

The assignment here is to explain an historical, current and/or future change using two or more theories of social change.

Technology, Power and Markets: The Trajectory of Social Change in Africa, 1880 – 2020

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In the 2011 edition of the “Human Development Report”, the United Nations Development Programme describes significant change sweeping the developing world: food security is on the rise, access to education is improving, and public health scores are moving in the right direction. The report describes these trends as a “global convergence” in human development – the result of decades of country-level interventions in emergency aid and transformational community-based approaches. Though there is much to celebrate, the UNDP strongly cautions that sustainability, equity and development are inextricably linked, and much of the progress made in recent years can be wiped out by inattention to equitable and sustainable development practices. The report suggests that we are fast approaching a point of fulcrum, where progress can be reversed by some of the same mechanisms that brought it about in the first place. This is a nuanced concept that is especially thought-provoking when examined through the lens of social change theory: powerful agents for change can be two-edged swords, on the one hand carving out progress while on the other chopping it down.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which social change has occurred, and will occur, throughout sub-Saharan Africa; covering a period of years between 1880 and 2020. I pay particular attention to the change theories of “Technology”, “Power” and “Markets” – three forces that have profoundly transformed sub-Saharan African nations for better or worse. I will describe how these three forces were behind many of the negative changes Africans experienced in the last two hundred years, and how the same forces drove many of the positive changes of the last thirty. Over the coming decade, it looks to be these forces yet again that will leave the most indelible mark and bring about the Africa that is yet to emerge.

Three Fundamental Forces

Power, Technology and Markets are three centrally important social change theories – and are also three of the most closely linked. In the “Power” theory, influential individuals and organizations create much of the social change that occurs around them. The “Technology” theory describes how new tools created to solve existing problems create change by virtue of creating solutions. The “Markets” theory states that competition over resources and wealth catalyzes much of the change we see in the modern world, providing an engine for each of the other two theories.

The relationship between these is complex, and difficult to summarize in brief. Too, leading authorities differ on the role each plays in the world around us. Using the developing world as background on which to project a variety of paradigms, I will consider some of the more popular theories and the role they may play in the “problem of development”.

A Lack of Consensus

In his stinging and controversial poem “The White Man’s Burden”, Kipling paints a picture of a developing world in need of rescue – one in which the indigenous inhabitants are incapable, unwilling, or both, to deliver themselves from their circumstances. The forces of imperialism, embodied in Europe and the United States, wield “Power” to impose civilization upon the uncivilized, and to do so is manifest destiny. While Kipling’s motivation and intent in authoring this poem is still in dispute today, and his use of language is at best carefully calibrated to provoke, his implication is altogether clear: the use of greater strength against lesser is a mechanism whereby profound transformational change can be achieved.

Borrowing the name of Kipling’s poem to make the opposite point, in his book “*The White Man’s Burden*” Easterly excoriates Western cultural and oligarchical imperialism for wielding “Power” in a way that creates widespread negative social change, and faults ham-fisted Western development interventions for many of the social ills afflicting sub-Saharan African nations today. According to Easterly, “Markets” are the solution to African problems – and entrepreneurial, community-based approaches are to be preferred over centrally-planned, bureaucratic interventions.

Easterly’s treatise is in part a response to Sachs’s *tour de force* work “*The End of Poverty*”, a description of how “Technology” and “Power” can combine in bringing about an end to the divide between rich and poor nations. According to Sachs, “Markets” are part of the problem – and the propagation of canned Western economic paradigms is to be avoided in favor of strong centrally managed aid interventions.

Yet another strong voice weighs in on the issue in Diamond’s “*Guns, Germs and Steel*” – a soap box for “Materialist-Technology” change theorists, and a demonstration of the influence geography, “Power” and a few key technologies played in bringing about Western political, military and economic domination over the rest of the world beginning in the 17th century. Diamond sees “Power”, “Technology” and “Markets” as equal parts problem and solution – the position most closely reflected in the UNDP report.

Perhaps the best take-away from each of these authors is that the relationship between developed and developing nations, and between each of the aforementioned change theories, is highly complex and cannot be easily distilled. Still, it seems useful to look at concrete examples of each theory in action – beginning with European colonization of the African continent.

The Scramble for Africa

Beginning in the late 1800’s, Europe turned its focus from the Americas to something rather closer to home: sub-Saharan Africa, up until that point largely unexploited and without large permanent colonies. Up until the outbreak of World War I, the entire African continent was partitioned between major European powers almost exclusively for the purposes of resource exploitation and political hegemony. Advances in “Technology” made it possible for Europeans to overcome many of the challenges that kept Rome, Persia, and the Greeks well to the north – namely, vast distances, unforgiving geography and the lack of sufficiently advanced weaponry. Improvements in transportation technologies, alongside new weapons of war and machinery-powered industrial and agricultural production, made the resource-rich African continent a much coveted prize.

In many ways, the interplay of “Power” and “Markets” in Europe catalyzed this expansion. Britain, France and Germany were bitter rivals and each still entertained notions of vast overseas empires. More than needing the resources of Africa for themselves, each feared the expansion of the others and sought to conduct such a partition so as to ensure an equitable share. Too, fear of another European war drove power brokers to seek a lopsided solution that favored Europe to the exclusion of Africa.

And so it was that cultural and tribal groups were mixed and matched and divided and recombined on the tables of Paris, Berlin, Brussels and London embassies – creating structures that facilitated much of the social and political strife that exists across Africa to this day. Too, European ethical norms and mores were imposed on a population to which such concepts were entirely foreign, helping foster corrupt bureaucracies and political systems that didn’t reflect the realities of the peoples they governed.

African De-Colonization

Throughout the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s, a groundswell of popular unrest ejected Africa’s European masters, replacing them with indigenous governments loosely modeled on the very systems they displaced. In some cases, wars for independence were fought and won – while in other cases, post-WW2 economic depression made overseas holdings untenable and resulted in peaceful transfer of power. As regards the former, exercising “Power” brought about transformational change, and with the latter “Market” forces worked similarly.

Post-colonial Africa is a unique and (probably) once-in-a-millennia example of abrupt catastrophic social change on a continental scale. Newly liberated peoples with no history of democratic society were rushed into a world where democratic systems were thrust upon them suddenly and out of necessity. Centuries of tribal feuding and ethnic hatred were brought to the fore, and manifested as a series of devastating civil wars between people groups oddly matched within arbitrary national borders. Without firm legal systems and a balance of power, despots and dictators arose to exploit the vacuum left by the vacating Europeans – oppressing their peoples as a means to retaining and expanding power.

And so, the “Power” theory of social change strongly governed the affairs of many newly minted African nations. Corrupt leaders hobbled many African economies, and the black market was as large a part of “Market” change as was legitimate economics. Gross inefficiencies existed at all levels of government, resulting in mismanagement of agriculture, mining, fisheries, water rights, pollution, erosion, education and law enforcement. Famine, drought, disease, crime and poverty resulted. In this atmosphere of moral decay, unsafe sexual practices helped spread the HIV/AIDS pandemic – eviscerating an entire generation of Africans and setting development back several decades (a problem that persists to this day).

The African Renaissance

Coinciding with the formation of a nascent Western global-social consciousness (and resultant external diplomatic pressure), “human rights” began to take root in many African nations throughout the 1990’s. Occurring most famously in South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda, the residual racism and us-versus-them mentality of colonialism began to dissipate in the face of distinctly indigenous peacemaking and

reconciliation efforts. Harnessing “Power”, populist movements began to overthrow dictators and demand more democratic processes alongside the rule of law. Countries like Botswana demonstrated what enlightened economics and political systems could accomplish, transforming their nation from just another failed British colony to a success story all their own.

Around this time, “community development” began occurring in Africa in earnest. The drivers were multitude: market appetite for risk, coupled with demand for commerce and trade in underdeveloped regions; political will to address suffering made uncomfortably visible through technologies like television and the Internet; and the use of power by Western nations desiring to right historic wrongs. Too, many African nations were emerging from their birthing pains and were beginning to create the systems and structures necessary to stimulate growth.

The proliferation of technology has vastly improved sanitation, food security, water availability, public health and resource management throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Many excellent NGO’s carry new techniques and approaches into both urban and rural areas, partnering in efficient public-private arrangements that empower local governments through capacity development and train-the-trainer programs. Through satellite, cellular and internet technology, responsive supply chain management enables NGO’s and governmental agencies to mitigate disasters and promptly intervene in crises in high-leverage ways. The communications infrastructure of virtually all African nations has leap-frogged the land-line systems of Western nations, going instead directly to cellular based and fiber-optic solutions. Internet access has closely followed the proliferation of cell phones, helping propagate human rights and basic freedoms.

A more even distribution of power has begun taking root in sub-Saharan Africa, as governance migrates to strongly local systems and community based organizations. This creates new efficiencies and empowers localized change, as bureaucracy and poor administration is supplanted by coalition- and consensus-based decision making. This trend helps foster human rights and gender equality, in addition to helping transcend racial and tribal barriers. Too, focuses on community ownership of issues helps stimulate investments in early childhood education and child rights.

Market-based phenomena like micro-lending have arisen coincident with these changes, empowering otherwise option-less families with a way to pull themselves out of cycles of generational poverty. Market demand also drives tens of billions of dollars in new investments each year into sub-Saharan African economies – where even emergent powers like China find fertile ground to create new wealth.

Working together, the same Market, Power and Technology forces that brought Africa to its knees are now reinvigorating it with hope, entrepreneurship and a fresh outlook on the role of Africans in the world. Still, as the UNDP report indicates, there are reasons to be concerned.

A New Imperialism and Problems of Sustainability

Looking forward, market forces and corporate oligopolies threaten to stifle the same spirit of entrepreneurship that is driving African development today. The more economic progress occurs, the greater interest large multi-national corporations will take in African markets. These organizations can

bring significant resources to bear on the relatively fragile African marketplace – potentially overwhelming local business and stifling innovative indigenous approaches. A “new imperialism” has the potential to emerge – where Western (and Eastern!) corporations once again look to Africa as a way to grow profits and tap into new resources. Too, as many ongoing development efforts are strongly linked to robust giving from Western economies, downturns like the 2008 recession create strong and sudden reversals in development indicators – suggesting the need to make development work more resilient to changes in Western markets.

Unsustainable market growth and mismanagement of technology threaten to continue depleting natural resources and pollute waterways, atmosphere and arable land. Migration of Western nations to expensive green technologies, unaffordable in the African context, may exacerbate this trend as retired low-cost heavy industrial equipment floods the African market and creates spikes in pollution and negative environmental impact. As these problems are most likely to most heavily impact the impoverished, there is the potential to create an additional barrier between poverty and economic independence: environmentally linked health problems reducing the labor force much in the same way the HIV/AIDS pandemic has done.

For these reasons and many others, the UNDP urges caution to African planners and international NGO’s as they continue to conduct community development activities. A careful balance between aggressive and sustainable growth must be emphasized, so that Africa transitions smoothly into the modern global economy and doesn’t collapse under the weight of impractical, unworkable, unsustainable systems.

The future of Africa seems bright – and Market, Technology and Power forces for change should work in African’s favor now that they have begun to overcome their post-colonial growing pains. Africans have a long history with these dynamics, and know them as well as any developed nation. As long as these forces for change work together in sustainable, equitable ways, Africans can expect to continue to see broad-based improvements in such important indicators as public health, early childhood education, economic growth, human rights and food security. The rest of the world can expect Africa to soon rise as a powerful global presence, influencing culture and commerce in a way commensurate with the deep resourcefulness, creativity and passion of its native people.