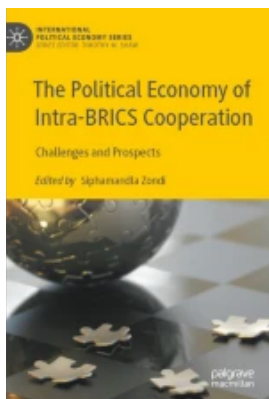


Book review

The West and the Rest of Us? A Review of The Political Economy of Intra-BRICS Cooperation: Challenges and Prospects

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A number of the luminaries of the Pan-African movement such as Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, W.E.B Dubois, C.L R James and Eric Williams as anti-colonial thinkers and political leaders cherished aspirations of an alternative international order. Their anti-colonial struggle was not just nationalistic and continentalist in outlook but was inspired by visions of “world-making” (Getachew 2019). Their project of African Independence as undergirded by Pan-Africanism sought to challenge the West as the embodiment of slavery and colonialism (Chinweizu 1975) not only on the continent where it created colonies but the post-World War II dispensation. Many of them propagated socialist sentiments and objectives. W. E.B. Dubois was a Marxist until the moment of his transition. It was in this sense that as Marxist in ideological outlook and socialist in political praxis, they were anti-capitalist in orientation. They embraced the Afro-Asian call of cooperation (Bandung spirit) to challenge the world hegemony of the West which characterised “the long twentieth century” (Arrighi 2010). Thus, a foundation of the “global South” as a victim of underdevelopment by the West was laid. They wanted to challenge the hegemony of the political economy of the imperialist West.

The book under review is also about the challenge of the “liberal international order” (Zondi et al 2022:3) under the banner of BRICS and South-South cooperation. It comprises a short preface and 13 chapters by different authors from several disciplines. The context of the book was the global epidemic called COVID-19 which is regarded by other anti-capitalist critics as a typical instance of “accumulation by crisis” and “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2011). While the literature on BRICS is not monolithic, it can be argued that there are at least three schools of thought regarding the nature and impact of BRICS on the current neoliberal imperialistic world order. The first school comprises the BRICS optimists. This school of thought is confident about the ultimate success of BRICS in terms of transforming the unequal economic international order through its gradual and strategic interventions. The second one consists of the BRICS sceptics. For this school of thought, BRICS is a welcome intervention to the current exploitative international economic order but given the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism as “the end of history” (Fukuyama 2006), the incremental efforts of BRICS will not radically displace this hegemony in the long run. The last school of thought comprises the BRICS pessimists. According to the pessimists, BRICS is not radical

enough to destroy the entire capitalist international economic order and to replace it with a socialist one. Its arrangement is incongruent as it consists of different countries with different ideological and foreign policy interests which are antagonistic at times. Superpowers such as China and Russia are in the last instance imperialist about countries on the continent of Africa such as South Africa. The imperialist aspirations of China in the form of “reconfiguring racial capitalism” (Huang 2024) and Russia’s intervention in West Africa are cited as evidence that BRICS is just a front for these superpowers to gain geopolitical spheres of influence to outcompete and supplant the West. The role of “Russia in Africa” (Ramani 2023) is regarded as one of a “resurgent great power”.

While it may be unfair to categorise all the contributors in the book under review as BRICS optimists, a fair number of them exhibit the typical traits of BRICS optimists. The theme and title under the name of “intra-BRICS cooperation” are to a great extent indicative of BRICS optimism. The book has a good structure and the chapters are well-written within the contours of the “missing link” of “intra-BRICS cooperation”. While it was written in the context of the scourge of the epidemic it offers information beyond the ravages of the virus. It covers several topics and ideas which include the creation of the BRICS Development Bank, Climate change, Energy production, transnational crimes, the 4th Industrial Revolution and financial inclusion. Readers who are interested in empirical and policy studies will find this book a worthwhile read. It is written in a simple language making it easy to comprehend its arguments and recommendations.

The preface of the book pre-empts one of the critical points associated with the BRICS pessimists by stating that it seeks to focus on the cooperation among BRICS countries as opposed to the view that regards BRICS as a mere an extension of Russia and China (Zondi et al 2022: vi). Chapter One reinforces the need for the focus on the internal cohesion and convergence of interests among the BRICS countries. It even in a typical pre-emptive liberal scholarly posture which seeks to disarm its critics acknowledges the BRICS sceptics such as Patrick Bond. Bond is a BRICS sceptic because while he points out the “sub-imperial role” of countries such as South Africa, he makes a distinction between “BRICS from above” which he dismisses and “BRICS from below” which he prefers (Bond and Garcia 2015:11). The second chapter discusses the importance of the BRICS Development Bank. While it contrasts the BRICS bank with Bretton Woods Institutions in terms of voting powers it still welcomes cooperation with them and even recognises the positive credit score from rating agencies of the West such as Standard & Poor and Fitch. Chapter three is a typical contribution from a BRICS optimist. The concept of “passive revolution” is a case in point. It uses the concept of “structural power” and “war of position” to advance the argument of inclusion as opposed to confrontation with the West. The fourth chapter discusses climate change how BRICS countries emit a lot of CO₂ and how they can cooperate to tackle this problem as a collective. Chapter five discusses energy production and points out how many BRICS countries are reliant on hydrocarbons and the need to shift from this to green energy through cooperation. The sixth chapter deals with transnational crimes and how BRICS countries should work together to fight this global problem as a bloc. Chapter seven discusses the 4th industrial revolution and explains the correlation between operationalised 4IR competitiveness markers and new foreign direct investment. The eighth chapter just like chapter seven is written in the spirit of “technological optimism”. This chapter discusses the implications of the 4th Industrial Revolution on employment, inequality, and skills development. It recommends the cooperation of BRICS countries to mitigate against the negative implications of the 4th industrial revolution.

Chapter nine provides an overview of the trade relations between BRICS countries. The chapter calls for equality of trade between the countries and concedes that South Africa has been exporting raw materials to BRICS countries. It also recommends the “capitalisation” of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement by BRICS countries. In the spirit of the call for cooperation, there is no critical

analysis of the imperialist and exploitative economic relations but just empirical data. Chapter 10 deals with financial inclusion in the context of India and South Africa. It calls for more financial inclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups in BRICS countries. In the context of South Africa, the chapter fails to provide a solid critique of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000) of both white settlers and the Chinese with their China malls in South Africa (Huang 2024). Which women? What is the point of including African women in a white settler economic system (Magubane 1979) co-owned by white women?

Chapter eleven discusses the counter-cyclical measures used by BRICS countries to deal with the negative impact of COVID on their economies. Premised on BRICS optimism like the above-mentioned chapters, it calls for the overcoming of realism among BRICS countries and the alignment of their national interests. The prospects of South Africa re-asserting itself as a vaccine producer are discussed in chapter twelve. Technology transfer, human capital and a suitable policy environment are also discussed. Chapter thirteen which is the last one discusses the issue of accountability framework on sustainable development goals. Apart from a run-of-the-mill disquisition on Millennium development goals and sustainable development goals, this chapter provided a promising but brief critique of the idea of development. It relies on the current intellectual fad of the decolonial school. Given the heavy dose of empirical and policy studies analysis one is subjected to throughout the book the brief section called "Development as a Conundrum" was a breath of freshness which was not enough. It is in this sense that this book is devoid of a solid philosophical and political economy critique reminiscent of the CODESRIA scholars such as Archie Mafeje, Samir Amin, Claude Ake and Wadada Nabudere, to name a few reputed ones.

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