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# The Euro-American Bequeathals to Africa in the Opening Years of the Twenty-First Century: Debt, Death, and Exploitation

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The Euro-American Bequeathals to Africa in the Opening Years  
of the twenty-first Century:  
Debt, Death and Exploitation

**The Euro-American Bequeathals to Africa in the Opening Years  
of the Twenty-First Century:  
Debt, Death and Exploitation:**

**A Talk to a Truman College Forum on Racism,  
Chicago, March 20, 2004**

By  
**Prexy Nesbitt**

Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen, Brothers and Sisters, Friends and "Camaradas" of Uptown, Truman and DePaul.

Like Henry Stanley and David Livingston in the nineteenth century, lots of Americans have recently 'discovered Africa.' George Bush made the HIV/AIDS in Africa crisis the center fold of his trip to the 'country of Africa,' as anchorwoman Katie Couric of NBC's Today Show repeatedly described the world's largest continent one early July morning. Many of those discovering Africa are yet obsessed with their love of the lion cubs and are light years away from recognizing that Africa is a continent with people living there.

The seriousness of what's happening in Africa today cannot be over-stated. Someone in Africa dies of an Aids-related illness every 15 seconds. Six Thousand African people are dying each and every day from HIV/AIDS. A minimum of 17 million Africans have died of Aids since 1982 and there are an estimated 30 million African people living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa today. Of that 30 million, as the July 12, 2003 Washington Post noted, only 30,000 people continent-wide are receiving antiretroviral treatments. Additionally, as the advocacy organizations, Africa Action and TransAfrica Forum, consistently point out, Africa is today home to more than 13 million HIV/AIDS orphans.

During and after his five country, four day transcontinental blitz when he spent 4 hours not in a multinational, air-conditioned hotel suite, George Bush, with his standard, dramatically messianic zeal, declared repeatedly that his country was going to stand by the side of the people of Africa in their fight against HIV/AIDS "in a big way." Specifically, the President publicly pledged that 15 billion dollars would be distributed to fourteen countries in Africa and the Caribbean over the next five years. The fifteen billion hasn't happened; isn't going to happen, was never intended to happen. What he announced was a "virtual grant," his way of producing an electoral "Africa survival game" starring himself!!

Over the last year what has emerged is a clear pattern where the USA government grants HIV/AIDS moneys to a few chosen governments but stalls and avoids making substantive commitments to fighting HIV/AIDS CONTINENT WIDE and above all does not provide the support that the UN's Global Fund needs.

But it is not solely the HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC that makes Africa's situation so starkly grim. The point must be made (as President Thabo Mbeki so often does) that Africa's poverty is a major determinant of its alarming death and mortality rates. Economist Giovanni Arrighi outlines Africa's devastating rate of pauperization in a recent article in the New Left Review (NLR) when he notes:

In 1975, the regional GNP per capita of Sub-Saharan Africa  
stood at 17.6 per cent of 'world' per capita GNP; by 1999  
it had dropped to 10.5 per cent. Relative to over-all Third  
World trends, Sub-Saharan health, mortality and adult-literacy  
levels have deteriorated at comparable rates.



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Behind Africa's poverty lie specific causal patterns. Contrary to the representation that seeps so pervasively into US media coverage, Africa's poverty is not the result of genetic or "racial" constitution. (The poverty is not because Africans cannot tell time or "don't know what watches are," as US AID Director Andrew Natsios alleged several years ago explaining to the US Congress why anti-retroviral drug treatments couldn't work in Africa). Rather, poverty in Africa stems from specific and historical global configurations and economic and social dynamics. One of the most critical of these has been Africa's debt.

Salih Booker, Executive Director of Africa Action, one of the nation's oldest advocacy groups for Africa, points out in a recent Foreign Policy Forum article, "Africa's Debt: Who Owes Whom?"

African countries are trapped beneath a crushing debt burden of some \$300 billion. Each year, they are forced to spend nearly \$15 billion repaying this debt to wealthy foreign creditors. In a continent where many subsist on less than \$1/day, African governments are required to divert huge portions of their national budgets away from addressing their critical domestic needs in order to line the pockets of rich Northern governments and financial institutions...The All Africa conference of Churches has called it "a new form of slavery as vicious as the slave trade."

But the story is not quite told. Like the ancient theological construct of the Four Horsemen, the third dastardly jockey on the grim visage of Africa today is "exploitation." Historically, that equestrian rode various steeds, slavery and the slave trade; gold, diamond and coal mining.

Today it is OIL that provides the new ride across and through Africa for the grim rider, exploitation. Africa clearly is rich with oil. From Nigeria to Namibia, the coast and off-shore reefs of Africa, are thick with oil deposits of a quantity and quality that may prove to surpass whatever the Middle East, Mexico and Venezuela have to offer. Steadily, more and more Western government officials are heralding how oil is going to lead Africa to new bonanzas and a new coziness between the West and "Emerging Africa!" Noting that US oil companies were not just sopping up the "light and sweet" West African oil fields but were contributing to Nigerian development, Sec of State Powell gave the 2003 Corporate Excellence Award to Chevron Texaco for its work in Nigeria.

Other voices, especially more and more of the voices living in the midst of the growing oilfields are asking whether or not the oil wealth is worth it. Are these growing numbers of giant oil companies exploring and producing oil in their backyards, in their waterways not a "clear and present danger, to their environment, to their lives, and to generations yet unborn?" (see the new study on Shell Oil in Nigeria, Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil by Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas).

But even this is not yet the full story.....

I have pondered often why there is such a relative silence-especially in the United States- about Africa's various crises, like the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Why is there such a persistent and thundering silence about what is, in effect, and, in essence, the playing out, as we sit here of one of human history's gravest tragedies? I believe to be true, along with many others, what the head of UNAIDS, Peter Piot, said, **"If this (the AIDS pandemic's concentration in Africa) would have happened...with white people, the reaction would be different."**

Clearly, just as race and racism are critically embedded in the historical development of slavery, the slave trade and colonialism, race and racism impact how Euro American nations view and interact with the nations of Africa (and the nations of the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia).



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I subscribe fully to the notion of *global apartheid* (best articulated, probably, by Salih Booker and Bill Minter in their Nation magazine article but most fully explained in an article in the Spring, 2003 Public Eye Magazine by Nikhil Aziz entitled "Rac[e]ing Abroad: Exploring Racism in US Foreign Policy). I believe it right (and it corresponds with my experiences in this apartheid city misleadingly labeled "Chicago") that the debt, death and exploitation that Africa faces is in large measure resultant from what Booker, Minter, and Aziz define as a "system of inequality that dictates access to wealth, power and basic human rights based on race and place."

Take a hard critical look at what I am saying today about global apartheid and think about it as you walk out of here unto Wilson Ave. For "like the former system of apartheid in South Africa (or racism in Chicago, Houston, Boston or Los Angeles) global apartheid entrenches great disparities in wealth, living conditions, life expectancy and access to government institutions with effective power. It relies on the assumption that it is 'natural' for different population groups to have different expectations of life."

I think, there is more to the story. Race and racism are linked to other patterns and behaviors. Racism, is like a chameleon. It adapts and camouflages itself. While it quintessentially operates on the institutional level and entails the exercise of power, it reverberates as well within individual human relationships, particularly in those societies where the socio-economic dynamics of the society are grounded in the historic racial ordering of that society. How anyone who moves around in this country can truly believe that America is now beyond race and racism defies the most energetic exercising of my imagination.

But the America = color-blind claimants require of us that we ignore or forget Jasper, Texas and James Byrd, New York City and Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo, Chicago with the death of La Tanya Haggerty and the torture by police commander Jon Burge.

How does one forget or ignore George Bush's infamous remark to the German Parliament in Berlin, May of 2002 when he said about the War he had just inaugurated:

"In this war we<sup>1</sup> defend not just America or Europe; we are defending civilization, itself.... America and the nations in Europe are more than military allies, we're more than trading partners, we are heirs to the same civilization. The pledges of the Magna Carta, the learning of Athens, the creativity of Paris, the unbending conscience of Luther, the gentle faith of St Francis - all of these are part of the American soul. The New World has succeeded by holding to the values of the Old.... These convictions bind our civilization together and set our enemies against us."

What we should recall, I would suggest, is that the current administration has, throughout its tenure on every conceivable level, sounded a subtle (but consistent) clarion call for a racialized and white supremacist re-generating that is similar to the coded summoning that his father issued in his use of the Willie Horton imagery during his election bid in 1988.

There is more to it than just racism functioning like a chameleon. Eduardo Galeano, the great Uruguayan historian and novelist recently said about this period of time:

"Never have so many been held incommunicado by so few. More and more have the right to hear and see, but fewer and fewer have the privilege of informing, giving their opinion and creating. The dictatorship of the single word and the single image, much more devastating than that of the single party, is imposing a life whose exemplary citizen is a docile consumer and passive spectator."

(In NACLA REPORT, Jan-Feb, 2004, p. 14)

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<sup>1</sup> As Nikhil Aziz reminds us in his brilliant article on Racism in US Foreign Policy, the 'We' Bush is referring to are white, Christian, hetero-sexual males(see: Public Eye Magazine, Spring, 2003)



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What Galeano is so eloquently highlighting is the role which passivity and silence play today in sustaining the new manifestations of racism. Lots of white Americans prefer to pretend that everything is problemless, just as they pretend not to see the homeless person or hear the pleas for help of the woman being physically attacked by her husband in the house across the street.

Racism in 2004 is alive and thriving, as the new book, **WHITE-WASHING RACE: THE MYTH OF A COLOR-BLIND SOCIETY**, so vividly and powerfully demonstrates. Race and racism provide much of the undergirding for the roadway that makes the connections between what the US government does overseas and what it does to its Third World, black, brown, red and "poor white" populations at home.

A 2002 article in Z Magazine called "Empire Abroad, Prisons at Home" provides a grim tally about the connections between US foreign policy and US domestic policy when it notes:

"America's commitment to imperial militarism and corporate financial globalization produces instability, poverty, and violence around the world, providing endless pretexts for the illusory "corrections" provided by more US empire. Domestic mass incarceration furthers the impoverishment, demoralization and destabilization of America's most disadvantaged communities and families creating condition and expanding recruits to inner-city crime, which provided the pretext for yet more non-corrective expansion."

Bear in mind incidentally how much of America's empire building, empire-sustaining adventures take place not in European theatres but in the homelands of the dark skinned people of this earth: Columbia, the Phillipines, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Grenada, Panama, Angola. Not incidental, not accidental, this fact.

I must wrap these brief observations up. I close with one gentle, but considered notion. There is but one antidote to racism and repression, patterns of death, debt and exploitation. It is to make change. Not to moan; not to become Imbunches and Xiconhocas<sup>2</sup> and close up inside big Hummers with tinted over windows which block out things we don't want to see and prohibit us being seen.

It is not to become those types of university trained individuals and university trainers who can write endless reams about misery and never move a finger to end that misery. The anti-dote to active racism is active anti-racism. It is learning to say "NO!", "NUNCA!", "NO PASARAN!" (Dolores Ibarrari) To say: "Never, Never and Never Again" (Nelson Mandela).

In a recent inspiring speech, the charismatic thinker and speaker Arundhati Roy asked that Americans in their millions join in the battle for a kinder, just and democratic world. She said, "if you join the battle you will be greeted joyously - befriended, instead of isolated. Loved instead of hated."

The debt, death and exploitation today decimating African populations, their children and the veritable future survival of Africa; the growing numbers of despair-filled, needle-addicted, and slowly dying homeless, unemployed and imprisoned populations in this country dictate that we stand up and become engaged. The swelling cries of the suffering dictate that we struggle for change, for a new dispensation.

Thank You.

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<sup>2</sup> An "imbunche" is a frightening, mythic figure from Chilean, specifically, Mapuche Indian, folklore. The imbunche has had all the openings of his/her body stitched shut; thus, he/she/it is unable to take in or void anything. The Chilean novelist Jose Donoso, author of among other works, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, utilizes the imbunche figure in several of his works "Xiconhoca" is a character created by the Mozambique Liberation Front's (FRELIMO) Department of Information. It is a negative figure representing all the evils of colonialism and racism. A xiconhoca has the mouth of a drunk, the ear of a gossip, the hands of a miser and speculator, the eyes of a racist, the nose of a tribalist, the teeth of a regionalist and the feet of a troublemaker.