

Sub-Saharan Africa: After fifty years of “independence”

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This anniversary falls in a period marked by a crisis of the neoliberal economy, which has not affected the African economies to the same extent as those of the capitalist centre. Meanwhile, in what can be seen as a practical critique of the economic “cooperation” between the former colonies and the western powers of the first five neo-colonial decades, we see the development of partnerships between Africa and the so-called emergent economies in general, the Chinese in particular.

Adjustment to neoliberalism

A half century after the first wave of independence, sub Saharan Africa remains fairly specialised in supplying the industries of the capitalist centre with agricultural, energetic and mining raw materials, often strategic and sometimes at the price of neo-colonial wars which are often presented as ethnic or confessional. This capital and bloody participation in the development of the capitalist economy is often hidden by the habitual evocation of Africa’s 2% rate of participation of Africa in world trade, an undeniable expression of its marginality. The mission of the developers is then seen as inserting or integrating Africa in globalisation. A good intention which is unhappily based firstly on a falsification of the history of the world economy, and secondly on ignorance of the fact that Africa is the continent most connected to the world economy, with only 15% of exchanges being conducted between the different states of the continent. The most significant share is realised with the rest of the world (whereas intra-European exchanges of commodities represent more than 60%). The claimed African marginality is moreover, very particular with respect to what it contributes to the rest of the world – raw materials, which are one of the conditions, indeed the condition sine qua non for certain performances by the most powerful companies of Western capital. Thus the quantitative expression of African marginality, by its weakness, can also be interpreted as the expression of the persistence of unequal exchange on the world market which remains controlled by the economic powers of the Centre.

A situation of inequality and not of marginality, which has accentuated with the neoliberalisation of the so called African economies organised from the 1980s onwards by the international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank and so on), through structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), considered as the appropriate response to the structural crisis of the neo-colonialism of the first two

decades, manifested by the critical indebtedness of the African states — at the same time as those of Latin America and Asia. Thus, since the 1980s, this region of the world has been permanently readjusted or restructured for the consolidation of the neoliberal version of neo-colonial domination. An operation carried out with the active support of the states of developed capitalism, whose multinational companies appropriate formerly state owned African companies, in the sectors considered the most profitable [1].

The African continent is considered by the technocrats, those of UNCTAD for example, as that where foreign capital realises the best return on investment (an average of 24-30% since the 1990s, against 16-18% in the centres of capitalism). This is the consequence of the success, among other things, of the mission confided to the international financial institutions, including African ones like the African Development Bank (ADB, which includes non African public institutions among its shareholders) and of adaptation, by local governors, of national legislations to the neoliberal demands of capitalist accumulation. Thus, the second half of the first fifty years (1980-2000) proved to be one of neoliberal "recolonisation", through the reduction to the minimum of the margin of autonomy — already very relative — acquired with the declarations of independence and favoured by the climate of the "Cold War". With the disappearance of the so called "Communist" bloc in Europe, the margin of negotiation of the petty bourgeois nationalist elites with imperialism was reduced. In other words we have seen the quasi disappearance of any progressive nationalist project, based on the development of a state economic sector and a less restricted redistribution of the national wealth. That is, the collapse of what some observers had hastily classed as socialist experiences in Africa (from Nasser's Egypt to Thomas Sankara's Burkina Faso, by way of the Congo of Marien Ngouabi and the Madagascar of Didier Ratsiraka), forgetting that they were effected always in a capitalist context, taking account of the structural mechanisms of the so-called neo-colonialism of cooperation with the former metropolises.

But with the neoliberalisation of the world economy, Africa is no longer considered as the exclusive province of the old colonial metropolises. Since December 1998 (Saint-Malo Accords), these metropolises, the France of Chirac-Jospin and the Britain of Tony Blair, have decided to dominate Africa in a concerted manner. Since the end of the last century, Africa is also one of the areas of the new restructuring of the imperial order and the US has reconsidered its African policy and strengthened its economic presence. Thus the main European neo-colonial mechanism, the European Union/Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Agreement (EU-ACP, formerly EEC-ACP) and the traditional agreements of bilateral "cooperation" between European and African states, have been joined by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, 2000) introduced under the presidency of Bill Clinton. The main reason for the installation of this so called preferential market is the search by the United States for better access to the energy resources (long under-valued) of Africa, indeed with the intention of controlling them, at a time when the US supply coming from the Middle East became insufficient and indeed threatened. However, the strategic interest in oil (92.3% of US African imports in 2008) on the West African coast, from Nigeria to Angola, was accompanied by an interest in other African productions (minerals, metals, transport equipment, textiles) and the export of US products (18.6 billion dollars in 2008, against 86.1 billion in imports) from genetically modified seeds (Bt cotton and so on) to military equipment.

Military imperialism

The US oil supply relates to national security, and is accompanied by a direct military presence of the army, a change after a long period of indirect interference, during the Cold War, for example by providing logistic support, via South Africa and Mobutu's Zaire, to the UNITA of Jonas Savimbi in its long war against the government in Luanda. France thus lost its monopoly in terms of a direct

military presence on the continent, with its bases inherited from colonisation, whose maintenance as favoured by the Cold War and which served as a means of pressure, intimidation and worse, against certain political and economic orientations in its former colonies.

For a decade, the US army has been multiplying its joint military operations with African national armies, including those of the traditional French fiefdoms. Under George W. Bush's presidency it was decided to give the African continent a US military command, like other continents — an exclusivity of the global hegemon — by instituting, in 2007, the United States Africa Command (Africom). Which makes the US an African military power, even if the US army has been present for decades off the coast of Africa, on the giant base at Diego Garcia — Mauritian territory which the United Kingdom kept among its last colonial possessions [2]. But, with the drunkenness of power, very manifest under the presidency of Bush junior, there was no question of the administration requesting the opinion of African “partners” concerning the continental accommodation of the said command. Thus, the latter could find no land of welcome on the continent, which is however well known for the hospitality of its governors with regard to everything opposed to the interests of the peoples. The African Union (AU) seems, for the moment, determined to dissuade any irresolute state — like the Liberia of Ellen Sirleaf Johnson (newly elected) — from going against its resolution to rid the continent and islands of foreign military bases. Even Morocco, which is outside the AU and indecisive — according to persistent rumours — seems unable to escape the pressure of its peers. Thus the US military command in Africa remains based in Stuttgart (Germany). The only open and permanent US military presence on the continent is then, for the moment, that (subsequent to the creation of Africom) at Camp Lemonnier, one of the French camps in Djibouti. Declaring independence late, in 1977, Djibouti has remained the main French military base in Africa.

While awaiting a breach in the pan-African consensus which could give it the benefit of a site on the continent, Africom contents itself with regular missions of training, joint exercises and so-called humanitarian actions (health interventions and so on) in different African countries. Which is not negligible, for with these military manoeuvres and so-called humanitarian interventions, the US army consolidates, inside the local armies, indeed certain African élites, the tenacious myth of its effectiveness, which seems unaffected by its historic misadventures of the 20th and 21st centuries, from Vietnam to Afghanistan by way of Somalia (Restore Hope and Continue Hope, 1992-1993), characterised by ongoing human rights violations. Like the US army everywhere, Africom is integrated in private multinational military missions, with their mercenaries of sinister reputation. The industry of death is traditionally, it should be remembered, one of the most lucrative sectors of actually existing capitalism, that of the US above all.

This African activism of the US army has its economic dimension. The missions and other activities of Africom are also an opportunity for unabashed advertising campaigns for the national military-industrial complex. Indeed, in spite of the growth of military expenditure for a decade, the continent does not appear among the main clients of the US arms industry. Apart from Egypt (9th), the main African importer, the other African states appearing in the top 50 of importers — Algeria (15th), South Africa (27th), Angola (36th), Sudan (43th) — get less than 4% of their supply from the US. Algeria (the main importer in recent years) and Sudan prefer Russian arms (more than 65%), while South Africa supplies itself more from Europe, mainly Germany (more than 65%). As for the other African states, some minor clients remain still, in this area, very linked to the colonial metropolis. Post colonial military cooperation agreements, signed between France and its former colonies, limit again the diversification of training and military equipment of the latter. But in offering more training grants to African trainee officers destined for command positions in the near future, Africom can scarcely conceal a certain competition with its European partners, who, while being members of NATO, are developing a common European defence policy, the European Force (Eufor). It seems that it is Africa where Eufor is most deployed (Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and Central

Africa), under French leadership (by recognition of its colonial and neo-colonial experience on the ground), shared with Germany, with the regular participation of other European states, like Sweden, which is in the top 10 of European arms merchants [3]. However, US supremacy inside NATO plays in favour of Africom, as agency of the military-industrial complex.

Nonetheless, this competition between the traditional imperial powers should not make us forget their permanent complicity, which is currently manifested particularly in the face of the ambitions of some emergent economy states (China, India, Brazil and so on) for access to African resources.

The Chinese ogre

The growth of Chinese economic power presents a serious threat to Western hegemony in Africa. A share of the resources it needs to feed the exceptional growth of its economy is drawn from Africa. Hence the development by China over the past decade of an economic partnership with the African states: 56 billion dollars of Chinese imports (71% in oil products) against 50.8 billion in exports in 2008 and an exponential growth in direct investment, which has gone from 10 billion dollars in 2000 to 106 billion in 2008, with more than 100 billion anticipated for 2010. Among Chinese exports there are the products of its workshops, considered more accessible to African mass purchasing power, affected as it is by two decades of structural adjustment.

This Sino-African partnership attracts the ire of a fraction of the organic intelligentsia of Western capital, not because of its unbalanced character in China's favour — even if the main African capital, that of South Africa, has been able to invest 1 billion dollars in China (against 6 billion for China in South Africa) — or the environmental consequences of the intensive exploitation of minerals over the medium and long terms. Because in these areas, China has done nothing new in Africa and those who worry about it are being selectively critical in favour of the practices of Western firms and their states. Nor because of the risks of a new explosion of external public debt which will be generated by the loans granted by China to its African partners (on conditions preferable to those of the international market), as IMF director general Dominique Strauss-Kahn would have us believe, to justify the mobilisation of the neoliberal technocracy against a recent contract between China and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In exchange for the exploitation by Chinese enterprises (private and public) of a little more than a million tons of copper and more than a half million tons of cobalt, China was to grant the DRC 9 billion dollars (including 6 in construction of road, steel, health and educational infrastructures, and 3 as financing of Congolese participation in a Sino-Congolese mining enterprise). According to the Chinese ambassador to the DRC: "We from the beginning avoided any situation which could lead to an increase in the debt" [