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ON AFRICAN GLOBALITIES AND FRONTIER ZONES

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Introduction

In a speech in the Ugandan parliament in July 2018, the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, outlined 'ten guiding principles' of India's engagement with Africa. His framing of India's African policy in a list of principles was somewhat uncharacteristic of the prime minister's speaking style. Modi has a penchant for pitching policies in acronyms and backronyms. For instance, defining the India–China relationship just two months before his Africa speech, in May 2018, Modi used a backronym 'Strength' (and in the process misspelling it) to assert key strengths of the relationship between the two Asian giants.[1] So, when he chose to list 'ten guiding principles' rather than some laboriously assembled acronym or a misfiring backronym, it was clear that the contours of India's Africa policy were shaped more by the need for sure-footed policies than for pleasing platitudes. Modi asserted that the India–Africa development partnership would be guided by African priorities and would be conducted on African terms (Viswanathan and Mishra, 2019).

Two months later, in September 2018, at the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, China's President Xi Jinping was even more

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emphatic about Africa deciding its own priorities in relations with China. In the backdrop of not-so-hushed conversations on China's debt-trap diplomacy, Xi Jinping's 'Five No's' strongly emphasised that China will not impose its developmental policies on African countries (Yutong, 2018).

As these pronouncements make clear, Global South powers are acutely conscious of not replicating the European model of engagement through conditionalities with African countries. Countries like China, Brazil, and India are clear in their messaging about not wanting to interfere in the internal politics of the aid and in recipient countries (see Chapter 2 by Bunskoek).

For much of the Cold War period, relations among key Global South actors and African countries were high on solidarity but low on substance. This slowly changed at the start of the new millennium as three Global South powers, China, Brazil, and India, enlarged their cooperation with Africa. President Lula from Brazil visited the continent 33 times during his presidency between 2003 and 2010, while India began to leverage its long-standing diasporic links with the continent for larger economic cooperation (see Chapter 3 by Dye et al.). China, which was the first country to start a continent-wide ministerial conference with African countries, a model that had now been replicated by several other countries including India, Russia, and Turkey, placed Africa outreach at the forefront of its global power aspirations.

There is no dearth of literature today exploring the dynamics of relationships between key Global South actors and the African continent. Indeed, from an International Relations (IR) perspective, there is now a cottage industry of scholarship on 'rising powers' and Africa which explores the political, economic and diplomatic relationships (although a predominantly large quantity of this work focuses on China and Africa).

A lot of this scholarship has debated whether the rising powers are neo-colonial powers in Africa or benign actors fulfilling the grand emancipatory missions of South-South cooperation (Balasubramanyam, 2015; see also Chapter 1 by Hönke et al.). Such discussions have increasingly become trite, employed sometimes in propagandist ways, and as Folashadé Soulé (2020) argues, they

grant little or no agency to African actors. Attendant to this is the old and cliched but always insightful caution, 'What is Africa?'. Any suggestion to treat a whole continent through the sweeping eyes of a roving academic or policymaker is fraught with issues which the convenience of categorisation can scarcely now hide. In turn, Raoul Bunskoek also raises the question in this volume: 'What is China?'. In other words, can we realistically speak of a 'China model', or for that matter, of an Indian or a Brazilian model, and so on?

The chapters in this book move away from the analytical certainties that the macro-frame of 'Africa's international relations' spawns in conventional IR literature. I trust that in the discussion below I will be able to alert the reader to aspects that make this book a worthwhile effort to reflect more deeply about Africa and its international relations. Drawing on various chapters, I reflect on the relevance of the Global South as an operative concept/category and discuss the various imaginaries of 'frontier zones' that come through in the book.

South-South interaction: The illusory promise of emancipation and difference

Emerging from a Goldman Sachs acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China (which then excluded South Africa), the term BRIC(S) gained immense traction in the late 2000s to eventually coalesce into a political grouping. At the time of its emergence, some of the decolonial scholarship celebrated it for its emancipatory potential. In one such attempt, the decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo (2012) argued that the BRICS project was essentially one of 'epistemic disobedience'. Seeing BRICS as a historical successor to Bandung, Mignolo argued that BRICS was a power coalition with an anti-imperial ethic. It harnessed neoliberalism for the Global South through a process of delinking from Western institutions. All BRICS countries were ruled by 'people of colour'; 'the colonial/imperial wound' and a 'stigma of the skin' brought them together, 'even if their skin is white like Slavs in Russia or European migrants to Latin America from the second half of the nineteenth century' (Mignolo, 2012: 88–9). Indeed, he counselled countries in Africa, quoting

Lottin Welly Marguerite, to follow the 'BRICS model and find association of cooperation and mutual strengthening' (ibid.: 84).

Although Mignolo has progressively distinguished the BRICS form of 'de-Westernization' from a decolonial project of delinking from Western modernity, the latter is a utopia that bases itself on expectations rather than experiences. Substantively, 'de-Westernization' is what you get as a reality to compensate for the non-realisability of decolonial utopia.

However, one needs to be cautious about hearty hallelujahs around BRICS, and which the chapters in this book avoid. Indeed, juggling between de-Westernisation and decoloniality, Mignolo pays little attention to another possibility which has now progressively disappeared from public discourse. This was the vision of South-South cooperation advanced by the South Commission in the late 1980s. There are four key reasons why it is important to distinguish Mignolo's de-Westernisation from the less utopian but eminently more emancipatory vision of South-South cooperation.

Firstly, *The Report of the South Commission* which first proposed the development of a 'South Consciousness' had called for the need for a broader Global South coalition, a strategic alignment of countries of the Global South around common issues (Independent Commission of the South on Development Issues, 1990). And throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there did indeed seem to be a broader Global South sensibility which emerged around global equity and justice on issues as diverse as climate change, the World Trade Organization, nuclear disarmament, global health, and United Nations reforms (Hopewell, 2016; Plesch, 2016; Biehl, 2004). But by the late 2000s, a broader 'Global South' project had been effectively usurped by specialised coalitions of a few increasingly neoliberal and self-interested countries, such as the BRICS. On the issues above, the interests of these more powerful BRICS countries, such as China, Brazil and India, although not homogenous, are often at cross purposes with other Global South actors.

Secondly, the hopes riding on BRICS cooperation, such as those of Mignolo, were exponentially exaggerated. China and India are traditionally hostile to each other and given the geopolitical churning in the Indo–Pacific, India is more easily allied with the West than

with China. Further, and it is increasingly evident, what brings Russia and China together is the geopolitical rivalry—and sense of threat—from the West rather than any 'solidarity of the colour'. Despite the rhetoric of Global South solidarity, public imagery is filled with 'Wolf Warrior'-like visions of BRIC countries acting as new saviours of Africa. Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro had turned its foreign policy focus away from the Global South though. In other words, the collective promise of BRICS for emancipation in the Global South is injudiciously amplified.

Thirdly, as various chapters in this book show, political rhetoric notwithstanding, the relationships between African actors and BRIC(S) countries are to a great extent driven by private actors rather than by political will. These private companies may originate from the Global South—although some of them, like Arcelor Mittal, operate from the Global North—they come under no illusions of being overly concerned about Africa or indeed emancipation.

And finally, as all four BRIC countries are, or have seen attempts to turn illiberal, de-Westernisation may increasingly serve as just a propagandist prop for their oppressive actions internally. Perhaps it is unfair to be critical of Mignolo more specifically for not ethically thinking through an event in the far future, i.e. the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (as of this writing in 2023), but as Tamar Koplatadze (2019) has argued, the longstanding lack of engagement by decolonial/postcolonial scholars with Russia's own histories of internal colonialism perpetuates such blind spots towards Russia's 'subaltern imperialism'. Likewise, Dibyesh Anand (2012) has made the case for theorising China and India's policies in Xinjiang and Kashmir, respectively, as informal imperialism. Civil liberties for Muslims in Kashmir, more specifically, and the rest of India, in general, are under serious threat under Narendra Modi's right-wing regime.

In any case, this turn to illiberalism is not just an internal concern for these countries. As Laura Trajber Waisbich argues in the book (Chapter 4), illiberal policies foster less accountability towards Africa-focused projects in these countries. Civil society actors from the BRIC countries now play little or no role in devising and monitoring projects in Africa, shown also with regard to the absence

of Chinese NGO activism around corporate projects by Sändig and Hönke (Chapter 5). We'll return to this point again later, but before moving on, it is important to reiterate that theoretical aspirations of a macro-level decolonial theory are fraught with counterproductive assertions and ingratiating apologia for illiberal regimes.

The Global South (non)models

Despite my hesitation about conceiving of the BRICS as an automatically benign grouping, I would not suggest—and this book and most other scholarship provides enough evidence of this—that the Western actors and non-Western actors have the same interests and modus operandi in Africa. But the question which motivates the three editors, Jana Hönke, Eric Cezne and Yifan Yang, 'do Global South actors bring a different model/distinct practices?', needs considerable unpacking. This may be broken down into a set of provocations.

To start with, do Global South actors bring different forms, sensibilities, and practices to what is often seen as a Western model? Yes, of course—that is inevitable. But as the editors and the authors in this book emphasise, there is also not one 'Southern homogenic' model to speak of. A Southern model is too far-fetched to consider when as Bunskoek shows, there is also, despite popular perceptions, no 'China model'. Indeed, the kinds of practices that finally concretise into policy outcomes evolve out of negotiated agreements between various stakeholders at multiple levels, including African stakeholders. To speak of one (or even several) Southern models may perhaps be heuristically convenient, but such characterisations come at the cost of understanding bottom-up and sideways processes. Furthermore, are all these policies from the Global South actors necessarily more beneficial to Africans than the policies of the Western actors? Again, answers that are arrived at through broad indicative generalisations would leave a lot out.

In addressing these issues through empirically rich studies, this volume raises important questions about how to think of South-South relations, albeit without necessarily spelling it out that way. It eschews a normative approach, and focuses on the materiality

of relations and the agency of local(ised) actors. But importantly it provides invaluable insights on how we should think about 'the Global South' as a category.

Here, one pauses to ask: has 'the Global South' become an empty signifier? I must state the point with some caution: we certainly cannot disregard the colonial and historically racialised ways in which global inequalities are arrayed, or how in some of the Western literature, countries like China in particular are always suspected of evil designs. But despite that, when today key Global South actors are among the largest economies in the world, some of the most grotesque accumulators of weapons of mass destruction, purveyors of neoliberal policies, and oppressors of vast internal populations, focusing on their difference from the West serves limited normative or analytical purpose. Indeed, in works employing the term to connote a category of resistance with a promise of emancipation, the 'Global South' categorisation ends up reifying an inverse normative binary in which the Global South is already seen as a progressive agent.

Analytically, difference (as one of the editors reminded me here) may not be better but neither is it necessarily worse. Accordingly, a decade ago, in *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa*, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2012) suggested another way of thinking about the Global South and its difference from the Global North. Instead of looking at the Global South as a political entity doing action, they conceived of the Global South as a historical field which was at the forefront of modernity. The historical arc of modernity had bent towards the Global South, they argued. In other words, the world in general now looked more like the Global South than the Global North. Earlier, our theorisations about the world took the Global North as the primary field of action, for that was where all modern phenomena, such as industrialisation, progress, and nation state, played out. The Global South did the catching up to Global North modernity. Theory about the Global South could only be derivative. However, it was now quite evident that not only did modernity play out differently in the Global South, but it was the Global North which was doing the catching up. For example, European nation states are increasingly becoming 'polycultural postcolonies', mimicking the Global South template

of nation states. This form of mimicking is replicated in several fields and zones from development (Mawdsley, 2018) to counter-insurgency (Camp and Heatherton, 2016). The Global South, the Comaroffs argued, was consequently the new global condition and hence a more privileged site for theory production.

Again, one could take issue with the Comaroffs: which 'Global South'? But to think of Global South as a space rather than as an agent, as Hönke et al. suggest with this book, helps to highlight the potential for creative work. It is here that the focus on African globalities in this book—seen neither as derivate of the West, nor as a universalising, thus normative, category of its own—presents a more engaging and fruitful way of thinking from and about the Global South. The focus on material sites, where we see politics in action, allows us to think through the entanglements of international political, social and economic life. Such sites (or 'frontier zones', soon discussed), are where ideologies are refined in actions, where idioms are chiselled into bureaucratic practice, where meanings are stitched in the raw and vibrant materiality of an infrastructural site that is composed of things, people, and institutions. If there is a 'Global South' sensibility or form or difference, it is through these sites that we must arrive at them. In other words, the task of decolonising knowledge must move beyond just focusing on Global South actors and incorporate analyses that centre the Global South as sites of knowledge production.

In general, as Hönke, Cezne and Yang remind us, broad-based analytical categories do not help with understanding the multifarious, plural, comprehensive and at times incomprehensible relations at these sites. A view of power as a top-down mechanism, flowing from one (state) into another, and, inversely, power as resistance which is necessarily bottom-up, does not comprehend the full scale of mechanisms and practices that are at play. Power, in the Foucauldian vein, manifests itself in the totality of its relations. It is a diffused, omnipresent force that relays through rather than originates from its subjects. For Foucault, this creates a paradoxical situation of subjectification: the process that makes a subject—one who is shaped by structural power—is the same process that creates an agent—one who shapes the structure. Power is always

refracted, modulated, altered, and (dis)framed by the subject of its passing. Every subjective contact with power is simultaneously also an act of its amplification/subversion. When we focus our analytical eyes too much on clean categories of imposition, capitulation, or indeed resistance, we miss the multiplicities of its relay and their political potentialities. Might one then suggest a 'grounding' of theory: with people, with movements, and, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2012) suggests, with the messy politics of everyday encounters. The 'frontier zone' as one such messy site of everyday encounter furnishes new conceptions of globalities.

Frontier zones

The term 'global' is in academic vogue. Indeed, there is a rush to adjectivise it into disciplinary vocabularies: Global History, Global Sociology, Global IR, and so on. But the term is an(other) empty signifier, at least in IR. 'Global International Relations' suggests doing what IR ought to be doing even without the word 'global', that is, to draw on the experiences of the whole world in our theorisations. 'Globalities', in contrast, as Hönke, Cezne and Yang argue, 'conceive the global in smaller, more pluralistic, and procedural terms.' Globalities cuts the global into manageable morsels, into active observable sites where one could make concrete analyses of the ways in which our world is being shaped. This approach necessitates taking an exploratory view of agency. Different chapters in this book argue for expanding our horizons of actorhood. In addition to states (and the decision-making state elites), private companies, civil society organisations in both receiving and granting countries, and local communities figure prominently as key actors who shape the contours of relationships in the book, although none of them operate completely autonomously.

Several chapters in the book zoom in on 'frontier zones' as concrete sites. Literally, the term frontier can mean two, sometimes contradictory, things. In one sense, the 'frontier' is a border or a limit—a space at the *end* of one's remit. The 'frontier' is where one's reach begins to end, the power begins to taper off; a space of discord between the intent and the reach of power; and consequently, a

space that is sometimes fiercely vigilant against the possibility of subversion. In another, often complementary but also opposing way, the frontier is the space *just beyond* one's remit. An unexplored space whose uncertainty, abnormality, unpredictability and unboundedness fashion new horizons of compromise and creation. A frontier zone thus inheres contradictory possibilities. It encompasses zones of the contrived as well as the creative, and the managed and the messy.

In all, it seems to me that there are five ways in which these 'frontier zones' are manifested in this book. Each of these brings out new possibilities of research on African 'globalities'.

The first of these ways focuses on the materiality of these sites. As the editors explain, 'frontier zones' are 'sites [that] integrate expanding circuits of capital and (transnational) relations of exchange of various forms and destinations with Africa's long and multiple entanglements with various parts of the world' (Hönke et al.: 3). Objects as assemblage play a productive role in the creation of political relations. Infrastructures are not merely static objects but constellations of material and social relations. Thus, the port in Lamu cannot just be understood as a 'port', with a generic port function of acting as a node of supply lines, but as an assemblage formed through generic as well as specific ways in which circuits of people and things—both material and non-material—and their relations are produced. Here the port is conceived not as a static space, but one that consumes, observes, relays a surfeit of power relations. As Kilaka (Chapter 6) as well as Gambino and Bagwandeen (Chapter 7) show, Lamu is a political space, which to some degrees is distinct and irreproducible.

The second way in which 'frontier zones' appear in the book is in the form of what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) calls 'contact zones'. These are 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (ibid.: 4). The focus here is primarily on human relations, which although asymmetrical are still defined by relative indeterminacy. As Gambino and Bagwandeen show, what might appear at first sight as highly asymmetrical relations are themselves caught in what Bourdieu would call their respective 'fields'. The agency of individuals is constrained by the different fields they

occupy. For instance, the Chinese supervisors and workers operate under disempowering constraints of the Chinese contract labour system and economy, even though they may seem to have immediate power over the African workers. But at the same time, the contact zone is a zone of mutual translation, a zone occupied by 'pidgin'—metaphorically and literally, which leaves more scope for assertive transfers of management practices but also subversive transgressions thereof (Driessen, 2020).

'Frontier zones' are also spaces of friction, spaces that contrive typical reactions from the 'clash' of ideas, motives, cultures. This is the third way in which frontier zones appear in the book. In a neoliberal world, the means and relations of transnational production are anchored in specifically exploitative ways. The focus on the subalterns, in this case, workers (in Gambino and Bagwandeen), host communities and advocacy networks (in Chapter 5 by Sändig and Hönke, Chapter 6 by Kilaka, and Chapter 8 by Sambo and Bußler) the outwardly political ways of their resistance is not merely a descriptive but also a political choice. The essays in the book take that choice seriously and by revealing the creative, innovative ways in which resistance is mounted, they restore political agency to the grassroots.

Fourthly, frontier also operates here as 'a zone of distinction': exceptionalised, even deterritorialised (such as special economic zones), often falling outside of the purview of normal legal mechanisms, gated time-spaces which produce distinctive sets of relations. In everyday encounters, frontiers appear as spaces of profusion and excess, as spaces in which the surfeit of interactions and the possibilities of their meanings exceed a certain permissible economy of their operations. African workers and Chinese/Brazilian/Indian supervisors are not supposed to talk much, limited by both the constraints of language, nationalities, and class positions, but the interactions produce their own dynamics—sometimes bringing order to structural chaos, and other times inserting manageable chaos into deliberately segregated spaces. The gated zone of this 'frontier' creates life-worlds of its own. In all this, the effort is not to suggest which of the ways does it best, but rather to point to a plethora of imaginations at the frontiers. The zooming in on these

frontier zones allows us to see how power relations are sutured at specific sites (see Chapter 6 by Kilaka, Chapter 7 by Gambino and Bagwandeen, and Chapter 8 by Sambo and Bußler).

Finally, the 'frontier zones' allow for multiscale actorhood: these are spaces which involve governments—domestic and international, civil society actors—non-governmental organisations and community boards, companies (providing labour, machinery, and skills), specialised legal and financial regimes. The chapters in this volume do not take a unified view of agency, but instead point to different ways and means through which agency is exhibited by actors at different scales (see Chapter 2 by Bunskoek, Chapter 3 by Dye et al., Chapter 4 by Waisbich, and Chapter 5 by Sändig and Hönke). Going further, the 'frontier zones' in Africa, as we have argued with the Comaroffs, are now the privileged sites of theory production. This volume eschews that task somewhat, for it restricts itself to unearthing the practices, but one could suggest a further line of enquiry.

What do these 'frontier zones' of Africa's infrastructure 'globalities' tell us about modes of neoliberal governance? Operating at the crossroads of global finance, international and local governments, community life, and (racialised) cultural and labour practices, the 'frontier zones' proffer new modes of governance that integrate freedom and security, (political) rule and (market) management, dominance and resistance to produce racialised neoliberal subjects (on the racial capitalism of African infrastructures, see Kimari and Ernstson, 2020). Could one suggest that the 'frontier zone' is to the 2010s and 2020s what the factory floor was to the 1970s and 1980s?

Conclusion

I have made two broad points here: first that our discussions on the Global South must also increasingly problematise the term itself. The focus on the agency of Global South actors (largely key Global South states) tends to inscribe them with an emancipatory potential which is largely misplaced. Instead, it may be more fruitful to place the Global South, or rather the 'globalities' of the South, as concrete

sites, at the centre of our analyses, which also helps to amplify the several other Global South actors who are on the ground. But going further, it is through a focus on these sites that we can appreciate the surfeit of actions, practices, movements, and structures that are being shaped and reshaped, and thus view these locations as sites for knowledge/theory production. This volume busies itself in excavating a rich tapestry of African infrastructure 'globalities'. As Global South powerhouses and their infrastructures (capital, labour, machines, practices) venture into new lands, including in the Global North, perhaps the next step, as I have indicated, is to query the extent to which these are generalisable.