

How has the legacy of Imperialism impacted modern Niger and its relations with France: A Neo-Marxist and a Marxist-Feminist perspective

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I. Introduction:

In his Draft Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions, Lenin (1920) stressed on the need to continuously expose the stratagem methodically adopted by the imperialist nations in creating, “*under the guise of politically independent states, states which are wholly dependent upon them economically, financially and militarily*”¹....”

At the core of this paper is an assumption that one of the principal goals of Franco-African relations and policies after the end of colonial rule was to ensure continual and low-end supply of minerals, such as uranium. This assumption is highly relevant to and can be supported by examining the case of Niger as after the discovery of Uranium in its northern parts in the early 1960s, Nigerian government signed an agreement reserving exclusive accessibility to France, which at the time intended to gain “energetic independence”. As a result, commercial exploitation of the country began in 1971 by the mining operations of SOMAIR² followed by COMINAK in 1974, both national corporations with Areva (63.4 and 34 percent respectively) having only 36.6 and 31 percent of Nigerian government participation, respectively (Idrissa, Idrissa and Decalo, 2012a:457). In this same context, this paper will examine how the legacy of French imperialism has impacted modern Niger. It does so by making use mostly of elements of Neo-Marxist perspectives such as Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems analysis. The division of the world into core, semi-periphery and periphery becomes of interest and apropos to the case study when combined with Raul Prebisch’s dependency theory that takes into account certain functional aspects, such as imperialism, colonialism, neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism³, and the causal logic of the underdevelopment of the periphery and core countries, (Perreault & Martin, 2005:194). These will be discussed in the section that follows.

The concept of the world as being three-fold— has for the purposes of this paper— two relevant dimensions: first, it helps evaluate how the core nations (that are also former colonisers and imperialist powers) ground strategic and structural dependency of the periphery countries (that are also former colonies) on them; and second, it helps assess the role of Multinational corporations (MNCs), as will be done in the third section of this paper, that exert influence over political behaviours of countries that they operate in to further their own interests and that of their home states (Mentan, 2018:238). Alternatively stated, many African countries, former colonies, are so desperate for revenue in order to meet their domestic needs and/or to establish their political independence that they are willing to accept the detrimental conditions of foreign corporations, thereby allowing them active participation in the everyday politics of their country⁴. To add to the dialectics of the analysis, the fourth section of this paper will explore the feminist-marxist scholarship that transforms the focus of dependency theory’s division of labour into a more refined approach to division of labour on the lines of gender and the social dependency of capitalism and exploitation on women to provide a deeper understanding of the links between class, gender and capitalism (Jones, 1996:405). The section succeeding it is aimed at outlining the

¹ In 2018, France had about 3,000 troops spread across — Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso— as part of Operation Barkhane (Mentan, 2018:268).

² SOMAIR stands for Société des Mines de l’Air

³ Kwame Nkrumah, president of Ghana (1960–66), coined the term “neo-colonialism” in the book *NeoColonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965).

⁴ In line with this idea is the former American president Dwight D. Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex, where he advised the American government to watch out for “unwarranted” influence exercised by private corporations (in particular, the armaments industry) (US National Archives, 2011). In other words, he warned that capitalist (or ambitious) nations become so dependent on private companies that they fear holding them responsible for undermining the national interests.

dynamic and complex social positioning of Nigerian women in a neo-colonial era as gender collides with social hierarchies and socio-economic positions. Lastly, there will be an executive summary and a succinct discussion of the major ideas elaborated in the analysis.

Neo-Marxism as an International Relations Theory:

In 1950, Prebisch and Singer (cited in Bloch and Sapsford, 1997: 1873) observed that the imports of developing countries were dominated by finished goods while the exports primarily consisted of raw materials. This led to the formulation of a popular response to the research known as the ‘dependency theory’ that laid out the elements of imperfect competition between developed and developing economies. The underlying idea is that wealth and growth of richer nations is often at the expense of that of poorer nations, since the capitalist world economic system relies on the division of labour between the core and periphery countries. As compared to classical Marxists, Neo-Marxists, such as Samir Amin (1974) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1976), view the advancement and development of European advanced capitalist economies as highly dependent on the ‘peripheralization’ and ‘underdevelopment’ of third world countries. Wallerstein (2004:24) identifies the modern world-system to be a capitalist system that prioritises “endless accumulation of capital” by putting in place structural mechanisms that both reward and penalise. As a result, international trade in the post-colonial times continued to be imbalanced since some countries (the core) were economically more robust, thereby capacitating them to push for trade agreements that enabled them to drain surplus-value from economically weaker countries (the periphery).

Furthermore, this parasitical nature of trade relations and the contemporary global distribution of wealth has more than often served to enlarge the pre-existing economic gulf between core and periphery countries. Perpetual modernization of industrial production mainly due to technological innovation and advancement in core countries gravitates them to prioritise acquisition of and control over certain minerals. The naturally determined constraints on the availability of many of those minerals along with capitalism-induced uneconomic conditions give rise to the phenomenon called “strategic dependency” of the core countries on the peripheral countries. Throughout history, accumulation of capital in the core or advanced capitalist economies has been parallel to an increasing reliance on foreign suppliers, mainly developing or underdeveloped countries with low-cost labour and cheap critical materials. A counterpart to this strategic dependency of the core is the structural dependency of the periphery countries that exposes them to vulnerable political and economic actions (Munoz, 1981a:193–6).

In essence, the political and socio-economic environments of the periphery countries are deliberately conditioned to meet the requirements of the core of world capitalism. The consolidation of dependency principles and such a high degree of influence that it itself reproduces creates a political and economic situation that in many ways mirrors colonialism, thereby giving rise to neo-colonialism. Thus, the new states enjoy the illusion of political sovereignty but with a substantial amount of dependence on their former colonial power. Neo-colonialism as a concept is inherently based on the premise that the end of colonialism does not necessarily imply the termination of the systematic exploitation of former colonies (Harshe, 1980:159). For newly independent countries, political independence takes precedence, however, fragile economies, especially in the case of former African countries, implores them to turn to their former rulers or other rich economies for support. In this era of neo-colonialism, in addition to the traditional political tools and techniques such as unequal treaties and trade agreements, and diplomatic pressures, advanced countries employ more elusive control methods including foreign aid and investment, and public and private MNCs.

Niger-France relations, Neo-colonialism and Exploitation by (French) private sector:

French writer, FrançoisXavier Verschave (1998, cited in Szarka, 2008:41), coined the term “*Françafrique*” to describe the deep-rooted postcolonial (and in many ways, neo-colonial) involvement of the French state in Africa. Since 1960, France has enjoyed direct and indirect domination over and control of the complex political and economic environment and related policies of both state and non-state actors with an interest in its ex-colonies. This neo-colonial nature has helped establish a “personal dependency” between France and its former-colonies (Szarka, 2008:41).

French capitalism has had major interest in Sahelian Africa, and especially in Niger as it has an abundance of high quality uranium. The colonial pact⁵ and the ‘secret agreements’ signed at the time of independence outlined certain obligations of France’s ex-colonies towards France, which included French control over foreign currency reserves and strategic raw materials (uranium in the case of Niger). More importantly, the pact enabled France-based companies to maintain monopoly and enjoy priority in terms of

⁵ Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff (1958:249, cited in Harshe, 1980:160) observed the non-competitive form of relationship, named “colonial pact” between France and its former colonies, which actively subjected the interests of colonies to the French state.

government contracts (Busch, 2017). In the 1970s, Uranium represented about 80 percent of Niger's total exports, mostly commissioned to French enterprises, however the percentage drastically dropped to 30-35 percent in 2012. The mining titles of Areva⁶ (SOMAIR and COMINAK), the French industry giant, in Niger were secured in 1968, six years after Niger gained independence from France, for a period of seventy-five years. Here, it becomes crucial to the analysis to note that a substantial portion of Areva is owned by the French government, which coupled with the agreements of 1970s⁷ and the mining titles gave France exclusivity to exploitation of uranium, consequent to the generation of prices primarily shaped not according to the world market, but according to demand in France and in the parts of the world it re-exported uranium to. In return, the Nigerian government was compensated in royalties with hardly any control over the export prices of the commodity. As per the revised Mining laws of 2006, the royalty rates for large exploitations were increased from 5.5 percent to 12 percent depending on profits. However, Areva did not only continue to pay marked-down royalties to Niger, but also maintained substantial fiscal exemptions, tax breaks and related benefits it had received under the previous mining law of 1993, a piece of legislation that was designed to attract foreign investors (Idrissa, 2018:38). Interestingly, this also indicates how heavily France had come to be dependent on African resources, especially its atomic-energy industry which functioned owing mainly to the uranium it imported. This can be called what Munzo (1981a:194) describes as strategic dependency, thereby explaining, to an extent, her continued military, economic and political presence in Niger. However, it is important to note that the ability of a core country to manipulate its own structural and strategic dependency on a periphery is often much higher than that of a periphery country⁸ as they have a wider spectrum of alternatives available to regulate their dependency than do most of the periphery countries.

An incontrovertible evidence of the undermined and manipulated political and economic independence of Niger due to its relations with France is the coup d'état that overthrew President Hamani Diori in 1974, after he attempted to pressure the French government to amend the preconditions of their exclusivity agreements (Martin, 1989:637). Nonetheless, there has been a significant shift towards balancing of the interdependency between the two states as Areva (renamed Orano) signed a five-year agreement with the Nigerien government in 2014 in line with the revised mining laws of 2006. The agreement has potentially increased the royalty rates to 12 percent of market value, depending on profitability, and additionally allocated Nigerien managing directors to the boards of SOMAIR in 2015 and COMINAK in 2016. As a result of this newly signed agreement, the government of Niger is expected to gain at least additional \$39 million in tax revenues annually (Uranium in Niger - World Nuclear Association, 2020).

Feminist-Marxism as a sub-theory of Feminism in International Relations:

Neo-Marxist scholarship is largely concerned with addressing issues of colonization, imperialism and neocolonialism, however Agathangelou (2002:142) presents a moderately agreeable critique of the scholarship for its failure to accommodate racial and sexual aspects of globalisation. By focussing on domestic workers and their migration within periphery countries —Greece, Turkey and Cyprus— Agathangelou demonstrates the importance of accentuating a feminist critique to better understand the existing neocolonial relations. Additionally, Beauvoir (2011:93) points out that the ontological claims of Marxism and Neo-Marxism that express economic conditions and material realities of the working class are true. However, she asserts that if these do not address the entire human reality including gender and sexuality they might fail to explain anything. She adds that both workers and women are downtrodden, however it is women whose problems are reduced to their comparatively low capacity for labour.

Meg Luxton (2014:145) claims that both Feminist and Marxist perspectives stem from colonial and imperial histories, thereby rooting both the IR theories in particular spaces and times. Furthermore, she points out that a congenial perspective, this is marxist-feminism, insists on conceptualization of politics that address all systematic forms of oppression and class-struggles.

A marxist-feminist perspective on this case study will thus direct us towards a classist reality of everyday life, as it focuses on exploitation of women not only as labourers but also as domestic workers. Women have to negotiate a division of household labour with the men and children in the family, and their unpaid care work that reproduces the proletariat (or the working class) and functions as a subsidy and buffer for capital often goes unrewarded. Arguments in support of laissez-faire capitalism often silence or completely ignore the significant roles that working-class women play in accumulation of capital; for neoliberalism and

⁶ Renamed Orano, since 2014.

⁷ Mentioned in the introductory paragraph.

⁸ It is true that some periphery countries were able to manipulate the strategic dependency of a core country on its resources for its own economic development, for example, Brazil and Mexico, enabling them to attain a semiperipheral status (Munoz, 1981b:83). Post 2014, Niger has been making progress in its attempt at shifting the strategic dependence of France, more specifically Areva, on its resources into its favour.

capitalism to survive, it not only depends on the production by the existing working class but also on the reproduction of the working class (Marx, 1976:718 cited in Cock, 2018:211). Likewise, Luxton (2014:154) also points out that a “social reproduction” perspective substantiates many struggles directly concerned with standards of living, such as working conditions, labour-wage, family income and access to healthy food and environment. To examine how power and exploitation operates, one needs to look into who takes the responsibility of social reproduction, who benefits from it, and at whose expense.

Furthermore in a socio-economic environment of Africa today, it is the black, indigeneous working-class women who experience disproportionately the direct and indirect hazards of capitalistic exploitation at all fronts— environmental (air and water pollution due to industrial activities), economic (low individual and family income) and social (low disposable income and living standards). A crucial observation that Cynthia Enloe (2014) makes in her *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* is the lack of participation and inclusion of women in international relations. She (2014a:87) points out that women are often reduced to national symbols at the expense of any acknowledgement of them being active participants⁹ in nationalist movements against colonialism, classism, and internationalised capitalist exploitation. As a result, women are left out of any company-community negotiations, thereby marginalising the concerns of women. Nonetheless, with respect to mining-related concerns, there has been a shift in gender-relations as women have come to realise some sense of agency by forming associations, alliances and NGOs such as WiMin¹⁰.

A Feminist-Marxist perspective on contemporary Niger:

After her husband’s death in 1999, and that of several other mine workers, Fatima Taoka described the impact of uranium mining in Niger in her life and the role it played in her husband’s death:

"He was always strong, but then he had nothing but pain and became as thin as a stick... it was because of the dust, there was something evil in the dust."

Rakia Agouma is another widow whose husband died in the year 2009 after having driven trucks containing rocks in the uranium mine for more than three decades; whilst the doctors claimed that he died of malaria, she believes it was occupational cancer that caused his death (Meyer, 2010). Women in Niger, because of gender-specific social positions and stereotypes within the community, suffer unduly from mining’s social, economic, political and environmental impacts. Idrissa et al. (2012b: 465-7) claim that in pre-colonial Niger, women enjoyed some level of sovereign power and were in a position to initiate a divorce, head the household, accumulate personal wealth, but in the contemporary days women are considered an inferior group. They go on to assert that the colonial regime and the Napoleonic code (women are legally inferior to men) abysmally altered the Nigerien society to fit their economic demands. These transformations, including facilitation of vertical social hierarchies, coupled with Islamization that advocated transfer of power and authority to men, led to the annihilation of the status of women in the society. In the post-colonial period, which has been accompanied by aggressive mining, women in Niger are doubly exploited, firstly and directly as labourers and secondly due to their gender-roles of being mothers, wives and daughters (the non-waged labour), which implies that women have to work harder than others to stretch social grants and insufficient wages (of their own and that of other individuals in the family) further. According to the world bank data retrieved from ILO database, the weighted average wage of male workers in Niger dropped from 10.11 per cent in 1991 to 7.68 per cent in 2014, while for female workers it dropped from 6.95 per cent in 1991 to 2.18 per cent in 2014.

Enloe (2014b:259) points out that women’s labour is made cheap by deliberately manipulating notions of femininity shaped by acceptance of masculinity. Furthermore, young girls are employed for unskilled labour, and to reach their fathers and husbands working in the mines, they have to cross terrains prone to cave-ins. These girls and women are not only exposed to physical risks but also suffer from psychological damage due to the hostile environment of the mining sites (International Labour Organization, Bureau for Gender Equality, 2007). The psychological damage also stems from the perpetual loss of life of friends and family members working in the mines that leaves the women no choice but to work in the same mines to provide for their family. With the establishment of anti-extractivist and anti-mining organisations such as MACUA, Highveld Environmental Justice Alliance and WiMin, and efforts by the UN and Greenpeace, Niger has witnessed improvement on all fronts- infrastructure, working conditions, and legal rights. Since 2016, only girls of 15 years of age or above are legally allowed to work. Campaigns, in order to sensitize parents to the hazardous effects of the mining activities, have been conducted with the aim of discouraging child labour and encouraging education. In 2013, Areva donated medical supplies and provided aid to improve healthcare for women living near the mining sites (Niger: AREVA renewed aid for women’s healthcare, 2014). A joint UN and African Union mission (2018) also focussed on encouraging participation of women in regional responses to the existing

⁹ who use their skills, ideas, experiences and goals.

¹⁰ WiMin is a regional alliance, formed in 2013, that aims at encouraging solidarity among women in Africa against extractivism.

environmental, humanitarian and development challenges that Niger and the Sahel region are facing.

II. Discussion and Summary:

With the establishment of military bases, setting up of ‘decolonized communities’, foreign aid, the imperial powers have continued to keep, rather successfully, their former African colonies under their control. Though these former colonies are allowed formal independence, the economic activities and various neo-liberal policies are engineered to keep them politically and economically dependent. West Africa, in particular, is at the core of capitalist globalisation (Mentan, 2018:270). Uranium has played a key role in Niger’s politics, especially in the modelling of its relations with France. Since the discovery of uranium in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the commencement of mining operations, the industry has mostly been at odds with the state. As a result the national government of Niger has become dependent on the revenue from mining activities. Due to lack of access to complementary capital, intermediate inputs and information, Nigerian government has often been unable to benefit from the technological changes in primary production or manufacturing.

It is important to note that the approach is not without errors. A limitation of applying a Neo-Marxist approach to analyse the impact of imperialism on Niger is that the theory of IR does not provide as concrete a solution as it does the analysis of the world economic system. For instance, a solution that the dependency theory advocates is an increased control of trade by state and an inward approach to state development, thus fostering nationalisation of essential industries, also known as import-substitution industrialisation (ISI). However, eventually ISI proved to be a rather unsuccessful strategy as its policies led to economic instability and high inflation, ultimately leading the countries, such as Mexico in 1982, into a debt crisis (Perreault & Martin, 2005:195). Another limitation is that the neo-marxist theory of IR, like Marxism, often fails to emphasise that the market needs to be in harmony with gender and morality in order to benefit everyone. There is no concrete layout, however, Marxism and feminism (and even Environmentalism) need to be juxtaposed, especially in the case of Africa, for a just and radical transformation. A marxist extension of the feminist theory, by its very true nature, helps us bring to light other factors important for a radical social transformation other than the development of factors of production that are premised on men and patriarchal relations. Enloe (2014b:258) asserts that ignoring the struggles and experiences of women is risky as gender politics is highly significant in terms of globalisation, development, division of labour and death.

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