

BOOK REVIEW

John Hollaway, *All Poor Together: The African Tragedy and Beyond*.
Johannesburg: Capricorn Books, 2000; 364 pp.

This book is a different but informative insight into the economic, “political” and more recent history of the sub-Saharan portion of the African continent through the eyes of a thoughtful and caring Africa-born patriot and very concerned mining consultant. In sum, it is partially an autobiographical account of his experiences in 23 African countries as a peripatetic adviser to multinational mining corporations, governments and non-governmental organizations and institutions, and yet again, it reads like a structured type of adventure novel, which it is not.

In its 21 chapters the book discusses extremely wide issues; from the United Nations’ Development Programme, international donors’ aid money, the IMF, the World Bank and right down to AIDS. It relates a great deal of interesting facts about the extraction of Africa’s mineral resources, delves into the connection to the Zimbabwe Ruins and extends the subject of mining from the South African Rand to the diamond fields of Sierra Leone. And, finally, a hypothesis is presented that is reminiscent of the Ayn Rand genre of philosophy, to show a way forward to a true African renaissance.

This book is well-written, erudite, and while it does contain 162 references, they do not intrude. It also has extensive but apt quotations from which is also derived the main title—from a speech by that eminent teacher and experimenter, Julius Nyerere, who while addressing a conference of the Chama ChaMapunduzi Party in 1982, said: “Once we were rich and poor, now we are *all poor together*.” [My emphasis.] This reviewer makes no apology for quoting the author’s own preface in full as a foretaste of the book’s worth which becomes largely self-evident:

“The first task is to see the way in which our attitudes are rooted in the poverty, inequality and economic peril of the past.”

—J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 1958.

This is the story of a personal search for the answer as to why aid money—several hundred billion dollars of it—has made no impact on Africa’s poverty and, infinitely more important, what would.

J. K. Galbraith was writing for the North America of the late 1950s, at a time when there was still some disbelief at the wealth that was washing over the inhabitants, and the fear of another Depression was not, in his words, a little thing. Galbraith's concern was this: 'to have failed to solve the problem of producing goods would have been to continue man in his oldest and most grievous misfortune. But to fail to see that we have solved it, and to fail to proceed thence to the next task would be fully as tragic.'

Galbraith was forty-nine at the time; from my sixtyish view of matters he was a bit young to be so Churchillian in style, and some of his conclusions are seriously dated. (He lightened up a lot afterwards; read *Money, Whence it Came and Where it Went*.) But as far as Africa is concerned he had it dead right in his fear that the lessons of Western economic history might be ignored. For Africa is a continent where past attitudes are driving millions of people into deepening poverty and present-day thinking on aid is equally inappropriate.

Its geology, or more specifically its quiet plate tectonics, has ensured that the soils of Africa are leached and infertile, while its status as the home of mankind has ensured that it is riddled with mankind's diseases. Without fertilizers it is necessary to move on every year or so. Coupled with a fearsome child mortality, in this environment the number of women, children and livestock are the assets by which a man is judged. This has led to communal landholding, polygamy, the bride price in livestock and, given a modicum of infant disease control, a population explosion. It also results in a deep, near-exclusive loyalty to the extended family that has been fatal to the development of properly functioning nation states in Africa.

The lack of understanding of the African's adjustment to his or her environment—and its disastrous incongruity in a world of vigorous capitalism—has led to the greatest waste of taxpayer's money in peacetime history. During the fifty years from 1950 to 2000, about three hundred billion dollars was spent on aid—'development assistance' is the more dignified expression used by the 'donor agencies'—to the continent. During the latter part of this period, at a time when the flow of aid was at its height, the average African got no richer, and almost certainly has become poorer. Poorer by how much depends on whose figures you take, but overall probably of the order of five percent.

Short of building a bonfire of three billion \$100 notes, the money would have been far better used just by handing it out to the Africans, at a rate of around thirty dollars a year, for the best part of half a century. In very broad terms this would have given everybody in Africa an annual income supplement of between five and ten percent; at the very least it would have stopped the inhabitants from becoming poorer.

During the same period, Japan and much of the rest of South-East Asia started on their march to success. The contrast was so marked that there was unconcealed glee amongst African leaders when, after decades of being nagged at by the International Monetary Fund and the like to emulate these paragons, South-East Asia underwent a massive financial crisis in 1997.

Yet at its most fundamental the Asian collapse was caused by success; after

decades of unprecedented investment-fuelled growth there were not enough good projects left to go round. The money kept flooding in, so it went to dud schemes instead. When the inevitable losses occurred, the money took fright, regardless of the quality of its investments. Some primitive economic attitudes were in place in some of the countries, Japanese protectionism for example, but overall this was a financial crisis, not an economic one. Once the painful adjustments between reality and perception were made, all those Asian 'cultural' assets of hard work, thrift and commercial networking came into their own again.

At the beginning of this period, during which Asia grew and Africa shrank, I was at school, acting as an occasional spare pair of watchful eyes during the fortnightly gold 'clean-up' at my father's tiny mine in the then Southern Rhodesia. By the end of it I had become a too-much-travelled mining consultant. In much of the world mining is not seen as a serious business; too many little bags of purported gold dust have been pushed across too many Hollywood bar counters for it to be otherwise. But in Africa it is one of the few resources that is marketable. So with my modest skills.

Because I worked on my own, because I came from a background of small-scale mining (people like my father were known as smallworkers) and because Africa is a continent where something like fifty tonnes a year of gold comes from the activities of unsophisticated local gold miners, I became an involuntary, accidental even, specialist in such matters. An aid worker.

In this guise (which even now seems improbable) I found, as have many others, before and since, that aid was not effective in Africa. I was not, it seemed, part of the answer. Could it be that I was part of the problem?

Worse, the economists, formerly as one in their demands for liberal, open economies and fiscal discipline in Africa, were now at furious odds over what to do next. The only area that everybody agreed on was that aid does not work in a 'bad policy environment'. Like many of the phrases used in the development assistance business, this is the surface expression of a multi-layer code. The next stratum down attaches it to the writer's speciality—for the economists it means 'weak economic management', for technicians like myself it means 'the poor allocation of limited resources'. But below this there is consensus again; that it is due to fragile property rights, high levels of corruption and egregious taxation arrangements.

So now, with only one point of accord to build on, development assistance (which lives by buzzwords) has focused on 'governance' and 'civil society' as areas where special attention must be paid, so that aid will be effective. It can be predicted that shortly dedicated institutions will be created to inculcate the virtues they represent (just as they were for 'capacity building' and 'development economics').

The new focus is as doomed to failure as were the previous ones. The culture that has enabled Africans to survive for hundreds of thousands of years in their harsh environment will continue to be at odds with the fine visions of honest bureaucrats, equitable taxes and secure land tenure.

The way forward is not to try and change the way in which the system

malfunctions from outside and from above. It is to start below, to construct a new African society that has an interest in reforming its own political and social arrangements for the better. This society would have the courage to leave behind the family-based, semi-nomadic, polygamous cultural survival mechanism that has become the instrument of its impoverishment. This society is already forming in a small way; my own African clients are members of it. Unusually for Africa they are invariably property owners.

The process? The French, naturally, have a word for it, *embourgeoisement*. It may have echoes of class warfare, but I have seen what damage a philosophy like that of Julius Nyerere's downward levelling has wreaked on the people of Africa. As Galbraith observed, our attitudes are rooted in the challenges of the past; we have trouble recognizing the elements of success when it is all round us. If we in the West have not solved the challenge of becoming 'all rich together', at least we have left behind us the major hazards of poverty, such as water-borne diseases and nutritional deficiencies. Why not Africa?"

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