



The Man Who Brought Marxism Back to Kenya

By Paul Goldsmith



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Jubilee supporters invoke the “colonial mentality” trope to defend the government against critics of Kenya’s spiraling debt burden. Kenya’s inequitable land legacy resurfaces in attacks on the white owners of wildlife conservancies. A chief rapes a minor in the Rift Valley; a social media influencer tweets that the blame lies with colonialism. A commentary on [Kenya’s Failed Independence](#) in these pages detours to take aim at “the hare-brained ideas and visions peddled by middle-aged white men,” enroute to calling for a new narrative based on the African experience.

I could not agree more. But the current backlash against the colonial intervention and its post-colonial aftermath points to the decades-wide gap in the conceptualisation of this new narrative. Problems of land, inequality, citizenship rights, and Kenya’s fossilised elitism have not gone away. Several decades after the political economy debate that predicted the failure of the independence project in the first place, the discontent signifies a deeper malaise.

I expected to find this kind of racially-tinged anti-colonial fervour in full swing when I first came to Kenya in 1974. Instead I found pipe-smoking civil servants in knee-length socks, district commissioners in pith helmets, and a near-ubiquitous Anglophilia. The iconic Mau Mau were barely keeping body and soul together. I came in search of the ecstatic poly-rhythmic antecedents of avant-garde jazz only to discover Kenyan hipsters listening to Jim Reeves, Skeeter Davis, and Roger

Whitaker.

The conservatism of cosmopolitan Kenyans clashed with the progressive critique dominating the civil rights movement and the robust Third World studies of that era. To be sure, the debate over neocolonialism and capitalism was raging among the university crowd. No one disagreed on the need for some form of colonial detoxification. Secondary students shared frayed paperback copies of [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#). The rhetoric tallied with many of my own assumptions after growing up in America's Deep South.

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But in the countryside and the towns hosting most of Kenya's population, the post-uhuru betrayal articulated in English-language polemics like Odinga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* occupied a narrow band in the public imagination.

Not yet decolonisation

Theory predicted a population receptive to the Marxist arguments of those days but the empirical reality of independent Kenya got in the way. Agrarian commercialisation generated multi-sectoral economic growth while preserving the role of estate agriculture and foreign investment. The transfer of land through the Million Acre scheme cooled anti-colonial passions even though the land problem remained. Kenya's early post-independence success and stability augured for a continuation of the same.

The Kenya model provided a pragmatic counterpoint to the socialism being championed by Algeria, Mali, Mozambique, Guinea, and post-Haile Selassie Ethiopia. Support for anti-colonial policies nevertheless continued to exert a strong ideological and political influence across the continent. The radical critique advanced by African scholars and writers at home and in the diaspora enjoyed the advantage of authenticity that the liberators who turned conservative once in power could muster little intellectual ammunition to counter.

They did not have to. The Kenyan government conjured up its own version of "African Socialism" in [Sessional Paper No. 10](#). We all know how that played out. The new elites were not content with harvesting the low hanging fruits of uhuru. Anyone standing in their way became enemies of the state. Kenya's stability bought international support.

In his colorful memoir, [The Reds and the Blacks](#), the anti-communist US ambassador William Atwood dismissed the post-uhuru angst of Odinga & Co. by explaining that the contest for the political soul of Kenya was really about superpower patronage and ethnicity. The neo-capitalism versus socialism debate was a red herring. The assassination of Tom Mboya two years after the book's publication suggested he was right.

When Julius Nyerere castigated Kenya as a man-eat-man society during the foreplay that led to the break-up of the East African Community, Charles Njonjo replied that Tanzania was a man-eat-nothing society. The jibe became a political meme. J.M. Kariuki's comment that the country was becoming a land of "ten millionaires and ten million beggars" arguably came closer to how many citizens felt. The disappearance and death of the outspoken politician in March 1975 triggered the government's first serious crisis. The crowd heckled Jomo Kenyatta when he addressed the public at Uhuru Park. The president mobilised the military, jets buzzed over Nairobi.

Back on the cooperative farm hosting my field studies programme, our Swahili teachers told us they were going to take up arms. Most of us were sympathetic, although a few of our fellow students did not tune in. Nothing happened, but the martyrdom of J.M. did refocus attention on Kenya's capitalist problem, at least for a while.

The experience that preceded my arrival in Kenya contributed to my eclectic and nuanced view of developments in Kenya. I participated in the April 30 and May Day anti-Vietnam war protests in Washington D.C., but I was not pro-Ho Chi Minh. I immersed myself in the feed-your-head radicalism of the university environment, but I found the student Marxists pedantic, arrogant, and overbearing.

I took off and spent nine months in Central America, where the time spent in Maya Indian villages converted me to the cause of peasants and indigenous peoples. Like many of my generation radicalised by the war and Anglo-American racism, it was perfectly logical to lionise Che Guevara while rejecting Fidel Castro.

I resonated with the radical anti-colonial analyses of Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, and Franz Fanon before travelling to Africa, but was ambivalent when it came to the record of the continent's socialist leaders. Once in Kenya, I found my Marxist peers at the University of Nairobi to be even more over-the-top than Gringos. I headed to the lightly colonised periphery where I found that "the idiocy of rural life" provided rich insights into Africans' creative tradition of adapting to their distinctive environmental and social conditions.

In any case, life in the shags offered a more useful pathway to personal decolonisation, an objective that tempered one's perceptions of Kenyan politics. Moreover, Kenya's high profile as an exemplar of capitalist development in Africa actually cut both ways. Ideological opposition to the government contributed to the country's vibrant intellectual milieu, which in turn translated back-handed support for the *status quo*. The contradiction manifested in the detention of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for staging his vernacular play *Ngahika Ndeenda* in 1977, while his English-language books remained on the national secondary school syllabus.

The role of Marxism in the region's political discourse was, however, already diminishing at this juncture; the detention of several other Marxist critics of the state signaled that in Kenya the party was over. The dominance of the Dependency school, and the mess created by the neo-Marxist shortcuts implemented by its African adherents – as I was to realise many years later – hastened its decline elsewhere across the continent.

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The activism inspired by the radical Marxist narrative returned for a swan song several months after Daniel arap Moi became president in 1978. Nairobi University students registered their dissatisfaction with his government by staging a protest on behalf of striking doctors. A boisterous crowd marched down River Road chanting and carrying placards with the usual slogans: *A Lucha Continua*, *Arise Ye Wretched of the Earth*, and *Not Yet Uhuru in Kenya*.

I watched the impending collision from a box seat on the balcony of the New Kenya Lodge. The General Service Unit ambushed the students when they reached the corner of Latema Road. The ringleader was wearing a red cap. He and several of his mates melted into the crowds of unsuspecting pedestrians. "No maize in Kenya!" they shouted as they weaved their way to safety.

It turned out to be the last time I witnessed Kenyans rallying around Marxist slogans.

The Moi dialectic

The Marxist bogey had returned in the guise of the MwaKenya movement after Moi assumed power, but it did little to slow down the long slog of his “passing cloud” presidency. The failed military coup that almost did on August 1, 1982 had dispensed with the anti-capital clichés. Its inebriated leaders exhorted the gathering mob to loot by shouting “Power!”; the traditional “to the people” refrain was conspicuously absent.

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Not that Marxism mattered anymore in the febrile narratives of the next twenty years—the direct link between the Air Force coup-makers and the Odinga family had dissipated any political legitimacy the formerly Marxian opposition once enjoyed.

A friend from Harvard once told me that Marxism was the last stage of Christianity. It is an interesting hypothesis. Like Christianity, the Marxian Gospel gave rise to many denominations and interpretations: the epistemological Marxism of the professors, the mobilising ideology of the freedom fighters, the liberation theology of Latin American priests, the Animal Farm Marxism of Lenin’s revolutionary vanguard school, and the magic of the French Structural Marxists who employed class analysis to account for inequality in pre-capitalist societies, to name a few.

The last stage of Christianity metaphor, however, was not about the religiosity behind the draconian purification of Mao’s Cultural Revolution and the Khmer Rouge. Rather, he was referring to the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic’s similarities with the cosmology of the Christian Trinity.

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Unlike Ali, I was not a member of that club. I had been initiated into the “consciousness-raising” cult of Marxist theory; I never drank the Kool-Aid. The religious Marxist discourse that had put me off during my youth had much in common with today’s Islamist narrative and the praxis of true believer movements like ISIS, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram.

The radical influences that shaped both of us while coming of age steered us towards different compass points. Ali Zaidi believed in Hegelian progress towards the universal spirit as it unfolds through the resolution of capitalism’s contradictions. My quest was the more Fanonian salvation to be found in non-capitalist cultural systems.

The years had melted away since we embarked on the respective paths that had brought us both to Kenya. The twenty-eight year Moi interlude had in fact advanced Kenya’s dialectical process in a manner not anticipated by the middle-aged white, brown, and black men entrusted with charting the neoliberal’s pursuit of the end of history.

Moi was the forest fire that clears the way for new growth, the flood that forced the river to change

its course. The largely donor-driven phase of the developmental cycle that unfolded in his wake had bulldozed the once vigorous ecology of ideas and concepts, and left a stagnant swamp of buzzwords, negative ethnicity, and flavour of the day policy analysis in its place. It was bad.

We were all trying to get by and to find a way through the degraded collective mindset when I met Ali Zaidi in 1995.

Commodity fetishism revisited

We had come from different sides of the world, and we were both products of the eclectic countercultural milieu of the 1960s and early 1970s. We shared many of the same interests in music, literature, and international affairs, but with some important differences. He was an urbanite; I have always straddled town and country. I was a baseball person and he was a cricket guy; I was a fan of the Marx Brothers, Ali a dedicated follower of Karl Marx.

Ali underwent a catharsis after the events of 1989 that he described in an essay published in the *Executive* ten years later. Until his death this month, he retained the belief that Marx was still relevant to the fact that the world deserves better than the mess that was unfolding on all sides. The latter problem became the focus of many long conversations that gravitated towards the former's work.

I was sceptical in the beginning but came to a new appreciation of the clarity Marx offered under Ali's tutelage. Like many of the zealous Marxists trading in his ideas, I had actually read only a limited sample of the Prophet's own writing. I owned up: although Marxist analysis had produced much of the best work in my field, I found Marx's writing too dense.

Ali, who had actually read the full canon of Marx's works, disagreed vehemently. I remember one discussion in particular that captured the quality of our discourse. It grew out of my misuse of Marx's commodity fetishism: I had always assumed the concept was bound up with the anthropological definition of fetishism i.e. the practice of investing inanimate objects with power or some mystical agency.

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Wrong. "Commodity fetishism is not about personal identification with products and brands," Ali told me. "It's about the difference between the use value of an object and the exchange value of the same in the market."

He went on to explain this difference. "For example, if you catch a fish and we eat it on the table I made, we are sharing in the use-value generated by our labour. But when conditions induce us to sell these products of our time and labour, the end result is the valuation of everything and everyone in monetary terms. Commodity fetishism dehumanises the relationships between people and communities by reducing them to factors of class, wealth, and status."

No one had connected these dots in a way that brought this basic insight home. The invisible hand of this commodity fetishism is driving the transactional forces reconfiguring the global economy. You can observe it at work in the tribalism, polarisation, and racism exploited by the architects of Brexit and the alt-right. The Kenyan version of this fetish has transformed the struggle for democracy into

a violent game of votes, no end in sight.

Ali's Marxism was not about quasi-religious abstractions; it resurfaced in the decategorised approach Ali personified through his highly interactive lifestyle. Everyone counted. He shared and communicated without pretention, and he was a positive influence on the ever-widening circle of those who came into contact with him.

We are all colonised. We go through life as vehicles for our identities and histories and cultural preferences. It is hard to escape, but the received influences defining our personas can be mitigated by our accumulated experiences. The tendency to categorise people by the language they speak, their clothing, appearance, age, complexion, possessions, and signs of origin was always there, but it has grown stronger as Kenya transits into the kind of atomised capitalist society Marx predicted.

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Perhaps we were lucky. Ali and I parachuted in when it was easier to form relationships and friendships based on our shared interests and common humanity. We arrived as outsiders and Kenya became the reality wreck that forced us to co-evolve.

This brings us to the dilemma of the younger Kenyans who are now the majority in Decolony Keenya. They are discovering that when you are born is just as important as where you are born, and they think it is not fair. But as Fanon predicted, "For many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught."

Yakubaliwa. Millennials, more than the post-independence generations preceding them, are the real victims of colonial rule. And a dose of Ali Zaidi-style political theory might help them fill the gap in their existential critiques.

Nothing is sacred - even the idea of decolonisation should be decolonised.

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