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African Migrant Workers and German Post-Growth Society

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Die DFG-Kollegforscher_innengruppe „Landnahme, Beschleunigung, Aktivierung. Dynamik und (De-) Stabilisierung moderner Wachstumsgesellschaften" – kurz: „Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften" – setzt an der soziologischen Diagnose multipler gesellschaftlicher Umbruchs- und Krisenphänomene an, die in ihrer Gesamtheit das überkommene Wachstumsregime moderner Gesellschaften in Frage stellen. Die strukturellen Dynamisierungsimperative der kapitalistischen Moderne stehen heute selbst zur Disposition: Die Steigerungslogik fortwährender Landnahmen, Beschleunigungen und Aktivierungen bringt weltweit historisch neuartige Gefährdungen der ökonomischen, ökologischen und sozialen Reproduktion hervor. Einen Gegenstand in Veränderung – die moderne Wachstumsgesellschaft – vor Augen, zielt das Kolleg auf die Entwicklung von wissenschaftlichen Arbeitsweisen und auf eine Praxis des kritischen Dialogs, mittels derer der übliche Rahmen hochgradig individualisierter oder aber projektförmig beschränkter Forschung überschritten werden kann. Fellows aus dem In- und Ausland suchen gemeinsam mit der Jenaer Kollegforscher_innengruppe nach einem Verständnis gegenwärtiger Transformationsprozesse, um soziologische Expertise in jene gesellschaftliche Frage einzubringen, die nicht nur die europäische Öffentlichkeit in den nächsten Jahren bewegen wird: Lassen sich moderne Gesellschaften auch anders stabilisieren als über wirtschaftliches Wachstum?

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Zusammenfassung

Unter Bezugnahme auf die Geschichte neoliberaler Enteignung und Verelendung in Afrika, der daraus resultierenden Migration auf der Suche nach Lebensunterhalt und die Kämpfe afrikanischer (migrantischer) ArbeiterInnen in Deutschland sowie ihrer Praktiken der Zugehörigkeit postuliert das Working Paper, dass ein nachhaltiger Versuch des Aufbaus einer solidarischen Postwachstumsgesellschaft die Lage der „Ausländer" und ihre Kämpfe ernst nehmen müssen, da diese integral für die Kämpfe der Arbeiterklasse und der Armen in Deutschland sind.

Abstract

Drawing on the history of neoliberal dispossession and impoverishment in Africa, consequent migration in search of livelihood and the struggles of African (migrant) workers in Germany as well as their practices of belonging, this paper posits that a sustainable attempt at constructing a post-growth solidary society must take seriously the condition and struggles of ''outsiders'' who are integral to the struggles of the working class and the poor in Germany.

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The last shall be the first.
Frantz Fanon [The Wretched of the Earth]

Introduction

This working paper sets out to do three things: (1) briefly outline the application of neoliberalism in Africa and attendant migration of Africans to Germany, (2) trace the social location of a category of African migrants in Germany to a sphere of class exploitation and political nativism I call the *ademocratic* realm of social ordering (3), put forward an alternative model of belonging based on residency and open political community as opposed to the dominant nativist understanding of belonging in Germany. As a contribution to the Research Group on Post-Growth Societies thematic area of *Democracy*, I argue that existing democracies, including Germany's social democratic variant, are compatible with political and social exclusion and extreme exploitation. Accordingly, a fundamentally meaningful democracy would have to set itself the task of challenging all forms of exploitation and exclusion. In the case of Germany today, it is my contention that the place of migrants in the polity and economy means that their struggles for equality must be a *fundamental* - not an *additive* – part of any critique of the limits of growth and the mappings of the outlines of a post-growth emancipatory society.

I Neoliberalism and Contemporary African Migration

Castles and Miller (2009) proclaim that we live in the *age of migration*. More people are said to have moved from their places of regular residence in the last four decades than at any time in recorded human history. This wave of human movement is driven by old forces – economic need, conflict, and curiosity – and new-fangled human and nature induced threats such as environmental destruction. Africa is features prominently in these movements (ibid). For Zeleza (2005), the primary driving factor behind migration within and outside of Africa is the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAPs) by African governments under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) beginning in the late 1970s. This was against the backdrop of a generalized high indebtedness of African countries that peaked in the 1970s (Adesina, Graham and Olukoshi 2006; Soludo and Mkandawire 2003). Foremost tenets of SAPs such as liberalization of the economy, privatization of public enterprises, retrenchment of workers from the public sector initially culminated into the emigration of mainly skilled workers in the 1970s (Adepoju 2005).

Far-reaching cuts to public expenditure on education, water supply, electricity, and health care particularly exposed the most vulnerable sections of the African population to extreme poverty (Soludo and Mkandawire 2003). The near uniformity of SAPs policies across the African continent rendered most parts of the African continent into no-go areas for potential migrants. Nonetheless, people moved to countries within the continent that they considered relatively better off. For example, Nigeria became

an attractive destination for people from the adjustment-stricken countries in the West African sub-region. (Zeleza 2005; Adepoju 2005).

The acceleration of the socio-economic difficulties reconfigured the gender demographics of African migration (Adepoju 2004). The initial wave of the migration was male-dominated. Over time increasing numbers of women began to actively seek livelihood for themselves and their families outside of their countries of regular residence and outside of the African continent. This is the outcome of the shift of responsibility to women when a male breadwinner is no longer capable of providing for the family. Faced with mounting familial responsibilities and worsening living conditions while having little or no income, both middle class and working class women increasingly resorted to migration as a way to obtain a livelihood. The result is that today in both Nigeria and Burkina Faso, for example, women make up the bulk of the non-resident population (Adepoju 2005).

Following Harvey (2000), I conceive of neoliberal globalization as a continuation of the long existing relations of capitalist exploitation across space that directs resources from one portion of the world to another and at every locale across class lines. Contemporary migration - whose roots lie in the implementation of SAPs- - is a response by ordinary people to dispossession through neoliberal globalization. A dispossession through organized class transfer of resources that leaves ordinary people with little option but to trail the footpaths of capital to the historic and new centers it carves. The movement of proletarian Africans to Europe, North America and portions of Africa is an act of staking a claim to resources in direct opposition to state and capital erected barriers. This in no way dismisses the micro and actor-based approach to understanding migration that rightly emphasize people's agency and the importance of social networks in the migration process. The approach taken here foregrounds the actor agency within the primary drivers of such movements – a geography of unequal accumulation. Actors, networks and group agency regarding the decision to migrate, where to migrate to, and the initial settlement arrangement is a case of ordinary people acting out their individual and collective hopes and desires.

Contemporary African migration is therefore an instance of a global trend of proletarian movement across the world in response to neoliberal globalization. African migration as part of this constellation is an outcome of the application of neoliberal thinking to public policies across the world. The vulnerable, especially women, who already bear the burden of social arrangements of domination and unequal economic structures, are further marginalized and forced to seek livelihoods outside of their places of regular residence.

II Views of Migration in Germany

Consequent upon the longstanding geography of unequal accumulation (Wallerstein 2011; Harvey 2005), the age of migration largely follows capitalism's historic patterns of spatial inequality, within limits

(Castles and Miller 2003). Thus, some countries are mostly sending regions while others predominantly serve as receiving centres. Germany was, and remains, an important receiving centre. As of 2010, 19.3% of the entire German population had a migration background while foreigners officially constitute 7.9% of the total population. The figures for net migration for 2012 stood at 369,000 (Körner, Puch and Wingerter 2013). In spite of the consistently significant in-flow of migrants, and substantial evidence to the contrary, German political elites have until recently insisted that Germany is not a country of migration. The historic roots of this thinking can be located in the 19th century when German nation builders committed to the *Volkstum* prioritized the control of the immigration of Polish workers. The fear then was two-pronged: Firstly, that the Polish migrants would form an ethnic alliance with German-Poles, a dangerous possibility in the eyes of those committed to building a *Reich* out of native Germans. Max Weber (1893) for example saw the immigration of Polish workers as displacing native Germans from their *Lebensraum*. He therefore provided ammunition to the widespread fear of *Überfremdung* by arguing that the in-migration of Polish workers to portions of East Germany led to the out-migration of native Germans. This was the second fear of migration. To forestall this, workers were recruited via agencies and middlemen from Poland to work in Germany for limited periods of time after which they had to leave the country given the limited validity of their work permits. The limited recruitment initiative was meant to prevent the contamination of the *Volk* by workers of supposed inferior racial stock. The initiative also had another function: it was advantageous to employers as it kept down the cost of labour, especially on the farms, where seasonal employment was the norm and organized workers were struggling for better working conditions and standardized employment (cf. Herbert 1990).

The requirement for cheap labour by employers and the propagation of the fear of *Überfremdung* were jointly responsible for the similar assumption that Turkish, Moroccan, and Tunisian *Gastarbeiters* were a transient source of labour that would have to return to their 'places of origin' at a time when their labour can be dispensed with. This was a calming thought that proponents of the *Gastarbeiter* scheme used to allay the fears of opponents of the scheme uncomfortable with what they saw as the importation of foreigners (Herbert1990).

Carduck, Kronberg and Nipper (2008) have argued that the lack of a deliberate effort by the German state to facilitate the social participation of migrants in Germany is responsible for the creation of seemingly self-contained national and/or ethnic migrant communities that allegedly interact mainly with themselves. For them, migration denialism and the consequent absence of integration policy resulting from the long-held view by successive German governments that the migrant is only a temporary source of labour who will eventually return to her/his home country, shifted the burden for social participation solely to the migrant. It was in the migrant's hand to navigate the socio-cultural world if s/he desires to be socially active (Kvistad 1998). De jure this mindset appears to have changed with the introduction of an integration package that includes specialized language classes to facilitate the integration of migrants, among other measures.

III Africans and Germany: absent presence

The migration of Africans into Germany in significant numbers is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, Africans have historically lived in Germany since the 14th century. Indeed there was a settlement next to Kassel that was called "Mohrenkolonie Mulag" which was inhabited by Africans, most of whom arrived in Germany as court servants, slaves, or military band drummers (Mazon and Steingroever 2005). Africans were then revered in the German social imaginary. This was before the rise of eugenics and its attempts to hierarchically rank its phantasmal distinct human races. Further African presence in Germany was mediated by German colonial and imperial expansions in Togo, Namibia and East Africa. The Ghanaian born 18th century philosopher Wilhelm Anton Amoo is one example of the early African presence in Germany (ibid).

The sporadic early movements from Africa to Germany took a decisive turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Africans reeling under social and economic difficulties and related civil conflicts sought livelihood and refuge outside the continent (Tonah 2007). Germany became attractive due to its requirement for labour at the time (Adepoju 2005). For example, significant numbers of Ghanaians moved to the cities of Hamburg and Düsseldorf and created a music sub-culture known as Burger hi-life[1]. To date, the word 'burger' is a status symbol in Ghana, used to refer to someone who lives outside the country and who is perceived to be economically well-off.

Overtime, both the settled and new African migrants in Germany diversified their geographical radii. Cities like Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt attracted substantial numbers of new migrants. Frankfurt in particular became home to a number of African migrants due to its economic strength and a cosmopolitan outlook. Today, Africans reside in and around the city of Frankfurt with most working in different service sectors – from cleaning firms to the post office. A handful run businesses while others simply manage to get by doing odd jobs that are intermittently available (Garba 2012).

IV From precarity to precarity

The German welfare state is under strain (Dörre, Lessenich and Rosa 2015). The right-wing identifies migrants, the unemployed, and welfare recipients as the culprits. Those of progressive persuasions identify neoliberalism as the driver of the 'Third World' condition present in Germany. While both the right-wing and those of progressive persuasion will consider their views to be in fundamental opposition, they are in reality united by an ahistorical view of the world. For both see the world as disconnected: Germany, and by extension Europe, is perceived as a region of self-generated prosperity while the third world stands for self-incapacitation. Nothing can be farther from the truth. The reality is

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[1] Burger hi-life is as a music genre combines West African drum music and German instrumentals into a new synthesis. The other dimension of the burger culture is dressing component. Headlined by *Pimpinis* where men tuck-in to almost to the waist. Men and women wear jerry curls, long gold necklaces and very pronounced rings.

that the world has been intricately connected prior to the emergence of Europe as a political and economic force. (Boatca 2015; Sitas et al. 2014; Wallerstein 1978; Rodney 1973).

The political-economic process that led to the welfare state was partly a product of a global connection that left – and continues to leave – other parts of the world impoverished. The relegation of parts of the world to the export of raw materials is a direct consequence of an active program of industrial development in the centres of capitalist accumulation and underdevelopment in the periphery.

The growth of inequality in Europe, which will continue to rise (Dörre, Lessenich and Rosa 2015), is the logic of the unequal accumulation and distribution of resources that sustains imperialism (Asamoa 2001). The contraction of avenues for accumulation due to the exhaustion of further profit making openings means the concessions (in the form of an embedded liberalism) that metropolitan capital was forced to make due to working-class struggles will be rolled back if a counter movement is unable to stop it. The curtailment of job and work security is a reality that imperial capitalism has imposed on Third World working classes for more than 400 years.

In South Africa for example, racial capitalism was structured in such ways that workers needed more than 50 years of struggle to gain the legal right to be workers: To organize in unions; to collectively bargain for better working and living conditions. The migrant labour system across settler colonies in Africa and some non-settler plantation-colonies such as Ghana, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast (Asamoa 2001; Mamdani 1996) was built on the denial of the most basic civil and labour rights at a time when workers across Europe had secured the same. The profits squeezed on the backs of a captive labour force in Africa contributed to securing the class compromise which is the welfare state. In the case of Germany, the argument put forward is that its relatively short colonial exploits limited its capacity for external accumulation. Granted that Germany was a late-comer in the scramble for colonies, the fact remains that it was an imperialist power with concessions and national capital that was deeply entangled with the national capitals of the pioneers of the scramble. It is these international entanglements of national capitals that hold imperial capital together as a unitary albeit unstable entity (Mazon and Steingrover 2005).

Datsa, Malsa, Andre, Erti, Dama, and Minamila were working in Africa before moving to Germany. Andre, Datsa, and Minamila resigned from their full-time jobs that were precarious. Andre worked at a plastic manufacturing company in Ghana, earning very little wages. His wage was not enough to pay for his transportation to and from work for the duration of a month. He was only able to go to work by borrowing money for transportation. Datsa, a bookshop attendant in Burkina Faso, had a workers' association to thank for his lunch at work. Minamila was a teacher in a public school in Benin. Prior to teaching at the public school, he left a private school due to irregular salary. It was not any better when he moved to the public school either. Teachers in Benin frequently embark on strikes before they are paid. Even then, they often only get a portion of their accumulated wage arrears. Dama and Malsa were transnational traders along the West African coast before moving to Germany. Malsa sold African movies, chocolates and flip flops. Most of her customers bought the goods on credit. Getting them to pay took a great deal of effort. The unreliable payment means that some of her customers still owe her

some money close to a decade after she stopped the business. Yas'an was a civil servant in Togo before leaving the country on account of poor working conditions. Tinashe worked as a maid in a hotel in Harare earning very little. She was unable save enough money to buy a sewing machine in order to pursue her dream of becoming a seamstress.

Kofi was a part-time teacher and part-time professional soccer player before trying his luck in Germany. His income from two part-time jobs was supplemented by his family, and he in turn provided for their upkeep whenever he could. Wagi had worked as a casual labourer for an Italian firm in Libya before moving to Germany. Liaci, Mala, Terfa, Biane, Dictaben, and Yau'arme were unemployed before arriving in Germany.

Precarity is therefore not new for both the previously employed and the previously unemployed. It was the definition of their lives and the reason why they left Africa for Germany in the first place. Upon arrival in Germany they encountered another precarity. The precarity in Germany is the product of the same global process of unequal capitalist accumulation that set the migration in motion. In the case of Africa, its peripheral nature means that the working conditions even for those with secure jobs are below what they require to live decent lives. In Germany they continue to face similar hardships as they had encountered while in Africa. Contrary to what the German right and even not-so-right political formations peddle, it is not their presence that brought precarity and job insecurity to Germany. A global capitalist system which had maintained precarity in Africa is responsible for transposing the same to Germany.

The German state, like other capitalist states, is active in this transposition of precarity. The state provides the legislative framework and administrative basis for the emergence and functioning of temporary, mini, insecure, and precarious working and living arrangements. The series of Hartz legislations created the legal basis for super-exploitative working and living conditions. The state normalizes precarity by disciplining and coercing workers into accepting jobs that are incapable of meeting their basic needs (Dörre, Lessenich and Rosa 2015). Under the welfare laws of the German state a worker who refuses to accept three consecutive job offers could forfeit her/his entitled unemployment benefits as a sanction. The state allows employers to pay below the minimum wage if they prove that paying the minimum wage would have adverse effects on the sustainability of their enterprise. The state commits itself to meeting the shortfall of the wage thereby paving the way for the employer to pay below the minimum wage. It is important to highlight the fact that the minimum wage is incapable of meeting the needs of workers.

The gulf between a minimum wage and a living wage is explained away by the need for the state to arbitrate between the demands of workers and the demands of capital (Dörre, Lessenich and Rosa 2015; Harvey 2005). Implied in this arbitration role that the state assumes is the need to maintain a democratic balance between, in liberal democratic terms, the conflicting interests of competing social forces (Dörre, Lessenich and Rosa 2015; Claude Ake 1996). This is in spite of the fact that the conflicting social forces are not on equal footing. Production relations in a capitalist society necessarily place workers at a disadvantage by the very existence of wage labour. Irrespective of the social pact

that the state aims to achieve in its mediation, an outcome that perpetuates the existence of wage labour as the generator of capital it does not own or control necessarily disadvantages workers. This realm of limited, perverse democracy aimed at protecting the privileged position of capital is not available to the illegalized worker. Democracy in the liberal and social term means low wages. It is perfectly legitimate for exploitative wages to be paid in a democratic manner given that the state has to equally cater to all its constituency - capitalists and workers alike.

IV *Ausländer* as Political (non) Identity

The demarcation and gradation of those who belong from those who do not belong has a long history in Germany. The notion of an exceptional occident as compared to a broad Europe (Boatca 2015) was constructed by the association of a *Volkgeist* and history that supposedly animate different groups of people *a la* Hegel. As stated earlier, Poles in particular have constituted the other of German nation building for a while (Herbert 1990). Today Eastern Europeans in general constitute the frontier within.

Africa and Africans have played a similar role in the self-formation of Germany, whether within or outside Germany (Mazon and Steingroever 2005). Africans were the eternal other from which the *Volk* must distance themselves. They constituted what Europeans must not aspire to in terms of conduct, aptitude and disposition. The numerous names of meals and the many colonial relics that litter Germany's cities and public places attest to this (ibid). The triple association of culture/place/belonging inadvertently construct migrants in general, but for this purpose of this paper, Africans in particular, as those whose alien cultures linked to distant and backward places have no place in Germany (ibid). African workers like Kozi who have spent two-thirds of their adult lives in Germany and formally possess German citizenship report of being viewed as eternal outsiders:

> "Forget about us, even our children who were born here don't get accepted. Teachers in school see them as outsiders and often ask them to tell their classes why their family left their home to come to Germany. They are often referred to as refugees."

The outlook of individuals could influence such treatments. But what Kozi is drawing attention to is the structural relationship that informs how culture, belonging and the public sphere are conceived in Germany[2]. The idea of the *Volk* is not operationalized as having a historicity; it often comes across as an unchanging ontology (Keim 2014). To belong, one has to trace a continuous lineage to Germany. This is not only a recent historical invention, given the recency of Germany as a unified entity, but the many French Huguenots and Dutch that make up the separate pre-Bismarckian Germany is hushed in favour of a monolith that freeze historical change.

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[2] It is important to add that this is not in any way peculiarly German, although the configuration of the triple association has its specificities in Germany.

This way of conceiving belonging in Germany allows for the allocation of belonging and political identities that wantonly excludes. Today the *Ausländer* who has no *deutsches Blut* can juridical become a *Bürger*. But socially, she is still an *Ausländer*, albeit a notch above the illegal *Ausländer* who is politically and socially an *Ausländer* and for that matter, outside the broad *Volk* that is covered by practices of democratic participation and decision-making.

An alternative approach, one which African migrants exemplify in their resistance to the ideology of the exclusive *Volk* is the insistence that "this place belongs to us too." The basis of their thinking is the association of belonging to residence and as understanding of culture as ever-changing. In opposition to a view of culture as static and unchanging, African migrants in Germany act out culture as a contested terrain with different sources. Here, 'German culture' will be inclusive of practices of people who have lived, (often moved into) the disparate independent German territories and those who trace origins and relations to Turkey, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and beyond.

V Conclusion: In solidarity towards alternatives

In the face of the challenges that migrant workers in Germany face, not least an estrangement that militates against their social membership, there arises the question of how they cope with, and adjust to such conditions. This is in the face of Dörre's (2005; 2006) observation that precaritiy prevents social participation even for locals whose economic conditions limit their life chances thereby estranging them to the margins of society. For migrants therefore, it could be contended that precarity limits their capability to become members of society and to join, or align with others in similar condition in fighting for better living conditions – more so, given the reality that the neoliberal onslaught actively delegitimizes working class forms of organization by attacking unions, works councils and all forms of working class formations. Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) citing the French example, observed that union membership declined sharply because companies resorted to union-breaking strategies such as signing individual contracts with workers and retrenching workers that are active in unions. This, coupled with the nature of flexible, part-time and agency work of differentiated work sites (Standing 2011), demobilizes worker organizations by atomising workers. Following Dörre (2006), it is apparent that precarity has an enormous impact on worker organization, and dialectically, the very act of individuating work contains the seeds of organized workers' action aimed at challenging poor working and living conditions. Precarious African workers in Germany like Dezva gravitated towards their colleagues at work and formed a works council in order to defend their working conditions collectively. Yau' Arme and Wagi see workers as united by their similar fate as labourer against the employer. Nonetheless, African workers in Germany feel excluded from the larger society. They feel they are not just made to feel out of place because of their class position, but also due to who they are as *Ausländer*. While the exclusion that they face is underwritten by an economic arrangement that requires cheap disposable labour, it is secured via a politico-legal regime that delimits belonging on account of

origin and an autochthonous model of citizenship. Consequently, it is my contention that any attempt at reconstituting the social fabric in Germany via the creation of a humane alternative society not driven by unending growth must also take seriously the task of fundamentally re-conceptualizing what it means to belong.

A model of social belonging based on political community where anyone who lives and makes a livelihood in a society is acknowledged as a member of such a society is intricate to a counter hegemonic project. Among many political tasks for unions, activists and progressive groupings is to take seriously the question of migrants as a political question instead of a humanitarian concern with saving the desperate. As the epigraph at the beginning by Frantz fanon conveys, it is only when the most despised and dehumanized of the labouring class is placed at the centre of a new sociality that a society begins to fundamentally transform.

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