

Book Review

SOUTHALL¹, Roger, and MELBER², Henning (eds.). 2009. *A NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA?* University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 440 pp.

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Is there a new scramble for Africa? The old scramble was, of course, the colonial scramble – for land, resources and markets. Most contributions of the book focus on the scramble for resources (oil, copper and other minerals, genetic resources) and for markets (EPA, AGOA). The authors come to the conclusion that there is indeed again a scramble for Africa; a new one. It is brought forward mainly by China and India's high economic growth and resulting need for inputs to their industrial production process and by competing interests of other industrial countries.

The new scramble differs, though, from the colonial one. International extraction enterprises must now conclude contracts with sovereign governments and pay for getting access to the resources. However, “plundering” – as several authors call it – of resources continues, but the proceeds are now shared between the enterprises and the national elites.

Free trade initiatives of industrial countries, such as the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) of the European Union or the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of the United States, are likewise subsumed under “scramble” – scramble for markets. This view may be justified for the EPA which stipulates that both sides have to open their markets. AGOA on the other hand unilaterally grants free access to the American market. Nevertheless, it turns out to be for Africa's disadvantage: The additional export opportunities are used by Chinese and Malaysian firms, who set up footloose industries in Africa, pay dismally low wages to the African workers, and close down when production costs elsewhere become lower. In other words, it is better to have no industrial employment and exports than to compete with other countries and their labour standards.

On one point the authors are of course right: that the advent of China and India on the global scene and in Africa has added momentum to the scramble. But it has added only some momentum to a process that has been going on since

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² *Melber* was the first Director of the Namibia Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU). He is now Director of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in Sweden. The book contains 16 contributions from the editors and a number of other authors whose main academic backgrounds are sociology and political science. Most of them are from South Africa.

a long time. Extraction of African resources by foreign companies started in colonial times and continued thereafter. It had its up- and downswings, in line with the movement of world market prices for the resources and with technical developments. “New” is only the additional momentum, and nobody knows how long it will persist. It may fade off again, as it repeatedly happened in the past.

The scramble for African genetic resources (mainly plants used for pharmaceutical and beauty products), as well, is not new but a continuous development that started in colonial times – as the author of that chapter rightly mentions. What is new with that scramble is that it is now governed by a legal frame (under the WTO). The author is again right to point to the questionable effect that framework may have on the interests of the indigenous hosts and gardeners of these resources.

However, there seems to be one really new type of scramble. It was a characteristic feature of colonial times but disappeared thereafter, the scramble for land. Now it is occurring again: foreign land grabbing, as it is usually called. South Korea, India, Saudi-Arabia, Egypt and many more states as well as foreign enterprises are buying immense areas of “idle” land in Sub-Saharan Africa. Curiously, the editors and authors of the book did not find it worthwhile to mention and to analyze this phenomenon though it is perhaps the single really new scramble for Africa.

A concluding chapter of a book usually offers a summary of the main findings. In this book, however, it is different. The last chapter, called “Conclusion: Towards a Response”, written by Southall and Melber, mainly deals with the analysis a member of the British communist party, Bill Warren, has proposed in a 1980 book on “Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism”. This focus of the conclusion is surprising because Warren and his arguments are not mentioned in any of the book’s previous contributions. A summarizing answer to the question of the book’s title is eventually given at the end of the chapter, on half a page.

The book will delight readers who still think and argue in the categories and notions of the 19th and early 20th century Marxist theories. It is full of references to monopoly capital, transnational capital, capitalist classes and proletariat, to Hilferding, Bukharin, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Other readers will find this theoretical orientation – shared by many but not all contributors (and not by Melber) – a bit outdated. Some readers, the reviewer included, may find the main thrust of the whole book, the “new scramble”, a bit overblown.