

# Empire and Economics

## *Decolonising Colonialism and Its Legacies in Africa*

In order effectively to decolonise Africa we need to *understand* better the economic and political effects of colonialism in and on Africa today. To achieve that understanding we need to look beyond the tired, well-trodden themes in African historiography and political theory. Liberalism, communism, African and Afrikaner nationalism, localised cultural and social histories and related ideological conflicts of identity have failed to grasp and explain the relations of power that continue to operate at the level of economics, finance, education, war and politics. These factors have not adequately been thought through theoretically, precisely because they are treated as inevitable material circumstances separate from the *longue durée* of justifying ideas, enduring practices and relations of power and the persistence of institutions even, in many cases, sixty years after independence from colonial rule.

More specifically there exist three major limitations in contemporary African political theory, historiography, intellectual history and development studies. First, there is not enough political theory and intellectual history in particular. These areas of study are marginalised, poorly supported and largely derivative on their richer and established northern, western and eastern cousins. As a result they are far from reaching critical mass and thus the courage and power to strike out on their own, speaking back to these more powerful discourses regarding the most important and explanatorily enlightening histories, concepts, fields and methods of inquiry.

Second, dominant norms and methods of Western political theory have obscured empirical contexts by over-emphasising, on one hand, the historical significance of nationalism, liberalism and so on, or, on the other hand, historical materialistic readings of the necessary determinations of economic development. Such analysis often transposes presumptions about European conditions of state formation and development into an alien context. The formation of the South African state, for example, has little or nothing to do with considerations that underpinned state formation in Europe (that is, with securing the peace, well-being or freedom of South African peoples); and, in the main, everything to do with *external* (Western) theoretical paradigms and practical interests.

Third, a strong reaction in contemporary South African historiography against such broad ideological brush strokes – the supposedly determinative role of liberalism or African nationalism, for example – results in narrow stud-



ies of local histories that pay insufficient critical attention to the task of contextualising these events in broader, global and regional intellectual, philosophical and economic histories. A dearth of theoretical engagement with ideas around justifications of colonialism and views on the centrality of land ownership, local and regional economic histories of development, colonial institutions of education and state formation, for example, has impeded much of the democratic gains that could have been achieved in the postcolonial and post-apartheid periods in Africa.

In response to these lacunae, this special issue collects together four articles that shine a light into some of the ways in which we may be able to overcome these colonial intellectual, historical and economic legacies. They focus on global justifications for colonialism, the significance of public debt, war and the metropole and broader economic histories of development, and the strongly determining effects of institutions and norms of education. Understanding the persistence of these processes of generating hegemony and elite co-optation, especially evident in the case of the legacy of colonial institutions of education, is vital for identifying new ways of escaping the grasp and the interests of old and new imperial masters. The authors come from a diverse range of fields, including political theory and intellectual history, history, economic history and economics.

In his article, 'Invoking a World of Ideas: Theory and Interpretation in the Justification of Colonialism', David Boucher draws upon examples from European settlement in the Americas, Australasia and South Africa in order to argue that modern colonisation and imperialism, despite considerable variation, drew upon a range of justificatory principles which constituted a background theory, or worldview, that was invoked in part or in its entirety in justifying the civilising mission which was viewed by its proponents as both a right and a duty.

He begins by showing how the infamous 'Requirement' ('Requerimiento') of 1513 becomes intelligible as a performative utterance when connected to the constellation of ideas that makes it warrantably assertible, as John Dewey put it. It is not so much about the land or its use in conceptual terms but instead about the larger value judgements the colonists were applying. It is the 'world of ideas' generated by the constellation of assumptions that make the stray remarks of colonialists, and apologists for colonialism and imperialism intelligible, and render remarks such as those of Arnold, Kruger and Lugard warrantably assertible. Natural law, and the law of nations, is a central component of this justificatory 'world of ideas'. Uniquely the product of the Western political experience, they were conceived to be universally applicable, and from which local variations, at least in terms of fundamental beliefs, were regarded violations. Implicit in this way of thinking was a scale of civilisation that was invoked to determine to what extent those who did not belong to the higher on the scale may exercise universal rights, for which certain qualifications had to be met.

Universal rights, which have the potential to liberate, are more often than not transformed into special rights, and used to subjugate rather than protect and empower those very people who are most in need of them. Universal obligations were used to indict indigenous peoples of neglecting their duties, and in many respects giving just cause for war. This explains why many colonisers believed that what they were doing was morally laudable, rather than reprehensible. Boucher illustrates this with reference to the universal right of property ownership, the associated right of husbandry and the obligations they entailed, which Europeans claimed, both explicitly and implicitly, were not being effectively discharged by certain categories of non-Europeans in dereliction of their duty to God to make the land as productive as possible, and to do so most efficiently within political societies affording the appropriate rights and protections for the maximisation of effective production. In other words abstract doctrines, with their universal principles, when translated into concrete practical prescriptions resulted in justifications for occupation and appropriation of lands.

In the second article published here, “‘The Expenditure of a Million of British Sovereigns in this Otherwise Miserable Place’: Frontier Wars, Public Debt and the Cape’s Non-racial Constitution’, Jeff Peires seeks to enhance the historiography of the Eastern Cape frontier wars by adding war profiteering to land hunger as a motive for settler militancy. Equally important however was the extent to which the exorbitant military expenditure of the Eighth Frontier War (1850–3) aroused the concern of the British Treasury, and drew their attention to the corrupt practices of Colonial Secretary John Montagu, the de facto head of the Cape government. This was precisely the period during which the Cape franchise was under review at the Colonial office, and the article concludes by showing that imperial intervention in favour of a broader more inclusive franchise was due less to democratic concerns than to its desire to put a brake on the Cape’s burgeoning public debt.

In the third article published in this special issue, ‘The Keys to the Economic Kingdom: State Intervention and the Overcoming of Dependency in Africa before the Crisis of the 1970s’, Bill Freund is concerned with reviewing the history of developmental states on the African continent which have been neglected in the theoretical literature. It is important to consider not only successful models of developmental states but also partially successful and failed attempts at developmental policies to understand the concept and its place in economic literature. Particular attention is given first to the ambitious examples of Ghana and Tanzania following independence. There is brief discussion of other individual cases, notably Zaïre and Zambia. The last part of the article looks at the developmental aspects of South African economic history between 1910 and 1990. This was apparently a far more successful project but it contained inbuilt flaws that eventually killed off dynamism. The sociopolitical context of racial dominance and separation was a major one of these flaws.

In the final article in this special issue, ‘The Economics of Decolonisation: Institutions, Education and Elite Formation’, Nicola Viegi argues that colonial education norms and institutions had a significant impact on the process of decolonisation and the following postcolonial history and they still represent a significant obstacle to the development of the human capital necessary for economic development. As he submits, modern economic growth theory gives a central role to ‘institutions’ in understanding the ability of an economy to break development constraints.

His article briefly reviews a growing economic literature that focuses on African economic history in order to identify the linkages between institutional development and economic growth. Because present-day African institutions are often direct descendants of the colonial experience, colonial economic and political institutions have been the main focus of this literature. By contrast, this article analyses closely the role that the colonial education systems had in the process of decolonisation and in Africa’s postcolonial history. Because of the importance of education in the process of economic development, an education system aimed mainly at co-opting an elite in the ways of the coloniser might be a significant obstacle in generating innovation and creativity necessary for the process of economic development.

Thus, by reflecting on the global and regional intellectual, historical and institutional realities of empire and its legacies in Africa, this special issue also sheds light on some of the internal conflicts and inconsistencies of the established canon of international political and economic thought. The context in which empire was justified, and the contingent form it was forced to assume, gives critical insight into its typical modes of legitimacy. This special issue therefore exemplifies why it is important to take seriously the same canon of political thought *and* the historical, sociological, economic and financial context within which African polities and economies were originally formed and on which they continue to depend. So, in essence, the project is driven by a strong motivation and need to find ways in which the novelty of new understandings interacts with the persistence of the established canon and its political, that is to say intellectual, historical and economic, legacies.

A note on form: these articles are four of the most path-breaking articles presented at a conference, ‘Empire and Economics’, hosted by Peter Vale and myself in 2012 at the University of Johannesburg. They also represent well the main intention behind the conference: to bring together scholars from various fields to deepen our understanding of a number of interrelated components of colonial and postcolonial state formation in sub-Saharan African, with particular emphasis on the history of ideas, the economic history of the region, state debt, education and various forms of representation. Given their provenance, the articles published here do not always follow the norm of the scholarly, heavily footnoted journal article. Moreover, they are somewhat less theoretical – in the received view of what that means – than may be the norm for *Theoria*. As editors we are happy and excited by that as social, economic and political

theoretical paradigms are often too constraining, especially given the unequal theoretical power relations that exist between the global South and the global North. All of these articles engage with a whole array of mainstream theories, but they also use the distinct context and concerns of postcolonial Africa to break away from many received theoretical truisms and traits.

Lastly a big thank you: I am indebted to the energy, intelligence, foresight and good humour of my co-host, Peter Vale. The conference and this special issue would not have been possible without him (or the financial support of the National Research Foundation). Thank you too to the other contributors: your work is not published here for a variety of reasons, but the success of the conference and this special issue is indebted to your varied, fascinating contributions. All involved have displayed exemplary patience; for that too we are indebted. It has been a long journey, much too long, but worthwhile, given this result.

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On behalf of the Editors of *Theoria*