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The Global Economic Crisis and the Africa Rising Narrative

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Abstract

As seductive as the Africa rising narrative is, this article argues that it is misleading. It draws the people of Africa into a false sense of promise – of 'development' and 'decent' jobs for all – that can never be delivered by the current economic growth paradigm. A radical rethink is needed to break out of the cycle of deepening inequality, dispossession and ecological devastation. The 'modernisation' paradigm based on incessant production and consumption can only meet the needs of an enclave within a sea of poverty, pollution and plunder. Africa is regarded by transnational corporations and their governments as the last piece of virgin territory left to exploit for maximum returns. This search for new avenues of accumulation must be understood in the context of the intertwined global socio-economic as well as ecological crisis, where capital acts as a spreading virus. It develops but also destroys; if left to its own devices, its destructive power is incalculable. This article situates the Africa rising narrative, and the challenges of growth and development, within the context of the global poly-crisis. It examines the economic and ecological dimensions of this continuing crisis, and asks whether Africa's future prospects lie with mimicking the industrial development paths of Europe and North America, which leads to enclave development, or in forging a new holistic developmental path that avoids the pitfalls of dispossession, environmental injustice and rising social inequality.

Résumé

Aussi séduisant que puisse être le récit sur l'émergence de l'Afrique, cet article soutient qu'il est trompeur. Il entraine les populations africaines dans la fausse voie d'une promesse – de « développement » et d'emplois « décents » pour tous – que le paradigme de la croissance économique actuelle ne peut jamais satisfaire. Une nouvelle réflexion radicale est nécessaire pour sortir du cycle

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de l'approfondissement de l'inégalité, de la dépossession et de la dévastation écologique. Le paradigme de la « modernisation » fondé sur la production et la consommation incessante ne peut que répondre aux besoins d'une enclave dans une mer de pauvreté, de pollution et de pillage. L'Afrique est considérée par les sociétés transnationales et leurs gouvernements comme le dernier lopin d'une terre vierge abandonnée à exploiter pour un rendement maximal. Cette recherche de nouvelles pistes d'accumulation doit être comprise dans le contexte des crises socio-économique et écologique mondiales étroitement liées, où le capital agit comme une propagation de virus. Il se développe mais détruit également; s'il est livré à lui-même, son pouvoir destructeur est incalculable. Cet article situe le récit sur l'émergence de l'Afrique et les défis en matière de croissance et de développement dans le contexte de la poly-crise mondiale. Il examine les dimensions économiques et écologiques de cette crise persistante, et pose la question de savoir si les perspectives d'avenir de l'Afrique résident dans la reproduction des modèles de développement industriel de l'Europe et de l'Amérique du Nord, qui conduisent à un enclavement du développement ou au choix d'une nouvelle voie de développement holistique qui évite les pièges de la dépossession, de l'injustice de l'environnement et la montée des inégalités sociales.

Introduction

After *The Economist* announced a decade ago that Africa was a lost continent, provoking intense criticism from Africans, western media including *The Economist, Financial Times* and *Time magazine* have in recent years swung the other way: African countries have amongst the highest GDP growth rates in the world, and investors are flocking in. This Africa rising discourse has been welcomed by African elites. In the case of South Africa, the elite is using the Africa rising discourse to argue for accelerated growth in South Africa to create jobs (through amongst other things lowering wages and labour standards).

As many have argued (see Fioramonti 2014), the Africa rising discourse, whilst seductive, is misleading. Firstly, where growth is based on reliable statistics, the high spurts are from a very low base, and often say little; secondly, where there is some statistical backing, it records massive growth in the extractive sectors, which do not take into account the overall net loss to Africa of its resources going abroad; and thirdly, it is a truism that narrow GDP growth, loved by investors who only see returns for themselves, can mean little or nothing to the lives of ordinary people. Indeed, often growth in mining activities or the building of dams (or indeed the setting up of export zones for global conglomerates) can result in the loss of livelihoods of people displaced from their land (or whose land is contaminated – the most graphic example being Shell's oil explorations in the Ogoni region of Nigeria).

While few can deny the importance of what some call 'pro-poor' economic growth (UNDP 2014), this needs to be measured more accurately, taking into account negative externalities, to see the net effect on a country's economic wellbeing. It also needs to measure its developmental impact – the extent to which the fruits of growth are redistributed in a universal manner, rather than to a few well-connected elites.

Africa is regarded, by western and Chinese[1] corporations and their governments – on behalf of capital[2] – as the last piece of virgin territory left to exploit, for maximum returns. This search for new avenues of accumulation must be understood in the context of the intertwined global socio-economic as well as ecological crisis, where capital acts as a spreading virus. It develops but also destroys; if left to its own devices, its destructive power is incalculable.

This article situates the Africa rising narrative, and the challenges of growth and development, within the context of the global poly-crisis. It examines the economic and ecological dimensions of this continuing crisis, and asks whether Africa's future prospects lie with mimicking the industrial development path of Europe, which leads to enclave development, or in forging a new holistic developmental path that avoids the pitfalls of dispossession, environmental injustice and rising social inequality.

The Global Crisis

The 2007-8 financial crisis, which persists in many ways, emerged alongside increased recognition of a global ecological crisis, the chief characteristic of which is the climate crisis. These inter-connect with other economic and socio-political crises, and are rooted in a centuries-long process of 'accumulation by dispossession'. In other words, an industrialisation/ urbanisation process that at the one end produces abundance in terms of material goods and services (the accumulation imperative), while at the other end it requires the dispossession of people's land and livelihoods, the commons (including public assets) and the natural environment.

The promise of the last two centuries of 'modernisation' and development for all is certainly alluring. It is the aspiration of most governments and peoples mesmerised by the indisputable benefits of continuously improving technology and the value of things produced from nature. However, this model is now under serious question as the social and natural/ecological 'limits' to economic growth become increasingly evident, if disputed.[3] The current phase of neo-liberal hyper-capitalism, which has washed over most other forms of capitalism, has intensified the commodification of all that is valued. Today, wealth is measured not in terms of the intrinsic value of things and relationships, or for Karl Marx their use-value to society, but in terms of their exchange value (what they can be bought and sold for, particularly for the few large corporations that straddle the world). It rests on the exploitation of human beings as well as rapidly depleting fossil fuels, pollution of various kinds (in particular carbon emissions), and other forms of environmental damage caused by incessant production, consumption and urbanisation.

A crisis is usually deemed a crisis by those in the midst of it, experiencing its effects. The poor, hungry and exploited majority of the world's population, it could be argued, have been in crisis for much of the twentieth century – stripped of their land and meanis of subsistence, and forced to sell their labour or beg and steal to eke out an existence, often in health-threatening working and living environments, including being placed close to the polluting waste of industry. From an ecological perspective, the natural world or ecosystem (including other living creatures) has been in various stages of crises as industrial development crowds out non-human animals, forcing them into fenced-off parks and zoos, hunted and sought for trophies, while the destruction of forests, pollution and emissions threaten the very existence of earth as we know it. The latter has only become a concern for the privileged and powerful when it threatened their own system of production and consumption – but only grudgingly, and partially. Many are still in denial.

However, when there is a crisis of profitability, such that the wealth of the rich and powerful is directly threatened, only then is a 'crisis' truly proclaimed. This is even more so when the rich and powerful at the centre of global capitalism – in North America and Western Europe – are affected, which was the case during the recent financial crisis.

The financial crisis has had a direct impact on the real economy, with low consumer demand leading to a crisis in manufacturing, and millions of job losses throughout the world. This crisis, which began in 2007, rapidly displaced the ecological crisis gripping the world a few months previously (particularly when oil prices began to approach the $200-a-barrel level). While climate change conferences temporarily put the natural limits to growth back on the global agenda, with lowering oil prices and the rising of fracking for gas alternatives, the minds of the world's governments are insufficiently focussed to produce a binding commitment to lowering carbon emissions and move decisively towards a non-nuclear renewable energy regime.

High oil prices, the threat of depleted fossil fuels (particularly oil) to run the modern economy, oil spills, the destruction of rain forests, the displacement of millions of rural dwellers for the building of dams to supply industry, the rapid decline of bio-diversity, rampant carbon emissions and pollution such as acid rain and acid mine drainage (which endanger the health of both humans and the eco-system) and natural disasters caused by climate change – all of these and many other ecological disasters are rarely or weakly linked to the economic/financial crisis, and the socio-political consequences of both.

In other words, when we speak of a 'global crisis', it is necessary to conceptualise the inter-connected economic, ecological and socio-political crises. Indeed, as Foster (1999: 195) observes, the word 'ecology', coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, has the same Greek root oikos for household, out of which grew the word 'economy'. Neo-classical economics, as Karl Polanyi (1944) argued, have sought to dis-embed economics from society, as well as nature, to produce what the political economist Ben Fine[4] has called economics imperialism – the subordination of society and nature to a narrow, mathematised and dismal pseudo-science. The poly-crisis points to the necessity to re-embed and subordinate the economy to society and nature.

These crises are rooted in a centuries-long process of what David Harvey (2005), following Rosa Luxembourg, calls 'accumulation by dispossession' – the dispossession of people's land and livelihoods, of the commons, of the natural environment. This process began as merchant capitalism in fourteenth century medieval Europe (Mielants 2007) and, through the dispossession and plunder of people and resources in Africa, the Americas and Asia, wealth was accumulated in Western Europe, providing the capital for the industrial revolution of the seventeenth century. This, of course, required further waves of colonial plunder and dispossession in the search for cheap labour, resources and markets for an ever-expanding global regime of accumulation.

Capitalism, in other words, is characterised not merely by the marvels of innovation, entrepreneurship, modernisation, higher standards of living and increasing consumer choice. This is only one side of the coin, which the insiders enjoy. More accurately, capitalism is a system of uneven or *enclave* development – namely, a world system comprising islands of privilege and power, surrounded by seas of alienated poverty, pollution and plundered resources. The promise of 'modernisation' and its 'neoliberal' or free market variant, that expanded growth will eventually bring 'development' to all the world's population, has proven to be more myth than reality. Instead, poverty and inequality between and within nations have increased significantly (Bieler et al 2008). Capitalism, as Marx once said, develops and destroys. It simultaneously enriches (the few), and impoverishes (the many). The development of Europe and later North America rested to a significant extent on the underdevelopment of the rest of the colonised world (the peripheral or semi-peripheral countries) (Wallerstein 1979 and Frank 1966).

The recent and still-persisting 'financial' crisis has evoked a variety of responses: from the very narrow, one dimensional approaches (free market and Keynesian-lite) which see the crisis purely as a financial one, to broader Keynesian-Marxist approaches which conceptualise the crisis as economic, rooted in the stagnation of the real economy (particularly the manufacturing falling rate of profit), to the very broad, multi-dimensional eco-Marxist approaches which see the crisis as a complex interaction between economic, ecological and social crises that has its roots in a pattern of industrialisation that relies on the exploitation of fossil fuels – what Altvater (2006) calls 'fossil capitalism'.

The Financial or Economic Crisis

In Marxist terms, an economic crisis refers to deep-seated, system-threatening breakdowns in the accumulation process. Economic crises can be short-term (for example, the Asian crisis of 1997) or long-term (the Great Depression of the 1930s). The current financial crisis is not financial in origin, but has its roots in the stagnation of the real economy (Foster and Magdoff 2009; Brenner 2009; Arrighi 2007). This is due to the falling rate of profit, as a result of two things. Firstly, the *struggles of subordinate classes*, including the working class at the workplace, as well as the working class and other classes in society at large, to extract as much of the surplus produced as possible, either directly from the employers through higher wages and benefits, or indirectly from the state through higher taxes to fund a higher social wage (in the form of public health care, education, subsidised transport, subsidised food, welfare benefits and other social services).

The second factor, closely inter-related to the first, is *inter-firm competition*, both at the national and the international levels. Rising costs make firms uncompetitive in relation to their competitors, unless they are subjected to the same rising costs. Increased competition spurs innovation and the accumulation process, giving rise to a crisis of 'over-production', which drives down the unit price of commodities. This exacerbates the crisis of profitability, forcing firms to cut back and leading to the under-utilisation of productive capacity. Firms go bankrupt, workers are laid off, and stronger firms take over weaker ones, leading to the monopolisation of capital[5] (Baran and Sweezy 1968).

One way out of the cycle of declining profitability, at least temporarily, is to find cheaper sources of labour elsewhere, cheaper raw materials and new markets for excess products. Drawing on David Harvey, Beverly Silver (2004) identifies various 'fixes' that capitalism uses to navigate its way out of continuous crises of profitability. These include the spatial fix, where capital moves to cheaper and cheaper locales of production; the product fix, where capital moves from one niche product to another, chasing increased profitability (for example, from textiles to automobiles to information technology); and the technology fix, where, through innovation, labour-saving technology increases the productivity of labour. These fixes, however, address the accumulation crisis only partially or temporarily.

As in the past, a crisis in profitability in manufacturing boosts the financialisation of capitalism. However, in the context of a more globalised economy and new computer technology at their disposal, investments in 'fictitious' capital to increase profit rates rapidly overtake investments in the real economy. In the US, the heart of global capitalism, the percentage of financial profits over total domestic profits in 2007 was just below 40 per cent, compared to well below 20 per cent in the early 1980s and below 15 per cent in the 1960s (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 93). By contrast, manufacturing profits steadily declined from over 50 per cent of domestic profits in the late 1960s to less than 15 per cent in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 55).

In summary, the financialisation of capitalism is not the cause of the capitalist crisis, but was itself *a response* to the crisis of the 1970s (Brenner 2009 and Arrighi 2007). This is what Beverly Silver (2004) calls the financial fix. Inherently crisis-ridden, this 'fix' spawned a number of short-term crises in different parts of the world over the past two decades, including the US savings and loan crisis (1989-91), the Japanese asset price bubble collapse (1990), the Scandinavian banking crisis (early 1990s), the European exchange rate crisis (1992-3), the Mexican debt crisis (1994-5), the East Asian crisis (1997), the Russian crisis (1998), the Argentinian meltdown (2001), and the dot com bubble burst (2001). The current financial crisis, which hit the core developed countries directly, is the deepest since the Great Depression.

Foster and Magdoff (2009), in an extension of the Sweezy and Baran analysis, characterise the new stage of capitalism as monopoly-finance capitalism. It is based on ever-increasing concentrations of capital, under the rule of mega-financial institutions that straddle the globe, where manufacturing firms are intermeshed with financial firms and investments. Despite the anger against these institutions for 'causing' the financial crisis, governments in the US and Europe are reluctant to take decisive action against them, regarding them as 'too big to fail'. Indeed, executives of these institutions continue to pay themselves enormous salaries and bonuses, with much talk but little action against them. This is unsurprising, given the fact that core government elites are themselves part of what David Rothkopf (2009) calls the "superclass' – six thousand people in a planet of six billion who, in addition to powerful governments and international finance, also run transnational corporations and global media houses.

Fossil capitalism is a system of accumulation based on mass consumerism (the creation of everlasting wants), but because of rising global inequality and stagnant or declining real wages, these new wants cannot be satisfied because potential consumers do not have the means to purchase the commodities produced. The only way out is increased indebtedness – household debt in the US has increased from 62 per cent of GDP in 1997 to 92 per cent of GDP in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 47). Consumer debt as a percentage of disposable income increased from 62 per cent in 1975 to 127 per cent in 2005 (Foster and Magdoff 2009: 29). This mirrors the increased indebtedness of the US economy as a whole, as it borrows on the financial markets to maintain its position as a global hegemon – by fuelling its war machine (a form of military Keynesianism), preserving its legitimacy through social and internal security spending, continuing to provide subsidies to threatened industries (particularly agriculture) and, of course, bailing out the banking system.

The end result of over two centuries of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2005) is a system of uneven development, with rising inequality both at the national level, in general, and at the global level. The core of this world system are the rich, developed countries on the one hand, whose wealth and power rest largely on the under-development of the formerly colonised world – the periphery and semi-periphery. This division occurs within countries, with a core of formalised work and a periphery of informal and unemployed labour, mostly living in urban or peri-urban slums. According to Samir Amin (2008), the proportion of 'precarious and pauperised' members of the working classes (broadly defined to include formal and informal workers and the unemployed) has over the past fifty years risen from less than one quarter to more than one half of the global urban population.

Economic globalisation has, since the 1980s, simultaneously enlarged the periphery within the core countries (within increased informalisation of work and unemployment, and a declining social wage), as well as enlarged the core within the periphery and particularly within the semi-periphery (countries such as Brazil, South Africa and India, and increasingly China), as capital moves around globally. However, with a few exceptions such as the now 'developed' status of east Asian countries like South Korea, the overall global picture of uneven, enclave development remains intact, at least for the foreseeable future. This is despite ostentatious claims by national elites, such as in India, that their country will be 'fully developed' within the next thirty to fifty years – conveniently ignoring that 95 per cent of its workforce is informalised labour (Bieler et al 2008), while in the rural areas 'development' has deepened the misery of rural people, causing a massive increase in farm suicides and the rapid rise of Maoist groups championing the cause of the rural poor in tribal forest areas (Perry 2010).

The Ecological Crisis

These islands of privilege are, of course, modelled on western patterns of consumption – particularly that of the US. The mainstream US commentator, Thomas Friedman (2008), warns about 'too many Americans' in the world today – meaning too many hyper-consumers, influenced over the past decades by American mass media (particularly films, advertising, television shows and magazines) that celebrate the 'American Dream' of unsustainable consumption based on the creation of incessant wants (as opposed to real needs). Friedman warns against 'America's affluenza', '*an unsustainable addiction to growth*' (2008:54, my emphasis).

The Americum is a unit of 350 million people with an income above $15 000 and a 'growing penchant for consumerism', particularly American-style energy-sapping living spaces, cars, fast foods and levels of un-recycled garbage. Current growth and consumption trends suggest that by 2030 the number of Americums will have increased from two to eight or nine – at least a fourfold increase within the space of between thirty and forty years: in other words, from 700 million people to over 3 billion – half the current world population. Of course the total population will also have grown (some say to about 7-8 billion by 2030).

If the crisis of accumulation is temporarily arrested, and global growth and 'prosperity' increases as suggested, these 'carbon copies' of American consumerism could threaten the very foundations of that prosperity. If based on fossil fuels, it will inevitably run into the natural limits of growth, because the expansion of Americum production and consumption will require the colonisation of at least three more planets.

The inter-related triple threats of rising pollution, the rapid depletion of natural resources and declining biodiversity are increasingly being acknowledged as threats to the survival of the earth as we know it. There is little doubt that human intervention, in the form of industrial (fossil) capitalism, has brought us to this point.[6] Despite international efforts such as the Brundtland Commission on environment and development in 1983, the Rio Summit in 1992, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (or Rio+10) in Johannesburg, amongst many other interventions, the process of environmental degradation in recent decades has accelerated, rather than receded. The notable exception has been the partial restoration of the ozone layer, after international efforts to ban ozone-depleting substances contained, amongst others, in aerosols and refrigerators.

If capitalism remains the dominant social order, we can expect unbearable climate conditions, an intensification of social and ecological crises, and 'the spread of the most barbaric forms of class rule, as the imperialist powers fight among themselves and with the global south for continued control of the world's diminishing resources. At worse human life may not survive" (Angus 2009:232). But – at least in the short run – as ecological breakdown accelerates, the dominant classes will survive, living in protected enclaves.

Rising Global Inequality

As Piketty (2014), the UNDP (2014) and Oxfam (2015) show, the current model of hyper-capitalism, based on the self-regulated market model, has increased inequality significantly over the past thirty years, both within countries and between countries (notwithstanding the rise of China and India as economic powers). At the global level, one per cent of the world's population owns half the world's wealth. The bottom half of the world's population – mainly in developing countries – own as much as the richest 85 people in the world (Oxfam 2014). This has accelerated inequality over the past thirty years, and is unprecedented, and reverses gains made in many countries after the second world war. As Oxfam shows, inequality has increased in most countries of the world, including the relatively more socially protected countries of the EU. In most cases, women bear the brunt of rising inequality, and they form the bulk of the informalised workforce.

If the global picture of uneven global development still maintains the essential features of the core-periphery model, it is sobering to reflect on the massive inequalities that have accompanied the increased informalisation of labour within developed countries (see Bieler et al 2008). As Oxfam (2015) notes, the share of national income of the top one per cent in the US has doubled from 10 per cent in 1980 to 20 per cent in 2014. That of the 0.01 per ent has quadrupled. Regarding the UK, Oxfam (2015:1) says, 'inequality is rapidly returning to levels not seen since the time of Charles Dickens'. The US and UK are the prime advocates of neoliberal Ango-

American capitalism, which has since the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions of the 1980s seen the gradual erosion of social and labour protections, welfare provision, economic liberalisation, de-regulation and tax reductions – forced on the developing world, in particular Africa, through the structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and IMF (Peet 2009).

However, if the US and UK are examples of neoliberal hyper-capitalism, China's ostensibly more developmentalist alternative model has seen the top 10per cent earning nearly 60 per cent of all income – making China reach inequality levels similar to that of South Africa, 'the most unequal country on earth and significantly more unequal than at the end of apartheid' (Oxfam 2015:1). Indeed, China and South Africa show how pervasive the neo-liberal, globalised model of capitalism is – it mutates and takes on different forms, from developmentalism to the green economy – but maintains an essence based on the freedom of the virus of capital (called 'foreign investment') to spread everywhere (Satgar 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the rising levels of inequality, champions of the dominant growth model argue that, world-wide, poverty has decreased.

The decoupling of the wealth of the few from the poverty of the many underpins the ideological discourse of the past thirty-odd years. It wheels out 'the poor' in defence of market-based solutions to 'poverty', backed by statistical data showing that, indeed, poverty has decreased. However, the World Bank's poverty line is pitched at $1.25 a day, and some research showing a rise of the 'middle class' in Africa using $2 a day as a base line, with an 'upper class' starting from $20 a day (Tschirley et al 2014).

The UNDP's call for a return to full employment, characterised by the continued migration out of rural areas and into cities, is based on the assumption that the conditions of the post-war boom can be replicated. This is highly optimistic, and ignores the broader context of full employment in the developed world in the context of under-development and super-exploitation in the former colonies. This was, as noted before, enclave development on a global scale.

The UNDP seems to tacitly acknowledge that full employment is a distant dream, and advocates more robust forms of universal social protection along the road to that ideal end point. It is here that it makes valuable observations that social assistance of various kinds did not wait until countries were well off. Indeed, in many European countries (such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark) as well as small countries like Costa Rica and South Korea, robust and universal forms of social protection (including education, public health and social security) were carried out when countries were at the equivalent level of between $1,500 and $2,000 per capita income.

As global conglomerates strive to dominate the food chain, and threaten food security, access to land remains a critical issue. Cuba has shown what can be achieved through the promotion of community organic food gardens in urban areas. This can be another form of local economic activity that undercuts the stranglehold of supermarket chains and agri-business, and allows poor communities to have a greater say in their own food security. In Africa, where the majority of people still live in rural areas, active support for small-scale farming and subsistence farming is critical.

Holistic Development Visions

Today, there is increasing recognition that alternatives, if they are to serve ALL the world's people, and preserve the natural environment for current and future generations to enjoy, must be substantive and go beyond the interests of only the state and the market. In other words, in contrast to the dominant paradigms of statist or free market development, there is a need for a *society*-focused development path, such as what is being (or has been) attempted in the Indian state of Kerala, or in countries like Bolivia.[7] By 'society' is meant unleashing the power of ordinary citizens as agents of their own destiny, where the state and market are subordinate to societal (or the people's) general interests. The challenge is to build a participatory political and economic system for people in harmony with nature. Indeed, even the small mountain country of Bhutan has lessons to offer, as it navigates out of its feudal past into a multi-party democracy and the challenge of pursuing Gross National Happiness (GNH) based on balanced development. Bhutan's GNH Index offers a deep and extensive methodology to measure development in all its dimensions, and all development plans must first be subject to a GNH audit.[8]

In addition, there are a range of other local economic alternatives being practiced in communities around the world, including co-operatives, community gardens, and socially-owned renewable energy projects, which can be learnt from. The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) also offers alternative conceptions of regional trade, based on co-operation, solidarity and even bartering (where for example Cuba trades doctors for Venezuelan oil), rather than cut-throat competition. While these regimes may not all be fully democratic, they have made significant progress in improving the well-being of subordinate classes compared to other countries in the region (see Kellogg 2012).

Arguably, the most advanced and democratic of this new wave of Latin American governments offering alternatives is Bolivia. Its indigenous president, Evo Morales (2009), who was re-elected in 2014 with another healthy majority, offers this inspiring vision:

> For us, what has failed is the model of 'living better' (than others), of unlimited development, industrialisation without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature. For that reason we promote the idea of Living Well, in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth.

While advocacy work from above - to convince statisticians, government officials and other opinion formers about the follies of the GDP paradigm, and the need to consider alternatives - is important in the fight to undermine the art of paradigm maintenance, history tells us that, more often, radical change comes from below. Struggles against elite dominance usually bring to the fore new visionary leadership that can either break new ground, or become co-opted into the dominant paradigm. To prevent the latter, as Gandhi and later the feminist movement warned, activists must be the change they want to see. This involves personal transformation and continuous introspection, as well as a deep participatory politics, where leaders are always held accountable to their organisations, members and communities.

Conclusion

As seductive as the Africa rising narrative is, this article argues that it is misleading. It draws the people of Africa into a false sense of promise – of 'development' and 'decent' jobs for all – that can never be delivered by the current economic growth paradigm. A radical rethink is needed to break out of the cycle of deepening inequality, dispossession and ecological devastation. The 'modernisation' paradigm based on incessant production and consumption can only meet the needs of an enclave within a sea of poverty, pollution and plunder. Only the people, from the bottom up, can ultimately break this cycle. The movements of indigenous people in alliance with labour movements and other sectors of civil society are sources of inspiration in this regard.

While it is disappointing to many that the current GDP growth paradigm has managed to re-assert itself after the 2007-9 financial crisis, an understanding of the social and natural limits to growth will lead to a realisation that the art of paradigm maintenance has its own limits. It is up to activists and movements to seize these moments and work to build broad-based alliances around common struggles. The counter-narrative is increasingly capturing the imagination of significant actors around the world. Capitalism, and its logic of incessant growth, is killing the planet. That realisation, combined with increasing anger about rising social inequality, is becoming a rallying call to action.

Notes

1. There is also a small but increasing presence of Indian firms in some African countries.
2. By capital is meant material wealth valued in money terms for investment purposes. Following Marx, it is an impersonal force that has its own accumulation logic, separate from the subjectivities of capitalists, who try and ride its waves but do not always control its destiny – indeed, they may themselves be victims of its creative-destructive powers (see Istvan Meszaros (1995), Beyond Capital, Merlin Press) and Harvey (2014)).
3. David Harvey (2014) acknowledges the environmental contradiction amongst his seventeen contradictions of Capital. However, unlike many environmentalists, he is more sceptical about the natural limits to growth argument. He believes that thus far capital has always found ways to turn limits into barriers that can be overcome – hence the rise of the green market niche.
4. These remarks were made at a Global Labour University workshop in Johannesburg, October 2009.
5. The regular emergence of new competitors to challenge existing dominant firms (or, in South Africa's case, the break-up of monopolies such as the Anglo-American Corporation during the post-apartheid era), and hence reduce monopolisation, does not contradict the underlying trend towards monopolisation, as new competitors either become absorbed by, or themselves absorb, the dominant firms – or firms such as South Africa's banks and cellphone service companies collude to keep prices high (hence the need for state regulation, often ineffective, to enforce competition).
6. This does not negate the fact that some climate change is also caused by natural phenomena – however, scientists have pointed to a direct correlation between rising carbon emissions and climate change.
7. For more information see Heller, Patrick, The Labor of Development: Workers and the Transformation of Capitalism in Kerala, India, Cornell University Press: 1999 and Bolivia Reborn (http://cojmc.unl.edu/bolivia/rules_toc.html). Bolivia has in recent years come under severe pressure to pursue more conventional extractive growth models, to meet the developmental needs of its people (given the failure of the developed countries to conmpensate it and Ecuador for preserving the rainforests, and thus reducing carbon emissions and climate change). This poses a severe challenge to its constitutional commitments around environmental preservation – and underlines the need for a coordinated effort by developing nations to pursue alternatives paradigms.
8. Interview with the GNH Planning Commission head, Dr Thinley, December 2013.

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