BOOK REVIEW

Frank Furedi:
The New Ideology of Imperialism.

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Introduction

This contemporary period of post-isms poses enormous challenges for Africa and African scholarship. Two particular and interrelated "isms" are central to these challenges. These are postmodernism and postcoloniality. The two represent an age of intellectual curiosity but also disorder given their attempts to redefine history and especially the place of the Third World. While one would have expected reversals in the initial compartmentalization of the globe into Euro-America as opposed to the 'rest of us', the contemporary state of knowledge has not helped subvert this Eurocentric image. Postmodernism and postcolonialism are intellectual movements celebrating the latest ideology of imperialism.

Context

It was Peter P. Ekeh's (1978) study on ideologies of legitimation that paid succinct attention to imperial and colonial ideologies of legitimation. He understood ideologies as interest-begotten theories that have no qualms about distorting truth in the interest or benefit of particular people or groups. These perversions of truth could be non-conscious in the sense that they are socially determined thought in which the writer's cultural worldview and his/her more immediate background condition his/her perception of social reality. Ekeh however noted the conscious distortion of facts and exaggeration of reality to convince the colonized of the morally imperative nature of colonialism.

The essence of postmodernism is to celebrate Western liberal triumph in this neo-colonial and post-Cold War era. It is a re-assertion of the dominance of the globe, economically, culturally and even socially by the marauding western civilization at the behest of the U.S. Postcoloniality is employed to illustrate that colonialism represented better and useful times that ensured progress for Africa. Postcoloniality also sanitizes the past of colonialism and capitalism, silencing their repressive presences (Zeleza, 1997). Thus postcoloniality is a favourable eulogy of colonialism, looking back at it with nostalgia. It emphasizes afro-pessimism, adding that since the grand year of Africa's independence, in 1960, it is chaos and anarchy that characterize the African political landscape. The highest scorn on African independence history abounded in Mazrui's recolonization thesis in which he averred that even "the degree of dependent modernization achieved under colonial rule is now being reversed."

Recolonization is the bitter message that Africans have to accept, added Mazrui (1995).

Such afro-pessimism is not without a background. One very important characteristic of an effective ideology is its dynamism in dodging the facts that contradict its false claims. This is a mark that the liberal ideology has gained; to transform and recast in new guise old racist ideologies while retaining their old virulent nature. Frank Furedi's analysis is a lesson in the changing nature of Western imperial and colonial ideology. It is an essential reading that flows forth and back in time highlighting on the changing façades of western presentation of Africa. These are presentations that arise from the Western post-independence phobia against Third World Nationalism.
The book is divided into six chapters. Its period of analysis begins in the Cold War era going deep into contemporary manifestations of imperialism. The main argument of the book is that Third World nationalism has emerged as the menacing enemy of the West. This has provided the rationale to concentrate on denigrating it in Western intellectual discourse. A first coming impression has been to demonize Third World nationalism through unproblematized assertion of its backwardness and avowed primitive resistance to civilization (Western civilization). This has justified a western phobia of the Third World that constantly appears in international diplomacy. This, argues Furedi, constituted in a defense of the imperial race; a race vigorous, industrious and intrepid, that has a license to dominate and civilize. That is, the European race, under whose providence depends the future. It is a rare preserve of this race to interpret world history for others. The future of humanity allegedly depends on the perpetuation of this race. 

Furedi illustrates that the general phobia in western media and pop culture is derived from the embarrassment western élite feel about colonialism. In its old guise of the civilizing mission rhetoric, imperialism could no longer withstand the enlightened clarion of nationalism. Thus it became the hallmark of western imperialists to invent justification for transforming this ideology, away from embarrassing facts of colonialism to a new form that demonized Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islam. This however betrayed the crisis of confidence within the imperialist culture of the West.

In demonising Third World nationalism, imperialist ideology relied on western intellectuals like Harold Laski, Diedrich Westerman and Branislav Malinowski. These scholars warned of the potential of African nationalism turning into extreme anti-Europeanism. Although they made reference to the possibility of retribution and revenge, they never made explicit analysis of the nature of the dynamics in the Third World. Furedi demonstrates how this presentiment of danger focussed on demobilized soldiers after the Second World War and the fact that the imperialists created in their imagination the dangers of demobilization before its very fact. These anxieties expressed in the imperial perception of the question of demobilization suggest that what was really at issue was the moral crisis of European imperialism.

The social construction of the Third World was therefore a pertinent aspect of molding public image and opinion. Propaganda, consciously planned, became an important instance in transforming the ideology of imperialism. Both in public media and scholarly discourse, there was a concerted Western initiative to criminalise the Third World along lines of terrorism and brutish appliers of force. In this case, the anti-colonial resistance was criminalized to provide justification for derogatory terms like terrorism, warlords, fundamentalism etc. What needs to be investigated is at what point a group of people become terrorists, warlords or fundamentalists? Also, under whose discretion should others be labeled terrorists, warlords or fundamentalists? What, for instance, justifies the acts of George Bush in the gulf or Benjamin Netanyahu in Palestine as good and those of Saddam Hussein or Colonel Mu’ammur Gaddafi as terrorist? This has to do with the social construction of reality, which entails power and power relations. The victors tell the story and reserve the right to label. This has become characteristic of the New World Order of media bias.

The pedigree of western social construction of Third World terrorism, according to Furedi, is predicated on an assertion that colonialism was by all intents reasonable while Third World nationalism was clearly a form of anti-colonial violence. What was at stake in anti-colonialism was pure criminality. This perception is molded on the earlier political sociology theories that had depended on the analysis of mass psychology. Mass psychology theorists upheld a lack of faith in the masses. These were characterized as the rabble who by nature were irresponsible and could not make choices in their best
interest. They needed ‘a few responsible men’ who understood the public’s interests. The causes of savage violence and wars in Third World nationalism were associated with the dissipation of individual reason to the passion of the crowd. This analogical way of explaining terrorism lacked any interactive experience with the people of Asia or Africa. Other explanations were fitted into a schema of maladjustment to civilized life in the Third World. No attempt to ground this construction on concrete reality was made.

Yet the prevailing post-war climate could not withstand both imperialism and anti-colonialism. A new brand of thought fronted by a racist but ‘benign’ cadre of Europeans emerged that sought to champion anti-third worldism but offer token accommodation with them. This became a period of compromise, which many Europeans experienced as the appeasement of forces they loathed, if only to heed the warning “against the practice of crude colonial domination in order to contain the passion of revenge” (p. 17).

Arising out of the western intellectual creation of a morally deprived African mass, the idea of democracy and fair play could not be extended to Africans. The argument was that Africans lacked the moral responsibility necessary for political independence. It was the duty of the “race born to rule” to decide and accredit what facets of anti-colonialism were noble and fit for accommodation. The challenge of anti-colonialism was perceived as a resort to primitive passion, but this was so animated that it needed accommodation and direction. Anglo-Americans proceeded to do just that. They argued that African nationalism could not have indigenous causation, rather, it fed on prepackaged instigation by Pan-Africanism or the Africa for Africans movement. This, according to Furedi, was elite theory combined with racial superiority at its best (p. 61).

This combination, Furedi demonstrates using assertions of Governor Philip Mitchell of Kenya in September 1948, exhibited a dislike for the “semi-educated” Africans. These were seen as ‘detribalized natives’ operating in a vacuum. While education detached them from traditional lifestyles and people, semi-education did not accomplish the integration into civilized life. The fact of being Africans meant that they could not be like their European counterparts. They were therefore products of maladjustment bent only on destructive behaviour. They remained the greatest danger to the master race. The only solution to this scenario was Lord Hailey’s prescription: “thwarted it can be dangerous; met in the right spirit, it can be guided into fruitful and constructive channels.” (p. 63)

But African nationalism got entangled in contradictory Anglo-American perception. The British looked at it in relation to the survival of empire while Americans perceived it in relation to the Cold War. The American obsession with the Cold War militated against her pushing Britain to decolonize because of the need for solidarity against the East. In steering African nationalism in a constructive, accommodative manner, Britain had a leeway over America. America was forced to straddle fences between a confessed rhetorical anti-imperialism and the real practice of pro-imperialism. Furedi illustrates how their policy derived from the notion of White superiority and how it failed to placate anti-colonial forces. Yet this remained a formidable campaign by imperialists to limit damage already inflicted.

The need to limit damage is discussed in chapter five. African nationalism did not only aim at gaining independence and power, rather such power implied an assertion of legitimacy. This was legitimacy asserted in juxtaposition to imperial legitimacy. It is for this reason that imperial authors had an obligation to damage control by calling on their countrymen not to get embarrassed about the notion of imperialism. This was an era when the term imperialism had lost moral and social favour across the continent and was being attacked.

Postcoloniality thrives on blaming the failures of independent Africa without focussing on colonialism. The waning credibility of Africa in the independent era has been instrumental in morally rehabilitating imperialism. It is this scenario that Furedi examines in chapter six, seeking to locate the
rehabilitation of imperialism in three separate but mutually reinforcing events, i.e. failures of third worldism, emergence of conservative intellectual climate and the end of the Cold War. These have provided a rationale for afro-pessimism, which posits that colonialism represented better times for the Third World.

Furedi is at one with Mamdani (1994) in his examination of the new Afro-pessimist moves to rehabilitate imperialism. He examines the intellectual annihilation of Third World nationalism and picks, among others, on Basil Davidson’s book for review. This is in order to illustrate the despair among former friends of Africa of the chaos and anarchy in Africa, which, it is argued, feeds on the vacuum or maladjustment from the traditional to modernity. The whole question of legitimacy and the fact of its being a crisis created by colonialism is sidestepped. It is this kind of silence in Western discourse that has given justification to proposals for recolonization, a proposal that assumes that the Third World must be saved from itself. Furedi’s analysis is an important contribution to this growing literature. Although unaware of Mamdani’s critique of Basil Davidson’s book then, they (Furedi and Mamdani) agree extensively on its faulty interpretation of Africa by analogy.

Conclusion

The urgent issue in the African political and intellectual arena is public education and awareness. An informed bureaucracy and public are an asset for the progress of African and Third World states. Furedi’s study illustrates that the Third World has been criminalised and demonized by targeted propaganda from the west. An educated public would very easily counter such propaganda that assert the binary logic of liberalism i.e. the superior/inferior dichotomy. The whole series of western exploitation of the Third World from slavery to neo-colonialism would suffice to illustrate that Africa’s crises have historical origin i.e. external and internal. Multinational corporations exploitation of the Third World is feeding on this neo-colonial propaganda and the present attempt to propose recolonization is a milestone in this new ideology of imperialism. Furedi’s book provides concrete examples to beef up the theoretical critique of postcoloniality. It only needed to integrate a theoretical critique of postcoloniality within its empirical data to make the discussion very combative. We in the Third World need to be combative about our situation.

References.


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