



Capitalism and Its Discontents: My Observations in Uganda and Kenya

By Jörg Wiegratz



The world, including Africa, has arguably never been more capitalist than at the current juncture. And yet, the scholarly and public debates in and about Africa, as far as I am aware, are nowhere near in tandem with this reality. In countries such as Uganda and Kenya, that I both regard as capitalist countries, there is hardly any explicit public debate about how capitalism shapes and alters these societies. The very basic question (are we a capitalist society?) does not get discussed in public forums.

In Kampala, despite the capitalist character in the culture of everyday life that is intensifying by the day, public debate is about almost everything except capitalism. Government officials, public servants, technocrats, political, religious, and business leaders and national observers and commentators rarely use the C-word in their public analysis, speeches or statements.

This low intensity of an explicit capitalism debate is not necessarily unique to these two countries or the region. Colleagues who do research in Central Asia tell me the situation is similar in that region too. And in my home country, Germany, this topic is hardly ever discussed head-on by government officials and mainstream parties either; official discourse there circles around the term “social

market economy”.

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Plus there is a group of other public intellectuals who are making various aspects of capitalism the explicit focus of some of their analyses, including [Fred Muhumuza](#), [Moses Khisa](#), [Charles Onyango-Obbo](#), [Kalundi Serumaga](#), [Mary Serumaga](#), and [Yusuf Serunkuma](#). But that, more or less, is basically it in terms of focused, explicit articulations on the matter in the analysis that makes it into the (English language) media space. To date, the weekly prime time talk shows on [NTV](#) and [NBS](#) as a rule of thumb do not frame debates in terms of capitalism, neither does the weekly [media roundtable](#). The general silence regarding capitalism in Africa (CiA) doesn't stop there, or on the continent for that matter. It also extends to university campuses where it suppresses intellectual creativity (as I have argued [previously](#)).

And yet, many African countries are by now capitalist societies and analytically need to be treated as such. A number of social phenomena in these countries can be seen to be typical of a capitalist society, such as inequalities and uneven spatial development. These are to some degree comparable to similar phenomena in other capitalist countries across the world, including the Global North. There are striking similarities now across the North-South axis when it comes to some of the experiences of capitalist everyday life. Let me go deeper here...

Sometime ago, I attended the [grand finale](#) of a best comedian-type competition show of a Ugandan TV station (NBS [The Comic, Season 2](#)) in a big packed show tent in my neighbourhood in Kampala. It was a live event that had major elements of similar TV show competitions that I have viewed back home in the UK: prominent judges; an excited, participating large (young) audience that votes for their winner via mobile phones; ecstatic prominent organisers/MCs; corporate sponsorship; stars' performances; votes of thanks to the sponsors; proud winner with a cheque and new car to go home with, etc. Witnessing the event reinforced my view that an intensified analysis of CiA is needed and that I had to focus and sharpen my analytical lenses and fully recognise and make sense of the fact that these social phenomena are typical of contemporary capitalist societies everywhere. In other words, these different social phenomena and the societal order as such need to be recognised analytically and studied empirically from the perspective of “capitalism”.

And further, that capitalism is not peripheral or irrelevant but central to these phenomena. That phenomena x, y, z (say, this national, corporate-sponsored comedy competition) cannot merely, or predominantly or easily, be grouped under some of the most widely used analytical frames in what is called African Studies or Development Studies that together dominate scholarly debate about the dynamics on the continent: development; democracy/democratisation; security, (post-)conflict; poverty; crisis; politics; authoritarianism; and so on. Instead, these phenomena need to be analytically categorised as capitalism i.e. as phenomena of capitalist economy, polity, culture, and society. The comedy show, for example (and many similar shows), can be seen to be part of what can be called entertainment capitalism in Africa, part of the [advertising and marketing complex](#) of global capitalist culture. This show has, of course, not only highly cultural but also political dimensions, functions and effects, in the way shows such as [The Voice](#) in the UK and elsewhere in the North have within the capitalist societal context there. That is to say, there is a [cultural political economy](#) at work in these cases.

One term that has been used is “africapitalism”. It is suggested that capitalism can be turned into something very positive for the African continent and its people (including the subaltern classes) if a, b, c (e.g. indigenisation of capitalism) happens i.e. that the private sector wants and can contribute to socially progressive, sustainable, long-term development on the continent.

My heightened attention to and search for everyday phenomena of capitalism in Kampala and Nairobi led me to think about the available analytical categories and options. Consumerism? Commercialisation? Uneven and combined development in capitalism? [Market society](#)? Corporate state? Market state? [Competition state](#)? Economic and cultural globalisation? Cultural diffusion? [Cultural mélange](#)? Capitalist social order? Afro-capitalist civilisation?

The one term I have used for years to orient and frame my research is “neoliberalism”. I have explored the embedding of neoliberalism in Uganda i.e. the making and operation of a capitalist market society there. But maybe there is a need for a different, more suggestive term - a term that reflects more the particular glocal character of the current phase of CiA of this continued spread, intensification, institutionalisation, reproduction and modification of the capitalist social order (CSO). Could one say that many of the examples I had noticed more and more, and so intensely, during my extensive stay in the two capitals in 2018 were pointing to the continuous building, expanding, locking in and managing of CSO, including capitalist culture? That the advancement of what we academics term as “market society project via liberal reforms and programmes” was a crucial part of the contemporary advancement and consolidation of “‘[capitalist civilisation](#)’ (Immanuel Wallerstein) of “‘[market civilisation](#)’ (Stephen Gill) in Africa or Afro-capitalist civilization.

“Civilisation” is a particularly loaded, tricky and controversial term, and is linked not only to the recent “[clash-of-civilisations](#)” argument (Samuel Huntington) but also to the [discourse](#) of the advancement of “Western civilisation” on the continent during the colonial period. Still, well-known analysts of capitalism, such as Wallerstein and Gill, have, as I have indicated, brought the term civilisation into the analysis of capitalism. Also, Erik Hobsbawm’s *Age of Capital, 1848-1875* is published with a History of Civilization label at the bottom of the book cover; while Fernand Braudel titled one of his major books [The Wheels of Commerce: Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Century](#).

So capitalism/markets and civilisation have been linked in scholarly debates (see also the work of [Karl Polanyi](#) and [Max Weber](#)). But can one talk of Afro-capitalist civilisation (ACC), Euro-, South Asia-capitalist civilisation, and so on (in order to highlight region-specific origins, trajectories and specificities of capitalism)? Can one analyse how ACC is related to global capitalist civilisation? Can one argue that the neoliberal era has also been about the further expansion, build-up and management of ACC?

One term that has been used is “africapitalism”. It is suggested that capitalism can be turned into something very positive for the African continent and its people (including the subaltern classes) if a, b, c (e.g. indigenisation of capitalism) happens i.e. that the private sector wants and can contribute to [socially progressive, sustainable, long-term development](#) on the continent. A blog piece about this philosophy is titled “[Capitalism with African values](#)”. The Nigerian banker, entrepreneur and economist, Tony O. Elumelu, who coined the term, runs The Africapitalism Institute. I haven’t delved into the respective literature yet (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), but the term’s [definition](#) seems rather business and management speak.

That said, however, as much as one is intrigued by the contemporary features of CiA and tries to grasp the specifics of the current era of capitalist restructuring and reality on the continent, the process of spreading and embedding CiA goes back very far. There has for long been a flow of

capitalist tropes, ideas, norms, and practices of financial capital, labour, and commodities, an expansion of commodity production and circulation, and so on. That is to say, not everything we see in neoliberal Africa, especially culturally, is new as such.

But again, my argument is this: In countries like Uganda, capitalism is now more broad-based, established and advanced (i.e institutionalised) than during earlier periods. And this difference has analytical significance. The neoliberal era has made the country more capitalist, and, crucially, [normalised](#) capitalism further i.e. rendered capitalism *more* (not absolutely) natural, ordinary, hegemonic. This process, as James Parisot detailed for the case of [America](#), is particular to any country that goes through capitalist restructuring.

The neoliberal era has arguably brought about an acceleration and deepening of commodification, commercialisation, and [marketisation](#) in many countries in Africa, especially in urban areas (above all in the big cities/capitals). Scholars call the latest phase in this process “Neoliberalism 3.0 i.e. the ‘deep marketisation in the South’. In short then, a country like Uganda has arguably never been more capitalist, and is becoming ever more capitalist by the day. And some of the ways in which Uganda or Kenya and the social classes there are integrated into global capitalism are specific to the current era; some of these are [cutting edge](#) capitalism (e.g. [M-Pesa](#)).

In Kenya too there is a major capitalist wave, thanks to the effects of the period from the late 1980s onwards, the period of embedding and locking in the neoliberal variant of CiA. This significant and hard to reverse institutionalisation of capitalism in African countries such as Uganda and Kenya is perhaps one of the most fundamental outcomes of the ongoing neoliberal era...

The neoliberal project of [social engineering](#) has made a significant difference in this regard; the policies, programmes, discourses, technologies, and practices accelerated and shaped the process of the institutionalisation of CSO in Africa in the current period. Neoliberalism here and elsewhere has put in place or resulted in “a new [institutional architecture](#) for managing capitalist social relations”, as Damien Cahill and Martijn Konings put it. Crucially, neoliberal capitalism has seeped deeper into Ugandan [culture](#) and transformed part of this culture in the process, including crucial matters of moral-economic order (values, norms, subjectivities, practices etc.). Capitalism makes and shapes everyday life, including [moral economies of earning a living](#), more and differently now than prior to neoliberal reforms.

In Kenya too there is a major capitalist wave, thanks to the effects of the period from the late 1980s onwards, the period of embedding and locking in the [neoliberal variant](#) of CiA. This significant and hard to reverse institutionalisation of capitalism - i.e. making capitalism more embedded, pervasive, powerful, normal, acceptable, cherished, and desired (yet at the same time still ridiculed, critiqued, and resisted) - in African countries such as Uganda and Kenya is perhaps one of the most fundamental outcomes of the ongoing neoliberal era, as is highlighted in a [new book](#) that I co-edited with Giuliano Martiniello and Elisa Greco.

Looking back at the last three decades from this angle then, one can conclude so far that - as [Graham Harrison](#) and others told us early on in the process - neoliberalism was never just about a particular policy, a right or a ballot, or a style of people-state communication (as donors and other proponents of liberal reform told us). It was about something more fundamental and contentious: about hammering capitalism into Africa for good and thereby moulding class, property and power relations and patterns of social domination, surplus appropriation, and resulting social inequalities and conflicts. Picture a living room with all sorts of furniture. Neoliberalism has brought about a

massive moving around of furniture, and throwing out of some and bringing in of other furniture. There is more capitalist furniture (the pillars or institutions of CSO) in the room now (while non-capitalist furniture is still there too of course). And a good share of that furniture was put there by foreign actors, including Western governments, donors, and corporations.

That is to say that pro-capitalist forces and actors in the country are more numerous (especially local ones), powerful and resourceful now, three decades into neoliberalism. In various issue areas, they have the high ground. Capitalism (or its manifestations) is to a considerable degree common sense and taken for granted. Various Ugandan actors – directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously – embrace, endorse, advance, celebrate and/or defend it (or versions of it), in the name of development, modernisation, competitiveness, growth, productivity enhancement, entrepreneurship, poverty reduction, survival, empowerment, national sovereignty etc.

The argument is not that capitalism swept everything away (and that it is all there is now) but that it has expanded and advanced and thus become more influential in shaping societal and personal life, again, especially in urban areas. It is significant that the national football league, the Uganda Premier League, now has a [multinational corporation](#) as a sponsor (Chinese technology and media company Star Times that operates in [30 African countries](#)), and [TV rights](#) and the rest of it are part of the package, while members of the national men's football team take part in betting adverts. Sponsors of the team [include](#) Betlion, a mobile betting company, Airtel, National insurance Cooperation, Nile Breweries, Bidco, Rwenzori and Eco bank. In other words, [commercialization of this popular sport](#) is advancing in Uganda, and elsewhere in the region. It is significant that a multinational bank runs and sponsors interventions in the education system (e.g. a [national school competition](#)). And that Coca Cola has made it into the [State House](#).

Notably then, some of the pro-capitalist actors are creations of neoliberal intervention and to various degrees [orchestrated](#), designed, financed, supported and/or empowered by foreign actors. The [Private Sector Foundation Uganda](#) (PSFU), founded in 1994, was (and remains) a key vehicle for World Bank interventions in the country concerning private sector development. The PSFU was part of the Bank's [strategies](#) to ensure the acceptability of capitalist restructuring and to prevent policy reversal: "The mix of sensible ... policies which have been introduced in recent years will need to be maintained. Private sector confidence and the credibility of government's handling of the economy take a long time to be established, and would be lost far more quickly should policy reversals be made. ... [T]he Government will try to widen support for the measures being adopted. This is not a technical problem, but rather requires achieving a wider degree of understanding and endorsement of the strategy, amongst key interest groups and the population at large, to build the support needed to sustain sound policy over the longer term. Tools to perform this task are included in this project (i.e. the Private Sector Foundation Component)." Set up during the neoliberal era were also other things like "investment clubs" in schools (from primary level up) boosted by banks, government and others in the name of advancing financial literacy and entrepreneurship amongst children and youth.

I had noticed (and studied) capitalist social phenomena in Uganda in previous years too. I first came to the country in 2004 but it became more noticeable in 2018. The show scripts, the adverts, the economic protagonists, the corporate-speak and propaganda, the discourses of the powerful, the social media rhythms, the aspirations and emotions concerning money and individual success on display. For example, the TV shows I came across had (partly not surprisingly) a global feel i.e. strong parallels with show formats elsewhere. (Look for instance at this format called DFCU Battle For Cash'. I am far from being an expert of these sorts of reality shows, but it instantly and strongly reminded me of [Dragon's Den](#) and [The Apprentice](#). Then here other Ugandan shows: [Make My Home](#); [The Property Show](#); (see [here](#) and [here](#) for Kenyan equivalents); [Money and Markets](#); [Supa jackpot show](#); [NSSF Friends with Benefits](#); and finally [Be My Date](#). Also check out [Nairobi Diaries](#).

Also listen to minutes 0:55 to 1:12 of this [clip](#): “Uganda is ready for business as a country. We value investors. The investor and the customer are the most important people in Uganda. People who bring capital, create jobs and bring revenue for the state,” says Uganda’s Prime Minister, Ruhakana Rugunda, there.

In addition, people with android phones in London, Berlin, Kampala and Nairobi now use fairly similar apps on their phones (and perhaps somewhat similar news feeds from global news providers, Twitter etc.). Some of the most widely used apps are designed and managed by major capitalist corporations. In other words, sections of Ugandan and Kenyan middle and upper classes enjoy some consumer patterns that are similar to their counterparts elsewhere

Let’s look once more then at examples. Again, this is my basic observation: in countries such as Uganda and Kenya, and especially in their major cities, one can find plenty of (cutting edge) social phenomena that are typical of contemporary capitalist society across the world. The mix and type (and concurrency) of similar phenomena is striking. This is significant in the larger history of the spread of global capitalism, and the march towards a “world market of a genuinely global scale” (Paul Cammack).

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Some of these phenomena are captured in aspects of the notion of and debate about Afropolitanism; here, as one analyst [put](#) it, there is “an image of an Instagram-friendly Africa...African versions of American or European cities. Afropolitanism it appears is grounded in the ability to engage in the same pastimes one could expect to enjoy in a Western capital...you can now have the Hipster Africa Experience”. On top of that, we have the core characteristics of capitalism present anyway: capitalists owning the means of production, workers selling their labour and being exploited by capitalists (both local and foreign), class conflict between workers and bosses, private ownership as a core legal institution, etc.

Conclusion

I have argued that despite all the global and local differences and inequalities, historical and current local specificities, and the [uneven](#) geographical [development](#) in global capitalism, there are striking similarities (and concurrencies) now across the North-South axis when it comes to capitalist everyday life. My point here is not to insist on a particular pattern of similarities and differences concerning social phenomena of CiA and capitalism elsewhere, to discuss these phenomena along binaries of good/bad, better/worse, to suggest which analytical terms are most useful, or to say whether this is about “catching-up” or “leading” vis-à-vis certain phenomena. My point is that current capitalism is altering African countries such as Uganda and Kenya in significant ways and that it is these alterations that need more analytical attention, explanation and discussion.

We are witnessing the operation of a more fully fledged, institutionalised, normalised capitalist social order, and an intensification and deepening of processes that will render these countries, for the time being, even more capitalist. Capitalism is now more fully operational and thus, so to speak,

causal i.e. it needs to be taken into account when discussing the drivers and characteristics of contemporary life in African countries.

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