

# REFLECTIONS ON HERB ADDO'S NEO-RADICAL WORLD-SYSTEMS METHODOLOGY

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**D**r. Herb Addo was my mentor, supervisor and friend. It is with the greatest sense of honor that I give this tribute to his theoretical contribution to world-systems theory and Caribbean thought.

I am particularly reminded of his pedagogy. In what must have been one of my first lectures with the man he stated that it was his personal goal "to make himself obsolete." At the time I found this statement to be so outlandish yet refreshing. I wondered how one could be so confident and self-assured. All I can say for now is that he abided by a philosophy of education captured in the following quote from Khalil Gibran's, *The Prophet*, which he himself quotes in one of his papers:

[The wise teacher] does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind (Khalil Gibran as quoted in Addo 1996:126).

In the style of good world-systems theory methodology one must locate the man and his ideas within the historical conjuncture. After all, Addo's work is premised on the notion of historiography and he would have insisted that it be done in this way. Addo is very much the product of the conjuncture of

Third World developmentalism and nation-building in the context of an American-led Cold War geopolitical order. He came into the academy just at the time when Third World perspectives had begun to seriously impact on the hegemony of modernization theory in the social sciences. Wallerstein refers to this phase as the 'worldwide revolution of 1968' to describe the wave of anti-systemic movements and the attendant alternative perspectives.

One of the key phrases and methodological concepts that I learnt early in my relationship with Herb Addo is that '*theory is history*'. That is to argue that social reality can be explained from historical analysis, not as chronological history but in the Braudelian sense of relating conjunctural change to structural permanence.

Indeed, Addo was always wary of those that were too eager to claim that there was change in the world-system, as exemplified by the contemporary allure of globalization. His word of caution was that we must be careful not to be blinded by the '*mythology of change*'. Instead, he argued for us to be mindful of the '*discontinuities*' within the '*continuities*'; to be fully appreciative of the '*sameness within the changingness*', i.e. the historic theme or trajectory of the world-

system as it unfolds. Addo was known to pose such a question in the following way:

Has the world really changed, or is the apparent change only an arrested variation of itself? Or, is it just a refined expression of its old self, an avatar of sorts? Or, have things changed only to remain the same, or get worse, for some and better for others? Or, has the world really entered a valid transition band wherein the texturity of its structures, processes, values, and mores are facing opportunities for the better of all? (Addo 1996: 138).

From this perspective, Addo was fond of quoting from Immanuel Wallerstein who argues that one of the key features of the modern capitalist world-system is the claims to change when in fact there has been remarkably slow change, if change at all.

Herb Addo described himself as a neo-radical Third World theorist of the World-Systems persuasion. He found the World-Systems approach to be well-suited to the concerns that plagued his mind, which were the persistence of underdevelopment in the peripheral areas of the modern world-system. The strengths of world-systems analysis are enumerable but one of the key elements that Addo was particularly attracted to was the goal of the theory which is "to unmask the ideological obscurantism of the self-interested upholders of encrusted privilege" (Wallerstein 1981: 268).

This places world-systems theory within the camp of critical-theoretical approaches that point to the hidden ideological agenda of the status quo and by so doing open up possibilities for alternative humanizing futures. World-System theory also embodies

a constitutive approach which reflects on the process of theorizing by uncovering the epistemological and ontological referents of the various contending perspectives.

From this viewpoint, Addo, along with other world-systems analysts, insists that '*theory is praxis*', which is to say that the world of ideas is not disconnected from the pragmatic world of decision-making. Any student of Addo must have heard him say a million times that "understanding the problem is half the solution". His critique of Third World and Caribbean development strategies was often to point to the fact that we were really engaging in '*alternatives in means*' rather than '*alternatives in ends*'. His observation was that we (Third World people) are essentially involved in mere tinkering or 'problem-solving' development approaches. The essence of the problematique, as argued by Addo is captured in the following quote:

The problem is not that Third World intellectuals have not been intensely at work. We all know that they have. The problem is precisely that the intellectuals have been intensely at work on the wrong conceptions of the problem. They have defined the problem of development in the wrong context of imitating European past history (Addo 1991: 262).

In local parlance Addo would often say that 'we spinning top in mud'. His view was not that this was a peculiarity of the Caribbean condition but rather a systemic feature of the Third World context of colonial conditioning as well as the uncritical acceptance of Eurocentric epistemologies in the social sciences. Much of what was defined as development theory and praxis was premised on the implicit and "explicit objective of

teaching Third World countries how to become like the West, and how to do so in the shortest possible time” (Marglin & Marglin 1990: 32). Development was about becoming western via industrialization, whether it is resource-based industrialization, import-substitution industrialization, export-oriented industrialization, service-based industrialization. Addo called it *WERD, the Western European Road to Development*.

He was highly critical of this approach which he called eurocentric developmentalism. To his mind the problem with this is that “following the mimetic route to development blocked us from seeing an alternative creative option.” More importantly, he argued that in a practical sense it is very difficult to compete with those from which you are borrowing, especially if you are wholly dependent on their technologies, their management, and ultimately their markets. In his view if you are adding very little value-added one should not expect to be promoted in the ranks of the capitalist world-economy.

Addo was highly critical of those who adhered uncritically to what George Aseneiro (1985) called ‘the-follow-the-leader-ideology.’ Addo shared with other neo-radical scholars the view that:

...the central problem is the imperialist pretension to universality made on behalf of western episteme and the total inability of its adherents to regard competing systems with anything but contempt, the inability indeed even to contemplate the existence of competing systems (Marglin & Marglin 1990: 25).

For Addo imperialism was more than a mode of administration but a totalizing activity that shapes the philosophical outlook of a society and consequently the choices that it makes. Addo’s conception of imperialism departed from the liberal, radical and Marxist perspectives in that he questioned whether “the inner logic of capitalism impels imperialist inevitability?” (Addo 1986: 37). This was the basis of his thesis that imperialism is a permanent feature of capitalism.

However, the more interesting aspect of Addo’s contribution comes from his argument that the imperialist problématique is not just an externally generated force. He argued that there are internal-periphery sources that fuel and perpetuate the imperialist problématique. Consequently, he was insistent that:

Third World societies are, therefore, not necessarily and potentially as impotent in providing appropriate inputs into the transformational requirements of the world-system as Eurocentric epistemology and conventional wisdom would have us believe (Addo 1986; 8).

For Addo this was the essential problématique. Indeed he would argue that it is the failure of Third World intellectuals to imagine and construct an alternative preferred future for their societies that was the crux of the problem. It was this failing that allows for the continuity of the imperialist problématique. He was very critical of his Third World colleagues and peers. His argument being that they were products of corrupt cultural hybrid societies, that is “a culture that emerges weaker than it was before its internal strains and encounters with

other cultures.” The following is his view of our intellectuals:

From the Third World we produce exhausted intellectuals in the moulds of perfect mimics, persistent reactive moaners, and dynamic complainers, or fundamentalists given to preaching the ordained necessity of return to nativities (Addo 1991: 262).

When Addo published, “Imperialism: The Permanent Stage of Capitalism”, he had already envisioned the follow-up volume. In fact he had tentatively entitled it “*On the Persistence of Peripheral Capitalism: Who Participates in Underdeveloping Whom, How, and Why?*” He did not finish this work but he was on his way. This is where his idea of *Trialectics* comes into play. He was firmly of the view that the explanation of the continuity of the imperialist problématique could not be accommodated within the eurocentric methodological framework of dialectics. “Trialectical methodology dwells not on mere claims to change, but on the meanings of such changes.” In essence, the primary concern of trialectics is to detect the causes of problématiques.

What is the solution one may ask? Did Herb leave us any prescriptions? What was his proposal for going forward?

His solution was that of *creative pessimism*. Creative pessimism is juxtaposed to that of *groundless optimism*. For example, he was very skeptical about the goals, prescriptions and prospects for the neo-liberal development agenda. Creative pessimism, he would argue, “is the antidote to such mindless and false indulgence in optimism. The difference is that creative pessimists take

neither victory nor claims of advancement for granted. They do not talk optimism just to gladden their own hearts” (Addo 1996: 139).

In this regard, he shared the view of Wallerstein that there were “limited possibilities for transformation in the capitalist world-economy” when one assessed the historical and empirical reality. In one of his later works he stated that “I am more confident than ever that developmentalism *via* full-scale industrialization is open to only a few” (Addo 1996: 145).

Addo would point to the experience of the Asian NICs to argue that mimetic development was a failed strategy. The argument was premised on the fact that the Asian NICs were the only countries to ascend from peripheral status to semiperipheral position in the current Kondratieff B-phase (1970s to the present) or downswing in the world-economy. Instead, he calls for a creative approach and therefore suggests the following:

...to modernize, you need not imitate or emulate the Western European culture form to the hilt. What is occurring in these [Asian] societies is not the perfect xeroxed duplications of the WERD (Western European Road to Development), but the clever adoptions of aspects of it, founded, scripted, and inked in their own specific cultural senses and contexts of transitions to their varied ends of modernity (Addo 1991: 4).

In conclusion, what Addo prescribes is the reform of the peripheral worldview enough that we realize and accept, on one hand, that the

goals of conventional development praxis is largely unattainable and undesirable given the inherent social and ecological cost, and on the other hand, that alternative cultural projects may be valid and efficacious. In short, it is a plea for the adoption of *Multiple Cultural Routes to Comparable Modernities* as opposed to the WERD approach. Addo calls for the recognition and validation of cultural diversity in the pursuit of development alternatives. As Addo puts it:

Third World societies ought to consider themselves free to buy, where necessary; borrow, where they can; and even steal, where they have to, in their transitional experiments, but in all the instances what we are advocating is that external influences must be put to the service of internal Third World cultural updating and revitalization (Addo 1991: 8).

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