COMMENT

Reflections on neo-liberalism in Africa

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The term “neo-liberalism” increasingly lays claim to an enormous terrain of political, social, economic, and cultural phenomena often so loosely applied and defined that it seems to be lurking almost everywhere. John Clarke’s thickly worded essay is a timely “wake-up” call to those of us (including myself) who often loosely use the term to explain a range of different social and economic changes without careful consideration of the term’s theoretical and empirical implications. The article is an important attempt to reassess the concept’s consideration as a serious analytical category that should be rescued from the kind of analytical/intellectual dilution that has accompanied other large concepts like globalization, modernity, or political economy—terms that are left open enough to be applied in almost any context. In doing so, Clarke’s admittedly unfinished and “conversational” essay on “living with/in and without neo-liberalism” takes the reader on an interesting consideration of just how complex, contradictory, promiscuous, and theoretically slippery the term “neo-liberalism” can be. As the author notes, the omnipotent nature of neo-liberalism means that “there is little in the present for which neo-liberalism cannot be held responsible” (p. 138). That aspects of neo-liberalism can be perceived around the world from corporate offices in the North to remote villages in the South is not disputable or

highly original. What is important to assess are the important social and political phenomena that might be slighted or even omitted through a fixation on neo-liberalism and its wide-ranging tentacles and theoretical debates.

As an anthropologist and an Africanist, there is little doubt that neo-liberal ideas, policies, and interventions have resonated throughout Africa during the past 25 years, often with disastrous effects. After all, there is no other region in the world in which key international financial agencies, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have had a freer hand to push their neo-liberal “experiments” in the guise of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and other “reformist” interventions. Similarly, neo-liberal democratic experiments have taken place in several African countries usually under the watchful eye (monitoring) of Northern donor and multilateral agencies. In the vacuum created by state downsizing and reforms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also have proliferated and taken on many of the tasks of governments and state governance that Clarke and others rightly observe. Finally, many of the neo-liberal hallmarks of managerialism, market logic, and responsibility/accountability are echoed in social sectors throughout Africa, including education, health, and public security, bringing so-called market discipline to social reforms.

Thus, given this evidence, why do I find some dissonance with many of the poignant issues discussed in Clarke's essay, especially in relation to contemporary Africa? First, the reality of neo-liberalism in Africa is so closely associated with external intervention, from early imperial ventures in the nineteenth century to recent Northern-imposed development programs, that much of the essay's discussion of governmentality, citizenship, and "governmental interventions" seems out of context in a region where most governments are struggling to maintain territorial sovereignty and national budgets are frighteningly dependent on foreign/external aid. African citizens and leaders, in turn, have learned to mimic the rhetoric of externally imposed neo-liberalism to access these resources. (There is an agency and element of performance in such practices that seem lacking in Clarke's essay, but their treatment would require more space than allowed here.) Most of the resources that can be attributed to neo-liberalism in Africa, with the possible exception of South Africa, have been and continue to be products of external intervention. Even when scrutinized, one finds that so-called civil society and grassroots communities are interwoven with strong flavors of international NGOs (INGOs) and external forces. Africa was forcefully supplied neo-liberalism; it did not ask for or demand it.

A second important contradiction associated with neo-liberalism correctly identified by Clarke deals with the large issue of sovereignty. Here he draws on anthropologist Aihwa Ong's recent (2006) book, to address themes of governmentality and sovereignty. Clearly, the regional focus of Ong's work, East Asia, is fertile ground to address the contradictions and flexibility of neo-liberalism as a "technique" that allows strong authoritarian ("undemocratic") regimes to pursue neo-liberal economic and trade policies, as well as to grant political and economic sovereignty to special zones and territories while still maintaining strong controls on civil society. As Clarke rightly implies, the key to such successful neo-liberal strategies in East Asia (especially China) seems to be strong states that can manipulate issues of sovereignty and trade policy

and allow neo-liberal economic policies to take hold without much of the other neo-liberal baggage (e.g., political "freedom," household and community responsibility, and so on). However, most African governments currently are too weak or dependent to pursue neo-liberalism in such an "exceptional" manner. Indeed, questions of states and territorial sovereignty take on a very different significance in Africa, where as James Ferguson points out in his new book, "neoliberal Africa has in recent years seen a proliferation of collapsed states or states whose presence barely extends beyond the boundaries of their capital cities. Vast areas of the continent have been effectively abandoned by the national states, subject instead to the tense and shifting authority of warlords and private armies and to the economic predations of resource-extracting multinational firms operating in secured economic enclaves" (2006: 13). In short, territorial sovereignty and governmentality are in a survivalist mode in Africa and not part of neo-liberal "exceptions" at present.

Finally, the contradictions between economic demands for growth and "lean" states, on the one hand, and local demands for welfarist policies, on the other, are fundamental contradictions within neo-liberalism. Clarke's essay and earlier work clearly demonstrate this paradox. Yet, the anemic size of most African economies means that the state—perhaps, again, with the exception of South Africa—cannot provide the kinds of assistance and safety nets that citizens justifiably clamor for but rarely fully realize, even in the North. Most African governments, in turn, often seek international support for what minimal social safety nets exist and over the past 20 years these interventions have done little to slow impoverishment and hunger on the continent. Depending on the vagaries of bilateral donors, INGOs and multilateral agencies for social welfare assistance are almost as risky as dealing with the climatic, public health, and political uncertainties that Africans confront daily and often respond to by depending on their own social networks and clientele relationships. In short, current debates about neo-liberalism's assault on welfarist states, as mentioned by Clarke, proba-

bly have more of a ring of truth in areas other than Africa.

In closing, this short comment does not do justice to the richness of Clark's essay and the range of issues addressed. It also is not meant to claim an African exception to neo-liberalism, since much of what Clarke discusses resonates for Africa. How the process has engaged with the continent has been strongly conditioned by its own unique mix of historical, political, and cultural forces. Neo-liberalism as an analytical category is probably under-theorized in the Africanist literature—in fact, I found only one African reference in Clarke's bibliography—but nonetheless is invoked as a descriptor and explanation for many of the region's current problems and contradictions. Some of the most innovative, contemporary work in the region by anthropologists and others, including Bayart (1993), Ferguson (2006), Guyer (2004), Mbembe (2001), Nordstrom (2004), Reno (1999), Roitman (2005), and Watts (2001), grapple with Africa's position in an increasingly neo-liberal world. They either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the utility of neo-liberalism as a concept, but perhaps in different ways than proposed by Clarke. Their studies attempt to understand neo-liberal articulations with Africa's rich diversity of economic, political, and cultural forms and the sometimes uneven, ambiguous, and even tragic outcomes that result. This growing body of scholarship on Africa uncovers additional processes and practices to those listed by Clarke (p. 138) and include terms like *illicit*, *"shadow states,"* *statelessness*, and *informality*. Although these phenomena are not unique to Africa per se, they are particularly salient in large parts of the continent and seem out of place with discussions of superpower development states like China or new modalities of citizenship in post-welfare Europe. To "straight jacket" such dynamic processes within the discourse and parameters of neo-liberalism as discussed by Clarke obviates much of what is happening in Africa and its "shadow" economies and politics. The disorderly ways in which neo-liberalism has engaged large parts of Africa and the unorthodox responses to them raise important questions about governmentality and eco-

nomic practice that would enrich the arguments presented in Clarke's welcome essay.

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