

Black Capitalists (A Response to Mcebisi Ndletyana)

Andile Mngxitama

Let me start with a request: will Mcebisi kindly point out which of Shivji's and Saul's texts support the position that "development" (the fiction of higher/better/improved life) is predicated on the extent of "penetration of capital" in a society or country.

The overall argument presented by Mcebisi is in fact simply the regurgitation of the outdated cold war ideological justifications of colonialism, embodied in what sociologists call the modernization theory. According to the father of that thinking, Rostow, operating within neo-classical thought, the problem of "underdevelopment" was not slavery/colonization/imperialism, but lack of Western domination over alien and backward cultures. So for Mcebisi the new imperial/colonial project driven by white and black South African capital under the protection of a black political class should be "cause for celebration not lamentation". This is the resuscitation of the Modernisation theory, just when we thought it was dead!

Mcebisi, you say we must celebrate capital's penetration of the continent? I say, tell that to the peasants of Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia who, a few years ago with their "primitive" tools and production systems, were able to put food on their tables. The arrival of the Tractor and the Supermarket from South Africa has now rendered them nothing but part of the "productive forces" for further "development" – simply said, they can now only eat if they have money in their pockets. They now buy food imported from South Africa.

In short, Mcebisi argues for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the flourishing of capital as a basis for "development". The trouble is he tries to mobilize radical African political economists for his reactionary project. These thinkers' actual stand is opposed to that trajectory of development, particularly Shivji. Saul, Leys and Shivji would instead fall within the Dependency school, these gentlemen rejected colonial/imperial and capitalist routes to development in all their writings I have seen thus far. So I am willing to read more on their alleged support for the capitalist route to development.

Mcebisi also mentions Bill Warren. Warren is an orthodox Marxist of the Eurocentric kind. He agrees with Marx's most racist pronouncement: that India and other worlds outside of Western influence at the time could only be saved by colonisation. Of course, we know that for Marx industrialization/civilization (brought about by violence and colonialism) had taken root in the West and that the emancipation of humanity/development is

dependent on further penetration capital in other parts of the world. In fact, in the Communist Manifesto, Marx sings the praises of the bourgeoisie: "it has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals...". For Marx capitalism was a necessary phase, the only epoch, which is capable of doing two things: firstly, develop the material resources to a higher level and secondly, bring about the gravediggers of capitalism. Marx's other works contradict this rather determinist logic.

But Mcebisi is only supporting the imperial/colonial project as foundation for "development", not the other aspect of Marx's thinking (gravediggers), he ends up in bed with the likes of Dr Chika Onyeani, the Nigerian author of that repulsive book, *Capitalist Nigger: The Road to Success – A Spider Web Doctrine*. It is ironic that the two black capitalists Mcebisi anoints as the saviours of Africa from its economic backwardness are nothing but the paid protégés of one mining Capitalist, bloodsucker and criminal, Brett Keble. He is quoted in *This Day*, as having said he is building a "patriotic capital class", and also revealed that he helped build both Tokyo Sexwale and Mzi Khumalo, and he is doing the same with the ANC youth league, and they in turn, as we now know, have pushed for privatization. How patriotic!

It is also quite surprising that Mcebisi seems ignorant of the deep resentment of FDI and Free Trade and Aid by radical African scholars including Shivji. Let me just give you a sense of their attitude, leaving out of it the likes of W. Rodney. Babu in 1971, writes in the Post Script to the classic, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* that, "there is no other explanation to the fact that practically the whole of the underdeveloped world has been colonized either directly or indirectly by the Western powers. And what is colonialism if it is not a system of "foreign investments" by the metropolitan power?" (emphasis is mine). Babu in the same text says, "If it (foreign investment) has contributed to our underdevelopment in the past, is it not likely to contribute to our underdevelopment now, even if the political reigns are in our hands?".

I think the one key point missed by those arguing for Capitalist led "development" is the impossibility of such development ever touching the majority of people on this planet. Capitalism by definition is predatory - it creates nothing without stealing/plundering at the same time. It is very interesting that both Chris and Mcebisi has nothing to say about the continued extraction of wealth from Africa by the West, which far outstrips the FDI we get. This should suggest to a progressive pan-African thinker that the resources for our development are here! Babu, writing to Mugabe after independence in 1980, says: "looking back, one wishes that sanctions had been imposed against all African countries after independence. What a happy people we would have been! It was "aid" that proved to be the kiss of death".

Africa is not poor because it lacks FDI and an African Capitalist class, on the

contrary, its people (the majority) are poor because capital has not stopped taking from them since the trans-Atlantic slavery trade, this was complicated by a global capitalist class, even if its origins are African. Frankly, reading Mcebisi one gets the feeling that one could be reading a World Bank manual on "Fighting Poverty". Yes, Mcebisi, capital does add value whenever it settles: railway lines, airports, roads to the fields and mines - which lead to one way traffic of our wealth - you call it infrastructure! The IMF, WB, G8 and Nepad agree, but there is the small matter of the poor getting poorer and we cannot trust you when you say, "the masses benefit indirectly" - is that not the murderous Washington Consensus nonsense you are now peddling? Or rather the Pretoria Consensus?

I think the trouble with both Mcebisi and Chris is that there is the "black government factor". For some reason the two think that there is something fundamentally different between white and black capitalists. The thing is they just do not tell us what it is. They say black capital, unlike white capital is likely to benefit the black working class. I can understand that kind of talk coming from Mcebisi, but Chris the Marxist and Communist?, strange indeed! He throws away his materialism and ventures into idealism and utopian territory, which leads him right into the service of the Imperial project. For him, as long as we can paint imperial plunder black, our problems are solved!

Chris says South Africa is an Imperial country proper. Then he says the difference between South Africa and Western imperialism is that the latter is motivated by racism in its exploits: see African as "barbarian" and "beasts of burden". And then he says the African capitalist class on the other hand will do what the Swedish/French bourgeoisie has done for their working class - raised its standard of living. But, he knows he is laying an anti-Marxist, and steeped in illogical formulations, foundation at this point, so then he tries to cover his tracks by saying, "this (improved standard of living) of course comes through workers themselves struggling to raise what Marx called the "historical and moral element" that determines the living standards". Which is which dear Chris? Is it the Swedish capitalists or the Working class struggle which produces the high standard of living? How can it be both? Oh! It's a dialectical process that Andile – the flat-footed nationalist – will never understand. So it is perfectly possible for the capitalist (wanting more profits) in battle with the working class (wanting more wages) to be credited for raising the living standards of the latter?

The truth is this, and Chris knows it, Sweden, and other Social Democratic governments, could only provide the goods to the working as the result of a compromise in a bitter struggle between local capital and workers. It was not out of love for their brothers and sisters that the Swedish capitalist "raised" the standard of living of the Swedish working class - it was out of fear that a communist reality was knocking at the door. This is true with the struggling

French workers and small-scale farmers. What kind of Marxist is this Chris fellow?

Listen to this:

"African nationalism sees Africans as brothers and sisters who have been robbed of a heritage, it does not see Africans as beasts of burden. An African capitalist class therefore, in my view, would make sure to create, at least in the long run, the same conditions that the French working class is enjoying for the African working class, precisely because the philosophical presuppositions of Pan-Africanism put all Africans on the same cultural level. Note that here I am not talking about the comprador bourgeoisie, I am talking about a capitalist class."

Chris, do you really believe this nonsense? What happened to Marx's understanding of exploitation, not as moral issue but as a question of how one is inserted into the means of production, based on which side of the ownership divide you are on? So, in terms of your formulation I cannot exploit and oppress my sister and brothers? This is such a-historical and antihistorical materialism, it's not even funny.

Chris, capitalism proper is therefore able to satisfy the material needs of the working class. If this is true, why the struggle against the capitalist class?

The problem with Western imperialism or in our case white capital is that its "philosophical presuppositions" are racist. What nonsense! As I have shown above, the achievements of the Western white working class were a product of their struggles. Secondly, Western capital could sustain the concessions to their working classes on the basis of the super-exploitations of other worlds such as the African continent through colonialism. But, that process was not sustainable as we see today that the Social Democratic experience is unravelling and the working class in those countries are on the defensive as capital cuts down on social goods previously enjoyed by the working class. The emergence of the Right Wing ideology exemplified by xenophobia is part of this neo-liberal attack on the global working class.

I do not think it is worth refuting the so called positive impact of the penetration of Checkers and others on the continent. Mcebisi has already told us that Checkers is affecting the poor negatively, the point is that he thinks this is unavoidable initial birth pains of development. Just like the Stalinist phrase: You can't have omelettes without breaking the eggs!

I did not try to deal with conceptual clarification of whether we are dealing with sub-imperialism or neo-colonial imperialism. I think we all agree that South African based capital is penetrating the African continent. As this discussion continues we may want to see how in fact the South African state,

not only facilitates investment possibilities for South African capital, but in fact also opens up possibilities for international capital. I think if we consider the behaviours of our government in the WTO (Doha), and to a lesser extent in Cancun, we can see that its role is not limited to promoting accumulation possibilities for black or South African based capital alone.

One does not have time to expose the lie of "development", and the mistake Marx made in crediting capital with the task of bringing about civilization. The 100 years after Marx's death tells us clearly that he was wrong to think that capital plunder would be followed by peace and joy. It is sad that those who live in the 21st century cannot see this self-evident truth. Now, according to the old gospel in new clothes by Chris and Mcebisi, the black capitalist class will save us all. Go tell this to the airport workers who have been on strike for 13 weeks because a black owned company is refusing to pay them a living wage!

Andile Mngxitama is a Johannesburg-based land activist.