Book Reviews


Literally, it is hard to put a pulse on Dambisa Moyo’s new book, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa*. The main reason is that I have a passive-aggressive reaction to it, which begins with its foreword written by Niall Ferguson. He introduces the 2009 book with the following words: “It has long seemed to me problematic and even a little embarrassing that so much of the public debate about Africa’s economic problems should be conducted by non-African white men... the African discussion has been colonized as surely as the African continent was a century ago. The simple fact that Dead Aid is the work of an African black woman is... a good reason to read this book nonetheless.” (Niall Ferguson, foreword)

If I had not known that Niall Ferguson was the internationally-famed conservative Harvard University economic historian – who has dismissed the notion that colonialism is a determining factor in Africa’s woes – my first reaction to the book’s opening would have been one of inspiration and admiration. I share many of Moyo’s cultural attributes: a black African female scholar living in the West, who researches issues of the global political economy and African affairs. For example, Ferguson proceeds to identify the main research question that guides this book, “Why do the majority of sub-Saharan African countries flounder in a seemingly ever-ending cycle of corruption, disease, poverty and aid-dependency?” It is a query that reminded me of my discomfort with the way Moyo has delivered what is otherwise a valid message about the current circumstance of aid-dependency in Africa.

It is this passive-aggressive reaction that guides the current review of the Zambian economist’s (Moyo’s) first book, *Dead Aid*. That is to say, I too have been suspect of aid-led development policies in Africa, which has further led me to – like Moyo – advocate alternative means for ‘financing development’ on the continent. Therein, however, lies the first contradiction emerging from this book, to make it reductionist. For example, is ‘financing development’ the same conceptual variable as ‘development’? Throughout the book, Dambisa equates the two, a problem that alerts the reader to beg the question as to what is the distinction between the two. While she does define ‘aid’, *Dead Aid* nevertheless falls short in presenting an adequate definitional category, through which to examine the contours of ‘development’. Aid for Moyo is to be understood historically: from the Bretton Woods agenda of the post-World War II period, to the poverty focus between the 1970s and 1980s output-based structural adjustment aid to the current focus on celebrity aid. Significantly, as well, Moyo admittedly eschews the discussion of charity aid and focuses her discussion of aid around concessional loans and grants.
If *Dead Aid* had merely been about aid, the contradictions would not have been so problematic; but in her own words, Moyo went on to underscore that “*Dead Aid* is the story of the failure of post-war development policy”. Moyo then proceeds to some rather apocalyptic questions about the African condition. She asked: ‘Why is Africa the only continent in the world that is dysfunctional? Why is it that Africa is not moving up the economic ladder? Why does Africa have the most failed states? What holds Africa back from joining the rest of the globe in the 21st century?” The answer says Moyo, has its roots in ‘aid’ (Moyo, 2009: page 7).

The third chapter is titled, “Why Aid is Not Working.” There, Moyo made the point more sophisticatedly, as she included other factors of geography, history, culture, tribe and institutions as attributes that explain the continent’s underdevelopment. Notwithstanding, quite curiously here she also claims that whereas different countries may differ in having one or the other factor to explain the major reason for its underdevelopment, all of African countries share aid-dependency as a common deterministic feature.

What is amazing is the fact that Moyo attributed the complexities and variances of the uneven and under-development of the continent simplistically to aid. Moyo would have done well to examine the various development discourses that constitute the discipline and, then, to situate her analysis in one of them. The discipline of development is a vibrant one that includes many perspectives: classical economics and neo-classical economics, Keynesian state interventionism; structuralist and post-structural paradigms; as well as the more holistic interpretations of development that expanded the discipline’s narrow scope beyond economics; these include modernization and neo-modernization theories, women-in-development theories; coupled with post-development and sustainable development approaches. A valid query is this: Which of these development genres does Moyo’s book refer to in her critique?

*Dead Aid*, which is useful in many respects, is still contradictory in other areas. For instance, for an African born scholar, Moyo’s epistemological perspective in *Dead Aid* seems to engage with the usual pathological pessimism that spouts African exceptionalism and alarmism. Such an analysis discredits the advancements of Africanists involved in the project of advocating for an appropriate discourse analysis of African political-cum-economic processes using more nuanced, complex and comparative and normative standards. Moreover, Moyo’s pessimistic analysis does not match the author’s own self-acknowledgment that for the past five years, African countries have indeed been re-experiencing economic growth.

Another important irony that one cannot help but notice in Moyo’s analysis is her prescriptions for solving Africa’s development problems without aid. Here, one is reminded of the words of Moyo’s mentor and predecessor in critiquing aid policies in Africa, William Easterly, who wrote, *inter alia*: “The failed ideologies of the last century have come to an end, but a new one has risen to take their place. It is the ideology of Development – and it promises a solution to all the world’s ills. The opposite of development ideology is freedom, the ability to be unchained from foreign control. . . . from ‘globalization from above’ . . . an alternative that implements time tested economic ideas – the benefits of specialization, gains from trade, budget constraints, by individuals, firms, and governments . . . .” Like Easterly’s article and his own book on the same subject, *The White Man’s Burden* (Easterly, Penguin Press, 2006), *Dead Aid* is similarly riddled with this kind of Orwellian double-

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