

Debates

A Multi-polar World in the Making: Opportunities and Risks for Africa¹

After congratulating the Centre of African Studies of the University Institute of Lisbon for organising and hosting this international conference, may I take this opportunity to express my gratitude, in the name of CODESRIA, for the honour and privilege of addressing this distinguished assembly of African and Africanist scholars on a theme of burning actuality.

My presentation revolves around three interrogations:

1. Is the world we live in today multi-polar?
2. What are the challenges and gains of Africa from the ongoing re-shuffling of world order?
3. What is the responsibility of the human and social scientist in this rapidly changing world?

First question

The rise of new economic powers from the midst of the developing/third world is undoubtedly the major shift of this early twenty-first century. Global economic governance and international relations have begun to sense the impact of such a shift. However, the characteristics of any potential new international order remain unclear. Multi-polar or not multi-polar? That is my first question.

It was Jim O'Neal, then leading analyst in Goldman Sachs, who devised the acronym 'BRICS' in an article he wrote in 2001 entitled 'The World Needs Better Economic BRICS'. The acronym referred to the so-called 'emerging economies' of Brazil, Russia, India, and China which he recommended as 'the economic future of the world-economy'. His assessment was based on macroeconomic data, especially taking into account demography, GDP growth and availability of strategic natural resources. The term caught on, and the BRICS (with a capital S after South Africa – whose economic performance during a period of recession surpassed that of the

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'developed world' – joined the group), became an actual group.

At first, the BRICS met regularly to discuss major issues of global economic development – climate change, currency baskets, modernization, innovation-based progress – then progressively started speaking out on 'hot-spot' situations, emerging international conflicts, reform of international institutions...

In the context of the 'global financial crisis' which hit the Western bloc very hard and which marked the halt – if not the end – of the US 'uni-polar moment' and the decline of US power, prestige and authority, the BRICS coalition was cautiously welcomed in the developing world as an original 'model of international cooperation' between states which showed respect towards each other's cultural and historical specificities.

And because the BRICS represent peoples from four continents – Eurasia, Africa and South America – and because they make the case for a more just and equitable world order, they quickly became the subject of controversial debate: with some thinking of them as the avant-garde of the anti-imperialist struggle, others as the sub-imperialist agents of the Triad, and yet others arguing that they were both. In any case, the appearance of the BRICS was thus perceived as the budding of a 'multi-polar world'.

Indeed, the BRICS' stance on certain international conflicts, their efforts to restructure some international institutions (UN, IMF, World Bank...) and attempt to create new structures on the world scene

are indirectly contributing to weakening the power of the 'Triad', to use Samir Amin's term. But this does not make the BRICS, or the other emerging economic powers, anti-imperialists. There is more to anti-imperialism than geopolitics. What about the internal class struggles within BRICS countries? What about the relations of BRICS countries to each other? And what about the relation of the BRICS countries to the non-BRICS countries in the South? And what do we do with the 'rate of growth' variable – which is the very 'raison d'être' of the BRICS – which is already flinching, as the economic depression lingers on and/or deepens?

Yes, we live a 'polycentric' world, a world in the process of re-composition, and which is very different from the relatively stable cold war era. However, the world-system's structural crisis is moving so fast, and in so many different and uncertain ways, that it does not assume sufficient stability that can allow us to ascertain yet the advent of a 'multi-polar world'.

Yet, speculation runs high on the nature of the new world order in the making. For the World Bank and its former President, the twenty-first century witnessed the multi-polarization of the global economy. The Third World as well as 'the old world of fireside chats among the G7 leaders' were decreed dead.

In his speech before the fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD V), the President of the African Development Bank declared that, 'At this time of anemic global growth, it is the emerging markets that have provided much needed economic energy. The multi-polar world has proved to be a multi-polar source of strength and diversity.'

For Chinese – and other BRICS – scholars and officials, the global balance of power has changed as a result of the rise of the

emerging economies, and this is contributing to the acceleration of the long-awaited and much-hoped for process of world multi-polarization. The twenty-first century is thus hailed by the emerging economic powers as the century of the birth of a multi-polar growth world where all civilizations will realise development and prosperity together.

Among American and European scholars and experts there is almost consensus on the fact that Washington and the G8 generate less power and that new actors are on the rise, but they consider that we are still a far cry from a multi-polar world. For these, the US remains the dominant economic – and military – power. Huntington, who has accustomed us to his buzz-words, described the world we live in as ‘uni-multi-polar’: for him, the fact that there was only one superpower did not mean that the world was ‘uni-polar’, but neither was it multi-polar; it was ‘uni-multi-polar’. Huntington has thus denied the crusader Bush the glory of his ‘uni-polar moment’.

This particular Huntington formula did not catch on; and we have other unsuccessful formulas: ‘selective multi-polarity’ (military bi-polarity, economic multi-polarity and moral multi-polarity – since the moral authority of Western leadership is questioned); ‘multilayered and culturally diversified ‘multi-polarity’ (a two-tier structure – the US and China in the first tier, and the second tier comprises most regional powers like India, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, Japan, the large European states and the remaining members of the G20).

There are, however, a few American and European scholars and analysts who have dared announce the advent of a ‘post-Western multi-polar world’ – post-Western because the core of the economic and geopolitical activity is shifting away from the West, and multi-polar because the West no longer has the financial means to dominate. The most dramatic act symbolizing this shift being the recourse to the \$700 billion loan from China to save Wall Street from collapse. For these analysts, of course, the ‘uni-polar moment’ is over.

But is it really over? Today, as we observe the unfolding of the numerous crises and hotspots around the world, we have the impression of a ‘déjà vu’. The world we live in is still a world made up of the ‘West and the rest’, but a West with a new style:

‘macho’ ‘uni-polarity’ has been replaced by ‘slick’ and ‘cool’ uni-polarity. I hope that this transition moves us progressively towards some form of multi-polarity in which the West will still play an important role not as a hegemon but as a coalition builder, a power broker and a balancer.

Until then and in spite of its relative decline – or maybe because of its relative decline – the Triad will continue to deploy all the economic, financial and military means at its disposal in order to perpetuate its domination.

Africa and the re-composition of world order – Opportunities and Challenges

I would have spared you the reference to the scars of this continent left by colonialism, slavery, the splintering into small and artificial countries, the long history of resource exploitation, the dictates of structural adjustment and IMF democracy...if Sakozy’s Dakar speech was not still resonating in our ears:

The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant ... only knows the eternal renewal of time, rhythmized by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress.²

A voice from ...the not too distant past! Indeed, less than a decade ago the world of Africa’s European partners was ‘tired of Africa’, dubbed as the “hopeless” continent. Today, we are stunned to hear and read the same PR agents pay tribute to ‘the lions on the move’, celebrate ‘Africa rising’, appreciate the ‘dynamic African market’, and recognise the ‘growth opportunities for investors’....

What has changed in Africa to explain this sudden shift from deeply entrenched ‘Afro-pessimism’ to dramatic ‘Afro-optimism’?

One – During the last decade Africa’s economies have grown, and grown faster than those of almost any other region. You know the details: exports are booming and export markets have become more diversified, foreign direct investment has increased six-fold over the past decade... and all the other indicators are in the green.

Two – This economic performance was made possible by the intervention of the emerging economic powers. The global shifts in economics and politics of this early twenty-first century have not only offered Africa enormous opportunities for economic transformation. They have also put forward a more resilient pattern of economic growth. Indeed, during this last decade Africa has benefited from its deepening ties with the emerging economies. Trade with China helped insulate African countries from the full impact of the 2008 financial crisis and was instrumental in fostering a strong recovery.

The value of Africa–BRICS trade has grown nine-fold over the past decade – while the share of the region’s exports going to OECD countries fell from 70 per cent to 50 per cent over the past decade. Africa has also attracted significant amounts of inward investment from the BRICS. Most of this originates in China, though India, Brazil and other emerging economies’ contributions have also grown in importance.

This happens at a time when the economic and financial recovery in the United States remains fragile, and when the European Union – still Africa’s largest market and largest aid provider – continues to be locked into a cycle of austerity and low growth. The situation in Europe and the US had and will continue to have negative repercussions on the level of US and EU investment and aid to Africa.

This rapid economic growth brings with it immense opportunities:

- African economies are becoming more integrated with high-growth emerging markets.
- The region’s vast mineral wealth is driving growth and attracting foreign investment.
- As the centre of gravity in the world economy moves south and east, the emerging forms of global economic governance could/might provide Africa with a greater voice.
- Meanwhile, the revolution in information and communication technology could create an opportunity for Africans to ‘leapfrog’ – and directly adapt new innovations.

But African governments still have to face up to numerous and serious challenges:

- The economies of emerging markets are themselves intertwined with

those of Europe and the United States, so Africa is still vulnerable to the effects of a further slowdown in the advanced economies. African governments should thus seek to diversify trade and establish linkages to wider markets.

- The 'land grab' and food-security in Africa: While foreign investment in productive farming can be beneficial, governments need to remain vigilant in guarding against speculative activity and the risk of displacement of smallholder African farmers.
- Extractive economy: Current patterns of FDI are focused on quick-profit-yielding mining industries, especially oil and other precious/rare minerals. This pattern of trade could trap Africa in areas of low value-added production with limited scope for the productivity gains needed to sustain high growth, generate employment and develop linkages to the local markets and the other sectors of the economy. Governments should direct FDI to the processing of primary products into exportable manufactures.
- Infrastructure: Infrastructural weaknesses are still an economic-growth bottleneck in Africa. Africa's traditional development partners have tended to neglect infrastructure financing, and have found it difficult to develop good models of aid-supported public-private financing arrangements. China and the African Development Bank are doing a lot in this field but much more needs to be done.
- Education and Regional integration: Together with infrastructure, investment in education and the promotion of regional integration contribute to creating the wider conditions for further development. They all require broader and deeper public-private partnerships.
- Industrialization: The discriminatory trade arrangements under the Partnership Agreements with the European Union and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) with the United States continue to hamper the growth of industrialization and related tertiary activities. African governments should endeavour to remove these obstacles when re-negotiating these agreements.
- The management of development assistance: Africa continues to be more dependent on aid than any other region in the world. Considering the economic constraints of the tradi-

tional donors, African governments are called upon to use the aid, whether in the form of aid grants or concessional loans, more effectively and act more on the mobilization of domestic resources.

Thus, in spite of the good economic performance of the last decade and the promising trend of African economies, there are still many challenges ahead, especially when we take a look at the quality of this growth. Yes, many countries across Africa are becoming richer, but whole sections of society are being left behind. After a decade of buoyant growth, almost half of Africans still live on less than \$1.25 a day, wealth disparities are increasingly visible, too many children are hungry and too many young people are without jobs. Governments are failing to convert the rising tide of wealth into opportunities for their most marginalized citizens. Unequal access to health, education, water and sanitation is reinforcing wider inequalities and small farmers have not been part of the growth surge either. So, the celebration of 'Africa Rising' is not complete if we do not at the same time celebrate growth and the quality of growth!

Moreover, the level of armed violence is increasing and armed conflicts are perpetuating instability in the continent. Identifying the numerous military coups, separatist movements, terrorist actions or the disguised global struggle for the control of natural resources as 'low intensity conflicts' neither makes these conflicts less destabilizing nor less hampering for the efforts of development of the continent.

It is no surprise then that the widespread and fast-moving wave of youth protests that has swept the world since 2011 started from Africa. It was in Tunisia – 'Ifriqiya' – the north African country which gave its name to the continent – that the first spark of the 'youth uprisings' was ignited. And let us not forget that pre-revolutionary Tunisia had an excellent economic record and excellent indices of growth. These social uprisings which denounce political and economic systems that are seen as serving vested interests rather than the public interest are spreading across Africa and even across the world. All these uprisings have in common a shared anger over inequalities seen as unjust; concern over youth unemployment; and,

frustration with corrupt and unresponsive governments. They also have in common a dynamic and phenomenal youth protest which is playing a leading role in these uprisings.

Whether we look at this wave of global social protest as a fall-out from the global financial crisis, or a continuation of the 1968 movement, or a corollary of the ICT revolution, the protestors who are gathering in 'Tahrir squares' around the world seem to have tapped into a deep reservoir of global public anger over an unjust and inequitable world-system, a system dogged in serving the interests of the few to the detriment of the majority.

What role for the Social Scientist?

This outburst and rapid proliferation of social movements around the world is a sort of 'wake up' call to the social scientist, not the social scientist-expert in charge of 'quick fixes' for the policy-makers but the committed social scientist whose ethical duty is to take part in the edification of a more just and equitable society.

At this stage in human history, it is indeed imperative that social scientists make sense of the systemic crises of our contemporary societies before putting forward the principles that would make for the continuation of a dignified and sustainable human life on this planet. The knowledge which has been accumulated until now, with all its imperfections, the experience of forms of social and institutional organization with all its shortcomings, and the concepts, categories and models of thought with all their limitations, make it possible today for the committed social scientist to face the great challenge of explaining and contributing to the solution of crises in practically all spheres of social life. Certainly, the scopes and consequences of the crises that we are witnessing are unpredictable, but they constitute a challenge, and in any case a test, for our capacity to sustain, to question, to propose and to imagine new paradigms of civilization.

This is, indeed, the direction of the discussions started by and among world scholars such as Bourdieu, Boaventura de Souza e Santos, Amartya Sen, Wallerstein, Anibal Quijano, Samir Amin, Mahmood Mamdani, Sulayman Bachir Diagne and others. It is the sense of the ongoing

debates and collaborative projects within and between CODESRIA and CLACSO. It is the direction of the debates within the World Social Forum and other world fora which share the same epistemological and ethical concerns. These discussions, as well as the rich debates we had during these last three days in Lisbon within the framework of the fifth round of ECAS, illustrate our hope and determination to

contribute towards the imagination of a just and peaceful world and the conception of a sustainable, inclusive and harmonious human civilization.

Notes

1. Speech by the President of CODESRIA at the fifth European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) on 27–29 June 2013 in Lisbon.
2. Le drame de l'Afrique c'est que l'homme Africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire. Le paysan africain ne connaît que l'éternel recommencement du temps rythmé par la répétition sans fin des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles. Dans cet imaginaire ou tout recommence toujours, il n'y a de place ni pour l'aventure humaine ni pour l'idée de progrès.