effective control of the country's minerals through a malleable local regime.

Britain and France followed suit, granting their colonies independence in a headlong dash. In East Africa, Britain had intended to establish multiracial constitutions that would leave power in the hands of an Asian or European minority, but faced with a social explosion in the Congo they dropped this scheme in favour of majority rule. Nyerere, Obote, and Kenyatta, all Pan-Africanists, were brought to power in East Africa and Azikiwe, another Pan-Africanist in Nigeria. France abandoned its plans to assimilate its colonies and forced independence on them over the protests of leading French African political figures. Within the space of a few years, colonies that the British had believed they could hold onto until the end of the twentieth century and which France had thought it could control indefinitely had been granted independence.

While relations were often tense between the new Pan-Africanist leaders and the West, there was a general recognition that their apparently socialist policies, particularly the provision of welfare measures, were the price to be paid for preventing a further upsurge of popular protest and strikes.

Pan-Africanist leaders were able to maintain a certain ability to manoeuvre because of the Cold War, which allowed them to extract more concessions from the West than would otherwise have been possible. But if they overstepped a fine line they could find themselves victim of a Western backed coup, as did Nkrumah, or even of assassination. The Belgian, British and US governments all concluded that Patrice Lumumba had to be murdered when he called on the Soviet Union to send troops to support his government in the Congo. Others such as Nyerere survived because they proved their usefulness to the West in the Cold War. Whatever befell them later does not alter the fact that these "African Socialists" were put in power by the colonial regimes because of their ability to prevent a genuine socialist movement developing in Africa.

In a sense, Lancaster is right to say that the Pan-Africanists bear some responsibility for Africa's continued poverty and backwardness, but not because they headed socialist governments. They contributed to Africa's present condition because they pursued economic and political policies that have perpetuated Africa's domination by the West.

Lancaster's analysis is entirely superficial and does not correspond to any serious study of the history of Africa. Nonetheless, her book should be taken seriously because her theories correspond to the new wave of colonialism that is encompassing Africa. The purpose of books like Lancaster's is to justify this process in the same way that 19th century colonialists justified carving up an entire continent on the grounds that Africans could not form sound political institutions. For Lancaster, "there is little debate today that weak public institutions and faulty economic policies pursued by African governments have been key sources of the region's development problems."[7] She has simply revived 19th century theories in a new form by ascribing all Africa's problems to "African socialism".

With the end of the Cold War the West has been emboldened to pull the plug on the policies that its aid has financed in Africa. Yet there remains a certain anxiety in Lancaster's mind. She implicitly recognises that it was the growth of strikes and social movements that obliged the colonial powers to grant independence. The "African socialists" she condemns played a vital role in containing this development within the framework of nationalism. She expresses the concern that in dispensing with Pan-Africanism, the West may have replaced "an economically unsustainable development model with one that could eventually prove to be politically unsustainable if the pace of economic progress failed to accelerate."[8] With an instinct for the interests of the ruling class, she is aware that the real threat to corporate profits came not from the Pan-Africanists, but from the African working class and impoverished masses—and can do so again.

Footnotes:

1. Lancaster p. 21
2. quoted in John D. Hargreaves, Decolonization in Africa, Longman, 1996, p. 147
3. Arthur Gavshon, Crisis in Africa, Westview Press, 1981, p 166
4. Hargreaves p. 115
5. *Africa: the Next Ten Years*, Foreign Office document, December 1959
6. Nicholas J. White, Decolonisation, The British experience since 1945, Longman, 1999, pp. 125-26
7. Lancaster p. 22
8. Lancaster p. 30

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