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Abolish International Development: The Militant Anti-Imperial Praxis of Thomas Sankara

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AMBER MURREY, OCT 17 2023

In the week that marks the 36th anniversary of the assassination of Thomas Sankara, Pan-African and Marxist activists and intellectuals remember his unwavering call to “dare to invent the future” (interview with Jean-Philippe Rapp in 1985). Sankara’s militant imaginative aspiration finds its echoes and reverberations among the many insurgent Pan-African movements taking place across French-speaking Africa which are seeking to fundamentally break with imperial practices and political orders (on Neo Pan-Africanism, read Bamba Ndiaye’s 2023 article).

Remembering Sankara’s refusal of international development

Sankara’s struggle was to fully reconceive the terrain of struggle and its relationship with knowledge, culture, and economy—what we might today call a kind of decolonial ‘worldmaking’. His interviews, speeches, and actions revealed him to be deeply knowledgeable about the specific geopolitical role of international development in impoverishing countries like Burkina Faso in the years following formal decolonization. His revolutionary orientation was founded upon an insistence that all Burkinabè be free and empowered but that genuine self-empowerment was something to be cultivated through hard-work and seized through struggle rather than allocated by the capitalist status quo or apportioned through international aid designed for “mere survival” (Sankara, “One Color: African Unity,” August 1984).

In a conversation with the anticolonial Cameroonian historian, Mongo Beti, Sankara asserted:

Few countries have been flooded [like Burkina Faso] with all kinds of external aid. Theoretically, such aid is supposed to boost development. You will look in vain for any trace of development... The men in power, out of naivety, or out of class selfishness, have been unable or unwilling to control external support or understand its scope and articulate the country’s need in favor of the people. (interview with M. Beti, 11/3/1985)

Sankara’s testimony was an early and unwavering indictment against the violence of development projects. International development agendas, in his words, were little more than “world[s] of slavery redone in the fashion of the day” (Sankara, “Freedom Must be Conquered,” 1984). He rejected externally driven development agendas both for the tendency to ideologically obscure the violent economic and political consequences of global racial capitalism and also for the dependency and alienation fostered by such projects.

Sankara situated international development within a matrix of cultural imperialism. As he explained to Jean-Philippe Rapp in a 1985 interview, “From imperialism’s point of view, it’s more important to dominate us culturally than militarily. Cultural domination is more flexible, more effective, less costly”. At a rally in Ouagadougou in 1983 he said,

Imperialism is everywhere. Through the culture that it spreads, through its misinformation, it gets us to think like it does, it gets us to submit to it, and to go along with all its maneuvers. (Sankara, “Who Are the People’s Enemies?” 1983)

Against aid and racial capitalism

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Due to its interconnections with imperialism, racism, and capitalism, international development needed to be thoroughly transformed. Sankara discontinued the United States Peace Corps program in Burkina Faso in 1987. A Mexican American agroecologist invited to visit rural villages at the time recalled that a small group of American volunteers had driven a 4x4 vehicle over a meticulously dug irrigation canal, destroying hours of labour. Sankara was reportedly furious. The episode revealed the duplicities embedded in the Peace Corp programme during the Cold War years: naïve, inexperienced American youth sent to various destinations across the world for personal skills and career development and a fair bit of soft power diplomacy as 'good will' from the anti-communist US government. But too often good intentions devolve to dangerous outcomes, and often with little accountability. Sankara requested that the Peace Corps funds be channelled into an account overseen by a Burkinabé group or collective. This suggestion was rejected, and Sankara discontinued the programme in Burkina Faso. He was convinced that "Aid must go in the direction of strengthening our sovereignty, not undermining it. Aid should go in the direction of destroying aid. All aid that kills aid is welcome in Burkina Faso. But we will be compelled to abandon all aid that creates a welfare mentality" (Sankara, "One Color: African Unity," August 1984).

Sankara said that those who "have eyes to see" know the "terrible consequences of the devastation imposed by the so-called specialists in Third World development" (Sankara, "Freedom Must be Conquered," 1984). He had little patience for the roles of intellectuals and technical experts in the maintenance of the imperial order, frequently critiquing the African "professors, engineers, and economists" who studied in the universities of the West. He called out such professionals as returning to the continent with "vocabulary and ideas...from elsewhere" only to become agents of imperialism, "content...with simply adding color" to imperial development agendas (ibid).

It is both necessary and urgent that our trained personnel and those who work with the pen learn that there is no such thing as neutral writing...we cannot give today's and yesterday's enemies a monopoly over thought, imagination, and creativity. (Sankara, "Political Orientation Speech," 2 October 1983)

In an interview with François Thibault on 11-12 October 1986, he explained, "we need intellectuals." However, he continued, that the revolution did not need those intellectuals without deep knowledge of "the realities of [their] country [or] who knows what life is like in New York, Paris, or London better than in Bouaflé [city in central Côte d'Ivoire] or any Ivorian village, this intellectual is useless or even dangerous" (interview with *Ivoire Dimanche*, 14 June 1987).

Imperial counterrevolution

Sankara worked carefully but also tirelessly and quickly to concretise an anti-imperial, Pan-African refusal of imperial mechanisms of domination and control. He had a clear understanding of his obstacles:

[Our revolution] depends on our capacity to resist the exploitation they want to impose on us, on Africans, to resist the wars that they provoke in our homeland, the conflicts that they provoke between Africans, the military support, the bandits that they dispatch, the opposition groups that they arm for destabilizing progressive, revolutionary regimes. Today, on the African continent, there are many centers of listening, detection, monitoring, etc. that do not profit Africans but those who exploit Africans. There are many African ports that are occupied, which are veritable imperialist enclaves. It's all this that we must drive out of Africa (1987 interview with Thibault)

Brian Peterson documents the efforts of French intelligence to manipulate public opinion of Sankara in the years prior to his assassination. Peterson writes, "While France may not have engineered Sankara's overthrow from a military standpoint, the French government created the conditions in which a coup was more likely... The French tentacles of influence via military and intelligence channels were everywhere, especially given the large numbers of African soldiers trained in French military schools" (p. 272).

Several graduates of the US International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme played significant roles in Campaoré's coup. The provision of military-to-military aid and the sharing of military intelligence certainly helped to foster the conditions for Sankara's assassination. This is a point echoed by Bruno Jaffre (2018, p. 271), "in the months before Sankara's overthrow, France withdrew financial support, which made up between 30 and 40 percent of

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the [revolutionary party's] budget."

Four months before his assassination, Sankara reflected upon how he was known and how he wanted to be remembered.

I want them to think of me as a man who led a life useful for all. I would not like to be a man who fought for himself, but a man who fought *for* all others and *with* others to win with them. That is the ideal image that I hope one holds of me. Therefore, I have to work to lose my faults and gain more [positive] qualities. (interview with *Ivoire Dimanche* 14 June 1987).

Taking inspiration from Sankara to abolish development as a field of study and practice

In a recent book, *Learning Disobedience: Decolonizing Development Studies*, Patricia Daley and I are moved by Sankara's wisdom and take as our starting point the imperative for collective projects to abolish development. Part of this struggle means abolishing development studies and a set of disciplinary specialisms. We work through the histories and praxis of Sankara and other defiant intellectuals to refuse international development. Beginning with our refusal to continue to take 'development' for granted as a feature of contemporary life, being-in-the-world and academic knowledge-making, we embolden ourselves to the tasks of repair, re-imagining and transformation beyond it.

About the author:

Amber Murrey is an Associate Professor of Political Geography at the University of Oxford and Associate Editor of *The African Geographical Review*. Her award-winning scholarship on political ecologies and economies in Central Africa focuses on dissent and resistance amidst racialised extractive violence. Amber is the co-author of *Learning Disobedience: Decolonizing Development Studies* (2023) and editor of *A Certain Amount of Madness: The Life, Politics and Legacies of Thomas Sankara* (2018). She posts occasionally on "X" @Amber.Murrey but encourages correspondence via email at amber.murrey-ndewa@ouce.ox.ac.uk.