INTRODUCTION

A New Scramble for Africa?

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Something big was happening in Africa during the early years of the twenty-first century. More global investment was flowing into the continent than at any time since at least the 1960s and local stock exchanges were booming. There was a significant inflow of foreign capital investment, an improved outflow of exports, more focus upon Africa as a market and higher rates of economic growth. Most importantly, there was a modest increase in the average per capita income in many African countries affected by the new engagement. All told, this was an encouragingly different picture from that painted by *The Economist* at the turn of the millennium when Africa was depicted as 'the hopeless continent'.[1] To be sure, there continue to be major instances of civil war, political strife bordering on genocide, autocratic repression, democratic reversals and economic collapse – Chad, Sudan, Kenya, Somalia and Zimbabwe, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Madagascar – among others. Although many naïve expectations accompanying the wave of democratisation that washed through much of Africa during the 1990s have been confounded, the first decade of our new century was clearly one of much greater economic dynamism than *The Economist* anticipated.

Observers agree that the higher levels of economic growth recorded in most African countries were due, directly or indirectly, to increasing global demand for the continent's resources; notably for oil, but also for gas and other energy sources, minerals, metals and natural products such as fish and timber. There is further agreement that this increased demand has been driven, above all, by the sudden appearance of China as an economic actor, whose dramatic burst of industrialisation has fuelled the global upswing of the last few years. Africa was regarded during the immediate post-Cold War era as an undisputed sphere of Western influence. Yet this geopolitical map is now being challenged by China and other emerging industrial actors from the South such as India and Brazil. Worse still, as far as the hitherto dominant powers are concerned, the increased Chinese presence also constitutes a challenge to codes of conduct prescribed in numerous treaties, international documents and aid conditionalities, and formally promoted by the Western powers. Ironically, in contrast to various African regimes that manifestly rejoice in the greater freedom for manoeuvre the more fluid situation brings, some post-imperial commentators now warn of the dangers of Africa becoming subject to a new phase of imperialism. While the imperial imagery evoked is often sensationalist, a more substantial approach to increased external involvement in the continent is that of a new scramble reminiscent of the high-handed antics of the European imperial powers that divided up Africa between them in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century. It is to an examination of this perspective that this book is devoted.

The idea of a new scramble remains highly contested. For a start, there is substantial debate about the extent to which the recent era of greater growth and investment in Africa represents the inauguration of a new and significant phase in the continent's historical trajectory. After all, there have been so many false starts in post-colonial Africa that any analyst is well advised to regard the significance and potential longevity of new beginnings with suspicion. Yet more substantially, while there is near consensus that dramatically rising global demand for natural resources triggered the surge of growth in Africa, there is far less agreement about the long-term effects of the current impact by external actors. This is understandable, for apart from variant ideological and theoretical assumptions that underlie analyses of patterns of growth and development (or lack of them) in contemporary Africa, the changes identified with the new scramble (if that is what is taking place) are remarkably recent, and hence challenge easy categorisation. It is for this reason that the present collection seeks to promote discussion about whether the new era is best characterised as primarily one of renewed and changing imperialism(s); new investment and opportunity; or development.

The initial debate is about whether the new scramble has been unleashing a new round of competition and conflict between imperial powers in Africa. There is, on the one hand, a prominent perspective which argues that the upsurge of investment and external activity in Africa is analogous to historical processes that culminated in the Berlin Conference of 1884–5; and that just as the challenge to Britain and France by the rising industrialised powers of Germany and Italy set off the scramble for African possessions and empire, so today the new scramble is promoting competition for raw materials and influence in Africa between the established industrial powers of the West and the rising industrial powers of the East and South. Central to this analysis is the fear and prognosis that the new scramble will extend, deepen or transform Africa's subordination to external capitalist powers; and hence inhibit, if not negate, the continent's prospects for growth and development, even though it is recognised that there is no desire or quest on the part of imperial powers for direct political control as there was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If this is a renewed age of imperialism, then it is manifestly one of informal, not formal, empire.

Even within this broad approach, largely endorsed by the editors of this book, there is substantial debate not merely about the different elements and weights of historical continuity and discontinuity, similarity and dissimilarity; but also around the question of whether the behaviour of the new actors in Africa can usefully or correctly be interpreted as imperialist. Thus, whereas there is a long tradition of analysis of US and European policies in Africa as imperialist (or neo-imperialist) that lends itself easily to examination of Western engagement in the new scramble, there is no established body of literature that provides an equivalent basis for analysing the activities of China or India in a similar way. That is not to say there is any shortage of analysts who choose to depict the growing presence of China in Africa as embodying a new imperialism.[2]

Yet apart from the strident repudiation of imperialist motives by the Chinese government, and the importance of recognising the diversity of Chinese actors (huge state firms, private capitalist ventures and small traders, for example) and hence admitting a variety of Chinese motives in Africa, depiction of Chinese involvement as imperialist suggests we must similarly apply such analysis to the engagements of, for instance, the Indian state and Indian companies. If, as is suggested in some quarters, rapid South African investment expansion into the rest of the continent similarly suggests a new form of imperialism (or sub-imperialism), then we need to pose major questions about the relationship between the South African state and South African and international capital, and between economic, political and military power. In short, the questions come thick and fast. This is not to say there are no credible answers, only that they both overlap and compete. In other words, while we may easily view the new African scramble as a product of increased global competition for natural resources, political hegemony and military power between established (and declining) and new (and rising) Great Powers (and associated lesser powers), many argue that the jury is still out as to whether China (or India, or whoever) constitutes a new force of imperialism (Marks 2006).

The alternative approach to the new scramble recognises that it is largely a product of rapidly increasing global demand for natural resources contingent upon the rise, in particular, of China and India as industrial powers. From this perspective, traditional Western dominance in Africa in spheres such as oil, minerals, finance and manufacturing is being challenged by the recent arrival of new actors, with all the opportunities and costs that might be expected from a period of new and rapid capitalist growth. Globally this may imply, as argued for instance by British historian Niall Ferguson (2004), that the age of American informal empire is coming to an end, despite the desperate need for some Great Power to establish order over unruly smaller states in a highly troubled and dangerously unstable world. Yet this approach tends to deny, even if the post-9/11 war on terror is urging the US to militarise and extend its alliances in Africa, that the Americans and other Western actors display any seriously imperial ambitions in Africa. They may want to carve out areas of influence, it is argued, but wish to minimise long-term direct involvement in African states, save for extending and securing their direct investments and sources of supply. The new scramble, in other words, is primarily about investment and business. Meanwhile, some commentators from this perspective join many left-wing critics in arguing that, paradoxically, Western imperialism is being succeeded by Chinese imperial-like behaviour.[3] Others, even bodies like the World Bank, present Chinese, Indian and other new actors as providing the competition for African resources that can spark an era of African growth and renewal (Broadman 2007). Overall, this approach maintains that there is a great variety of external actors in Africa today; both old and new, with variant motivations, interested in short- and long-term benefits. There is thus no great sense or advantage in characterising or understanding their actions as imperial. The contemporary world is far more complex than it was during the late nineteenth century and there is no serious comparison between the initial and new scrambles, however inviting the latter label might be.

What is largely lost in the clash of ideas about the new scramble is the paradoxical possibility that both major approaches, while variant and opposed to each other in many ways, can also be mutually supportive. Or in short, if renewed imperialism involves investment, then it may also promote capitalist development. Of course, this may not be to the liking of many critics of imperialism, who while concerned to condemn the negative aspects of external involvements in Africa are less comfortable when considering whether these might have historically progressive consequences. Yet, as we explore in some greater depth in the conclusion, analysis of the present scramble would appear to need less Lenin and more Marx: that is, we need to move beyond the focus of Africa's under-development towards one that centres on development and growth. Such a perspective would not, it must be stressed, imply an acceptance of anything that goes and an endorsement of any and every prescription put forward by the World Bank or similar agencies. Quite the reverse, for it would rather combine critique of purely exploitative, external, probably extractive ventures, that have outrageously negative consequences for host communities with careful assessment of external involvements with progressive and developmental possibilities.

Indeed, it is precisely in this direction that some of the more sensitive assessments of the impact of the present wave of Chinese and Indian investment in Africa are going. It also involves a rigorous analysis of the class consequences entailed. On the one hand, the dramatic extension of Chinese aid to Africa, much of which is focused upon the provision and extension of infrastructure (including road and railway building, in the tradition of Cecil Rhodes), although designed to facilitate the more efficient and profitable extraction of oil and minerals, may well do much to boost local business. On the other hand, as emphasised by the American-Chinese scholar Lee (2008), it may simultaneously stimulate an active response by African workers, demanding of Chinese employers that they live up to the progressive rhetoric of their socialist past. In short, the argument here is that any analysis of imperialism, as much as that of investment, must also seek to engage with the problematic of development.

This collection raises many more questions than it provides answers and we are only too well aware of various inadequacies. Thus, although some attention is granted in passing to North Africa, the volume as a whole is largely focused upon parts of sub-Saharan Africa, even though it is recognised that, for instance, the linkage between oil extraction and the US-led war on terror demands that the continent be treated as a whole. Likewise, the focus upon external engagements with Africa has, we are uncomfortably aware, somewhat underemphasised African agency and response.[4] While sharing a common problem, the collection is also unashamedly diverse.

Our own approach, as reflected in our contributions, although leaning strongly towards an interpretation that endorses the idea of Africa being subject to an historically distinct and new round of imperialist engagement, nonetheless attempts to grapple with numerous complexities and contradictions of the present moment, however unsatisfactorily. Our contributors, meanwhile, adopt variant perspectives that range from enthusiastic endorsements of the idea of the new scramble as renewed imperialism, to those who either explicitly or implicitly challenge it and who present the new era as one of investment and (uneven) opportunity.

Nevertheless, the volume centres on the idea that whatever the nature and outcome of the new interest and investment in contemporary Africa, something big is happening and there is an urgent need for us as analysts to seek to understand it. As readers will notice, this collection was brought together before the onset of the recession in the global economy which is widely described as rivaling that of the 1930s in its severity. However, we do not believe that this in any way negates the idea of a 'scramble for Africa', even if, for the moment, it might reduce its intensity (although even that is questionable). There are a number of factors at play.

Despite the marked decline of projected economic growth rates as a direct result of the global economic crisis, African economies have been so marginal to the international economic system that they have been less affected than other regions. Perhaps because of the strictures of the era of structural adjustment from the mid-1970s through to the 1990s, Africa's banking system has been so conservatively managed that it has had almost no exposure to the sub-prime market that has wreaked so much damage elsewhere in the world. To be sure, unlike other African countries, South Africa is being adversely affected, not because of it having a banking sector which has been any less conservative, but because it has been running a sizeable balance of payments deficit which has been financed by foreign investment, and this is now flowing back out of the country. Furthermore, unlike other African countries, South Africa has relied on raising huge loans on international markets to fund ambitious infrastructural projects. For instance, the state electricity supplier, Eskom, needs to raise more than US$30 million over the next five years, but has now had to delay issuing bonds because of current market conditions. Nonetheless, the South African government remains committed to a significant shift in its spending pattern towards long-term infrastructural investment. Meanwhile, the fall in commodity prices, notably oil, but also diamonds and copper, will hit a range of countries, but many observers feel that these are going to be only relatively short-term effects, not least because 'China has an almost insatiable appetite for markets' (Plaut 2008). To be sure, whereas the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was predicting a growth rate of 6–7% average growth rate for African countries before the late 2008 financial meltdown, it has now revised that forecast down to between 3–5%. But that compares remarkably well with advanced industrialised countries, which are in the eye of the storm, for their growth rates are facing collapse in the midst of a recession and economies might even shrink.

One reason why the African performance can expect to compare relatively well internationally is that the African market is continuing to grow apace, and continues to attract international attention. According to one recently published review (Mahajan 2008, summarised by Mann 2009):

- Home to 900 million consumers, Africa remains one of the fastest-growing markets in the world.
- 220 million Africans live in areas where GDP growth in 2006 was more than 6%.
- Africa has some of the poorest nations in the world, but is wealthier across the continent than India. Average gross national income per capita across all 53 nations in 2006 was about $1066, $200 more than India.
- While it is true that the top four on the 2007 list of Africa's largest companies were based in metals, mining, oil or gas, consumer goods companies such as SAB Miller, telecom companies (MTN, Orascom Telcom, Itissalat Al Magrib, Telkom) and banks (Standard, Absa, First Rand) and real estate (Liberty International) are amongst the top twenty.

Meanwhile, apart from the increasing attraction of its status as a market for foreign-made consumer goods, Africa is slowly but surely benefiting from something of a peace dividend with the wind down of various long-running conflicts (even though some situations, as in Darfur, Somalia, and in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, remain desperate). This is bringing with it higher rates of infrastructural investment, which are likely to continue. Having said this, the new credit crunch might, however, exacerbate old problems and bring another debt spiral into force. The decline of financial sources to be invested from the outside might also reinforce the 'old' patterns of competition and dependency, even among new players. Further, we may well observe a renaissance of the IMF, which under a slightly modified management structure will be back in the arena as an influential agency. Both the conference of African ministers and central bank governors convened in Dar es Salaam on 10/11 March 2009, as well as the summit of the G20 in London on 2 April 2009, reinforced in different but complementary ways the role of the international financial institutions. While recent trends had suggested that development in large parts of the African continent would in the future be less dependent on the IMF, the opposite seems now to become a likely development. While neo-liberalism is ailing, it is far from being dead (cf. Bond 2009). It is also no longer the time for generous gifts of friendship to be exchanged in return for favours as a new form of investment.

This will clearly limit the windows of opportunity, which China and other emerging new global players had provided in recent years to African elites. We seem to be back to an era, where it is 'business as usual', no matter with whom (Melber 2008; Polgreen 2009). However, despite all the (not so) new hampering factors, most of all, Africa remains home to major reserves of scarce minerals. Global demand for these may fall off significantly in the near future. When – as it will – demand again picks up, the new scramble for Africa's wealth and resources will commence with vigour anew.

Notes

1. *Economist* 13 May 2000.
2. On the whole, such analysts come from the political left, with most such commentaries published in the electronic media. For a taste, see Cheng (2007) and Van der Walt and Schmidt (2007).
3. Valuable collections debating the notion of Chinese involvement in Africa as imperialist include Alden, Large and Soares de Oliveira (2008), Ampiah and Naidu (2008) and Games (2005). The influential South African commentator, Moeletsi Mbeki, is also manifestly ambiguous about the Chinese role, claiming that while offering opportunity it is replicating the classical exchange of raw materials for manufactured imports (as cited in Marks 2006).
4. See as a subsequent effort based in part on the chapters in this volume Southall (2008).

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