

The liberal virus and the false opportunity promise in third world education

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This article places third world education in a historical-political imperialist perspective. It draws on the conception of imperialism as a decisive hegemonic force that has penetrated third world societies through different historical stages. The present form of informal imperialism characterised by global neo-liberal capitalism and market expansions will move education in third world societies down the technical rationality and market-oriented lane and away from an emancipation terrain of education with severe consequences for the populace of Africa, unless a strategic counter-force is organised.

This article is in the first instance related to the concept that Amin (2004) has coined for the recent global capitalism, the Liberal Virus.¹ Secondly, it is related to what the modern school in Africa promises, namely modernisation. Becoming modern is to receive a salary by leaving the village for an office in town and also to become 'individualised' by leaving the extended family behind. But this promise is a false promise because most learners continue to be sent back to the village and become even less useful for that situation than before through the version of Westernized schooling they have endured. Further on, Africans still see themselves as collective persons due to kinship and have not adopted the pure individualistic perspective that Western schooling is trying to inculcate, but operates according to several registers to the dismay of those who only see development in Africa as an expansion of Westernized 'democratisation'. The article starts in a period when the early traits of the liberal virus where visible.

Already in 1980, when I for the first time stayed in a remote African village, as part of a language course for volunteers, I noted that one of the most powerful multinational corporations and global symbols of corporative capitalism at that time had already put its mark in the village long before my arrival. This corporation that is still a very successful business selling coloured and sweetened carbonated water in a characteristic bottle had already glued its adverts on the front of the village bottle store and attracted the local community with a picture that showed a sparkling bottle in the

¹ Samir Amin (2004) *The Liberal Virus – Permanent war and the Americanization of the World*. Monthly Review Press.

midst of an ocean of water. I would not have reacted to this contrasting message if it had not been for the slap-in-the-face-effect it had on the social context and its inhabitants, i.e. a desert where water was scarce and usually carried by women for miles before it reached their homestead, because the hidden message of the advert was: prosperity comes in a bottle from the West. Today, twenty-five years later, the same message is domesticated as part of common sense – everyone takes it for granted that this corporate influence and attached power has the right to invade the life of everyone in the name of ‘globalisation’ and free trade and its decisive discourse about the creation of opportunity and alternative as a disguise for capital concentration and monopoly.

Globalisation as imperialism in a new dress

The liberal virus is about the expansion of two forms to exercise power, formal and informal imperialism. Colonialism as a form of imperial force and a formal way to exercise power is thought of as a past era. Even though colonialism and imperialism is not always equated², we can for the purpose of this article say that formal imperialism is from an African perspective the interventional period that started in 1885 when the West-European nation states chopped up the African continent and ended with the partial victories in liberation struggles that gave the many African states their official and constitutional independence from the mid 1960s and onwards. Some Western states, like the Nordic countries, changed at the end of this period their colonial aspirations in connection with the advancement of social democratic ideologies and were openly supportive to liberation struggles in contrast to the East-West cold war dichotomy. This support contributed eventually to constitutional independence for African states, while the wish to broaden Western markets is today of a larger significance. Progressive educational policies that were part of the liberation struggles received support from the international community of that time but disappeared steadily from the common discourse together with imperialism as an analytical tool with the end of colonialism and the cold war era.

A combination of external and internal forces has so far hindered a development in Africa beyond the mere face-validity of a new post-colonial era. Old power structures still remain but under new and African mismanagement if seen from the perspective of the populace. The critical perspective once celebrated during the liberation era is now

² See for example Leon Tikly (2004) Education and the new imperialism. Comparative Education. Vol. 40. No. 2, May 2004. 173 – 198.

shelved in favour of the enforced neo-liberal agenda where everything in life is given a price tag, following the infections from the liberal virus. Colonialism is over according to the hegemonic discourse and what happens in Africa is up to the Africans themselves in this new global stage. However, what we see happen today need to be analysed and explained from a broader historical perspective and for that purpose the conception of informal imperialism becomes helpful.³

Foster (2003) writes, with reference to an article by Gallagher & Robinson (1953)⁴ that “the mechanism of global accumulation that systematically favors the core nations, constitutes the normal means through which imperialist exploitation of the periphery operates”.⁵ Formal imperialism operates on an overt and cruel arena as colonial conquest and imperial force that so apparently has re-entered the global scene through the recent war on terrorism, preventive wars, and the alarms about threats from rouse states. Contrary to that, informal imperialism appears as opportunity in its rhetoric through the expanding corporate powers and their imperial markets under the disguise of ‘free trade’. It is in this discourse that the emancipatory definition of freedom as ‘freedom from oppression’ has been transformed to the market-oriented rhetoric of ‘freedom of choice’. The fragile African states do not have any counter-force and sometimes not even the will to carry out their constitutional obligations due to their weak political and economic power. As Bracking & Harrison (2003) puts it:

Often states fail to serve the protective needs of their populations, sometimes because of deliberate arbitrary rules shaped in elite self-aggrandizement, and sometimes because they are empty vessels long plundered and left to crumble.⁶

To become part of ‘the global village’ is a blessing with mixed results that create new forms of accumulation through new forms of inequality and differentiation. Bracking & Harrison conclude:

Imperialism reveals that capitalist development in Africa fails to be developmental; instead it is a story of external dominance and socially damaging and extroverted forms of accumulation.

³ The concepts ‘informal imperialism’ and ‘the liberal virus’ are equated in this article.

⁴ Gallagher, John & Robinson, Ronald (1953) The Imperialism of Free Trade. *The Economic History Review*, Second series, Vol. VI, No. 1.

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ipe/gallagher.htm>

⁵ Foster, John Bellamy (2003) Imperial America and War. In *Monthly Review*, Vol. 55 No. 1, p. 9

⁶ Bracking, Sarah & Harrison, Graham (2003) Africa: Imperialism Goes Naked. In *Monthly Review*, Vol. 55 No. 6, p. 16.

This is why imperialism is still important, and why it provides a far more useful starting point than globalization in understanding Africa's relations with the global political economy. Embedded in critique, imperialism refuses to accept that bourgeois civilization has lived up to own historical claims of progress and well-being. Those who wish to imagine a politics of progress, development, and popular well-being would do well to (re)engage with the concept of imperialism, in order to identify and challenge both the hypocrisy of metropolitan idealism and self-serving discourses of benevolence.⁷

Another characteristic of the present informal imperialist mode of operation is its supranational form where corporate power operates across national borders. Ownership and thereby profit is no longer a strong national asset that can be utilised for taxations but an entity that is difficult to identify, sometimes characterised as 'capital without ownership', and that moves above nation states at an ever accelerating speed. The power of control over capital has moved away from the nation states into the hands of imperialist corporations that want to market-orient all aspects of social life that come in their way including education under the slogan 'freedom of choice'. Mainstream and metropolitan politicians, even those who used to follow different paths, follow suit and start acting on the global arena in harmony with their corporate partners and imperial free-trade-slogans applauded by the acronym business representatives, i.e. the WTO, the WB, and the IMF.⁸ In this process corporate forces and their allies use persuasive arguments that too often are unchallenged because of their attractive 'opportunity dress'.

Rights to education transformed to schooling as a commodity

Each modern society has stipulated that its citizens should go through a period of institutionalised schooling in early life. The motivation is often expressed through grand ideas about citizenship and officially acknowledged constitutive values about equity, democracy, and other positive humanitarian values installed to forward a betterment of human welfare. The period of schooling has successively expanded from a few years of primary education in the early years of industrialisation to more than 10 years of formal schooling in most Western societies that have entered the stage that is called the

⁷ Op.cit., pp 17-18.

⁸ WTO = World Trade Organisation; WB = The World Bank; IMF = The International Monetary Fund.

knowledge or information society, as an official response to the expansion of the skills and knowledge bases necessary for citizenry, while contradictory market processes make the populace more specialised and therefore also more vulnerable in societies where competition reigns.

The expansion of schooling can also be seen as a response to the social complications that have emerged related to the construction of the nuclear family. This entity is no longer capable to reconstruct the next generation without assistance from the larger society through institutionalised schooling due to other obligations (too much work) or marginalisation (too little work). While schooling has gained in importance at discursive level the recent political forces have undermined its humanitarian values and moved schooling closer to ‘commodification’ through market forces and competition.

The ‘commodification’ of schooling follows the patterns of free trade under the slogan of freedom of choice. The illusion of free trade as a humanitarian expansion of opportunity in recent years has proved its shortcomings even in relation to its own promises of progress, prosperity, and well-being amongst the populace. Castells expresses this failure under headings like “The de-humanization of Africa” and the “Rise of the Fourth World”.⁹ Castells’ verdict over the informal imperialism of the new global capitalism is severe.

...the First World has not become the all-embracing universe of neo-liberal mythology. Because a new world, the Fourth World, has emerged, made up of multiple black holes of social exclusion throughout the planet... much of Sub-Saharan Africa, and impoverished rural areas of Latin America and Asia...but also present in literary every country...American inner-city ghettos, Spanish enclaves of mass youth unemployment, French banlieues warehousing North Africans, Japanese Yoseba quarters, and Asian mega-cities’ shanty towns...populated by millions of homeless, incarcerated, prostituted, criminalized, sick, and illiterate persons...They are growing in number, and increasing in visibility, as the selective triage of informational capitalism, and the political breakdown of the welfare state, intensify social exclusion. In the current historical context, the rise of the Fourth World is inseparable from the rise of informational, global capitalism.¹⁰

The trends of informal imperialism have a negative and destructive ‘equalising’ effect that the quotation above illustrates. The marginalisation of social strata through the

⁹ Castells, Manuel (1998) *End of Millenium*. Blackwell Publishers. Oxford.

¹⁰ Op.cit., pp.164-165.

black holes of social exclusion is spreading across national boundaries in parallel to an accumulation of richness and capital in social enclaves of prosperity amongst new and old elites. In that sense you could say that informal imperialism creates a new type of global equalising effect. Richness as well as poverty appears everywhere across national borders and by that the dichotomy of the rich and the poor world has got a new meaning! The global features described through old concepts are that the third world has entered the first world and the first world has entered the third world. The first world 'prosperity enclaves' are becoming more and more obvious in urban areas in Africa where e.g. "no temporary visitor from Western Europe would miss any of the latest symbols of (post)modernity, being it cell-phones networks, computers, e-mail cafés, or the latest BMW models".¹¹ In return, the third world misery has entered new terrains in the affluent Western countries through the dismantling of the welfare systems once developed through the historical compromise between capital and working classes as a way to create socially just societies.¹²

Where does this scenario leave national schooling systems that were built up after the 2nd World War as part of the welfare state agendas in the rich countries in the West and as imitated and externally forced "ritualised-coulisse schools"¹³ promising modernity in the independent African states?

What we see today is a dismantling of the various welfare school models and their humanitarian visions replaced by an individualised and competitive marketing policy in the affluent spheres and a cry for efficiency and cost sharing as the remedy for the ritualised-coulisse school in countries were the policies of the acronym imperial partners reign. The remedies are the same even though the different pre-conditions call for differential strategies under the ruling message: Leave the official visions and policies behind and let the market forces run schooling as a commodity with profit gains!

The post-modern influences are to a large extent an indirect lever of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative attacks on schooling. Post-modernity is trumpeting individualism, subjectivity, and the end of ideologies that suit the neo-liberal and neo-

¹¹ Dahlström, Lars (2002) *Post-apartheid teacher education reform in Namibia – The struggle between common sense and good sense*. Department of Education. Umeå University. p. 56

¹² Amin, Samir (2004) Op. cit.

¹³ Dahlström, Lars (2002) Op. cit.

conservative agendas without unmasking their own ideological basis of capital domination.

What is happening behind the false opportunity promises?

In an attempt to identify the different measures and changes introduced recently in the area of schooling and formal education systems due to informal imperialism, I will give a few examples to show how newly introduced educational policies at times have been defined and/or redefined to accompany and even enforce informal imperial power in third world education behind the false opportunity promises, i.e. the rhetoric that everybody got the chance to become part of the type of prosperous life that the message is trumpeting, and by that the liberal virus is spread globally. The examples are initially situational-based from my own confrontations with third-world education but de-contextualised to avoid the pointing of fingers in certain directions towards people who already are victims.

The policy dilemma

I have more than once met prominent, in the sense that they have occupied influential positions at national levels in third world countries, consultants from the West, who have seriously given the advise that we should not worry too much about the policies that these countries have formulated. This unwillingness to consider policy is not based on a critique of the strategic borrowing of discursive elements attended to below, but is expressions of an apolitical and philanthropic view that ‘we are all here to help’ or a narrow scientific view that the truth about education systems is found in the statistics. Such standpoints are falsely presented as they hide the ideological basis on which their advice rests. The philanthropic viewpoint hides the fact that views about education are based on political and social preferences by trying to portrait education as a matter of consensus, good will and common effort by all, in a world that is becoming more and more competitive and selfish. The statistical viewpoint hides the facts that even the statistical figures that we forward as proof are based on conceptions and preferences that direct the type of data that we want the statistics to point to, avoids other more problematic and complex aspects of education, and simplifies both the problems and the

measures suggested to remedy the said problems. Further on, these viewpoints are ignorant to the complexity of national policy formations.

The efficiency dilemma

Education systems in colonised countries suffered from underlying racist notions. These notions were operationalised by the design of inferior curricula and the examination systems. Examinations created a negative self-fulfilment with the intention to verify the underlying racist notion by giving proof of ethnic inferiorities through the creation of failures. The normality was that 50% of the school-going black children were kicked out after four or less years of schooling.

The promise of different education systems came with the arrival of independence. In spite of measures like desegregated schools, the school systems to a large extent remained the same except for a few face-lifts like more modern classrooms that rather accelerated the image of the ritualised-coulisse school and policy documents that included a mixture of slogans that at a discursive level were going to make the difference, like 'education for all', 'learner-centred education' and 'democratic education'. Today we will find these slogans with some variations in all countries that are dependent on the financial support from international donor agencies as a hallmark of adaptation to the financial markets of donor money. Even though the long-term aims of 'education for all' etc. appear in all national policy documents they very seldom become operationalised on a practical level as an education that situates knowledge so that it becomes available to all not only physically in the form of modern coulisses, i.e. classrooms, but also practically in the form of educative processes of knowledge production. It is rather the efficiency claims that become prominent on practical level and that reintroduces the central position of examinations, performance ratings, and control as the measure for a good education system. A recent experience may shed some light on the efficiency problem.

On my way to the regional airport in a third world country I stopped by at a secondary school to observe teaching. It was the afternoon shift and I went into a grade 9 class. The classroom was overcrowded with 80 learners (10% female learners). The teacher had an ordinary class teaching activity that was well directed and dealt with a formula for physical movement. The students tried by all means to follow the calculations that the teacher was

doing on the board rather rapidly probably with different results in the understandings of the issue. When I left the classroom I was made aware of the large satellite-disc outside the building and the wiring that was already done in the classrooms. The only part that was lacking was the TV-sets that were on their way to be installed. I was told that lessons in core subjects will be sent from the capital in the future where well qualified subject specialists will carry out lectures and experiments on line. The local teacher will be asked to introduce and sum up the lessons.

- Yes I can see what you are thinking? said my local colleague when he saw my sceptical facial expression. By this the local teachers will be degenerated to technical managers.

There are a number of questions that can be asked in relation to this development: What is the basis for efficiency measures in such a system? What type of knowledge can learners produce by looking at TV? Who wants to become a teacher under such conditions and how will their salaries be affected when the gatekeeper of the school can as well take over the teaching? And not least – What will happen when the electricity or the satellite connections fail and teaching has been transformed to a gatekeeper's job? The reported episode above is envisaging a problematic future where ordinary teachers will be reduced to technicians and framed within an externally imposed situation. A waterproof examination system will follow suit on the centrally constructed “media curricula” directed by seconds on the air as an ultimate efficiency model that will surely select the fittest.

The introduction of outcome and competency based education are other effects of the efficiency claims that look modest in comparison with the scenario described above. It is hoped that through the predefinition of specific outcomes and competencies we will be able to gear the education process more efficiently towards these outcomes or competencies and that learning is verified by the examination procedures. The human endeavour called education can neither be reduced to a one-way TV channel nor be directed as an assembly line producing commodities. When such systems fail the efficiency prophets will blame the cadre of teachers for not doing their job and call for performance measures, more teacher-proof and de-politicized material that can be boosted by the further expansion of capital interests through joint financial cost-sharing based on market conditions.

Cost-sharing dilemma

A defeat of the humanitarian perspectives on education is at sight in the light of the dominant global agenda of informal imperialism and the new type of division between dominators and dominated, rich and poor, mainstream neo-liberal and neo-conservative influences and the marginalised critical and humanitarian perspectives on education. In addition to the marginalisation of policy and the ready-made efficiency models enforced by the mainstream influences another burden is introduced through what is called cost sharing.

The neo-liberal marketisation of schooling has by its cost sharing devices started the undermining process of the humanitarian right to education through official measures. The pricing process of social and humanitarian rights started long ago e.g. in the health services. However, there is a fundamental difference between education as a human right stipulated by law and other human rights organised by the state and its agents. If you get sick there is no obligation for you to go to the clinic, but in most instances it is an offence not to send your child to school. Parents will be criminalised through cost sharing when they cannot afford the blessing of being asked to pay for something that is stipulated by the government. In that way being poor becomes a crime when parents cannot pay for an education that they have very little influence over and never asked for. “How can you share when you have nothing to contribute with?” as an educator and community activist at the margin expressed the problems with cost-sharing.

An alternative is possible

The picture I have painted looks devastating and dangerous for humankind, but there is a counter-hegemonic cure for the liberal virus. This cure has already had some effects on global, national, and local levels.

There are a number of efforts made to counteract the present mainstream and decisive development that is rapidly accelerating the new social divisions while we at a discursive level hear the gospels of globalisation through the refrains of ‘the global village’. Counter-hegemonic forces on a global level have been rather successful in other areas than education thus showing that we should rather talk about ‘globalisations’ where the overwhelming informal imperialist globalisation – that Amin has called ‘The liberal Virus’ - is a strong force that in spite of its position can be counteracted.

Concerns about the ecological system have created many acknowledged NGOs that combat the disastrous over-utilisation of the natural resources that follow suit in the expansion of informal imperialism. These concerns have also created political parties that have had an impact in Western societies in particular by mobilising people on the political arena that otherwise seems to have lost its social dynamics and become another arena for individualised marketisations.

We will find the most successful counterforce in the area of economics where the so-called anti-globalisation movement has managed to disturb the agenda of the global acronym organisations and the expansion of corporate power. The movement has probably even had a positive and encouraging effect on third world countries' raising courage to oppose the neo-liberal agenda enforced by the acronym organisations. The anti-globalisation movement has grown thanks to the utilisation of the new information and communication technologies and has by that also become an example of how technologies that are developed to serve the informal imperialist agendas also can be used for opposing purposes – at least so far.

The global manifestations of opposition are particularly vocal in connection with the World Social Forum that has been organised on an annual basis not only at its initial birthplace in Brazil, Porto Alegre, but lately in India and with branches in South Africa and elsewhere. Unfortunately, even in this broad global movement and its different branches and focuses, there is little focus on educational issues. It seems as if education is not recognised as an important area for the critical inquiries into the informal imperialist trends and their effects on the different social areas that affect people's life and living conditions. The way informal imperialism is moulding education is obviously not recognised as the threat it is to the struggle for social justice. Awakened and critical educational practitioners cannot carry the awareness of this threat alone due to their vulnerable situation as educational insiders who can easily be threatened, marginalised or simply moved out from the system.

On national levels there are countries that have managed to escape the most severe illnesses of the liberal virus by refusing its strongest proponent, the World Bank, to take direct control over education reforms and to use the degrees of freedom made available by this refusal to move in a critical humanitarian direction. This is the case of Namibia since independence in 1990 until recently.

There are community groups and charismatic community leaders who have managed to develop alternatives on the local level, but under heavy constraints created not least by government authorities.¹⁴

There is a need for a new internationalism on educational issues that goes beyond the educational field and creates new alliances between concerned educational practitioners, community strata, and other progressive forces beyond national borders. A new counterforce can only survive, according to Amin, if a new historical compromise is created that forces capital to accommodate the demand for social justice, as expressed by working classes.¹⁵

The educational struggle for social justice must embrace the political and economic fields and can only be initiated from the Left and through an awakened class consciousness.

Academics and organic intellectuals (to use Gramsci's conception¹⁶) can play an important role and have a specific responsibility in this struggle by putting their cultural capital at the service of the dominated social strata in pursuit of a new critical internationalism. The way informal imperialism is transforming education into another arena for neo-liberal and capitalist advancements need urgently to be put on the agenda of a new international, anti-imperialist movement embracing also the field of education and working in the spirit of Pierre Bourdieu for the cause of the oppressed and to liberate ourselves from the liberal virus!

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¹⁴ See for example the Civil Society Campaigning on Education For All, www.campaignforeducation.org

¹⁵ Amin (2004) Op. cit.

¹⁶ Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers. New York.

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