

# Justifications of the Future: Growth-speak and its Shadow Sides in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Repräsentationen des afrikanischen Kontinents behandeln ihn zunehmend als „Zukunftskontinent“, der einen klaren wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Aufschwung vor sich habe. Diese Welle des Optimismus folgt einer vorausgegangenen Welle des Afropessimismus. Der Aufsatz fragt, wessen Ideen und Interessen sich in solchen Diskursen niederschlagen, warum sie gerade heute so virulent werden und wessen Interessen sie dienen. Die Wachstumsrhetorik, so wird deutlich, rechtfertigt die gleichen externen Interventionen, Investitionen und Extraktionen wie die vorausgegangenen Wellen der Rhetorik. Kritische afrikanische Stimmen weisen auf die Widersprüche und Sinnentleertheit der neuen Hyperrhetorik hin und bieten damit alternative, komplexere und historisch klarer verankerte Entwürfe der zukünftigen Einbindung des Kontinents in das globale Wirtschaftsgefüge.

## 1. Introduction

The vocabulary of potentiality and prosperity has come increasingly to dominate many contemporary media, development, business and even scholarly representations of an aggregated “Africa.” It seems that all kinds of people, both off and increasingly on the continent, can’t stop talking about “Africa Rising;” about this being “Africa’s century.” There is talk of African “lions” emerging to rival Asian “tigers;” talk of “a sleeping giant awakening;” talk of Africa being *the* space of “emerging markets” and economic growth, where natural resources, youth, communication technology, remittances and an expanding middle-class are cast as key markers of the continent’s timely (and, implicitly, long-delayed) “integration” into the global economy, as if it had somehow been outside of it

all along. All this fuels talk of Africa's apparently bright future. Indeed there is talk of Africa *being* the future.

This wave of optimism amongst particular pundits raises questions about whose ideas of and interests in Africa and Africa's future are being portrayed through such discourses, why, and why now? What does this largely neoliberal portrait of possibilities in these times reveal, and evoke, with what implications for whom? What or whose realities slip out of sight when associated ideas of "market governance" and the free-flow of global capital(s) in and out of African states are viewed and promoted as the pathways to (everyone's) future? While not able to answer these questions comprehensively here, the present essay considers the juxtaposition of possible and impossible African futures, and tries to reflect on the work that the new *growth-speak* is doing in justifying certain kinds of interventions, investments and extractions related to selectively imagined ends for Africa and Africans. At the same time, it looks at how critical voices especially from within the continent confront the perceived contradictions if not emptiness of some of these hyper-claims of growth and possibility. In so doing, they offer more complex and historically grounded perspectives on the workings of the new (secular) prosperity gospel of and for Africa, as well as alternative visions of its place in the world.

The essay begins by exploring the emergence of the new growth-speak and hyperbole of Africa Rising, to try and understand who is promoting it and why. It pays particular attention to the dominance – and limitations – of GDP as a measure of growth. The following section provides an illustration of the workings of the Africa Rising discourse, as promoted by key multilateral actors featured at an international conference in Maputo in May 2014, entitled "Africa Rising". The next section delves into African counter-narratives to the narrow representations of economic growth and associated visions of the future, while also asking some questions about hope and becoming. A brief conclusion reflects on the future as a field of struggle.

## 2. The Emergence of the (Narratives of the) "New" Africa

From the focus of film festivals in both African and Western capital cities,<sup>1</sup> to features in magazines such as *The Economist* and *Time*, to the speeches of African presidents, ministers and other senior officials, to strategic plans of development banks such as the African Development Bank,<sup>2</sup> to the focus of large multilateral-sponsored conferences (one of which shall be discussed later), this "rising" talk is getting louder and louder, albeit coded in different terminologies. But whether presented in metaphorical (rising) terms or more materially oriented, economistic (growth) terms, it's as if the more often it is pronounced and the more assertive the tone used, the more those doing the pronounc-

1 In November 2014, Copenhagen's annual documentary film festival, CPH:DOX, featured close to a dozen films under a special section called 'Africa Rising'.

2 African Development Bank, At the Center of Africa's Transformation. Strategy for 2013–2022, Abidjan 2013.

ing hope or believe – or try to convince others – that it will become “the” story of Africa. This, in spite of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie’s widely acclaimed warning of “the dangers of a single story.”<sup>3</sup>

Some fifteen years ago, this was not the dominant popular narrative about Africa. In 2000, *The Economist* famously announced Africa to be “the hopeless continent,” “unable to experience growth and development.”<sup>4</sup> This portrait was consistent with a certain scholarly literature during the 1990s and well into the 2000s that highlighted conflict, disorder and state failure across the continent.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, economists focused on Africa’s apparent “slow growth” at best, or “chronic economic failure” at worst,<sup>6</sup> some even speaking of an “African growth tragedy.”<sup>7</sup> As a strong critic of such literature and the deeply flawed methods underpinning its research and conclusions, Morten Jerven<sup>8</sup> has pointed to its misreading of African economic history, “based mainly on observations made during the 1980s and early 1990s, a period when most African economies were experiencing the deepest recession of the twentieth century.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, he has argued against the consequent causal explanations provided such as blaming African states for “bad policy” and especially for “too much state intervention”, and against the misrepresentations (through simplification) of Africa’s multiple and uneven economic realities. The wide-scale insistence on neoliberal structural adjustment policies across the continent by key multilateral organisations like the IMF during the 1980s and 90s promoted these as a corrective to the assumed bad policies of African states. This has hardly been the focus of deep self-reflection amongst those economists promoting this approach, despite evidence of its core failures.

Returning for now to the more popular realm, with increasing evidence of recorded economic growth across the continent during the 2000s, by 2011 *The Economist* had begun to rethink its view of Africa’s hopelessness, albeit still in over-simplified terms.<sup>10</sup> In 2013 it published a more nuanced “special report” written by Oliver August, almost equally famous by now, in which it claimed somewhat ingeniously that it would “paint a picture

3 C. Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Ted Talks, June 2009. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en) (accessed 1 February 2016).

4 M. Jerven, *Africa. Why Economists Get it Wrong*, London 2015, p.1.

5 A. Mazrui, *The Blood of Experience: The Failed State and Political Collapse in Africa*, in: *World Policy Journal* 12 (1995) 1, pp. 28-34; J. Herbst, *Responding to State Failure in Africa*, in: *International Security* 21 (1997) 3, pp. 120-144; P. Chabal and J. P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford 1999; R. Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*, Cambridge 2008; D. Branch and N. Cheeseman, *Democratization, Sequencing, and State Failure in Africa: Lessons from Kenya*, in: *African Affairs* 108 (2009) 430, pp. 1-26.

6 P. Collier and J. W. Gunning, *Why Has Africa Grown Slowly?*, in: *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13 (1999) 3, pp. 3-22; P. Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, New York 2007.

7 W. Easterly and R. Levine, *Africa’s Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions*, in: *Quarterly Journal of Economics* CXII (1997), pp.1203-1250.

8 M. Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It*, Ithaca NY 2013; M. Jerven, *Africa. Why Economists Get It Wrong*. London 2015.

9 Jerven, *Africa*, p. 8.

10 It published an article on 3 December 2011 titled ‘The Hopeful Continent: Africa Rising’: <http://www.economist.com/node/21541015> (accessed 1 February 2016).

at odds with Western images of Africa”; images it had itself been part of reproducing. While the earlier report in 2011 had drawn largely on conventional economic data to assert Africa’s economic growth trends, the 2013 special report was more diverse in its empirical sources. The author had actually visited some 23 countries on the continent himself. According to August

*War, famine and dictators have become rarer. People still struggle to make ends meet, just as they do in China and India. They don’t always have enough to eat, they may lack education, they despair at daily injustices and some want to emigrate. But most Africans no longer fear a violent or premature end and can hope to see their children do well. That applies across much of the continent...*<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the more anecdotal basis of many contemporary media claims of improvement on the continent, the aforesaid more conventional, economic representation of growth has continued to focus on classic indicators, most significantly gross domestic product (GDP). In this vein, we are informed by Africa Economic Outlook 2015, for example, that Africa’s overall GDP has been rising positively over the past decade, and is “expected to strengthen to 4.5% in 2015 and 5% in 2016”. This is despite the dip or “subdued expansion” in 2013 (3.5%) and 2014 (3.9%) due to a slowing down of the world economy after the 2008–09 global economic crisis.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, foreign direct investment (FDI) is said to be rising, projected to reach USD 73.5 billion in 2015.<sup>13</sup> This increase is apparently “underpinned by increasing greenfield investment from China, India and South Africa” in particular.<sup>14</sup> Remittances from African diaspora residents across the globe are also said to have increased “six-fold since 2000 and are projected to reach USD 64.6 billion in 2015.”<sup>15</sup> Although Egypt and Nigeria are said to receive the bulk of the flows, the pattern is significant for many more countries. The African Development Bank, among others, reports that “between 2000 and 2010, six of the world’s fastest growing economies were in Africa.”<sup>16</sup>

The same report also notes that “six of the 10 most unequal countries in the world are African.”<sup>17</sup> This concession to such unevenness across the continent and to ongoing challenges and constraints to growth is not unusual in itself. Most observers would acknowledge that, for example, GDP levels – and growth rates more generally – necessarily vary by country and across regions, depending on a range of inter-linked geographical, his-

11 See The Economist, 2 March 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21572377-african-lives-have-already-greatly-improved-over-past-decade-says-oliver-august> (accessed 1 February 2016).

12 Africa Economic Outlook 2015, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/outlook/forecast/> (accessed 16 December 2015).

13 Ibid.

14 Greenfield investment refers to investment in “new operational facilities from the ground up. In addition to building new facilities, most parent companies also create new long-term jobs in the foreign country by hiring new employees.” Investopedia, <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/greenfield.asp> (accessed 16 December 2015).

15 Africa Economic Outlook, 2015, p. 12.

16 Ibid., p. 11.

17 Ibid., p. 12.

torical, political, social, environmental and other factors. However, as shall be illustrated later, data that might complicate the main GDP paradigm and Africa Rising narrative – such as persistent structural inequalities, chronic political crises, diverse forms of social exclusion and so on – seem to be drowned out by the present brand of Afro-optimism with its celebratory exaggeration of actual growth or growth potential.<sup>18</sup> Irrespective of any contradictory evidence, the same growth figures are repeated uncritically time and again by those intent on (over)emphasising Africa's rise.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, there is almost a religious-like devotion to GDP. Fioramonti<sup>20</sup> calls it “the world's most powerful number.” This refers to its far-reaching influence on international and national policies and on private sector investment decisions that affect millions in Africa and elsewhere. But as he notes, “GDP tells us nothing about the health of an economy, let alone its sustainability and the overall impact on human welfare. GDP is simply a measure of market consumption, which has been improperly adopted to assess economic performance.”<sup>21</sup> Nor does it say anything of the estimated USD 1.4 trillion losses to the continent “in illicit financial outflows and corrupt deals” between 1980 and 2009.<sup>22</sup> Nor does it reflect on the non-renewability of many of the key natural resources that have been central to fueling growth in some countries, or the fact that the Human Development Index in many of these countries remains amongst the lowest in the world.<sup>23</sup> Nor does GDP reveal anything about Africa's rising debt levels that have accompanied increased borrowing alongside growth.<sup>24</sup>

The intention here is not to pose a dichotomy between Africa rising or failing. It is not to stand on either side of the pendulum that swings between the Afro-pessimism of negative stereotypes that has focused on crisis, impoverishment and impossibility, and the Afro-optimism of unbridled potentiality contained in the Africa Rising discourse. Both positions in their simplified versions are limited by reductionism; by their lack of nuance and complexity, and historical thinness. Clearly, the realities of growth and its other sides across Africa are much more layered, multi-dimensional and dynamically evolving than a single story of any shade. The key focus here is less on uncovering or asserting these complex realities *per se* than on exploring the intensification and growing dominance of the Africa Rising discourse in itself. The next section presents a particularly revealing illustration of the workings of this discourse, as promoted by key actors in the international development-and-investment community (the distinction between development and investment having become much harder to identify).

18 I. Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS – Diversifying Dependency*, London 2014.

19 Jerven, *Africa*.

20 L. Fioramonti, *Gross Domestic Problem: The Politics Behind the World's Most Powerful Number*, London 2013.

21 L. Fioramonti, *Africa Rising? Think Again*, <https://ke.boell.org/2014/03/04/africa-rising-think-again> (accessed 1 February 2016).

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 P. Adam, 'Africa Debt Rising', in: *Counterpoints 1* (2015), pp. 1-13.

### 3. “Africa Rising”: Reframing the Terms of “Helping” Africa”

This section focuses on an international conference entitled ‘Africa Rising’, sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and hosted by the Mozambique government in its capital city Maputo in May 2014. It was a grand event, punctuated with perfectly selected, internationally renowned, keynote speakers whose collective praise for the continent is key to manufacturing the growing trope of prosperous potentiality in Africa. However, as each speaker explicitly or implicitly advised, such potential needs wise and careful management, not least with the supportive expertise, finance and stewardship of their own and other Western organisations. Thus for example, a beamed video of former US President Bill Clinton greeted the audience of high-level African ministers, international diplomats and aid bureaucrats in Maputo with warm appraisal and appreciation of Africa’s “remarkable economic progress” in recent times. This was impressive, he noted; yet the new prosperity needed to be shared broadly. This new spurt of growth, he said, needs to be “inclusive growth,” a view shared by several others including the main keynote speaker, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the IMF. This new dynamic of economic growth, Clinton continued, presented the continent with “a future of shared opportunities and responsibilities,” a future which his own foundation wished to support. He then generously offered to be part of making sure “that Africa will rise together.” Indeed, he and his foundation promised that “we will help Africa to rise.”

Speaking after Clinton was Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, and now, among other things, chair of the Africa Progress Panel whose impressive collection of leading African and Western political and business figures, promotes sustainable development in Africa. “Africa Rising is a reality” he began, further asserting that “this is an era of enormous opportunities”. Yet while joining the chorus of praise singers of Africa’s progress, he raised key concerns about this new growth-spurge being largely jobless growth. This is of particular concern in a continent whose dominant demographic is that of youth which, while being one of Africa’s acknowledged resources (“the demographic dividend”) is also projected by some as being one of its potential threats, if unemployment continues to rise.<sup>25</sup> In a related vein, several scholars working in this field have underscored the phenomenon of “growth without poverty reduction”<sup>26</sup> and “growth without economic transformation.”<sup>27</sup> Picking up on the fact that positive commodity prices had benefitted the continent in general in recent years, Annan nonetheless pointed to the need to keep track of where these revenues are going.

25 T. Mkandawire, The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial “Rebel Movements”, in *Africa: Toward an Explanation of the Violence Against the Peasantry*, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 4 (2002) 2, pp. 181–215; for a more critical perspective, see J. Munive, The Army of “Unemployed” Young People, in: *Young* 18, 2010, 3, pp. 321–338.

26 T. Kelsall, *Business, Politics, and the State in Africa: Challenging the Orthodoxies on Growth and Transformation*, London 2013.

27 L. Whitfield, *Growth without Economic Transformation: Economic Impacts of Ghana’s Political Settlement*, DIIS/EPP Working Paper 28 (2011).

The IMF's Christine Lagarde gave the final keynote address. She spoke in similarly congratulatory tones about Sub-Saharan Africa "clearly taking off." Two-thirds of the continent's countries, she noted, have had more than ten years of uninterrupted growth. Some of this had translated into improvements in education and health care, in increased road and electricity coverage, in substantially greater access to mobile technology. Averages of 5-10% growth had been recorded in many countries on the continent. Resource-rich economies like Angola reached 22.6% growth in 2007. "But let's be realistic and let's be frank," she said; "revenues are captured by too few and are not always applied widely." She gave mining-dominated countries as a prime example of this problem. The IMF as much as others clearly sees itself as well-placed to serve its African member states with the kind of advice that will reduce such narrow revenue redistribution, especially in terms of promoting a strong "governance" agenda and offering advice on "sound financial policies." Without any direct reference to the IMF's own poor record on the continent with its flagship structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 90s, Lagarde reassured her audience that the Fund had conscientiously "listened to the voices" – who these voices belonged to was unclear – and had reformed some of its instruments away from the more rigid policies of the past.

"The future will be yours," Lagarde proffered. Again it was unclear to whom this gesture of reassurance was being offered beyond those in the conference hall. One imagines she may have been speaking to the presumed growing middle-class on the continent,<sup>28</sup> whose numbers are expected to have access to, or soon to have access to, the presumed universal signifiers of modernity such as mobile phones, internet cafés and urban malls. Clearly though, this version of "rising Africa" is not likely to reach many millions of Africans who live well below or close to the poverty line. At the same time, though given less air-time, she also noted the risks of such futures being dependent on an over-reliance on natural resource exploitation and especially mineral extraction, and their vulnerability to changes in commodity prices. In addition, with reference to the extraordinary expansion of technology across much of the continent, while this could foster further growth, she acknowledged that it could also deepen exclusions and inequality.

Admittedly, while the narrative of Africa Rising is powerfully reproduced and promoted at the highest levels of diplomacy and development, it is tempered to some extent by the recognition that there is a more complex set of dynamics at play that needs attention. On the one hand, as I have already suggested, depending on the interests at stake, consideration of the problems and risks associated with or existing alongside Africa's growth are largely relegated to the footnotes of the main storyline. At least this is so for the more deeply-rooted questions of structural inequality generated or reinforced by neoliberal policies in themselves, in both their global and domestic articulations. On the other

28 Figures for the apparent rise of the African middle class have themselves come under critical scrutiny (Fioramonti, Gross Domestic Problem), particularly when such claims of expansion are based on statistical surveys that define the middle-class in Africa as being those with a per capita daily consumption of between USD 2 and USD 20 in 2005 PPP (purchasing power parity). See M. Mubila, M.-S. Ben Aissa and C. Leyeka Lufumpa, *The Middle of the Pyramid: Dynamics of the Middle Class in Africa*, Market Brief, African Development Bank (2011).

hand, there are many challenges that can be, and are, effectively “rendered technical”<sup>29</sup> in ways that make them amenable to technocratic “solutions” such as capacity building and policy advice on “good governance,” economic policy, and so on. Such assistance is provided through various mechanisms by the kinds of organisations given a key platform at the Maputo conference. This kind of offer of external expertise to address “Africa’s problems” – underpinned by a presumption of appropriate stewardship – is in no way new.<sup>30</sup> Neither is the possibility of finding allies among local state, political or business elites willing to facilitate this kind of relationship: a pattern at least as old as colonialism. What may be relatively new, however, is the extent of the shift from developmentalism to neoliberalism as the key framework for external intervention, or in any case their increased imbrication. Already in the 1980s and 90s, structural adjustment conditionalities had become the norm in many places on the continent. As noted by Dolan and Roll:<sup>31</sup> “By the 1990s, the development industry was inextricably entwined with this broader neoliberal project, embedding its core tenets of economic liberalization, privatization, and market discipline in policies and programs for African development.” Increasingly investment and trade, as opposed to aid, have become the dominant mantras of engagement for external development actors, with the local private sector in its various guises – including local business and political elites often associated with ruling parties, but also the poor themselves as “micro-entrepreneurs”<sup>32</sup> – as the preferred partner. African states and their official planning and regulatory frameworks, by contrast, are (still) viewed as something to largely circumvent. This latter discourse of mistrust in African states echoes earlier (1980s) anti-statist discourses by the World Bank among others, as well as the more recent “failed state” thinking amongst both scholars and policy makers.<sup>33</sup> Both ideological and material interests continue to fuel the efforts by different agencies to secure the conditions for liberalizing market access on the continent.<sup>34</sup> This need has deepened in recent years, as fears of diminishing natural resources and competition over global access has come to the fore.<sup>35</sup> There is little overt discussion in public fora such as the Maputo conference of the fact that some of the intensified attention of Western countries to growth in Africa, and efforts at positive positioning of key Western organisations and corporations relative to the continent’s ‘new opportunities,’ comes precisely at a time when such fears are growing. This is exacerbated by the emergence of alternative

29 T. M. Li, *The Will to Improve. Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*, Durham 2007.

30 E. M. Roe, *Except-Africa: Postscript to a Special Section on Development Narratives*, in: *World Development* 23 (1995) 6, pp. 1065–1069; T. M. Li, *The Will to Improve. Governmentality*.

31 C. Dolan and K. Roll, *Capital’s New Frontier: From “Unusable” Economies to Bottom-of-the-Pyramid Markets in Africa*, in: *African Studies* 56 (2013) 3, p.126.

32 *Ibid.* p. 123; A. Schwittay, *The Marketization of Poverty*, in: *Current Anthropology* 52 (2011) 3, pp. 571–582.

33 Herbst, *Responding to State Failure in Africa*.

34 S. Bracking, *Structural Adjustment: Why It Wasn’t Necessary and Why It Did work*, in: *Review of African Political Economy* 26 (1999) 80, pp. 207–226; P. D. Little, *Economic and Political Reform in Africa. Anthropological Perspectives*, Bloomington 2014.

35 S. Borras et al., *The Politics of Biofuels, Land and Agrarian Achange: Editors’ Introduction*, in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37 (2010) 4, pp. 575–592.

poles of (economic) power such as China, Brazil, India, Russia and South Africa (collectively referred to as BRICS), which are increasingly active in partnering with African states and elites on the continent as investors and traders,<sup>36</sup> and in some places also as settlers.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the above, a more general argument is being made here that much of what fuels the Africa Rising discourse, at least in the form expressed in the Maputo conference example, is at least partly an expression of neoliberalism. Taking into account Little's<sup>38</sup> reminder that the term neoliberalism is often used too promiscuously to be of analytical value, I would nonetheless claim that it is relevant to locate at least some of the logic of the Africa Rising narrative, and intensified growth-speak, within such a frame. This a frame ideologically defined by a project of expanding and universalizing the free-market. But in addition, having gained such dominance in public life, it "has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world."<sup>39</sup> Here, however, one might take note of Ong's challenge to Harvey amongst others, concerning the limits of standardized, totalising models of neoliberalism, or what she refers to as "Neoliberalism with a big N."<sup>40</sup> Even while neoliberalism does indeed pervade the world now in ways that may have been difficult to imagine of any ideology before the electronic age, and even though it tends to, or tries to, dominate how the future itself can be imagined, it is also constantly being challenged, including by astute critics on the African continent, as the next section demonstrates.

#### 4. Alternative African Perspectives on "Africa Rising"

Single stories are fictions and fabrications in themselves, and hegemonic single stories, backed up by entrenched power and wealth – even overly-positive ones that counter and compensate for older, negative ones – are especially dangerous. They mask multiple and contradictory layers of reality, and multiple voices with alternative stories and visions. Importantly then, one needs to pay attention to other critical versions of Africa's changing conditions, especially among those living the reality themselves. In an editorial in May 2013 on the popular (and ironically titled) website, *Africa is a Country*,<sup>41</sup> the editor notes that in several postings by Africans on the site, the discourse of "Africa Rising" has been "debunked". The postings, he says, "make it quite clear that a future in Africa worth striving for is beyond the growth of the GDP, the rise of the ill-defined African

36 Taylor, *Africa Rising?*

37 M. Lee, *Africa's World Trade. Informal Economies and Globalization from Below*, London 2014.

38 Little, *Economic and Political Reform in Africa*.

39 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York 2007, p. 3.

40 A. Ong, *Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology*, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007) 1, pp. 3–8.

41 Find at: <http://africasacountry.com/> (accessed 1 February 2016).

middle class or the increase in return on investment” (ibid). Kenyan journalist and writer Parselelo Kantai<sup>42</sup>, offers a somewhat harsher critique: the “Africa Rising” discourse, he suggests, is an “insidious little fiction manufactured by global corporate finance.”

Among other important critics of the simplified growth-speak about Africa is Johannesburg-based international scholar and public intellectual, Professor Achille Mbembe. Mbembe is also particularly concerned with rethinking “the category of the future” more generally, and Africa’s relationship to it. In an interview with a Swiss newspaper in early 2013, Mbembe talked of the historical era of late colonialism and of liberation struggles in Africa, when visions of “the future” for Africans were fueled by “a constant engagement with the forces of the present that foreclosed the possibility of freedom.”<sup>43</sup> But now, Mbembe noted, economic dogma and “the time of the market” under current capitalist conditions, has fragmented notions of both the present and the future. There is an urgent need, he argues, for “reopening up a space not only for imagination, but also for the politics of the possible.”<sup>44</sup>

Mbembe recognized many of the same positive trends in economic growth in Africa that Lagarde and others speak of, such as increased rates of return to investment and a growing middle class. He also acknowledged some of the same risks they note, such as reliance on extractive sectors, vulnerability to volatile commodity prices, continued threats of political instability, and so on. In addition, he spoke of the paradox of growth alongside joblessness, limited public sector investment, and deepening social inequalities. However, Mbembe’s approach to the risks and vulnerabilities of Africa’s new “growth” context are quite different from those of the IMF and many others of the West. While interested in optimising the potentials of the future for Africans, he nonetheless emphasised the need for Africa *to become its own centre*. This was posed as a necessary counter to Europe’s deepening fortress policies of self-containment and isolation, and its intensified antagonism towards Africans coming to Europe, contradicting its rhetorical celebration of, and market-oriented desire to, tap into “Africa on the move”. Among other things, Mbembe believes that the work of “becoming its own centre” would require of Africa “to demilitarize its politics as a precondition for the democratization of its economy.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, he envisages that the continent would “have to become a vast regional space of circulation which means that it will have to dismantle its own internal boundaries, open itself up to the new forms of migration, internal as well as external”. He believes that such practices are beginning to happen to some extent in places like Mozambique and Angola, “where some Portuguese are coming back.”<sup>46</sup>

42 Cited in Taylor, *Africa Rising*, p. 3.

43 Th. Blaser, *Africa, Continent of the Future: An Interview with Achille Mbembe*, <http://www.tlaxcala-int.org/article.asp?reference=11071> (accessed 4 January 2016).

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

In responding to a broader question posed to him concerning what the African contribution to a future world might be, one of the key aspects Mbembe emphasized was the notion of multiplicity:

*Look at any single thing on the continent, it always comes under the sign of the multiple: the idea of one God is totally foreign to the continent, there have always been many Gods; the forms of marriage; the forms of currencies; the social forms themselves always come under the sign of multiplicity. One of the tragedies of colonialism has been to erase that element of multiplicity which was a resource for social development in pre-colonial Africa and which was replaced by the paradigm of 'the one', the kind of monotheistic paradigm.*

For Mbembe – echoing Adichie’s warning of the “danger of the single story” – this opening out towards multiplicity offers valuable new perspectives to others “for the making of the continent, its remaking, but also for the making of the world.”<sup>47</sup>

Such a visionary perspective on African future-making as Mbembe offers is important, but not always easy to sustain. So for example, in the mid-2000s, at a particular moment in Zimbabwe’s escalating political and economic crisis, when its destructive effects were already in evidence, a well-educated young man I’d given a ride to in Harare said to me: “Mugabe has stolen my future.” Besides the personal hardship reflected in this young man’s situation, it reverberated with a wider tragedy: of countless hopeful life-trajectories crudely curtailed through their selective disassembly by the Mugabe regime during the 2000s. This was undertaken in the service of a complex project of historically-driven political restitution and populist resource redistribution on the one hand, and violent party-state territoriality and related opportunistic elite accumulation on the other. The “stolen future” of many citizens defined as disloyal to the regime was that much harder to swallow given the rhetoric of radical, inclusive change for black Zimbabweans that Mugabe and his ruling Zanu PF party had initially used to justify wide-scale land invasions and land redistribution through the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, supposedly intended to lead to economic redistribution more generally.

At the same time, this lament of intentional denial by one’s own state of the possibilities of progress, of becoming something more in the future – whether at a national or individual level – evoked reflections that would preoccupy me for years. These included questions concerning what it is that generates and constitutes notions of “the future” at all? What elements are required to establish a sense of temporal unfolding that implicitly holds the promise of more or better? How do particular futures get imagined and expressed? How do various visions of the future, of progress and possibility, gain currency and get recognised and legitimized – indeed become hegemonic – and/or are contested and rejected by counter-hegemonic perspectives?

47 Ibid.

What is fascinating from a philosophical standpoint is the remarkable persistence of a sense of there being something other than or more than what there is in the present – or of one becoming (as an individual, a community, a nation) other or more – despite often extreme conditions of *impossibility* in that very present. This belief in what Bourdieu<sup>48</sup> has called “the forthcoming,” or having what Gabriel Marcel<sup>49</sup> calls “the feeling that time is not closed to us,”<sup>50</sup> approximates to hope, though for some that might be considered a term based more in faith than reality. Within such a framing of openness of and to the future, according to anthropologist Michael Jackson,<sup>51</sup> this is not merely about optimism concerning other or better times. More specifically it frames desires and expectations of some kind of *moreness*, even among those with little empirical reason to hope for more. Building on his long association with Sierra Leone, a country which has seen more than its fair share of “unliveability” (measured by UN criteria), Jackson notes:

*Though it is rare to meet people who are completely and permanently satisfied with their lot, it is rarer to meet people who expect nothing of life, abjectly accepting the status quo, never imagining that their situations could or should be socially, spiritually, or materially improved.*

Such longings have fuelled change in many times and places.

## 5. Conclusion: The Future as a Field of Struggle

Africa Rising, in itself, is quite pointedly a narrative – perhaps an elastic narrative – of futurity, of becoming, of *moreness*, of hope. One might even argue that its elasticity allows for different socially positioned and spatially located actors to identify with it, perhaps even to own its meaning and embellish or redefine it in situated ways. However, this does not diminish the work it does in reinforcing a hegemonic global discourse of neoliberalism geared towards the infinite marketization of all spaces, and that closes down conversations of structural and social inequality. At the same time, it implies a certain kind of diminished or lesser past that needs remedial attention in order to “rise,” to reach greater heights, to improve: a familiar trope from an earlier era. Yet while not only being narrated by external actors, there is some necessary skepticism about what this growth hyperbole represents. Whose interests does it reflect and legitimise? What discursive work does it do, and in what ways is it being countered or modified to reflect other positions and realities?

Clearly, “the future” is not a fixed point on the horizon. It is something always there but never quite here. It is a generative notion of ‘what is yet to come,’ or of what might or could be. It is also always a field of struggle, imaginatively, ideologically, discursively,

48 P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 206–245.

49 G. Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, New York 1962.

50 Both cited in M. Jackson, *Life Within Limits. Well-being in a World of Want*, Durham 2011.

51 *Ibid.*

materially. One possible way of exploring this field is through juxtaposing discourses, and juxtaposing what we know of different realities: letting the contradictions reveal, in themselves, what the complexities mean for whom.