

Transformative Social Policy

Introduction

This paper is about meeting what I have called ‘the Mafeje Challenge’: addressing the ‘big questions’ of our time. I will focus on what I believe will be a major area in which, as the neoliberal project comes to its dead-end, a range of extra-territorial agencies will try to shape Africa’s post-neoliberal future. Unlike the crude discussion that state equity-holding in companies that required massive bailouts equals socialism or the triumphalist tone of the ‘Marxists’ who went the Polanyian in the preceding past twenty years (who now see socialism around the corner), Neoliberalism represents only a very extreme form of the diversity of forms that capitalism can take. There is no guarantee that, simply because Neoliberalism has become disreputable, we will get anything close to a more humane, solidarity driven, social-market outcome; much less a more emancipatory outcome. The death of a king is no guarantee of what the new king portends.

The second aspect of my discussion is more ‘disciplinary’ in its bias although it can be cast more widely; it speaks to a segment of African gender discourse that has effectively been shut out of the work of the Council.

Research Priorities of Rethinking Africa’s Post-neoliberal Future: Transformative Social Policy

Rethinking Africa’s development has featured in the last two cycles of CODESRIA’s strategic research priorities. It marks the Council’s capacity to remain at the cutting edge of the intellectual and policy priorities for our continent; effectively looking ahead around the corner. As important as this agenda is, we have not been as successful in matching the identification of this priority into a library of works that define our concerns, and mark our space. An executive secretary and executive committee may soup up the priorities; it takes the community to convert these into deliverables and outcomes. While the priority agenda on the Council’s last two cycles of strategic plans, the organising priority of rethinking development has often been

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overwhelmed by other (perhaps equally important) research priorities.

Today, the key intellectual and policy challenges for shaping Africa’s post-neoliberal future will be around the issue of Social Policy. It is hardly possible to wear the badge of ‘free market triumphalism’ of the early 1980s anymore; it is hardly possible to insist on retrenching the state further in Africa when those in the North are bailing out their private sector, using tax-payers and sovereign funds of ‘less developed countries’. But that tells us little about what the post-neoliberal context itself will look like; it is never given. Salient to this are the links between the economic and social policies. What ethos will shape economic growth (and development) and what is the feasibility of inclusive and equitable social outcomes. At the moment, important extra-territorial agents are shaping this in the way they are framing Africa’s social policy agenda; the stampede just picked up recently. From the ‘Poor Law’ driven social policy frame-work, to the male-centric Bismarckian model, and the accent on fragmented and individualised, private social funds (pension funds being one example), three things will be vital over the next five years: our capacity to (a) engage with this debate intellectually; (b) mark out a more human-centric, developmentally inclusive and democratic approach to this field, and (c) effect a positive impact of (b) on the African policy landscape.

The days of arguing that the Council should be averse to anything with the word ‘policy’ on it should be over by now. Just because we refuse to engage with it does not mean it will not happen. The link between scholarship and ‘policy work’ is not in when scholars become policy merchants or get into politics. Ideas matter and it is the responsibility of a Council that define Africa as its primary.

home to contribute towards the shaping of ideas through its work. The field of social policy will be the crucial grounds for intellectual and policy hegemonic project over the next five years and the Council needs to make this a critical research priority within the wider framework of ‘Rethinking Africa’s Development’. I am convinced that we have a better conceptual handle on the area, in terms of the agenda of a ‘transformative social policy’ approach, than the range of policy and ideas mongering that are currently being deployed to shape Africa’s intellectual and policy future. The idea itself emerged from the global research programme that Thandika Mkandawire led at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), which was in turn inspired by his re-reading of the African experience. What emerged from this programme of work, for which the work of the Africa Research Group was coordinated by Jimi Adesina, is not only the historical root of this approach in Africa’s immediate post-colonial experience but how the more emancipatory and developmental aspects of the agenda was degraded over time. The transformative impact of social policy can be seen in the transformation of gender relations, generational roles and the ‘nation-building’ impact (social cohesion). Similarly, both economic development and social policy share the same normative concerns of social solidarity, and the mutually reinforcing impact of economic and social policies.

The long-term impact for Africa and the sharp inter-country (or even intra-country) contrasts could hardly be starker when we look at those who pursued an embryonic transformative approach to social policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s and those who did not. It is easy to take for granted the degree of social cohesion in Tanzania – relative to a less ethnically heterogeneous Kenya – and not reflect on the TANU/CCM social policy under Mwalimu J. K. Nyerere. The same can be said of the economic and social outcomes in Western Nigeria in the context of the policies pursued by the devolved regional government from the

mid-1950s to 1961. The use of social funds for supporting infrastructure development and industrial policy, and publically funded education and health-care were to be positively reinforcing with economic policies. These were not necessarily state-centric projects; they involved interesting community/state partnership that gave strong control to people at the level of the communities and strengthened the quality of outcomes. Within the field, these are not normally understood as 'social' policy because they do not fit into the 'welfare state paradigm'.

The current agenda of extra-territorial forces is going to trap Africa in an almost exclusive anchoring of social policy to social protection, and the idea of social policy as something for addressing market failure. There are important intellectual and policy consequences. The intellectual handle that the idea of Transformative Social Policy offers is a major tool for confronting and shaping the challenges of Africa's post-neoliberal future.

I have made this a central focus of my work over the next decade because I am convinced that this is where the next round of breaking and making Africa will take place. Some may see self interest in pushing this as a priority area for the Council; my sense is that each milestone in the Council's seminal impact on the African and global intellectual landscape has involved people working in certain areas, signalling these areas as worthy of the Council's attention. It is about 'futures studies' for the Council, seeing around the corner. The Council needs to make social policy a priority area within the ambit of 'rethinking Africa's development'.

African Gender Scholarship: The Neglected Seminal Works

The neglected seminal works in African gender scholarship, in the work of the Council, is an issue that I have raised in the past. Efforts to infuse gender priorities in the work of the Council have been long-running and commendable. Nonetheless, this is a work-in-progress, with rooms for improvement and scaling up, to avoid the Council's gender work getting into an impasse. An important area of improvement, *inter alia*, is overcoming the neglect of the seminal works of some of Africa's most brilliant intellectuals in the area. I will highlight only one aspect and the enormous sociological and conceptual implications.

Emerging from the works of scholars like Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi is the 'recovery' of the concept of 'matrifocal' nature of many (by no means most or worst still all) African societies. I contrast this with 'patrifocal societies'. In several cases, the reaction to the idea is the assumption that to talk of matrifocal societies is to suggest that these societies were not patriarchal; a short step from the charge that such works undermine – the struggle for gender equality and against gender-based oppression. It may explain some of the intense hostilities to these works that I have come across. These are understandable but ultimately flawed readings of these contributions to African gender scholarship.

While we do not have to agree with others, or find their personalities agreeable in order to acknowledge their works, the refusal to acknowledge these works and make them part of the intellectual dialogue that we desperately need is to play very close to intellectual censorship.

As a sociologist, I can see the immense conceptual and practical implications of these works. All knowledge, Archie Mafeje often told us, is first local; the imperative of carving the distinct space for the African intellectual community is fulfilled in the core requirement of pursuing endogeny – and overcoming 'extra-version'. Paulin Hountondji, who spent the first part of his intellectual work being sceptical about such claims, would, in the second segment of his intellectual history, acknowledge the imperative of such pursuit of endogeny. For all that can be said against them, the works of Amadiume, Oyewumi, and Nkiru Nzeogwu (to name just three) represent immensely seminal works of such displacement of extra-version; they represent distinct ventures in endogeny.

The concept of 'matrifocal societies' offers an intellectually robust handle on a range of theoretical and practical political issues. Intellectually, even if patriarchy can be applied to all societies, the works of these and other African scholars cast doubt on the extent to which we can transpose the 'effectivity' of patriarchy across time and space. 'Patriarchy', it would seem, functions differently in a matrifocal society than in a patrifocal society. This is an important intellectual issue and in need of further research. Also, the concept has enormous implications for the sociological study of

'identity'. Identity functions differently in matrifocal societies relative to patrifocal societies. A Wolof adage says, 'the only parent of a child you know is the mother'; it may also explain why a Walter Sisulu could grow up in South Africa a Nguni child rather than a 'coloured' and remain comfortable in his Africanness – as are his children. His patrimony was not a fundamental issue for his mother's people – he was 'a child of the compound'. We have research works being done on identity within the Council, completely oblivious of the intellectual framing that 'matrifocality' offers.

Finally, the implications for gender equity and struggles are important. When a Swazi colleague tells me that all the criticism of the Mswati's reed dance bride selection is Western feminist attacks on 'African culture', it is easy for me to point out to him that, north of Swaziland in Malawi, he would have been the one married by the woman and he would have had to move into her compound – matrilineal and matrilocal; this is also an 'African culture'. The 'Africanity' (in a futile search for a better word) of matrifocality offers important handle on gender struggles as well. Significantly, none of the leading scholars in this field could remotely be described as submitting to 'traditional female roles'; their lives and scholarships are self-evident rejections of contrived notions of the roles of 'traditional African women'. Indeed, Oyewumi has shown eloquently how the social and political aspects ('effectivity') of matrifocality were undermined by Victorian colonial norms; but never that matrifocality suggests the absence of male power in those societies or an idyllic past. The path to the future is in embracing the 'useful past'.

It is high time we engaged with the neglected works of these scholars purely on an ethical intellectual ground – that is, overcoming subliminal censorship. It is equally important in identifying areas of research priorities in the new Strategic Plan. The only effort at engagement – other than Ifi Amadiume's association with the Council in the 1980s and early 1990s – was in the proceedings of one of the Cairo gender conferences. The Council has a responsibility to reflect, in its research priorities, the works of the Africa-driven and Africa-focused scholarship of all of African scholars, whether we agree or disagree with particular strands of such scholarship.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The two areas identified above for the Council's research priorities are not about a radical re-making of the 2007-2011 Strategic Plan, nor were they absent from that plan. The plan was the outcome of extensive work and consultation; it also marked the recovery of the Council and evidence of its administrative and intellectual integrity. My sense is that we need to constantly scan the horizon for

the urgent areas of intellectual priorities that can further strengthen the Council's voice and hands as Africa's oldest surviving and largest social science research council. Social Policy will be the leading area of attempts to mould Africa's intellectual and policy landscapes in this new dispensation. We cannot afford to cede either space.

A more embracing approach to the African gender scholarship – ethical in terms of

open and embracing epistemological agenda, salient in acknowledging the seminal works being done – is important for the integrity of the Council's work. Some of the most exciting works being done in the field of Sociology, globally, is in this area. It has direct implications for knowledge production in the fields of Political Studies, Economics, Anthropology, Legal Studies, Philosophy, and History, to mention a few.