



Peter Little, *Economic and Political Reform in Africa: Anthropological Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

Peter Little, in his book, *Economic and Political Reform in Africa*, has taken stock of the effects of neo-liberalism on several countries in Africa from the 1980s to the present. He has used his skills in anthropology to do a comparative ethnography that focuses on the impacts of economic “reforms” on everyday life in Africa. He argues that neoliberal theorists have not paid enough attention to how their rhetoric and high ideals are not manifested practically in the projects they sponsor. Through extensive interviews and research in Mozambique, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia, he shows that “corporate neoliberalism” uses narratives and policies that “disguise underlying politico-economic agendas” which often result in land and money-grabs by the powerful who discredit grassroots peoples’ efforts to provide for their families as “backward.”

For example, outside development agencies came to Gambia and Ghana and encouraged African farmers to produce vegetables and flowers for the European market. This project was championed as a way for small farmers to flourish. Known as NTC (Nontraditional Commodity), due to expensive fertilizers and other capital needed, small farms could not compete. Outside investors pressured and enticed landowners into long term leases and then grew for the NTC market on a large scale. By 2004 almost no small farms were involved in Gambian NTC’s (35). Poor households ended up as farm workers. Luckily, this sad story has a happy turnaround. Finally the Ghanaian government and the World Bank itself realized their error, and decided to encourage smallholder farmers to join together to grow and sell pineapples. In 2004 they helped to fund “Farmapine Ghana Limited, which was 80% owned by the cooperatives and and 20 percent by two export companies,” to ensure that “undercapitalized small scale farmers” could engage in NTC farming (Little, 44). Small gains like this are an uphill battle in a neoconservative global environment, but Little takes heart in the fact that it is an example of the large powers realizing that the market itself cannot ensure the realization of goals like smallholder farms thriving. And of course the smallholders realized that they have to work together and join into a larger cooperative to be able to thrive on their farms in the new global environment.

Little suggests that poverty analysts have made errors in understanding those they are studying and categorizing. They want to count the poor, and then measure their compliance to new projects. Such a plan is misguided because, for example, poverty “experts” presume that livestock farmers are more backward and less modern than settled agriculturalists. Little challenges this preconception by explaining that livestock farmers are engaged in global trade. Contemporary pastoralists in Africa, due to their mobile lifestyle, live far from cities and markets and have little use for many of these consumer goods (and are therefore often labeled as “poor” by development agencies and their own governments, despite their valuable herds). But they are still part of the global economy if they cross international borders to sell their cattle. Somali pastoralists have been bringing their cattle to Garissa in Kenya for sale throughout Africa. African city dwellers gobble up cheap imports in Garissa and elsewhere in Kenya made available in part by the deteriorating of Somali state control (as well as Kenya’s liberalization of its markets). Somali traders get goods from Dubai and take them across the Somalia-Kenya border. By avoiding roads, one can bypass checkpoints

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and refrain from any import duties or taxes. However, if they run into Al-Shabaab militia, they may have to pay zakat on the spot, to be distributed to the poor. Little notes that Somali businessmen now at home in Eastleigh, Nairobi, can avoid the hassle and dangers of the land-crossing by bribing Kenyan customs officials at ports. Goods from Asia that land in Dubai can now be traded by Somali businessmen all the way to Democratic Republic of Congo (144-149, 169-185). The success of some Somali businessmen gives rise to envy and suspicion by Kenyans, who accuse them of starting their businesses with money from piracy ransoms (180-81, 191). While Little may debunk the “piracy” stereotypes, he still shows Somalis, both pastoralists and businessmen, as having to thwart national laws to make their profits on a global market.

Little explains that while the hawkers filling African streets these days selling cheap imported electronics and other items are clearly involved in global trade, they are nevertheless among the most desperately poor Africans. They are often refugees and displaced persons who turn to hawking consumer goods because they have no land to farm and can’t access land due to their outsider status. They often work for a supplier on commission, and many make as little as US equivalent \$2.60 a week, with 53 percent of hawkers making less than \$7.50 per week in contemporary Maputo, Mozambique, and only 9.4 percent of hawkers made more than \$25 per week (55). To hear of the vulnerability of hawkers highlights even further the tragedies we hear currently in the news, of Mozambiquan hawkers (among other foreigners) who suffered violence in South Africa in March and April 2015 due to xenophobia. South Africans who attacked them suffer high unemployment and fear that foreigners are taking away their livelihood opportunities. While the poor turn against each other, and the poorest hawkers are scapegoated, large-scale dispossession by foreign (outside of Africa) companies continues.

Little is concerned with business practices that undermine the futures of Africans. He speaks out against practices of leasing large plots of land to foreign companies for ridiculously low sums, citing studies that estimate that over 40,000 hectares of Africa’s land have already been leased long-term to foreign mining and agribusiness firms. He finds this practice of “wholesale leasing of valuable land and water” the “most troubling for the rural poor” (193, 195). His book contains a message for the misguided large development agencies who, due to their size and bureaucratic approach, make large errors and aren’t able to implement projects that would really benefit the smallholders and poor households they claim to assist. He advocates the creation of policies and programs that will truly encourage sustainable development. The Farmapine Ghana Limited cooperative company is one of the rare examples of smallholders joining together to protect themselves against the large landowners. Little’s book with its concrete examples of the impact of neoliberal-inspired projects is required reading for those concerned with addressing issues of poverty on the continent.

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