

Book Reviews

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, ISBN 978-0-85745-951-0, 272 pp.

Many works on colonialism and its aftermath assume a disjuncture between the colonial and postcolonial state, with some making passing reference to colonial legacies that haunt the “independent” governments of the global South. Others examine the political economic problems in most postcolonial African states as emerging from a crisis of governance and disorder (Chabal and Daloz 1999), the corrupt politics of the belly (Bayart 1993) and the resource curse (Collier 2008).¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s book disturbs these notions, suggesting that political independence is in fact compromised by the fact that colonialism actually endured through the reformed Euro-American empire and coloniality. It is, in part, a response to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), which argues that “empire” survived colonialism, but in phantasmagoric form.² Inasmuch as Ndlovu-Gatsheni adopts the notion of empire, he disagrees about its form. Instead of the “phantasmagoric” empire of Hardt and Negri, which informs the relationship between the imperial centres and the post-/neocolonial global South as one of modernity and liberalism, Ndlovu-Gatsheni insists the international political economy is built upon a “real existing empire” (18), since imperialism never ended but merely transformed and continues to “impose, reproduce and maintain Euro-American hegemony over the world” (24). Whereas to Lenin, imperialism was the highest form of capitalism, the “real existing empire” is a higher form of imperialism for Ndlovu-Gatsheni. Like imperialism and colonialism, empire is scaffolded around the “Cartesian” subject of Anglo-Saxon descent influenced by the philosophy of René Descartes’ “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am). This transforms into “I conquer, therefore I am” (17).

Whereas Hardt and Negri suggest that modernity, which is related to discourses of human rights, democracy and good governance, repre-

1 Chabal, Patrick, and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999), *Africa Works: Disorder as a Political Instrument*, London: James Currey; Bayart, Jean-François (1993), *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, London: Longman; P. Collier (2008), *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2 Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri (2000), *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

sents the Western path to African development, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that through colonial encounters, the West actually caused the underdevelopment of the global South. Under a modernity lens, the West depicts Africa as characterized by a catalogue of deficits, “lacking soul, lacking religion, lacking writing, lacking history, lacking rights, lacking democracy” (18). Empire’s invention of Africa as backward is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni refers to as the colonial matrices of power that facilitate empire’s control of African economies. The global imperial designs of the West ensure its control of African states and effectively reduce their leaders to mere “supervisors and foremen of the processes of production of primary products needed in Europe and America” (31). Also, using the case of post-1994 South Africa (Chapter 5) and post-1980 Zimbabwe (Chapter 6), Ndlovu-Gatsheni shows the pitfalls of modernity in post-colonial African states. Following flag-and-anthem “independence”, African states operate under the yoke of coloniality.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s work is a critical analysis of the making of Africa from the centres of empire and global capital. The author also captures African agency and resistance through the notion of “colonial difference”, the political, economic and intellectual struggle against domination. Colonial difference is a “decolonial epistemic perspective” that is built on the theory of coloniality of power, which describes “how the current modern global coloniality and capitalist structure re-emerged, was organized, configured and articulated according to the imperatives of global imperial designs” (53). Another perspective is the coloniality of knowledge, which “speaks directly to epistemological colonization whereby Euro-American techno-scientific knowledge managed to displace, discipline [and] destroy alternative knowledges that it found outside the Euro-American zones (colonies) while at the same time appropriating what it considered useful to global imperial designs” (54). The third decolonial perspective is the coloniality of being, which draws on racist thinking that informs the “politics of ‘Othering’ [...] colonized people” (55). These decolonial epistemic perspectives “demonstrate the importance of pushing the unfinished agenda of decolonization forwards concurrently with the equally important and unfinished democratic agenda” (56). They “carr[y] the totality of the [...] concepts in [the] agenda to critique Euro-American epistemology” from an African and global South locus of enunciation (*ibid.*). They also encourage paradigmatic shifts, inaugurating a “decolonial turn” that calls for alternative knowledges “as part of re-opening vistas of liberation from global imperial designs and colonial matrices of power” (57). Ndlovu-Gatsheni rejects modernist perspectives that present Africa as deficient. The book convincingly conveys the

richness of African perspectives, arguing that problems are caused by how coloniality misappropriates Africa's wealth. However, Ndlovu-Gatsheni also demonstrates how some demagogical African governments, such as Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF regime, are complicit in plundering the national resources on the pretext of confronting empire.

Whereas the postcolonial South African state is portrayed as having failed to consolidate the vision of "rainbowism", ZANU-PF has managed to control the political space through "rule by historiography". Eventually, Zimbabwe articulated discourses of indigenization and African empowerment, which resonated well with regional perceptions of the colonial legacy and the continuing influence of Western politics in Africa, even as it was becoming more authoritarian, suppressing its people through "the nationality of power and its tools of subjectivation".

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's book is an important addition to historiography that interrogates Africa's current condition. It will be a positive step in the theorization of Africa by African scholars.

- Tinashe Nyamunda