

DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2020-20-1-9-10

Editorial article

In This Issue

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Редакторская статья

В этом номере

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I am delighted to have been asked to write this guest editorial article for this special issue commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Year of Africa. The papers in the special issue draw from a conference hosted by RUDN University and the Institute of African Studies in Moscow in February 2020 to mark this milestone. The papers at the conference and in the journal reflect on the promise, pitfalls and potentials for deepening African liberation. This is a critical endeavour given the need for renewed focus on effective strategies of African economic transformation and liberation. Moscow has been and remains a major centre for African Studies globally and the conference drew participants from Russia and around the world to discuss these issues; sharing a common commitment to progressive values and the importance of academic engagement and writing in promoting these. While juridical independence is now complete across most of Africa, empirical sovereignty remains “weak” across much of the continent.

The papers in this special issue engage issues of liberation and continuity in structures of power. As Professor Molefi Asante describes in his interview, there is an ongoing need to adopt

Afrocentricity as an organizing principle of research on, and for, the continent. This entails viewing African actors, including those in the diaspora, as active subjects rather than objects of history, in spite of the massive power differentials which characterise transnational social networks. While Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o famously wrote about “decolonising the mind”, Afrocentricity represents a deepening of this project, not just through a rejection of imposed cultural forms or imported concepts, but through the active construction of liberatory ones, such as Afrofuturism, for example. The economic and hence genuine political liberation of the continent requires both intellectual work, multi-scalar and vector alliances, reform, resistance and through these, hopefully, renaissance.

The creation of the myth of Africa as an object of study, rather than Africans as subjects of history is not accidental but achieved through processes of discursive disempowerment, material extraction and geopolitical domination. Kalu in his paper examines the impact of the Cold War on Africa’s political culture, although as the eminent Russian political scientist Vladimir Shubin has noted in much of Africa this conflict was “hot”

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[Shubin 2008]. Whereas colonialism entailed direct territorial control, the mechanisms of Cold War geopolitics divided the continent into zones and spheres of influence, often bolstering authoritarianism as long as rulers were judged to be on the “right side”. It also resulted in the militarisation of Africa and as he notes “the United States foreign policy during the Cold War made it convenient for the American government to turn a blind eye to the true preferences of Africans”. We could go further and argue that in fact, along with the Soviet Union’s policies, in fact it suppressed them. This disempowerment then fed narratives of powerlessness, even as select political elites were empowered by such dynamics and creations and distributions of power.

In his brilliant essay, Professor Taylor explicates and dissects the continuing nature and reproduction of neocolonialism on the continent. While it has been fashionable in recent decades to downplay or dismiss the importance of underdevelopment theory, Professor Taylor reminds us of its continuing and arguably deepening relevance to understand “the” African condition. Given the continuing dynamics of underdevelopment “independence” has a decidedly ambiguous connotation in most African states. During decolonisation Charles de Gaulle talked about France “leaving, to better stay” in Africa. To a large extent this has been achieved, although the rise of new capitalist powers, particularly China, poses a partial or ambivalent challenge to Western domination of the continent.

Trevor Ngwane and Patrick Bond in their paper focus on what they term South Africa’s shrinking sovereignty. This case study of underdevelopment shows the ways in which sovereignty may be used to perpetuate dependence and extraversion to the benefit of national political

elites. Thus the rhetoric and reality of political independence and liberation may mask the continuance of deeper structures of discourse and power. The contradictions of these structures of power now find particular expression in the ecological crisis confronting much of the continent, as detailed in this paper for South Africa. Given the multi-fold challenges facing much of the continent it might be tempting or easy to fall into the comfort of Afro-pessimism, however Ngwane and Bond also give examples where progressive social movements have achieved notable victories through commoning strategies, particularly with regard to the decommodification of anti-AIDS drugs in South Africa for example.

In her provocative and engaging essay Jessica da Silva de Oliveira also entreats us to reimagine the field of International Relations. This is necessary to disrupt prevailing structures of discourse and power. Conventional approaches in the discipline pursue a false distance and purported objectivity she argues, and consequently the subject needs to be re-enchanted to enable the achievement of what Said talked about as “worldliness”. The method of autoethnography challenges us to engage critically with our own positionality as scholars and actors in the discourses we both study and create.

Sixty years after the Year of Africa it is important to reflect on both the current history of the continent and the theories and practices of action which inform this. The conference at RUDN and this special issue provide both an inspiration to engage with and develop new ideas to inform praxis, and to revisit and revivify older theories and ideas which retain their salience despite rapid evolution in global economy, environment and politics.

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