Is Colonialism Responsible for Africa’s Problems?

**Background**

Africa is a continent mired in poverty. Much of the region is politically instable. Repeated droughts threaten the survival of many of Africa’s people. Widespread environmental destruction is a constant danger. AIDS is destroying whole generation of people,. Africa’s continuing crisis threaten the region’s prospects for long-term economic development. Debate continues to rage about the origins of Africa[‘s problems. Many experts believe the lasting effects of colonialism are to blame. In the first reading, Charles O. Chikeka, an African-American Associate Professor of history, argues that colonialism created the economic dependency that remains with Africa to the present day. In the second reading, Finnish scientist Mai Palmberg- a supporter of black liberation groups in southern Africa- continues this theme by exploring the role of “development aid” in perpetuating dependence. In the third reading, P.T. Bauer, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, argues that colonial rule is not the cause of African poverty.

Read these three viewpoints carefully, and answer the questions that follow. (You may want to refer to the Skill Path “Analyzing a Reading” on page 14 before beginning.

**Remnants of the Colonial Heritage**

At the present time, most African states have achieved flag or legal independence but not real or genuine independence. The colonial heritage, which in the past divided the African continent into spheres of influence for European hegemony, has continued and, in effect, has undermined the efforts of pam-Africanists to achieve regional as well as continental unity and cooperation. The structures of economic dependency, which were established in the colonial times, have endured longer than the European powers actual presence.

Foreign interests still control major sectors of African economies. Expatriate administrators, bureaucrats, businessmen, scientists, and technical experts continue to make vital decisions that affect the economic and political destinies of African states. In many fields of economic activity, such as trade, investment capital, marketing, monetary and fiscal management, and distribution, European states still exercise their dominance over African economies… the plight of the underdeveloped countries… is doubly vulnerable because of the two-fold concentration of their exports in terms of commodities and in terms of markets.

For example, not only is each African country dependent of the fortunes of a very narrow range if export products, so that a serious decline in market demand for any one product is likely to become a major problem, but in addition, the prosperity of most of these states if very much bound up with that of one or two principal industrial powers to which they sell the bulk of their exports. The critics if these continued ties between the ex-imperial powers and the new states have expressed the legitimate concerns over African states’ dependence on European states for markets, aid, capital, technology, and defense. The term dependency syndrome has been used to characterize this situation. After examining the impact of foreign influence in general and the dominant presence of the former colonial preserves, one alarmed African intellectual commented:

*‘We are undergoing a second colonization: out present leaders are just like the old tribal chiefs who signed pacts with colonizers for a few beads. Friendship and military pacts are now penciled up in return for guns, aid, or cash loans. African is up for grabs.”*

Source: Charles Ohiri Chikeka, *Decolonization Process in Africa During the Post-war Era, 1960-1990.* Queenstown: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998, p. 247-248.

**The Exploitation of Africa**

The then Prime Minister of England, Harold Macmillian, in a speech in Cape Town on 3 February 1960, said that the main question now was whether the peoples of Asia and Africa would turn to the East or to the West, to Communism or to “the free world.” In December of the same year Charles de Gualle, then president of France, spoke to army officers in Blida in Algeria. He asked them to try to understand what was happening in the world, to understand that the old methods of direct control, based on arms and the colonial states apparatus, has become impossible to the practice, the new way had been found so that “the activities of France in Algeria can continue.” In March 1961 the US President John F. Kennedy launched what was called the “Alliance for Progress” for the Latin American states. To prevent the revolutionary example of Cuba becoming contagious the Latin American states were to embark on some social and economic reforms with the aid of US dollars.

These three speeches show how the leaders of the Western world understood that new forms for imperialism has to be created when direct colonial control was no longer politically possible. The question was how to continue the exploration of the Third World as cheaply and as easily as possible, and also to prevent the “loss” of more countries than China, that is, a change in Socialist direction. Independent Africa became a field of experiments for neo-colonial policies…

Economic Dependence

The independent African states got their own national flags but they inherited economic dependence. This dependence should be used by the imperialist forces to further their aims. The dependence rests on two pillars, a continued colonial division of labour and foreign control of key sectors of the economy.

But the investments and ttrade are not the only form of dependence. ‘Development aid’ has become an important instrument for the neo-colonial policies. The words ‘development aid’ give an impression that it is an unselfish sacrifice from the rich to the poor. But only if we look at it as part of the total economic relations between underdeveloped countries and industrialized capitalist states can we judge the real function of development aid….

An overwhelming part of all development aid goes to infrastructure, that is, to the preconditions for modern production. Infrastructure means, on the one hand, economic investments, such as communications, telecommunications, airports, harbours, energy supply, irrigation projects, etc., an, on the other hand, social investments such as schools, hospitals and administrative buildings. Of course, such projects need not be worthless for the receiving country. But, in the first place, they are designed to reinforce export dependence instead of further domestic use of raw materials. In the second place, these investments are, to quote [LD Black], a North American spokesman for development aid, ‘an indispensable precondition for the capacity to attract foreign investment’….

Unequal exchange

To all this must be added the losses incurred by the Third World countries from deteriorated terms of trade. This means that most raw materials, which we have seen make up the major share of the exports from underdeveloped countries, have decreasing prices on the world market, whereas the prices of manufactured goods, which the underdeveloped countries import, steadily rise…

This ‘unequal exchange’ means that for the Third World the loss is often more than what is ‘given’ in development aid. Another difficulty for the economy of Third World countries is the fact that they do not control the sale of their raw materials, but this is subject to speculation on the raw materials exchanges in New York and London….

As long as the majority of the Third World countries believe that changes can be made in cooperation with those industrialized countries which have created and maintained the Third World’s underdevelopment, the neo-colonial policies have not completely lost the day….

Political organization is decisive for development in progressive states. Only through a popular basis and control of political life can the people decide what will be produced and for whom.

Source: *The Struggle for Africa* by Mai Palmberg, 1983

**Colonialism is Not to Blame**

About ten years ago a student group at Cambridge published a pamphlet on the subject of the moral obligations of the West to the Third World. The following was its key passage:

*We took the rubber from Malaya, the tea from India, raw materials from all over the world and gave almost anything in return.*

This is as nearly the opposite of the truth as one can find. The British took the rubber to Malaya and the tea to India. There were no rubber trees in Malaya or anywhere in Asia (as suggested by their botanical name, Hevea brazilienis) until about 100 years ago, when the British took the first rubber seeds there out of the Amazon jungle. From these sprang the huge rubber industry – now very largely Asian-owned. Tea plants were brought to India by the British somewhat earlier; their origin is shown in the botanical name Camilla sinesis, as well as in the phrase ‘all the tea in China’….

Far from the West having caused the poverty in the Third World, contact with the West has been the principal agent of material progress there.

Large parts of West Africa were….transformed…as a result of Western contacts. Before 1890 there was no cocoa production in the Gold Coast or Nigeria, only very small production of cotton and groundnuts and small exports of palm oil and palm kernels. By the 1950s all these had become staples of world trade. They were produced by Africans on Africa owned properties. But this was originally made possible by Westerners who established public security and introduced methods of transport and communications. Over this period imports both of capital goods and of mass consumer goods for African use also rose from insignificant amounts to huge volumes. The changes were reflected in government revenues, literacy rates, school attendance, public health, life expectations, infant mortality and many other indicators.

Massive transformation

Statistics by themselves can hardly convey the far reaching transformation which took place over this period in West Africa….For instance, slave trading and slavery were still widespread at the end of the nineteenth century. They had practically disappeared by the end of the First World War. Many of the worst endemic and epidemic diseases for which West Africa was notorious throughout the nineteenth century had disappeared by the Second World War…

The role of Western contacts in the material progress of Black Africa deserves further notice. As late as the second half of the nineteenth century Black Africa was without even the simplest, most basic ingredients of modern social and economic life. These were brought there by Westerners over the last hundred years or so. This is true of such fundamentals as a public security and law and order; wheeled traffic and mechanical transport; roads, railways and man-made ports; the application of science and technology to economic activity; towns with substantial buildings, clean water and sewerage facilities; public health care, hospitals and the control of endemic and epidemic diseases; formal education. These advances resulted from peaceful commercial contacts.

Wherever local conditions have permitted it, commercial contacts with the West, and generally established by the West, have eliminated famine, extended life expectations and improved living standards…..

Colonialism is not at fault

Whatever one thinks of colonialism, it cannot be held responsible for Third World poverty. Some of the most backward countries never were colonies, as for instance Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Liberia. Ethiopia is perhaps an even more telling example. Again, many of the Asian and African colonies progressed very rapidly during colonial rule, much more so than the independent countries in the same area. At present one of the few remaining European colonies is Hong Kong – whose prosperity and progress should be familiar. It is plain that colonial rule has not been the cause of Third World poverty.

Nor is the prosperity of the West the result of colonialism. The most advanced and the richest countries never had colonies, including Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries; and some were colonies, as for instance North America and Australia. The prosperity of the West was generated by its own peoples and was not taken from others. The European countries were already materially far ahead of the areas where they established colonies…

The allegations that external trade, and especially imports from the West, are damaging to the populations of the Third World reveal a barely disguised condescension towards the ordinary people there, and even contempt for them. The people, of course, want the imports. If they did not the imported goods could not be sold. Similarly, the people are prepared to produce for export to pay for these imported goods. To say that these processes are damaging is to argue that people’s preferences are of no account in organizing their own lives….

Source: *Equality, the Third World and Economic Delusion,* PT Bauer

Decide which of the viewpoints you tend to support, and explain why. If you agree with neither, state the position you do support and explain it. Be sure to use specific info from the texts, the readings and the lessons.