

The Impact of White Supremacy on US Foreign Policy towards Africa

Written by Christopher Keith Johnson

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In bipartisan discussions regarding US immigration policy, President Donald Trump's dismissal of African nations as "shithole countries" was met by widespread outrage (Barron, 2018). President Trump's racist statements cannot be isolated from recent developments within America's diplomatic corps. The purging of people of color from positions of authority within the US State Department that has happened on his watch indicates that diversity is being sacrificed in line with Trump's controversial worldview (Ballesteros, 2017). Trump's statement was less a slip of the tongue than a verbal manifestation of systemic white supremacy very much a part of US foreign policy.

America is in a unique moment of self-reflection. For those who claim to care about Africa, it is necessary to (re)explore the ways in which American race relations impact its foreign policy on the continent. Through the lens in which many view America, every conversation, international development and foreign policy being no exception, can be filtered through a racial lens. Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith state:

Today, racially inflected contests in courts, legislatures, electoral campaigns, and popular discussions over affirmative action; school and residential segregation; felon disfranchisement; majority-minority districts; racial profiling; the disparate racial impact of incarcerations and the death penalty; hate crimes; reparations for slavery; Native American rights; immigration policies; bilingualism; multiculturalism; "model minority" stereotyping; and racial discrimination in housing, auto, and credit markets, and in hiring and promotions, all still roil American political waters. Many putatively nonracial issues, such as restraints on free speech, vouchers for private schools, the revival of federalism, and disputes over public health, environmental, and social assistance policies, all continue to be shaped by race-related struggles. Few of these issues, or the wider developments with which they are linked, can be understood without exploring the enduring tensions between and within the nation's racial orders (2005: 89).

The American engagement of race does not begin, nor does it end within its borders. What might be harder for some to support, especially those believing that the United States has reached a "post-racial" stage in its development, is the idea that the political leadership does not remove its bias against Americans of African descent from policy decisions that impact sub-Saharan Africa.

Race and American Politics

As stated in an essay by Julie Novkov, "the United States was founded simultaneously as a democratic republic and a racial state" (2008: 651). Inequality of various types that could be clearly observed along racial lines were widely accepted for most of its existence.

Due in no small part to the complexity noted by Novkov, people of color have disproportionately found themselves within the ranks of the American poor. As democratic space within the US appeared to widen because of the Civil Rights Movement, inclusion of people of color in the wider economic and political life of America factored heavily in its domestic policy agenda. This dramatic shift was made with both race and capital in mind.

The governance of the poor was driven by paternalism and neoliberalism (Fording, Soss and Schram, 2011: 1611).

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The behavior of the poor was observed and acted upon in a manner that highlighted dysfunction and prescribed a need for behavioral adjustment. Through a racist lens, unemployment, underemployment, and poverty itself—all driven by a myriad of underlying factors—was seen simply as proof of moral failure. The state rewarded those it deemed willing to change. Punishing those who in its view refused or were unable. Later, neoliberalism was promoted to expand markets to include the poor with the thought that access to economic “opportunities” would lead to a reduction in the need for welfare. Far from being limited to domestic application, these approaches also inform US international aid policy.

Paternalism and how best to apply it to public policy led to an adoption of concepts not unique to America, but reemerging in force as blacks demanded equal rights. The idea of a “deserving poor” was perhaps borrowed from the British who had themselves advanced from this notion by the 1880s (Moore and Hossain, 2005: 197). It resurfaced to drive interaction with people of color in America after the Second World War. The American application of this concept was viewed through the lens of race. White politicians could not openly offer welfare to poor blacks and expect to be supported by an overwhelmingly white, conservative constituency. When that space was forced open because of the Civil Rights Movement, the new recipients, unlike their white predecessors were considered and projected as poor by way of laziness rather than victimized by a downturn in the economy or lack of education. American politicians characterized poor blacks as a “social problem” and pulled from the long-discredited narratives of Christopher Mayhew and others, not bothering to make distinctions between the unemployed and the working poor (Moore and Hossain, 2005: 196). In America, blacks were considered deviant in the racialized political discourse. They were a problem to be solved.

Neoliberalism is processed much easier than its alternative. Capital as a cure all is very much a component of American culture. The impact of capital, class, and respectability have played a role in black life in America from its inception. Later, neoliberalism counted among its devotees even those who were the greatest victims of it.

Conditional US aid to Africa parallels the paternalist strain within American domestic politics towards the black poor. Adoption of rigid international standards, and trade agreements at times designed in part by the American government, its corporations and/or western allies, with or without African consultation, are championed and often included within foreign assistance frameworks. No matter if America practices what it preaches, compliance by its African recipients transforms the client to one “deserving” of the aid being offered.

The growth of international markets is spun not only to extract resources and capital from the developing world but also as a method to democratize it. Although there is ample evidence to the contrary that indicates that neoliberal policies have the opposite effect. Before being deposed, pro-Western leader Hosni Mubarak’s adoption of neoliberal economic policies resulted in widespread pushback from Egyptian citizens, later followed by a rapid crackdown on dissent and a closing of democratic space (Tagma, Kalaycioglu, and Akcali, 2013: 387).

The African-American problem joined the not so new “problem” of Africa as an independent grouping of states after colonialism ended, and later its existence upon the conclusion of the Cold War. To aid in its engagement, America and the West have at times pushed to promote the image of an exotic, ungovernable “other” in the form of Africa. One among many examples that has crept into discussions on the appropriate international aid response to everything from human trafficking to terrorism in Africa is that these behaviors, while reprehensible, and evidenced throughout history on every continent, are somehow new or different than what occurs or has ever occurred in the West.

While focused on conflict in the Balkan states in the 1990s Mary Kaldor and other scholars began to separate history into a pre-Cold War era where “war between states fought by armed forces in uniform, where the decisive encounter was battle” was deemed old (Kaldor, 2005, pp. 492-493). The post-Cold War battlefield of new war was one existing within “the context of the disintegration of states (typically authoritarian states under the impact of globalization); [...] fought by networks of state and non-state actors, often without uniforms” (2005, pp. 492-493). The concept of new war, is highly contested. (Duffield, 2001, p.32; Reid, 2007; Reyna, 2009, pp. 294-296; Schuurman, 2010, p. 98). Although it has been challenged as a fiction that does not adequately represent the history of combat and at times exoticizes violence in the developing world, it seems to be absorbed as fact as reflected by what some might

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consider an overemphasis on security in US aid packages to Africa. While I can't argue that the world is without political complexity nor without violence, studies have shown both in the US and in Africa that fewer lives are being lost through conflict in recent years (WHO, 2014).

The political drivers of crime and war are not dissimilar. Poverty, inequality, religious and ethnic conflict fuel criminally linked violence as well as that of its political cousin; no matter which category a social scientist chooses to classify the victim. But from a distance, especially the divide between the Global North and South, the latter is deemed by donor states to require a heavier hand to deal with conflict. The lens through which the West peers at its southern neighbors is cloudier, dirtier, and more bloodstained. The new war theorists revel in the description of the act of violence in foreign lands often without an interrogation of the underlying factors fueling it (Munkler, 2005: 24). America and its European partners must surely see that positioning the South as the dangerous other is tapping into long "out of fashion" imperialist ideology (Duffield, 2001: 32). And yet these notions often fuel the discourse on Africa.

The Diversity Problem in International Development

It was mentioned earlier that the US State Department is sorely lacking in diversity. Its partner in international development, international NGO's, have a similar problem. The values of America and the West are reflected in the way aid programs are designed and implemented. International NGOs feature prominently in the global development aid industry. What is problematic is the serious lack of diversity in international NGO boards. Seventy-two percent of the industry is based in the West with people of European descent making up 66% of the global racial makeup with 75 percent of all governing board members trained in the West (El Toms, 2013). Although buzzwords such as inclusion are tossed into numerous aid proposals, there is often very little of it in terms of who decides how programs will be designed and implemented in the field.

There are some international NGOs that are taking real steps towards addressing the problem. Keith Johnston discusses Action Aid's relocation of its headquarters to South Africa and World Vision's localization of its governance structure as steps in the right direction (2012, 4). An organization with key components existing in the global South would in theory be less likely to overlook the real concerns of its partners who are based there. It would certainly allow for more discussion and/or debate regarding program activity and the many local variables that should be considered throughout the life of the grant.

If international NGOs find no fault in the way aid is packaged to Africa and the rest of the global South, and see no harm caused by the homogeneous composition of its governing boards, there will be no reform. As America becomes a more diverse nation, the organizations tasked with designing and delivering international aid must first come to terms with societal shifts and ensure that diversity is reflected in their organizational makeup.

Conclusion

Being critical of one's own government while at the same time accepting its funds, fuels an internal battle within many an international aid worker. But is it necessary for practitioners to be in lockstep compliance with the political aims and objectives of the funder? Rather, as trite as the labels "change agent" and "activist" sound, if in fact those terms apply to international development practitioners at all, acceptance of these roles means that questioning and challenging power is an unwritten component of the job description.

The intersection of race and class in domestic American politics and how that impacts decisions made not only by the donor but by those tasked with implementation is a large component of the often-lacking degree of self-reflection within the planning stages of a bid for funding international aid work. This is not easily presented in a strategic planning meeting or workshop. The problem goes back further than the moment where funding becomes available.

As it relates to Africa, America's failure to confront its racial history, specifically white supremacy, will prevent it from making the most appropriate decisions about aid or policy relating to the continent. The baggage of unexplored, unchallenged ideas regarding people of African descent living in America weighs heavily on any discussion regarding possible aid solutions abroad.

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