ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 27.05.2021 | Branko Milanović

The marginalisation of Africa

African countries are often marginalised in global economic and political debates. But they are not powerless to change it

Is Africa marginalised in contemporary economics and politics, and in contemporary economic and political research? Impressions gathered over the years and a bit of evidence (much more could be assembled) indicate that it is.

I would distinguish three types of marginalisation: objective, objectified and subjective marginalisation.

Caused by poverty

Africa is not at the forefront of the new economic and social issues which arise in the advanced economies. Nor does it have the funds to maintain numerous intellectuals who create 'theories' and an 'intellectual climate'. *Objectively*, both problems are caused by poverty.

It is not by accident that economics developed in north-western Europe. Modern capitalism, financial crises, problems of displacement of labour by capital, the use of fiscal and monetary policy to wage wars and so on were first encountered there.

This continues to the present day — albeit Modern Monetary Theory, outsourcing, artificial intelligence and the like have taken the place of Adam Smith's discussion of the 'invisible hand' or David Ricardo's disquisition on the role of machinery. None of these cutting-edge issues is present in less-developed countries.

Poor countries are thus attractive as a field of research — but nothing more.

Poorer countries also lack resources to maintain the intellectual class which could promote 'their' (domestic) issues and they thus become mere consumers of the ideas produced in the rich countries. That has led to accusations of global-northern ideological hegemony but this

is largely independent of one's will: it is built into the very system of economics and other social sciences. We can deplore it but not much can be done about it.

At times it is reversed — as when such topics as industrialisation, central planning, land reform, saving and accumulation came to play an important role in economics. But this was exceptional and we are back to the 'normal' division of intellectual labour between rich and poor countries.

Ethical concerns

By *objectified* marginalisation I mean that, while Africa does not autonomously generate topics to be studied, it is often used as a 'research field' for themes defined by the north to be examined. These topics may or may not however have much to do with African countries and may or may not have any real effect on the ground in Africa.

Consider randomised controlled trials. RCTs have long been plagued by ethical concerns (as well as questionable replicability). These arise because poorer countries and poor people implicated in them do not have much agency — or often even full understanding of what is happening and what they are supposed to do. They are unable to shape projects or participate meaningfully.

Moreover, poor people's participation is cheap since, when compensated, the amounts received are a fraction of what would need to be paid in rich countries for similar participation (assuming that such projects would ethically pass muster there). Poor countries are thus attractive as a field of research — but nothing more.

Last year a project in Kenya randomly turned off water to households in default on their fees — to find out how they would react and at what point lack of water would force them to pay the municipality. One could not imagine a similar project in which, say, households in New York or Paris, late in the payment of some city dues, would be treated in the same manner.

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Often such projects have very little domestic ownership — even if on paper it might appear different. Northern consultants (who need such projects to write scientific papers or justify their fees) have huge power over local academics and communities. They hold the pursestrings: if one

frequently do, the research agenda in eastern Europe.

academic refuses to participate, another will easily be found.

This does not necessitate outright corruption, but incentives (fees, travel, co-authorship) are flashed in front of local counterparts. The economist Angus Deaton recently declared: 'Using poor people to build a professional CV should not be accepted.'

Self-induced

These problems are not unique to Africa — they are experienced by all less-developed countries. I have seen how foreign-funded non-governmental organisations used to determine, and still frequently do, the research agenda in eastern Europe — until some of these countries became richer, their academic community stronger and more self-confident.

But African countries have contributed to their marginalisation by not having developed stronger academic and political counterparts. Such *subjective* marginalisation is self-induced.

For instance, the reaction in 1998 of the academic community and policy-makers in South Korea to an austerity programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund highlighted the *lack* of reaction of intellectual communities in many African countries when exposed to even tougher IMF programmes. South Korean academics went on the offensive, using extensive connections with their counterparts in the United States, and the west generally, to push back on IMF proposals. Outside of South Africa, I am not aware of anything similar in over half a century of African countries' relations with the IMF.

If one puts the three causes of marginalisation together, they clearly flow from structural impotence to potential influence.

The self-marginalisation is even more puzzling because it cannot be put down to lack of knowledge of the world's dominant language. The elites in all African countries are perfectly fluent in English and French — many in both. By contrast, many eastern Europeans and some Asians are unfamiliar with English, which cuts them off from the most up-to-date research — even from mundane knowledge of whom to contact and how.

Early successes

If one puts the three causes of marginalisation together, they clearly flow from structural impotence to potential influence. There is nothing to be done about 'objective' marginalisation short of Africa growing faster, getting richer and thus provoking more interest — success always leads to interest — and in the process becoming financially able to shape the agenda. This is what China has done. 'Objectified' marginalisation would similarly largely take care of itself with greater wealth, even if it might take longer to overturn.

It is in the subjective marginalisation where governments could reap some early successes: it requires spending a higher share of gross domestic product on research, creating much better universities and think tanks, and attracting foreign researchers who, if they were to live longer in African countries (not just visit for a fortnight), would no longer see African issues as a good way to publish a paper but would fully participate in academic life.

In addition, it requires building much stronger ties between the domestic research community and government. Then African countries could take more initiative and exercise more ownership when it comes to policy advice proffered from the global north.

This article is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal.



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