Africa through Blair’s Commission and the Eritrean Story: Development beyond Neoliberal Deadlock and the Embattled Postcolonial-State

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a contested neoliberal global regime, this thesis inquires into the theoretical and practical underpinnings of ‘African development’ using Blair’s Commission for Africa and Eritrea as case studies. The thesis critically reviews the British Government sponsored enquiry Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa (2005) as an embodiment of the belief that neoliberal economic policies and liberal democratic reform can offset adverse developmental conditions across sub-Saharan Africa. The thesis contrasts how African states, socialist Eritrea as a specific example, get around the neoliberal global order heralded by the Blair Commission. ‘Development’ holds different meaning for specific actors because of underlying and often contradictory interests; dominant and subaltern groups rationalise development differently through their respective discourses. To map a consistent approach to African development, the thesis weighs specific questions about the basic character of development. The thesis therefore interrogates the link between the particular type of development discourse, social reality and practical change insofar as external prescriptive and internal voluntaristic approaches to development go.

Understanding the politics of development through the dichotomous examples of the Blair Commission and Eritrean State policies is important to consider a kind of development congruent with the African realities. Dominant discourses of development like Blair’s proposal for Africa engender powerful narratives that don’t necessarily reflect how the subjects of development perceive themselves, their conditions and their future. The thesis utilises a comparative historical analysis to explain how different groups account for development according to particular historical experience and political interests and objectives.

The thesis argues that the monolithic approach defining the Blair Commission’s development blueprint has a tendency to contradict any popular organic quality that the (African) development process may have. The thesis takes issue with the Blair Commission’s presentation of its development paradigm as of universal validity while unmasking its underlying ideological underpinnings. It argues that the Commission’s mix of assumptions, methods and conclusions endorse a free market development model and representative democracy for the region. The initiative could be perceived largely as a vehicle for the cultivation of material interests on behalf of a very tiny minority of transnational elites, not the African masses. Despite its problems, Eritrea’s historical materialist conception of development through struggle reflects an alternative way of thinking about and practicing
development in the region. The Eritrean experiment of independent national development is examined as a contrasting model of sub-Saharan Africa development.
INTRODUCTION

You cannot develop people. You must allow people to develop themselves.

- Julius Nyerere

In a speech given to the first post-apartheid South African parliament, the acclaimed African statesman, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, recounts his experience of being patronised at the hands of European officials. He spoke of being asked, during his travels abroad as a Tanzanian public figure, by Western officials to explain national events in the other African states. Following is an excerpt, as shared with the parliamentarians, of what Nyerere had to say in response to those officials’ questions that were clearly outside his formal capacity:

Here I am former president of my country. No problems in Tanzania, we never had these problems that they have, but I am an African and they see me, then they ask me about the problems of Rwanda. But I don’t come from Rwanda. But you come from Africa .... If Blair were to come to Dar es Salaam, I don’t ask him what is happening in … in Bosnia. It never occurs to me [to] ask Blair what is happening to you Europeans because of what is happening in Bosnia. If president Kohl was to come somewhere, I don’t ask him what is happening in … Chechnya. Kohl could say why are you asking me anything about Chechnya? I don’t know what is happening in Chechnya. But this is not true about Africa … [emphasis added].

(Nyerere 1997)¹

As an African—and as a human being—I find it problematic to think of the continual physical and symbolic violence perpetrated against the African continent and its peoples from without. For centuries, and unlike perhaps any other part of the world, Africa has been regarded as the tabula rasa on which outside actors could inscribe almost everything they willed.² Obstructing by different means the African peoples’ desires and efforts to self-

¹ Cited in Leadersoftanzania (Oct 12, 2011), ‘Remembering Julius Nyerere - First President of Tanzania - 3 of 3’, [Video File], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBnOdfTU5Gw &t=86s
² For Joseph Conrad, Africa represented a ‘heart of darkness’ as his classic work of the same title confirms, and, in the case of George Hegel, Africa came to denote a ‘land of perpetual childhood’ whose people lacked culture and couldn’t thus develop. And as Chinua Achebe’s incisive twin essays Colonialist Criticism and Home and Exile make clear, this particular European habit of maligning Africa appears to have found its way into the postcolonial period. So, the stereotyping of the African continent and its populations may not only be a historical fact but also a contemporary one.
represent and to decide their own future development course has been a significant feature of the modern world system dominated by the Western capitalist powers. Specifically, the architects of the postwar development project figure prominently. Tony Blair’s 2005-2015 Africa Commission provides their most recent and possibly final manifesto. They approach Africa as a homogenous social and geographical space with little acknowledgement of the continent’s diversity or agency. Nyerere’s distinctly mature and indeed abiding words couldn’t have rung truer in terms of their unhelpful imaginations of Africa.

Having disseminated constructs of Africa as traditional, underdeveloped or developing, Northern development planners commonly proceed to draw blanket policies on behalf of the entire continent in a bid to ‘modernise’ its countries; not only do such (exogenous) policies tend to be largely unsuited to Africa, but also presumably involve a questionable motive in the form of undeclared self-interest. Nevertheless, their strategies of essentialising and otherwise misrepresenting Africa and her peoples apparently in pursuit of a dominant politico-economic agenda have not gone unchallenged at different points. It seems that the resistance of the African peoples against foreign colonists and their local abettors has come to be a source of inspiration for the majority of Africans today. Indeed, it may be suggested that it is this form of popular democratic politics and on-going struggle which commonly resonates with the mass of the African peoples as they continue to weigh their future.

The historical and present-day struggle of the African peoples for sovereign political and economic development symbolises the dialectical state in which those two mutually opposed trends unfold. As a child coming of age in a politically vibrant late 20th century Africa and today as a student of African society and politics, the question of how these antithetical forces impact social change in Africa has never been far from my consciousness and life. My decision to focus on the Blair Commission for Africa and the Eritrea development model as entirely topical examples is a function of this enduring personal interest. I sense in the respective approaches of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean Government a perfect engenderment of the dialectic of external domination and indigenous self-determination. The Blair Commission’s carefully elaborated and nuanced plan sums up the policies and practical concerns that seemingly are necessary to guarantee capitalist expansion in the current (neoliberal) phase of its historical development. In contrast, the Eritrean Government’s fairly unconventional development approach aligns, albeit loosely, with the global anti-capitalist drive toward what could be described as better (socialist?) alternative to the status quo.

The main concern about studying alongside and against each other the Blair Commission’s policies and the Eritrean approach to development itself involves a quest to come to grips
with what lasting African development may really imply—how it can be facilitated and/or impeded in a theoretical as well as practical sense. The issues worth sorting out consequently centre around the fundamental description of the type of development implied, likely vehicle or force for delivering such development and locale at which the anticipated development may take place.

Through a comparative study of the Blair Commission and the Eritrean development model, the argument is made for a vision of change that is both organic and transcultural whilst rebutting dominant models as reactive/ reactionary ideology. The thesis thus analyses concepts of ‘African development’ deployed in those two contexts to tell apart credible development from fallacious proposals. I suggest that the principle of local knowledge, exemplified by the case of Eritrean development and by definition heterogeneous, is universally applicable in African development contexts. At the same time, I argue that capitalist development, despite the Commission’s assumptions to the contrary, is not universal, but instead contingent and provisional and indeed incongruous in the African context. Accordingly, the Eritrean Government’s indigenous approach, which is predicated on local-cum-universal knowledge, may offer, even if curtailed in some way, a significant practical model for African development.

In choosing the present topic, prospects and problems of African development in the light of the Blair Commission and the Eritrean example, I have in mind the pursuit of a principle in the form of a humane and just world for all. I give such weight to this ideal that my tendency is to seek self-validation in what I do. In addition, the inherently contentious description of ‘African development’ means a reflexive posture is likely to lead to better insight. Accordingly, the inquiry into African development is meant to benefit from both subjective and objective input.3 Or, we could be warranted in envisaging African development based on our specific experiences and concerns as members of society. Also, in being guided by our own individual tendencies, still we ought to think and act within the boundaries of scholarly knowledge. Ultimately, the imperative of seeking change in the interests of the impoverished majorities of the continent seems to justify this sort of furcated policy.

This positionality accords with my experiences as former colonial subject and my sensitivity to current indirect subtler forms of control over Africa. My past and contemporary experience

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3 In any case, those involved in development studies pursue their activity in a highly charged environment that it is not perhaps unusual to take a position in favour or against certain forms of ‘development’. Yet ‘subjectivity’ in the case of specific types of research (for example feminist) cannot be an impediment to scholarly discourse.
is such that I can’t possibly endorse what in effect could be a neocolonial agenda of the Blair Commission. Neocolonialism can be understood as another (more contemporary) term for imperialism—the military, political, economic and cultural domination of the world by great powers. According to Nkrumah (1965.ix) who coined the term, neocolonialism describes a situation wherein “the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.” As a label, neocolonialism seems to aptly summarise Africa’s subordinate incorporation into the global political economy in the wake of formal political independence. And because, as Nkrumah explains, the “methods and form of this direction” comes in different guise, the theory of neocolonialism thus sounds particularly explanatory from the point of view of the present study. Precisely because of its distinct reach, I shall be privileging the concept to study the relationship between the Blair Commission and sub-Saharan Africa, including Eritrea.

On the other hand, the fact that I find myself gravitating towards the forces resisting capitalist global domination possibly comes as natural. It is out of this elemental disposition that I have been willing to also undertake a systematic study of what the Eritrean Government has set itself to accomplishing: national development in opposition to the North’s apparently neocolonial designs for the region. Again, what seems to play a decisive role in all of this is the way my personal biographical background (together with the skills of critical inquiry I acquired as part of my formal academic training) has helped shape my eventual outlook. For, in the Africa of the late 1970s and 1980s I lived through a momentous social milieu wherein the call for national liberation, pan-Africanism, anti-imperialist world revolution and social and economic progress had resonated with so many among my generation. It is a cause for which the peoples of Africa have fought and sacrificed a great deal. This quest for the continent’s emancipation remains unfulfilled despite the subsequent changes in the international political system. A direct legacy of such politics, whose core message emphasised the right of self-determination for the African peoples, seems to explain my ongoing deep identification with the subaltern’s cause vis-à-vis hegemonic power. I thus tend to look at Eritrea (country and society) as an imperfect David of sorts whose will to independent development has pitted it against the Goliath that the global capitalist juggernaut represents. So, I see it as worthwhile to consider the significance of this basic question at a deeper level, and my wish is for the present study to be a small step in that direction.

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4 The terms ‘Dependency’, ‘Semi-colony’ and ‘Underdevelopment’ are sometimes also used in lieu to the concept of neocolonialism.
During my formative years I have frequently been encouraged to think independently and critically which I have tried to continually work on in the light of subsequent theoretical education. A distinctive impression about critical philosophical thought and radical social practice as sound and strategic underlies the approach I follow in this study. Meantime, I reiterate my concern with the topic of African development has an academic and a practical or real-world aspect about it. Incidentally, I share a great deal of lived experience with the subjects of ‘development’ in whose name I write; like sizeable segments of the African populations, I have endured violent conflict and dislocation and I have gone through the vicissitudes of life as a refugee in a hostile foreign environment. I can relate first-hand to what it is like to experience hardship and deprivation, to suffer from preventable diseases such as malaria, to survive on limited staple food and to feel generally insecure and in limbo about one’s future.6

So, in the case of peoples subjected to colonial rule, involuntary displacement and flight, the force of history can defy the language of abstraction; historicity tends to weigh in very real ways in the life of many Africans, the present author included. At the same time, it is essential to perhaps not think of this whole saga as being exclusively about trials and tribulations, or else one misses a very important dimension that is integral to this form of collective experience. Specifically, I would like to believe my life story has instilled in me humanist virtues (ethics of solidarity, empathy, cooperation, sharing) which I may otherwise not have cultivated. These values continue to guide my thinking and action, and undoubtedly play a central role in shaping the course/ tone of the present study. Yet, in a truly exceptional kind of way, on the other hand, I do consider myself somewhat fortunate in that I had access to proper education, a privilege not readily available to the average African.7 I therefore feel duty-bound in some way to speak on behalf of those who, for reasons not of their own fault, may lack the wherewithal to do so.

5 Day in day out I had to consume beans back then—whether that was a meal of fuul (broad beans), fasulia (kidney beans) or a’des (lentil). Meat, milk and most fruits on the other hand were unaffordable luxury foodstuffs.
6 This is not to blame external causes only for the problems the continent of Africa has faced and continues to face today. Yet, while numerous factors tend to be responsible for Africa’s regression in recent times, it is hard to ignore the crucial role played by colonialism and imperialism in that.
7 I completed my high school at a United Nations-sponsored school for refugees in the eastern Sudanese town of Kassala. The academic curriculum at this school was modelled on the University of London’s Overseas Board education program, the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level). My formative education in Sudan laid the foundation upon which I could subsequently build my academic learning.
The Commission for Africa and the ‘rising Africa’ meme

Upon sensing signs of apparent recovery following decades of economic and political stagnation, in February 2004 the British Government initiated a commission to promote African development. A year later, the Commission for Africa (the Commission) published its analysis and recommendation as Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa (the Report). By urging the African states to continue the progress they were registering, the Commissioners foresaw the continent’s total transformation in a decade’s time. The Commission for Africa thus has been a key force in kindling the latest narrative of a rising African continent.

The Commission’s blueprint epitomises the development agenda that evolved over the decades of Africa’s economic and political regression. The Report’s key features—good governance, growth through private investment, foreign aid, trade and debt reforms—echo the enduring terms of debate and action. The rhetoric is that of donor governments and multilateral institutions. The Commission’s approach encapsulates the dominant core-centric discourse, sanctioning a free market development model and multi-party representative democracy. Its mandate covers the entire sub-Saharan Africa region and involves many of the major international players. Sub-Saharan Africa has been the focus apparently because of its incomparable experience of stalled development fairly shortly after its countries achieved political independence.

It should be noted that since the initial Report was launched other documents have been published that audit progress and propose further changes in relation to African development. These include, Still Our Common Interest (2010) by the Commission for Africa, and a series of yearly reports by the Africa Progress Panel, the Commission and G8’s delegated monitoring body. These reports all focus on tracking the original plan of action captured in Our Common Interest and there has been no major departure or review of this original development agenda.

Place and time seemed to matter exceptionally so far as the Commission’s potential to generate change is in question. For the then-British Prime Minister and Chair of the Africa Commission, Tony Blair, 2005 was an important milestone; that same year marked Blair’s accession to the helms of the European Union (EU) and the Group of Eight most industrialised nations’ (G8) summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. In view of the Prime Minister’s dual mandate at the EU and G8, and in light of his open pledge to work hard to “implement

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8 For example, OECD member states, the UN, EU, G8, the IMF and World Bank.
all of the recommendations contained within” the *Report* (Williams 2005:529), the Commission for Africa elicited disparate interests and expectations. As such, it provides appropriate ground to revisit the current state of development theory, policy and action in relation to sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps, Commission for Africa and its *Report* ought to be approached from the vantage point of neoliberalism in its twilight. It makes sense accordingly to see the Commission for Africa and its findings as a last-ditch effort by the globalist cabal to map Africa's future—before maybe China in particular among the emerging economies takes over completely.

**Eritrea: subalternity and the intricacies of nation-building**

Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa region, provides an interesting counter-balance to the articulation of development represented by *laissez-faire* capitalism and embodied in the Commission for Africa *Report*. The present-day land of Eritrea has been the target of foreign colonial expansion for much of its modern history. As a nation-state, Eritrea formally gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 following a protracted struggle for statehood. Beginning in 1961, Eritreans fought against successive Ethiopian governments backed in turn by the United States and its Western allies and the former Soviet Union and its satellites. In the case of this country, a long history of foreign occupation and exploitation coupled with near-total absence of external support for Eritrean self-determination has arguably precipitated a distinct collective experience among the population. Eritrean social and political consciousness has evolved to value national unity and sovereignty exceedingly while resolutely resisting the intrusions of outsiders (cf. Connell 2003). The Eritrean Government actively fosters a strong ethic of self-help and patriotic national pride. Billboards emblazoned with phrases such as “I am an Eritrean …. I am proud” are common sight along some of Asmara’s major thoroughfares. The images captured in these billboards show the (happy) faces of Eritreans from the country’s different ethno-linguistic groups and regions. This sort of collective self-affirmation at the same time intersects with another Eritrean sentiment in the shape of perceptions of victimhood and distrust of the intentions of powerful foreign actors (cf. Allo 2018; Vitcheck 2014; Wrong 2005; Reid 2005). Through the medium of ‘national culture’, the Eritrean Government routinely disseminates specific ideological and political messages to induce/force the population to partake in its economic and social development agenda.

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9 To get a sense of this, the reader can consult McCarthy (2013) http://www.eyemagazine.com/blog/post/Pride-and-posters-in-Eritrea
The nation-building and development trajectory that post-independence Eritrea has embarked on stands at odds to the free market development model endorsed in the Commission for Africa Report. The Eritrean State, not the private, multilateral or non-government sectors, is overwhelmingly the overseer of national development in Eritrea. The one-party authoritarian Eritrean Government and the pursuit of a centralised command economy seem to contravene the Report's precepts regarding governance and economic growth. Neither Eritrean politics nor its economic policy appears to comply with the Report's recommendations of political pluralism and a free market capitalist road to development. Indeed, the Eritrean Government has ordered the majority of international NGOs working in the development field, including USAID, out of the country so it might forge ahead with its own brand of (statist) development. There is minimal or no engagement by the Eritrean Government with (self-centred) donors and the government has routinely refused tied aid and financial loans for fear of falling into a debt trap.

Yet, going against the reigning policy or status quo may not be all there is to the Eritrean story of pursuing alternate development. From the other side of the tracks, things seem to stand differently—both for a greater number of Eritreans themselves and for non-Eritreans. Of late, the Eritrean Government’s behaviour came under scrutiny from the United Nations Security Council which decided to censure it apparently for various misdemeanours. On more than one occasion, the Security Council voted to impose economic and other sanctions on Eritrea for its perceived role in destabilising the Horn of Africa region.\textsuperscript{10} For its part, in 2015 and again in 2016 the Human Rights Council also filed two critical reports about Eritrea’s domestic human rights record. And both Canada (2013) and the Netherland (2018) have declared Eritrea’s ambassadors to their countries persona non grata. Eritrea appears to be increasingly isolated internationally at the same time as it is facing growing domestic discontent. The absence of a Constitution and national elections, the jailing by the Eritrean Government of political opponents and journalists without due process, the failed January 2013 army mutiny and the steady flight of the country’s youth due mainly to the policy of indefinite draft\textsuperscript{11} are some obvious examples of on-going internal discontent. Unless

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\textsuperscript{10} Refer to UN News (2011) \url{https://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40628&Cr=eritrea&Cr1}. Interestingly, the sanctions against Eritrea were lifted in November 2018, coinciding with the completion of this project which is partly also about Eritrea.

\textsuperscript{11} Up until July 2018, the Eritrean Government routinely cited the on-going state of ‘no-war no-peace’ with its neighbour Ethiopia following their border conflict of 1998-2000 as the main reason for the continuation of this policy. Officially, for the last two decades Eritrea saw Ethiopia as a much larger and more populous country intent on reversing its independence. Besides, the Eritrean Government considered itself technically at war with Ethiopia for, despite the signing of a peace deal, the latter has refused to relinquish Eritrean land it seized after their last war. With the recent changes that took
somehow mitigated, these internal and external challenges have the potential to make Eritrea’s development process slow and difficult to say the least.

At the same time, Eritrea has progressed in a number of key development indicators. According to the World Bank World Development Indicators: the infant mortality rate in Eritrea has fallen from 151 in the mid-1990s to 45 in 2016; life expectancy at birth has continually increased for both men and women; fertility rates are dropping; the percentage of the rural population with access to improved water sources has increased from 47% in the 1990s to 58% in 2016; immunisation for children aged 12-23 months stands at 93% for measles and DPT (diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus) compared to a low of 34% in 1995; and the participation rates of females in education has improved noticeably. And as Eritrea specialist Thomas C Mountain (2011) states, Eritrea is one of a handful of countries in the world that is bound to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in a number of key areas. All this raises questions about what lessons can be drawn from the Eritrean model of development and how this can be compared and contrasted to the corresponding framework outlined by the Commission for Africa.

### The Blair Commission and the Eritrean story in perspective

Despite my life experience and any personal and political considerations, it is possible to study in detail the two approaches to development in order to outline meaningful African development. For one thing, I accept the stipulation that as much as possible scholarship ought to be pursued away from overt polemicising. So, when analysing the Blair Commission and the Eritrean Government’s policies, this implies particularly resisting any tendency to take at face value their respective claims about development. A practical way to ensure that the research properly deals with this concern is to say at the outset what is and what is not typical about the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean development experiment.

There are a number of things about the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean story of development that come to light following a skimming (re)assessment of each. In the first place, we could say that what commonly underlies the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean development project is the concept of ‘progress’ in its broad sense. Both the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean Government’s mandate appear sustained in their place in Ethiopia following the assumption of office by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, there are initial signs that Ethiopia may be about to reconsider its stance.

own distinct ways by visions of a modern society which radically differs economically, politically and socially from a preceding ‘traditional’ type. In each case, we can notice it has been assumed that ‘change’ is positive and must be embraced by all peoples; advances in science and technology and in the way society can be reordered efficiently enhance the quality of human life. Beyond this quite general feature, neither the Commission for Africa nor the Eritrean Government’s development strategy can be pronounced analogous or complete.

To understand what the two models may mean, it is important to clarify how in each instance historical fact and ideological necessity play a key role in the conceptualisation and practical pursuit of ‘development’. In the Commission’s as well as the Eritrean Government’s case, there is a set of underlying historical circumstances and belief systems about society and its mechanisms that seem to justify the form of development. We need to think of this background influence in terms of the capitalist version of modernisation and the Marxist model of social change respectively.

For the Commission, development appears legitimised by the sense that capitalism automatically engenders a democratic political order, an auspicious thing in and of itself. Correspondingly, the framework for Eritrean development is provided by the Marxist approach to economic and political modernisation involving the eradication of private property, exploitation, inequality and ultimately conflict. The sort of history and ideological thinking informing the Eritrean Government’s current broadly socialist development and that heralding ‘neoliberalism’ tend to thus be entirely unrelated. While the impetus for the Eritrean Government’s current development policy seems to derive from a national anti-colonial struggle, the background to (the rise of) neoliberalism can be explained in terms of conjunctural disturbances affecting the global capitalist order beginning in the early 1970s. Furthermore, the radically independent and collectivist spirit that was suited to the Eritrean peoples’ struggle for self-determination is what one locates as at the centre of this country’s post-independence development thinking and practice, becoming its salient feature. On the other hand, the rupture with past ways that was to accompany the advent of neoliberalism saw the taking particularly of the ideology of individualism and rule of the market to another (more acute) level. In order to deepen our understanding of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean case and the implication for meaningful (socially and environmentally balanced) development, we need to foreground this variation in historical and ideological lines of evolution.
And just as revealing about the Commission’s model and the Eritrean approach to development too seems to be that each has its pros and cons depending on the individual’s perspective. In general, the two models of development are likely to cater for the interests of different classes of people while equally being discriminatory against others. Or, considering the prevalence of plural stakes within society, both initiatives may be contested differently. The Commission’s blueprint is likely to find support, in addition to the North’s business and political elites, among Africa’s petty bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, the Eritrean approach (assuming unity between ideal and practice, to say nothing of a conducive external climate) may prove popular with the continent’s grassroots in that the aim apparently is to guarantee such basic human needs/ rights as education and health services for the poor. In practical term, their engendered weaknesses may run into excesses even as each purports to be benefiting all members of society—through ‘trickle down’ or enforced wealth redistribution. Be it despotic political systems and practices, social and economic misery and rights violations cannot be ruled out from both examples of development. I have to note this upfront to ensure as much as possible a sense of independence in the end.

**Research objectives and questions**

This thesis reviews the Commission for Africa and its *Report* a decade after its inception, coinciding with the due date for the Commission’s objectives to translate into concrete result. The analysis doesn’t seek to verify actual outcomes of development in the sub-Saharan Africa region over the span of 2005-2015 and beyond. Nor is the concern with any practical role as such that the Commission for Africa might have had. It is almost impossible to know what the link, if any, would be between the incidence of real development in all those (40-plus) states and the Commission’s blueprint.

Instead, the thesis focuses on the Commission for Africa to provide a considered response whether unchecked globalisation means there is no choice but a capitalist future before Africa—and the world for that matter. The thesis also aims to explore alternate development prospects by looking at the case of one African country, Eritrea, as it pursues a development agenda that seemingly runs counter to that of the Commission for Africa. Despite the universalising discourse anticipating neoliberal development across sub-Saharan Africa, the Eritrean example gives occasion to mull a different approach to African development. The Eritrean model of development appears useful ultimately for checking whether the present global system signifies historical finality, or else there continues to be scope for basic change. As such, this study focuses on the contested nature of African development in the shape of the tensions characterising both externally-designed (the Commission for Africa)
and internally-inspired visions of change (the case of Eritrea). So, in effect, the study is about the implications for Africa of rival development discourses and their relation to reality. And in that very sense, the underlying aim is to outline a sustainable course of development so far as sub-Saharan Africa (if not the world) is concerned.

Much of the literature on the Commission for Africa appears limited in scope to the Commission’s problem-driven and -solving strategies, and there is distinctly little or no sustained discussion in the totality of the literature of alternatives to its vision of change. Overall, the literature tends to either underrate or override ‘local’ experience as a driving force of development. The question of ‘diversity’ and of alternate paths to development as overseen by sovereign self-directing actors has been seldom explored as is the role of ‘culture’ in development. Also missing from the relevant literature seemingly is a discussion of the relationship, theoretical and practical, between what goes on locally and its universal signification. This research aims to fill a gap in the literature by analysing how the Commission for Africa conceptualises sub-Saharan Africa development compared with the Eritrean approach to national development, and by considering the implications thereof. So, in a step which could diverge from standard approaches to African underdevelopment, rather, the present inquiry seeks to consolidate materialist and symbolic analyses within a single framework. This carefully balanced approach is designed to help resolve the error of dealing with development in African contexts at either a political economy level or within the domain of abstract discourse, instead of inclusively.

I will be supplementing my personal experience of contemporary African realities as derives by virtue of tracing my descent to the continent. I was born in Eritrea (formerly Ethiopia) and lived in Sudan for a number of years and, although I currently reside outside the continent, I have not severed my ties with Africa completely. I intend to combine text-based knowledge with what you might call the personal dimension to enhance the findings of this research. Finally, besides enriching our knowledge-base by pluralising the available source material, the project’s general design is conceived in such a way as to underline the researcher’s personal and scholarly interests.

This thesis addresses the following principal question: **In light of Blair’s Africa Commission and the Eritrean case, how should we go about reconceptualising a realistic approach to future African development?** Put another way, **what must the essential development framework entail, theoretically and practically, to be viable over the long-run?** This question paves the way to other corollary questions about the significance of the Commission and the Eritrean case: Does the Commission for Africa...
provide a blueprint for real change or a continuation of the status quo? And what lessons can be drawn for sub-Saharan Africa from alternate development plans such as that articulated by the Eritrean Government? These questions can in turn be extended into a series of interrelated and mutually-reinforcing imperatives:

- How coherent is the Commission’s formulation of African development in theory and practice? Or, what are the Commission’s implicit and explicit assumptions and methods leading to its recommendations? And what can a careful deliberation on the Commission for Africa Report’s manifest and subterranean features ultimately reveal about its status?
- Is the Commission’s Report internally consistent regarding the rhetoric and reality?
- In what ways does the Report’s perspective on ‘culture’ and the ramifications for African development bring to light its doctrinal-ideological underpinnings and, ultimately, its construction of a particular set of solutions?
- Does its remit signal the foreclosure of alternate collective projects?

Assuming that underdetermination is at the heart of social history;

- How might the Eritrean case facilitate our understanding of ‘development’ in the context of sub-Saharan Africa?
- On what grounds can it be argued that Eritrea’s consolidation of its national historical experience of struggle contradicts the Commission’s prescript for the region?
- Are there any lessons that can be learned from the Eritrean focus on ‘national culture’ and self-determination?
- What, if any, is the justification to think that this country’s choice could have implication for radical African development in the current conjuncture? and finally,
- What legitimising claims can be made for the Eritrean domestic experiment in view of the wider struggle against neocolonialism in the global South (and neoliberal capitalism in the North itself)?

**The conceptual and analytical framework**

Concerning the question of research approach, the composite makeup of the thesis which draws together the Blair Commission and the Eritrean case calls for a distinctive methodological policy to accommodate that quality. Likewise, the relevant approach
anticipates renderings of development that can be borne out by this researcher’s personal experience of African realities on the ground.

Following the Commission and the Eritrean Government’s disparate conceptions, it is helpful to analyse the two approaches to ‘African development’ from a comparative historical angle. I find it apt in this case to draw on aspects of the model of comparative analysis outlined by Kerry Walk. As Walk (1998) points out, there are two ways in which researchers can engage in comparative analysis; the “classic” approach and the “lens” or “keyhole” method. The classic approach, commonly used to compare and contrast two similar things, accords equal weight to each object. The lens option, specifically adapted for this study, instead compares and contrasts A (Eritrea) and B (Commission for Africa) by weighting “A less heavily than B” and in which case A becomes a lens for scrutinising B. So, apart from simply alerting us to the possibility of a different form of development, the Eritrean model hence is not intended to be the real object. Instead, the Commission and its development text remain the focal point. Again, what seems to contribute to the effectiveness of the approach as far as my own interest goes has to be the factoring of historical reality into the analysis. In the words of Walk (1998)\textsuperscript{14} herself, “often, lens comparisons take time into account: earlier texts, events, or historical figures may illuminate later ones, and vice versa”. Consequently, in subscribing to this analytical technique, my idea is to use the Eritrean development experiment (despite its imperfections) as a base-line from which to launch a critical review of the Commission. The overriding concern thus is to demystify and otherwise question the Commission’s truth claims by calling attention to the radical implications for development inherent in the Eritrean example. As Walk (1998)\textsuperscript{15} has explained the point in some detail and clarity:

\begin{quote}
Just as looking through a pair of glasses changes the way you see an object, using A as a framework for understanding B changes the way you see B … Lens comparisons are useful for illuminating, critiquing, or challenging the stability of a thing that, before the analysis, seemed perfectly understood.
\end{quote}

And that essentially is the underlying assumption on my part about how it is that I intend to present the development texts obtaining from the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean Government.

\textsuperscript{14} See Walk (1998) \url{https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid
Meanwhile, in terms of practically applying this policy, the required analysis of ‘African development’ is intended to follow at two distinct but mutually-augmenting levels. On the one hand, a methodological stand which is explicitly social, historical and political in orientation appears necessary to understand the logic behind the Eritrean Government’s conception of development. In accordance with this choice, the Eritrean development ‘discourse’ should be read as the immediately intelligible spontaneous expression of its source point. Using such a standard system of reading, it is possible to convey the significance of the Eritrean development discourse from the literal language. And so, instead of unnecessarily perhaps trying to dig out any buried or ambiguous subtext that may not be there, the real task involves presenting the already known meaning of the Eritrean development discourse. Or, apparently, since what you read in the Eritrean development text is what you simply get, this unique strategy sounds especially effectual. It makes us see that ‘language’ in this instance represents the immediate actuality of the Eritrean nation’s consciousness which is itself a product of social conflict. I shall accordingly be closely adhering to such an approach in the parts of the thesis where the focus is on the Eritrean case. Some of the principles and techniques associated with this particular research method, considered invaluable for appreciating Eritrea’s development policy, contribute to the agenda of committed history writing. There is an obvious rationale to (partially) employing this mode of inquiry; it places the researcher in a good position to give voice to disempowered subject peoples and to address the question of social change—its potential agents and site. With reference to the development policies and practices of the Eritrean Government, that implies distrusting standard imperial history and representations of African development. It also necessitates that the researcher attempts to present Eritrea’s contrapuntal development approach whose aim presumably is to improve the social conditions of the mass of the people. Finally, besides its popular character, the approach remains just as influential in spurning vulgar historical revisionism, a pitfall I need to guard against for my own sake.

On the other hand, the idea of including an additional tier to the methodology is to facilitate the analysis of the Commission’s initiative. Since the latter tends to be about peddling a hegemonic discourse of development (which is different from social development in its amorphous and materialist sense), it becomes imperative that the researcher tailors his/her tools of analysis in accordance. At the heart of this component of the thesis is the question of the influence of power on knowledge and the concomitant need to unpick any agenda attending to that interrelation using discursive methods. I have thus set myself the task of closely ‘reading’ the narrative of African development featured in the Commission’s Report with the view to unmasking the underlying ideology. This calls for refocussing the inquiry onto the blind spots in the Commission’s discourse—to uncover not only what may have
simply been excluded, but also what cannot, as a rule, be incorporated into its text. The techniques employed in certain post-foundational modes of critical inquiry, such as critical discourse analysis, are then considered especially relevant in this connection.

As I explain, the reason for presenting in close association the Commission and the Eritrean case is the sense of polarity underlying the two approaches to African development. The Commission and the Eritrean story of development represent competing claims about not only the nature, but also the legitimacy of change. The entire study’s thrust hence is to render coherent the significance of this mutual irreconcilability with reference to the wider process of African development. Moreover, my main methodological means for analysing the dichotomous formulations of development characteristic of the topic draws on the assumption that: people can and do make something of themselves other than that which the historical process has turned them into if and when their consciousness is raised considering the role dominant ideology plays in obscuring their real conditions. In other words, I see the essence of African development as a tussle involving agency and structure which the Eritrean case and the Blair Commission are seemingly all about. And it is here that culture as well as language (as facilitator or staller of economic and political change) turns into a valuable analytical device in learning about this whole process.

And finally, in terms of theoretical grid or map, I have found it appropriate to use social conflict theory. Given the dynamics of a global political economy characterised by unequal power relations favouring the Northern states and the multinationals they serve at the expense of the populations in the South (and in the North for that matter), the theory of social conflict has, I think, unique potential to further our senses of ‘African development’. It helps us recognise how the interest of dominant powers (for which arguably the Commission stands as vehicle) dictates that the status quo be upheld by all means possible against any counter-hegemonic effort coming from those outside the capitalist system, like Eritrea for example. In addition, the theory can be of benefit for discussing local struggles within the global context of the discourse of resistance.

**Thesis structure**

Chapter one presents a review of the literature on the Commission, both mainstream and radical, whilst pointing to some unaddressed concerns. The chapter also assesses some of the secondary material on Eritrea’s nation-building and development experiment and discusses its scope and limitations. Furthermore, the chapter considers the implications for sub-Saharan Africa development of failure to identify gaps in the respective literatures.
Chapter two explores the methodological question in depth. To meet the objectives of the project and to adequately address the research questions, the chapter integrates a historical materialist line of inquiry and discourse analysis. This hybrid design is used to analyse both Eritrea’s recent socio-political history and its relation to national development and the ideological underpinnings of the Commission and its development model.

Chapter three looks into the Commission and the Eritrean case in further detail, providing background reading while setting the general context informing the Commission’s mandate and the Eritrean Government’s development outlook. The chapter proceeds to highlight the centrality of ‘culture’ to the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean Government’s ultimate agendas. The idea is to get an original sense of where both the Commission and the Eritrean Government are coming from in respect to ‘development’. I realise this by closely scrutinising the Commission’s theoretical statements on culture and by noting how the Commission consequently pitches its narratives of African development. Or, more precisely, considering the paramount requirement placed by the Commission for cultural understanding (to promote Africa’s development), the discussion in this chapter shows how this all-encompassing idea of culture governs all other details. The core objective in chapter three is to specify whether the Commission succeeds in satisfying the precondition it has set itself.

Chapter four, *Eritrea: Historical Experience, Endogenous Development* provides an overview of the country’s modern socio-political history, connecting the current drive to national development with the earlier experience of collective self-determination. The chapter aims to highlight the agency of the state in a sub-Saharan Africa development context.

Chapter five, *The Commission and the Neoliberal Construction of ‘African Development’*, explores the assumptions and methods which underlie the Commission’s development policy and action. The chapter focuses on the implication of the Commission’s development blueprint for the sub-Saharan Africa region. Specifically, it inquires into whether the Commission for Africa signifies a new approach to African development and assesses what its potential might thus be.

In chapter six, *The Broad Design of a ‘Heterodox’ Development Theory*, I continue with the analysis based on evaluations of the Commission’s and the Eritrean Government’s development policies and practices. This final chapter aims to outline a development theory and practice which could go with the realities of the continent in the contemporary period.
Chapter seven, the *Conclusion*, summarises the significance of what the research found out and completes the framing of the thesis. The chapter recapulates that ‘African development’ is a strongly contested prospect, that ideology explains how the continent’s development problem has been approached differently within the relevant accounts. The *Conclusion* also underlines that reflexivity, in contrast to a passive tendency, affords the African peoples greater insight into the continent’s development problem and any likely ways out.
1. THE COMMISSION FOR AFRICA AND ERITREA’S SELF-DEVELOPMENT APPROACH: THE LITERATURE AND ITS SCOPE

Prior to and following the launch of Our Common Interest in March 2005, Blair’s Africa initiative drew attention from a gamut of commentators interested in Africa’s future and the potential of the Commission to bring about meaningful and sustainable change. The Commission and its Report have generated contrasting responses, from those highly critical to those who largely endorse the Commission’s objectives.

The detractors of the Commission for Africa appear motivated by irreconcilable differences with the Blair plan as a whole (Bush 2004; Cammack 2005; Hoogvelt 2006; Hurt 2007; Miller ed. 2005), whereas those who generally agree with its vision of development tend not to have any intrinsic objections (Booth 2005; Brown 2006; Clapham 2005; Franks 2005; Gallagher 2009; Geldof 2004; Jackson 2005; Maxwell 2005; Mistry 2005; Morrissey 2005; Plaut 2004; Porteous 2005; Sandbrook 2005; Taylor 2005; Ware 2006; Williams 2005; Woods 2005). Individual interpretations on each side diverge greatly with respect to their scope and the focus point of their analyses. Those who seem to subscribe to the development model engendered in the Blair initiative may be circumspect about its implementation out of what they perceive to be a lingering gap between specific policies and evidence relating to African (and occasionally Northern) realities. Theirs are, in the main, conformist internal arguments typified by a concern to help revamp the model in front of them. The radically interrogatory commentary, conversely, approaches (African) development from outside the structures and systemic tendencies of free market globalisation. Some of the critique in this last grouping goes as far as to equate Blair’s posture with expediency, describing the move as an imposition on the continent of a foreign agenda in the guise of British national and global capitalist interests (Bush 2004; Cammack 2005). These commentators reject the Commission’s blueprint, however their focus does not lend itself to exploring in any depth the relation underlying dominant Africanist development discourse and alternate ways of being and knowing.

The state of the existing literature points to a general lack of focus onto the conceptual and practical underpinnings of the Commission and its Report as the embodiment of a hegemonic discourse of development. Furthermore, the literature appears devoid of alternate and competing visions of development and a due exploration of the role of Africans in bringing about social, economic and political change on their own account. It turns out
much of the literature shares a certain reluctance to approach the history and politics of African development from an angle that can corroborate the African peoples’ cultural and historical experiences. As such, there appears to be a need to look at development not only discursively (as a social construct designed to embed oppressive power relations), but also concretely as an open-ended social process of transformation in the manner of Diamond (1998) and Rodney (2012) for example. The perceived shortfall in the literature of a serious consideration of social, political and especially cultural forces in development misses the African peoples’ agency.  

This thesis seeks to redress this gap by providing a fresh perspective on African development that could enhance our understanding of the subject. The objective in this case is to reconfigure the question of power in development back into the hands of Africans as subjects of their own development, further elaborating and building on the work of selected postcolonial and subaltern scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo (1993, 1986), Edward Said (1994) and Ranajit Guha (1983). ‘Culture’ as idea and praxis in achieving the goal of African social, political and economic transformation is an area warranting particular focus and the case study of Eritrea provides a basis for contributing to the development literature in this regard.

1.1 Mainstream deliberations on the Commission for Africa

Considering the exceptional ambition and scope of the Commission for Africa, it is unsurprising that a debate centred on the plan’s signification and viability has ensued among the Commission’s otherwise sympathetic interlocutors. Typically, these mainstream exchanges with the Commission focus on the evolution of Britain’s Africa policy under New Labour, whether or not African society is in a position to undergo the required change and the appropriateness of specific donor policies.

The United Kingdom and Africa: Contextualising the Commission for Africa

Julia Gallagher (2009), Tom Porteous (2005) and Zoe Ware’s (2005) responses to the Commission for Africa describe the origin and evolution of New Labour’s Africa policy, providing important context into the Commission for Africa as a product of British foreign policy. Together, their commentary details the background to Blair’s decision to sponsor an African development commission, elaborating both the domestic and the international setting that helped influence the policy shift. These commentators all assume that the New Labour

16 Miller ed. (2005) can be considered as an exception to that trend.
policy represents a uniquely British approach to African development, as a project that is fundamentally ethical and righteous. For these commentators, it is other, wider influences stemming from attempts by the multilateral financial institutions, the UN and OECD to overhaul existing policies, that are cited as the external impetus for the shift in policy (see Porteous 2005:282). In looking at solutions, they focus on the extent of the practical applicability of the Commission's plan of development, whilst overlooking the African nations' own capacity for self-development.

While providing important context, Porteous and Ware's characterisation of the British government's motivation tends to be conveyed in personalising terms, focusing on the role of Tony Blair himself and some of the then-key members of his cabinet. The individual thoughts and actions of British politicians—of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and (the late) Robin Cook—are given precedence. These public servants are spoken of in approbatory fashion for their leadership in elevating the needs of Africa. The changeover to an 'ethical' foreign policy under the Foreign Ministership of Robin Cook, for example, is evoked as a watershed moment. We also learn how Blair's charisma and his gradual conversion to view politics from a moral angle meshes in with Cook's seminal measures in the evolution of the British Government’s Africa policy. Porteous and Ware’s assumptions about the importance of donor country leaders fails to acknowledge the systemic forces at play. Or, in other words, they appear to be neglectful of how the logic of capitalist accumulation can potentially undercut any good intention on the individual level.

Gallagher, on the other hand, appears more discerning in explaining this same context while acknowledging some of the elements of hegemonic discourse, identifying the British establishment's paternalistic representations of Africa as a “hapless” or “wretched” region. Gallagher intimates that the entire Africa Commission is based on a system of “idealisation” of Africa and of the role that the British government can and should have in the continent’s affairs (Gallagher 2009:438). Gallagher’s thesis helps alert the reader to a defining attribute of official British interest in Africa: that the concern with Africa finds ground less in lived African reality as on a mythologised version of it. Gallagher argues that Africa’s idealisation is maintained through negative perceptions of the continent whose roots go back to colonial attitudes and through constructing myths of African people as morally superior (that is, Africans as habitually optimistic even in the face of adversity). Gallagher’s mapping of the mode by which Africa is idealised and its reciprocal impact on British policy and action provides a useful perspective on some of the motivations underlying the Commission for Africa.
While Gallagher touches on the very important theme of official British policy discourse vis-a-vis sub-Saharan Africa, she seems to do so within a narrower frame of reference that excludes African experiences and perspectives on development and on the negative role of the British government in Africa. The commentary lacks reflexivity since, in the eyes of many Africans, not only is Britain a former colonial power that has sown division and strife in many parts of the continent, it is also the country perceived as seeking a neocolonial agenda in Africa in the contemporary period.\footnote{As one commentator, Yao Graham, has said about the Chairperson of the Commission for Africa: Just as he did for Iraq, in February 2004 Blair cobbled together a ‘coalition of the willing’ when he invited a small group of ‘reliable Africans’ well-schooled in IMF/ World Bank economics to give ‘African ownership’ of his Africa Commission. Be warned. When Western leaders talk about developing country ‘ownership’ of economic development, they don’t mean democratic control. Instead Western governments, IFIs and multinationals first determine African policies and then exhort Africa’s peoples to make them their own (Graham, in Miller ed. 2005:11).}

Conversely, Porteous and Ware convey the African crisis of underdevelopment as predominantly a moral conundrum, with the solutions put forward delegating responsibility for African development almost exclusively to external players. The contradictions they outline, and which the UK Africa policy must somehow surmount, stem from this elementary persuasion. For example:

For one reason or another ... a large number of African states are problematic for Western policy-makers because they are either unable or unwilling to implement the political and economic reforms that donors [prescribe them]. The challenge is how to get ... them to the development starting line ... One option is to ignore problem states ... Another is to contain them ... A third is engagement ...  

(Porteous 2005:290)

Whether making reference to issues of weak or failed states, the extent of Britain’s influence in Africa, or the tension between ideal and reality, both Porteous and Ware share the same analytical terrain that decidedly ignores a political-structural account, not to mention history, of African development or underdevelopment. The question of power in development illustrated in post-development literature (for example, Escobar 1995) is overlooked entirely in Porteous and Ware’s analyses. By bounding their explanatory scope within the terms of reference set in the Commission’s development strategy, ultimately their mission becomes synonymous with working out the technicalities of implementing a set agenda without reflecting on the nature of the agenda itself.
The Commission, the North, Africa: Development and its complex features

As, according to the Commission, African development is said to follow from donor-recipient cooperation, the areas in which reciprocal input is required—of trade, aid, debt, and political administration—sustains much of the debate. Here, reform of the global political economy and enhanced governance are thought to be the responsibilities that Northern donors and African states must each grapple with in order to kick start the "big push". Donor policy towards Africa, including the British government’s policy of increased aid flows, has come under scrutiny for a variety of reasons. Whereas some of the commentary affirms the need to transfer resources to spur African development (Williams 2005; Woods 2005), others criticise the gesture as vain and as a mischaracterisation of the problem (Mistry 2005; Taylor 2005).

Generally, advocates of external aid to Africa contend additional resources are necessary for promoting development across the continent. It is argued that the African crisis is so entrenched that only a massive increase of foreign aid could reverse it (cf. Moss 2011:138). Williams (2005) and Woods' (2005) tacit recognition of the need to scale up aid for Africa seems to be made on the basis of such reasoning. While granting the role of foreign aid in impacting development positively, Williams and Woods express quandary as to whether and how donors could deliver the proposed aid increases to Africa, citing potentially clashing donor priorities. Williams’ references to aid are rendered as part of a protracted treatment of the meaning of the Commission for Africa to British policy, which contrasts to Woods’ singular focus on the issue of aid.

Williams’ analysis focuses on the necessity of dealing with "central problems" brought forth by the Commission’s Report but not adequately addressed (Williams 2005:530). According to Williams, the Commission's ambiguities tend to undercut the UK's Africa policy and have the potential to be counter-productive. Williams traces the source of the problem to the cumulative impact of various factors, including: the distinct membership make-up of the Commission and its Secretariat; security versus development imperatives, and; the political economy and governance settings. His discussion draws links between the recruitment of the individual Commissioners and Secretariat members and the adoption of a market-led development blueprint. Similarly, Williams argues that security-related concerns pose their own set of difficulties for African development and poverty alleviation policy. Williams argues that British arms exports to the continent, priorities associated with the so-called “war on terror” and Africa’s general lack of resources for conflict prevention and peacekeeping, are
key issues that can’t be ignored. Regarding aid allocation and its links to governance, Williams highlights the tenuous principles on which the Commission’s plan is premised, such as the “relative balance between emergency and development aid, who should receive aid, for what purpose, and with what strings, if any, attached” (Williams 2005:535). Seen from this perspective, the challenge for the Commission lies in how to formulate the most effective plan of action that would simultaneously address governance issues and fulfil the humanistic desire to mitigate (eradicate?) poverty. Williams does not, however, appear to question whether a neoliberal development agenda is the right answer for Africa’s development challenges. At no point does the narrative envisage alternative models or bring African perspectives into the debate.

According to Williams (2005:535), the real predicament for the British government and, presumably other donor states, is that “giving aid to states that do not meet its preferred standards of ‘good governance’ will line the pockets of corrupt bureaucrats, [but] not giving aid to these ‘bad’ states will leave the poor within them without a lifeline”. Again, the Commission’s position comes under fire for failing to articulate what constitutes “good governance”. Williams’ contribution does, however, shed light on how the Commission determines which states follow principles of “good governance” and which don’t, revealing underlying geostrategic interests. What is not explored is how appraisals of governance ultimately involve narrow ideological assumptions. Williams implies that tackling poverty and pursuing liberal economic and political formations may not be mutually inclusive despite the Commission’s stated intention to have it both ways. Williams concludes that given the unequal priorities placed on the issue of governance and poverty alleviation, the UK government could restrict an effective continent-wide plan of action. In all of this, Williams does not venture alternatives to foreign-led intervention.

While Williams provides a useful discussion of the dilemmas and choices made in regards to foreign aid, Woods (2005) carries further the discussion, highlighting the susceptibility of foreign aid flows to changing international politics. Specifically, Woods’ analysis centres on the way the new post-9/11 global security agenda has impacted the prospect of foreign aid, enumerating the challenges to the quantity and quality of foreign aid posed by the “war on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Woods argues that the net outcome of recent shifts in the international political context is the displacement of the “goal of aid” from tackling poverty through development to security-related ends, diminished aid budgets due to the increasing costs of wars, and inefficiency in the delivery of aid as donor states become prone to following a security-informed unilateralist approach (Woods 2005:393). In this regard, Woods makes a significant contribution to revealing the undercurrents and politics of
aid. In the case of UK aid policy, for example, Woods highlights the strain on the overseas development budget due to the new security agenda. This does not seem to bode well for some of the African states which rely on Official Development Assistance (ODA) to achieve development goals. More specifically, given the securitisation of development aid, the prospect for African development as heralded by the Commission for Africa may not be that easy to execute.

Woods does not, however, explore in depth the interrelationship between foreign aid and development. That is, is external aid indispensable to the achievement of development goals? According to Keet, for example, foreign aid is rarely, if ever, entirely disinterested:

It is always utilised tactically by the donors, however indirectly, and it is inherently more advantageous to the aid provider. Even where it is—hypothetically—given with the best of intentions, aid reflects and reinforces the objective power relations, the hard realities—and political psychology—of dependence in the recipients. Aid can only be justified if it is conceived and shaped as a short term transitional measure to overcome specific hurdles or reach specific targets; and if it is explicitly designed to change the nature of the relationships and end the very need for aid.

(Keet in Miller ed. 2005:6)

While Williams and Woods problematise foreign aid, they do not reject its potential outright. Mistry (2005) and Taylor (2005), on the other hand, are critical of the significance of foreign aid. Mistry interprets the broader history of post-independence Africa as an odyssey in which failure to achieve development is the predominant feature. He argues that the transfer of significant amounts of foreign aid to the continent over decades has not and will not help break the cycle of underdevelopment. Mistry raises some pointed and necessary questions of the Commission for Africa, G8 and donors more broadly about the instrumentality of aid in stimulating African development. He asks whether “false hopes [are] being raised again about the development of sub-Saharan Africa being revived with more aid” and whether “more aid [will] help or hinder Africa?” (Mistry 2005:665). Indeed, Mistry apportions a measure of blame to foreign aid for Africa’s development problems. Beyond handing out aid, Mistry argues that donors must look into other issues to understand the causes of the current African development impasse.
Mistry’s invitation to entertain alternative reasons for Africa’s continuing crises provides an opportunity to revisit the debate about the essence of African development and the way forward, including the place of aid in that. However, the characterisation and remedy which Mistry puts forward seems to raise more questions than it answers. In ostensibly identifying the African development crisis as being constituted by a crisis in “human, social and institutional capital”, and then recommending Africa imports from abroad the very resources it lacks, Mistry provides an inadequate alternative. His approach does not help explain but rather explains away the question of African development—by swapping the symptoms of underdevelopment (human, social and institutional capital deficit) for its causes. Mistry’s distinctively tautological style ultimately hobbles and indeed defeats his purposes.

Mistry provides a parallel rationalisation to bolster his main argument for objecting to the policy of increased foreign aid, arguing that it is a misconception that Africa lacks financial resources and that the continent has already received ample levels of aid. His focus on human resources leads him to propose African states enact what are effectively skilled migration programs to acquire the necessary human and social capital, similar to the migration programs in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Europe and the US. Mistry does not, however, acknowledge the obvious differences between economically poor African states and these more developed countries, including: power imbalances in favour of migrants and the fact that none of the countries which Mistry mentions had ‘commissions for development’ authorised by outsiders as part of their development experience. Besides failing to see that sub-Saharan Africa’s foreign debt servicing outstrips what the region gets in aid from the outside world, the real shortcoming in Mistry’s argument is the propensity to wrest away from the continent the quest for autonomous development.

In the same vein as Mistry, Africa specialist Ian Taylor critiques the UK Africa policy and the Commission for the overemphasis on aid as key to African development (Taylor 2005). Taylor faults the donor assumption that “a lack of aid has somehow produced or at least exacerbated Africa’s situation” (2005:300). According to Taylor, it is a misperception that Africa is financially poor and that, in making additional aid the centrepiece of African development strategies, donor policy ends up “looking at the issue the wrong way around” (2005:301). Like Mistry, Taylor underlines the point that Africa has already received substantial amounts of foreign aid without showing tangible signs of development.18 He further shares Mistry’s unease that, rather than promoting development, foreign aid might in fact be responsible for holding back Africa’s progress. It is hard to differ with Taylor’s last

18 Taylor observes that the amount of resources (financial and otherwise) which has gone to Africa is equivalent to six Marshal Plans (2005:303).
point although that is far from saying that we should also accept his reasoning. My own criticism of foreign aid to Africa stems from a concern which is at a polar opposite to Taylor’s: more than it liberates, aid as it is currently administered tends to be about the perpetuation of dependency among the recipient African states. I therefore find myself agreeing instead more with Moyo’s (2009) point about the role of foreign aid as far as African development is concerned.

What lies behind the African crisis of development, Taylor asserts, is the considerable misgovernance of the region at the hands of its public officials. He squarely lays blame for Africa’s underdevelopment on the “misallocation of funds and the lack of prioritisation—as well as deep-rooted corruption and wastage” (Taylor 2005:301). Taylor makes the standard claim that, without “enhanced governance”, it is futile to resort to greater inflows of aid. The policy of injecting more foreign aid is perceived as a risky enterprise in view of its potentially harmful political fallout. Commentators of Taylor’s stripe remonstrate that aid has the negative consequence of shoring up Africa’s neopatrimonial system of governance. Taylor recommends that donor aim should be to cultivate a political environment conducive to development, and this demands addressing entrenched African political cultures of nepotism and cronyism. The tendency of donors to omit or downplay the impact on development stemming from the nature and form of the African state is what renders aid-based solutions to Africa’s lack of development untenable. However, Taylor’s analysis falls short of exploring or understanding the historical and indigenous evolution of political leadership and governance and its interplay with development, again deferring to external players as the source of change. He similarly doesn’t try to find out why donors may be willing to overlook bad governance and corruption in some cases and that if this could have something to do with self-interest.

It is here that other commentators, in particular Booth 2005, take up Taylor’s argument about aid and governance. The purport of Booth’s review is to gauge the extent to which the Commission fuses together the “best current thinking” on impediments and solutions to Africa’s development crisis. Like many of the critics, Booth delivers a mixed judgement on the Commission for Africa. After celebrating the inclusion of UK Department for International Development and ex-World Bank technocrats as a positive step in ensuring the Commission’s development credentials, Booth turns his attention to the “biggest blind spot” in the Report which he argues originates from failure to anticipate the detrimental impact of Africa’s politics on development (Booth 2005:494). Whether the focus is on weak states, capacity building or aid quality, Booth’s conclusion is that the system of African politics is what fetters the development of sub-Saharan Africa. While Booth also problematises aid and
is critical of the Commission for not engaging with current understandings of how African governance hinders development, he does not venture into broader issues that draw together historical legacies, power relations and the potential of the African peoples themselves.

The ‘Big Push’ and African development

The Commission for Africa can be seen as part of a broader push for rapid change across the African continent, described by some as the “big push” or “great transformation” (Sandbrook 2005; Brown 2006; Easterly 2009; Maxwell 2005). By taking over where the aforementioned critiques leave off, for example, Sandbrook’s analysis knits together the dynamics of culture and politics in presaging Africa’s great transformation. Like Williams, Sandbrook focuses on ambiguities and shortcomings in the Report with regard to the way culture informs politics. Sandbrook ventures a detailed account of the wider repercussions of Africa’s socio-political realities on economic transformation. He sees the politico-economic setting in contemporary Africa as constituting a hybrid system, a precarious state of affairs in which a market-informed rationality coincides with well-established norms and practices of reciprocity and redistribution. Even though the Report ostensibly dedicates a whole chapter to African culture, Sandbrook suggests that there exists a significant mismatch between what the Commission sets out to achieve and the constraining African reality. Particularly, Sandbrook argues that where sectional interests are embedded in such hybrid systems, social conflict in the context of transformative change becomes inevitable.

There is, however, shortfall in Sandbrook’s analysis. First, Sandbrook makes no effort to explicitly state what he understands as the meaning of “culture”, despite the centrality of the concept to his objectives. Sandbrook assumes of culture as inert, reflecting a structural functionalist mode of coming to terms with social reality. Sandbrook’s account overlooks, for example, the essence of culture as understood from within the field of postcolonial and cultural studies. Contemporary approaches to the study of culture place emphasis on the dynamic and contested nature of the concept; of cultural meaning as fundamentally unstable and liable to “subversion”. Second, the adoption of a conventional perspective re culture does not inform the reader of political struggles that exist within Africa whose aims are to overcome barriers to progress stemming from retrograde tradition and custom. As Iyob (1997:648) has observed of some of the social changes taking place in Eritrea, for example: “Social, economic and political policies are now being formulated with an eye to their impact on the fragile unity of the diverse sectors of Eritrean society. For example, affirmative policies intended to transform traditional ethnic and gender relations are accompanied by
laws and decrees introducing a separation between state and religion”. This highlights the potential of African agency to bring about social, cultural and political change. And this seems to run counter to the dominant neopatrimonialist literature (read hegemonic Africanist discourse) on the nature and form of the African state.

Sandbrook aligns with many other commentators in arguing that a “great transformation”, while perhaps necessary, is unlikely to materialise within the current African and international context (Brown 2006, Easterly 2009, Maxwell 2005). Brown (2006:349), for example, describes the Commission’s initiative as a modern-day “liberal internationalist” economic and political roadmap for the continent. He looks at the current Western donor attention on Africa from a useful comparative historical perspective, placing the Commission’s mandate against the antecedent of the nineteenth-century colonial project in Africa. Brown questions whether Western donors today have heeded any of the lessons from previous colonial encounters with the continent. For Brown, the most significant factor in African underdevelopment is the legacy of colonisation’s state formation. Brown perceptively notes that “it was perhaps the shift in imperial approach, as the question of whether and how to acquire territory turned into how to govern those territories once acquired, which left the longest legacy” (Brown 2005:363). That is, rather than establishing centralised legal-rational states, colonial political administration created quasi states along the line of customary beliefs and practices. It is this choice, Brown argues, that would subsequently spawn the neopatrimonial political orders believed to be currently stymying development across the continent. Brown however doesn’t link all this to the internal contradictions and crises of the capitalist system as it depends on constant expansion to last out.

The lack of attention to past mistakes by the Commission also underlies Easterly’s (2009) inquiry. Easterly distinguishes between “transformational” and “marginal” approaches to development. He defines the transformational model as “West comprehensively saves Africa” whereas the marginal strategy stands for “West takes one small step at a time to help individual Africans” (Easterly 2009:373). Reminiscent of Brown, Easterly indicates that there is a long history underlying the Commission’s vision of African development by means of a “big push”. Here, Easterly recounts that, as early as the 1940s and 1950s, the idea of a big push has been championed by economists and development theorists (e.g. Walt Rostow, Paul Rosenstein-Rodan) who believed that a combination of dedicated political leadership and foreign expertise is what it takes to effect change (Easterly 2009:375). This basic concept has survived in one form or another through the decades that saw the advent of ‘structural adjustment programs’ (1980s) and ‘shock therapy’ (1990s) to the new Millennium.
In his assessment of the Commission as a transformational approach to African development, Easterly notes two general trends in such approaches: escalation (that is, doing more of the same) and cycle of ideas (that is, the tendency to recycle and adapt old ideas rather than innovate). Easterly contends that the marginal approach to development holds a better promise for target countries.

Like Easterly, Maxwell (2005) favours the adoption of the “marginal” route to African development and is critical of the Commission’s idea of launching a big push, questioning why the Commission does not prioritise or present a sequence of development goals. Maxwell, more importantly, problematises the use of “Africa” as a monolithic concept to refer to the myriad of sub-Saharan countries. It is contended such a broad term suppresses the heterogeneity that characterises the continent south of the Sahara. Indeed, it is hard to argue against his critique of the Commission’s formulation of wholesale recommendations that do not make due or meaningful distinctions within the region. For example, Maxwell (2005:486-487) argues for the need to disaggregate the “big push” at the level of implementation on account of geographical as well as sectoral differences. Maxwell insists that it would be ill-advised to push to the same scale in every African country, but rather to set priorities according to needs and circumstances. Similarly, he warns that it is not appropriate to push equally across all sectors of a nation’s economy. Rather, Maxwell contends that it is selective and targeted development that will ultimately bring about the most effective change. Maxwell doesn’t pause to think and otherwise suspect if there can possibly be a political link (drive for domination) to engaging in such an act of overgeneralisation as the Commission for Africa does. He can only see the technical side of the problem.

That is more or less the gist of what I have tended to call the mainstream literature concerned with the Commission for Africa. In the end, what this literature makes clear is that sub-Saharan Africa is in need of overhaul of its economy and politics, and this may or may not imply a quest for a great transformation. The challenge that the African states face, and an area of debate, is the nature of the change sought as well as the means of achieving it. Further, any serious effort to achieve real change must, presumably, anticipate alternate measures beyond foreign aid and outsider tutelage and involve the peoples of Africa themselves.

19 This is not to suggest that there are no social, cultural, economic, political and historical commonalities across the sub-Saharan Africa region.
In their own ways, the mainstream reviews of Blair’s Africa initiative highlighted above raise important issues and concerns about the Commission and its *Report*. However, on balance, the commentary does not provide an adequate investigation of the cultural, ideological and political assumptions behind the Commission’s profession to the understanding and practice of ‘African development’. Their primary business seemed to be the justification of the status quo as unsurpassable, or the capitalist economic and political order as eternal. The various problematisation of foreign aid, for example, do not offer alternative solutions beyond and outside what is arguably in the interest of the dominant powers. That is, outlining the contradictions besetting the Commission for Africa and the significance of the ensuing conundrum for UK Africa policy as Williams and others have done is one thing, exploring how Africans themselves can proactively bring about change is quite another. Likewise, the controversy surrounding the instrumentality of external aid could have been thought through using a broader frame of reference. The relevant input could have benefitted from analysis that locates the African development crisis in underlying structural and political causes—colonial history and current neocolonial policies like unfair trade rules and practices, debt overburden as well as the culpability of Africa’s elites (for example, Arrighi 2002 and 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000; Leys 1994; Mamdani 1996; George 1992; Saul 2006). By highlighting perceived paradoxes in the Commission’s development vision, the contributions thus further the debate on the Blair Africa project’s chances of success at the level of practical implementation and from a strictly mainstream development viewpoint. Concerning the question of how the problem of African development may otherwise be understood, the search for alternatives must be directed elsewhere.

1.2 Counter-hegemonic discourses and the Commission for Africa

The visibly unconventional critiques of donor initiatives such as the Commission for Africa highlight the continuation of what is argued to be an ‘imperialist’ agenda. By tapping into the range of theoretical currents which obtain from the Marxist intellectual tradition, these commentators have interpreted such initiatives as forms of hegemony. Counter-hegemonic discourses about the Commission emanating from the likes of Bush (2004), Hoogvelt (2006), Cammack (2005) and Miller ed. (2005) give a flavour of the literature in this category and present useful analyses for exploring the possibility of alternative approaches to African development.

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20 The review here doesn’t enter into a discussion about how effective usages of ‘imperialism’ as explanatory category (of the dynamics of global capitalism in the 21st century) can be. I do take notice however that there is a growing debate on the need to supplant imperialism in its Leninist (obsolete?) guise with the notion of neo-imperialism as a more contemporary, perhaps apt, reference. For the purposes of this study, I don’t draw any serious distinctions between imperialism and neo-imperialism; instead, I use the concept of ‘imperialism’ quite loosely and as a generic word.
Dependency

Bush’s (2004) critique of the Commission for Africa declares Blair’s project “irrelevant” for what he sees as its untenable faith that Africa’s salvation will follow in the footsteps of a globalising capitalism. Bush argues that it is “unclear just how yet another commission on Africa… will advance strategies to ameliorate worsening [North-South] disparities in income and wealth” (Bush 2004:14). He instead opines that the (then) Blair Government could have perhaps used its time better “in dusting off the findings of the Brandt Commission [1980] and even the Pearson Commission [1969]...” (Bush 2004:14-15). Contrary to the Commission’s supposition that there are benefits to be gained from aligning to the global economy, Bush argues that doctrinal globalisation is in itself what stands in the way of real African development. Using a framework that blends dependency theory and aspects of Wallerstein’s world system theory, Bush foregrounds the dialectical way in which North-South relations are structured and operate. As such, Bush’s argument emphasises the kind of linkages that can be made in centre-periphery dynamics; that any transformation in the centre reverberates in the periphery in an inverse way.21 This, Bush laments, is most apparent in the globalisation process that the Commission for Africa sees as “panacea” for the continent’s underdevelopment (see also the likes of Chossudovsky 1997 and Frank 1993). In the words of Bush: “… the problem is not that the continent is insufficiently integrated with globalisation, it is that it has been integrated in a particular way that has left underdeveloped its resources of people and raw material” (Bush 2004:18). In particular, Bush decries the Commission as a proponent of neoliberal globalisation despite mounting evidence that, over the last four decades, the South has fared badly under this economic and political model. For Blair and his Commissioners to miss this glaring reality, Bush argues, it can only mean one of two things: that they are either confused or else they are deceptive (Bush 2004:19). Instead of opting for policies that may only mitigate the symptoms of Africa’s underdevelopment, Bush argues that the Commission should have considered putting together strategies that could have helped address the underlying (structural) causes of the African crisis. According to Bush, the right policies for Africa are those “that will attack the profits of Western interests, corporations and individuals that benefit from African misery” (Bush 2004:19).

21 Here Bush’s analysis shares common ground with that of the underdevelopment theorists, for example Samir Amin, Henrique Cardoso, Enzo Faletto, Celso Furtado, Andre Frank and Walter Rodney.
To his credit, Bush does not lay blame only on the overseers of globalisation in the North, but also acknowledges the role of local elites—the African comprador class—in contributing to the continent’s underdevelopment. Bush undoubtedly scores a vital point here, for it is true there are elites in the continent who are willing to throw their weight behind the call for globalisation often at the expense of subordinating their nations’ interests. He chronicles the gradual undermining of Africa’s political leadership under the forces of globalisation, culminating in their adoption of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) project, which some commentators have talked about as a capitulation of sovereign decision-making by African states and their leaders (cf. Bond 2005). Bush insists the search for solutions to Africa’s economic, political and social stagnation should involve a profound reorganisation of the matrix of global capitalism. Nonetheless, in what appears a step at odds with Dependency’s call for revolutionary supersession of capitalism by delinking, Bush proposes that the North embark on reformation of the international trade system, and that this should include abandoning subsidies and protectionist policies and practices by the Northern states which place African economies at a distinct disadvantage. “Only when the reality dawns on Blair that the character of capitalism in the twenty-first century is the problem rather than the solution to Africa’s crisis,” Bush argues, “will a glimmer of hope emerge as to what strategy for the continent’s growth and development might look like” (Bush 2004:14). As such, Eritrea presents a useful case study for exploring Bush’s thesis and the challenges that face any state that pushes against the dominant forces of global capitalism and Western interference (see chapter four in this study).

**Structuralism**

Like Bush, Ankie Hoogvelt (2006) considers the Commission for Africa as an illustration of the evolving interrelationship between core and periphery in the age of globalising capitalism. More specifically, Hoogvelt is interested in “the coherent conjunction between certain material forces of globalisation and the emergence of a new moral mandate and institutional form for intervention in the third world” (Hoogvelt 2006:159). According to Hoogvelt, projects such as the Commission for Africa are “post-modern imperialist” undertakings.

On a theoretical plane, Hoogvelt’s starting point is to make sense of the interplay between structure and agency in analysing historical change. It is a broader conceptual frame of reference which helps inform her account of transformations in the nature of imperialism and global capitalism. By leaning more toward the structure end of the dichotomy, Hoogvelt further reinforces her analysis by adapting Robert Cox’s notion of “historical structures” as a
composite of (capitalist) international class alliances, national governments that primarily serve this class’s interests and the dominant ideas and practices that are harnessed for building consensus within civil society. Hoogvelt’s adoption of the neo-Gramscian model, in which the previous Gramscian category of “historic blocks” is superseded by “historic structures”, is important here. Whereas in Gramscianism proper hegemony is understood to apply at the level of the nation-state, the move toward a neo-Gramscian perspective serves to highlight the supranational dimension of hegemony in the current phase of capitalist globalisation. Blair as Prime Minister and Chair of the Commission for Africa is not representative solely of British political and business interests; he is equally a spokesperson or agent for the transnational capitalist class and the many national governments and the multilateral institutions that act on behalf of this class. He also comes across as an ideological warrior for them. As to the rest of the Commissioners, including the Africans, their enabling roles within a dominant historic structure also accords with the role of the petite bourgeoisie, a small segment of the social populations in the global South, whose interest forces it to behave in that way—as a transmission line in the words of Frantz Fanon.

As occasionally global capitalist expansion runs into crises intrinsic to this system—“structural bottle-necks” as Hoogvelt would say—it is important for the system’s continuation that obstacles be overcome. Human agency, Hoogvelt asserts, proves inefficacious if not peripheral in such transformative processes. For Hoogvelt, depending on the particular epoch and on the extent and intensity of the crisis, the means resorted to are likely to vary in form and nature. In the case of “post-modern imperialist” interventions, agents of the reigning historic structure may see it fit to deploy resources including military, political and civil-ideological means (both hard and soft power) in alternation or concurrently. Putting aside the question of morality and Africa advocates’ genuine commitment and struggles, what Hoogvelt sees in the Commission for Africa ultimately is a kind of strategic manoeuvre whose real purpose is to propagate neoliberalism through a process of co-optation as opposed to direct coercion.

**Open Marxism**

Like Bush and Hoogvelt, the Commission for Africa as vehicle for furthering a hegemonic world order is taken up in Cammack’s (2005) assessment. According to Cammack, the Commission for Africa, G8 development programs, the UN Millennium Project and other similar initiatives, aspire to spread “a series of supranational initiatives aimed at endowing transitional states … with the capacity to pursue and legitimise capitalist development” (2005:331). The way that these initiatives promote capitalist development is through the
revitalisation of state agency, by consolidating the power and influence of states that are compliant to guarantee the unencumbered expansion of global capitalist interests. In contrast to Bush (2005) and possibly Hoogvelt (2006), Cammack does not see the hegemonic imperative of globalisation being confined to the global South only. Cammack notes that the same imperative lies behind the crafting of Northern domestic policies as well. As far as the Commission for Africa is concerned, Cammack believes the initiative is also equally representative of New Labour’s designs for the “modernisation” of Britain. In that respect, Cammack’s position can to some degree be likened to that of the World System theorists, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein.

Cammack clearly demonstrates how the Commission, rather than being an innovative step or offering new potential, represents prevailing development orthodoxy. For example, the choice of Nicolas Stern, former European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and World Bank Chief, as the Commission’s director of research is in itself revealing. Again, Cammack draws a similar lesson as he ponders the background context to the Commission, where he juxtaposes the Commission’s agenda to reforms already underway on the international stage. Such broader transformations cover developments at the global institutional level, evolution of new institutions in Africa, reform of the global political economy, elevation of the governance agenda, and so on. All of this is geared, according to Cammack, toward further upgrading and embedding neoliberalism across Africa.

Cammack’s critique (of the Commission’s Neo-institutionalist approach) draws heavily from Open Marxist theory in accounting for recent Northern development initiatives. As Tsolakis (2010:387) explains, Open Marxism aims to explain “the relationship between global capital, the international system and the state.” In line with this, Cammack thus argues that “capitalism has reached a point… where the idea of the ‘completion of the market’ provides an appropriate focus of analysis” (Cammack 2005:345). The universalisation of the market, or the diffusion of the social relations of capitalist production, implies an interventionist state; a state whose agency is sought to the extent that it imposes the dominant relations of production (cf. Harvey 2005). How initiatives such as the Commission for Africa unfold is explained by capitalism’s core imperatives which transcend national or regional boundaries and interests. A regulatory framework on a global scale—or what Cammack refers to as meta-governance—is necessary to reproduce the neoliberal global order. The benefits of employing an Open Marxist approach enables Cammack to make sense of the similarity of hegemonic development policies and programs wherever they are applied—in eastern
Europe, Russia and Latin America in the 1990s, Britain under New Labour, or sub-Saharan Africa in the new Millennium.

**Radical African Political Economy**

Finally, *The Alternatives Commission for Africa Report* (Miller ed. 2005) provides a useful compendium of alternative scholar-activist critiques of African development initiatives that aim to promote neoliberalism. The central question for the authors of this report is whether the Commission’s blueprint indeed signals a rupture with the established Northern norm of looking at (African) development. In response to this question, many of the authors redirect our focus to the nature of the development policy underlying the Commission for Africa Report at the same time as calling for a review of the North’s actions and rhetoric. Miller ed. (2005) invites perspectives from those on the ground in the different parts of Africa, from Cape (Dot Keet) to Cairo (Samir Amin), that together refute the Commission’s self-ascribed status of presenting a new way forward. This alternatives report effectively highlights how the Commission for Africa and G8 initiatives not only prioritise the interests of corporations over that of the peoples of Africa, but also prove problematic when it comes to bridging the gap between donor words and actions. The critique of the Commission’s neoliberal policy agenda, furthermore, follows at the macro-level concerning the characterisation of the African development crisis and the likely solutions to it, as well as more concretely at a level involving substantive issues such as aid, debt and trade.

Dot Keet’s contribution to The Alternatives Commission for Africa, for example, counters the Blair Commission’s understanding that the nature of the African development problem is linked predominantly to factors internal to Africa (Keet in Miller ed. 2005). Keet instead locates the root causes of Africa’s economic and social decline in the region’s lopsided external relations, which is akin to what Bush (2004) also thinks. In Keet’s supposition, what the Blair Commission has managed to uncover by way of “reasons” for the continent’s lack of progress are the outward manifestations of the problem. As she writes: “the strategies of the Africa Commission … are in the main focused on the symptoms rather than the underlying systemic sources or causes of the problems” (cited in Miller ed. 2005:5). A real way forward for African development, Keet argues, entails promulgating a set of measures that can undo Africa’s systemic disadvantage including: effective trade roles and rights in lieu to market access; autonomous policy rights instead of technical assistance; financial aid as human obligation, not as political lever; debt repeal as opposed to debt relief; poverty eradication in place of poverty amelioration; genuine democratic arrangements as bedrock of
good governance; fair and just participation in another world system (Keet in Miller ed. 2005:5-9).

Keet’s stance is echoed by a number of other contributors to the Alternatives Commission for Africa. In Neoliberalism wants to have the last laugh, Charles Abugre highlights the external origins of the crisis, insisting that African underdevelopment reflects an ideological state of affairs; a refusal to admit the foundering of neoliberalism and that the tendency to define and act on the issue of African poverty in moral terms becomes a spurious exercise (Abugre in Miller ed. 2005:27). Like Keet, Abugre outlines a number of possible steps forward involving transformations in relation to resources, debt and trade. Abugre proposes Africa steps up, as well as keeps within the continent, the revenues it generates while the issues of (oppressive) debt and barriers to trade are simultaneously dealt with. For both Keet and Abugre, the clamour around Africa as a moral cause is simply beside the point.

Concern about donor countries’ actions as opposed to rhetoric is another significant theme that emerges from the Alternatives Commission for Africa. Critics who lament the developed world’s failure to match its words with action cite the many false hopes that Africa as a region has experienced in the wake of numerous past development initiatives. The convening of the Pearson Commission (1969), Brandt Commission (1980), followed by a series of G7/G8 Plans and lastly the Blair Commission (2005) are highlighted as defining a pattern in the North’s relations with Africa—culminating in no discernible gains for the continent. The viewpoint advanced in this case is that these initiatives are bereft of the kind of political will which could radically overcome structural/systemic impediments. The indictment of the Northern states’ complicity in the continuation of African misery is particularly emphasised in the discussion on the question of debt and its effects. Indeed, a considerable portion of the Miller ed. report is dedicated to highlighting the impact of debt on the economies of Africa (see Dembele, Amin and Jubilee South in Miller ed. 2005).

The counter-hegemonic perspectives captured by Bush (2004), Hoogvelt (2006), Cammack (2005) and evident in Miller ed. (2005), all provide a useful theoretical, practical and even political basis for not only critiquing the Commission for Africa, but also for signalling the kind of alternatives that are needed and possible. As Hoogvelt writes, “rival structures can be developed and this leaves open the possibility that history may develop in a variety of ways” and “it is the task of the critical social scientist to uncover ‘plausible alternative futures’.” (2005:161).
1.3  The case of Eritrea: voices from the margins

In exploring alternatives to the hegemonic development discourse and its underlying agenda represented by the Commission for Africa, a starting point is to reaffirm Africa’s heterogeneity and to validate her intrinsic capacity to define and enact development accordingly. The many and varied critiques of mainstream development initiatives, including the Commission for Africa, have so far skipped the potential of the African peoples and fully explore, as Hoogvelt would ask, plausible alternative futures. This is presumably where Eritrea and her development experiment ought to fit into the picture.

‘Culture’ and the Eritrean story

While much has been written about Eritrea’s political history (for example, Connell 2011; 2001; Gebremedhin 2002; Habte Selassie 2010; Iyob 1995; 1997; Makki 1996; Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005; Pool 2001; Reid 2005; Venosa 2014), there appears to be a dearth of academic research that focuses on the country’s collective self-determination and nation-building journey as a process underwritten by a strategic conception and application of ‘culture’. How Eritrea’s distinct national experience, the mobilisation then and now of an entire society through culture, informs her ideas and actions about nationhood and development needs to be fully explored. That is, a major gap in development literature is on the strategic dimensions of culture that underpin social struggle and change. The paucity of literature on Eritrea with the kind of focus on culture could also be because Eritrea’s history as a nation-state is still so recent. However, a rudimentary look at the public discourse of the Eritrean Government with regard to its national development strategy raises interesting questions about alternatives to the development agenda coming from the North, and refocuses on issues of sovereignty, national culture, historicity, resistance and self-reliance.

Of particular interest is the way in which national culture is woven into counter-hegemonic development discourse. There is useful literature which begins with the pioneering work of the likes of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, and that continues in contemporary forms in certain postcolonial and subaltern literature, that helps to illuminate resistance to domination through culture understood in the broadest sense. The significance of what Fanon and Cabral wrote more than five decades ago—in the context of colonial Africa—regarding the deployment of culture as a vital tool of struggle by subaltern and oppressed groups to achieve common political objectives, appears pertinent to understanding contemporary scenarios, including Eritrea. Fanon, for example, characterises culture as a “special battlefield” where the goal of African economic, political and social emancipation can be fought.
For his part, Cabral analogises culture to a flower when underlining the centrality of culture in the social and political fields. Like a flower that bears the seeds that ensure a plant species’ propagation, so too culture warrants the viability of a people’s sense of identity and being. The implications of Cabral and Fanon’s works for Eritrean self-determination and nation-building are worth elaborating further and in light of the contemporary context which is not defined by formal or classical colonialism but by less direct yet equally oppressive power relations.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed some of the literature on both the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean story of political self-determination and economic development. The review comes in the context of the search for alternative African development to the current dominant form.

In the case of the Commission for Africa, the review covered two types of sources, presented as mainstream and radical respectively. Despite minor difference, the review confirmed the first series of responses to be largely in line with the Commission’s development agenda. Meanwhile, the review of the second collection of commentary showed that this literature featured perspectives that considerably diverged from the Commission’s. Compared with the first group’s quite accommodative approach, the second set of sources was found to be more effective in generating better insight into African development. At the same time, the review uncovered some weaknesses in the two bodies of literatures, even though this tended to vary in terms of its nature.

In an additional move, the review also deliberately dwelled on the literature on Eritrea and showed its scope as well as limitations. I noted that there remains a gap in the Eritrean development literature in that, overall, there is no significant reference to history, collective agency and culture. In my review, I also pointed to the need to address this perceivable gap to complete the picture of Eritrean post-independence development and to draw implications for African development. I therefore called to source information about the Eritrean development experiment that has hitherto been unconsidered. It was rationalised that the inclusion of such supplementary data will make it possible to go beyond what the Commission for Africa and its many discussants have already said.

The next chapter, the methodology, will feature both the conceptual and practical tools that are necessary to address the topic, including the research questions. This chapter is
designed to envision potentially an alternative development theory and practice based on the literature review.
2. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Social scientists have sometimes drawn the conclusion … that all knowledge is founded on assumptions which are arbitrary from a rational point of view, and that ultimately it is a matter of taste or politics which paradigm one adopts.

- Martyn Hammersley

Scholarly inquiry is sustained by key philosophical assumptions about what authoritative research is supposed to embody. The very pursuit also involves the identification of which research methods may be compatible with the generation of knowledge in a specified project. This chapter presents the conceptual framework as well as the practical facets of the research. It fleshes out the research questions and outlines the methods of inquiry in accordance with the nature and objectives of the project. In this respect, it is essential to contextualise the research within ontological and epistemological field, for presuppositions about the nature of social reality and of knowledge bear significantly on how the topic is treated and on the status of the research overall. The justification for sourcing research material, namely the election of a qualitative historically- and politically-informed approach will be addressed.

2.1 Reality, Social Inquiry, Africa

When dealing with the vexed subject of sub-Saharan Africa and the region’s development future, whether research culminates in adequate understanding of the continent’s development problem or not, may depend, in the end, on the feasibility of the researcher’s methodological stand. In the practical reality of African development, this whole exercise is likely to come down to exploring ways which could ensure the experiences and aspirations of the majority not only are simply acknowledged but also acted upon. So how is one to designate a sociology of knowledge such as would clear the ground to pursuing alternative pedagogies? Also, in terms of general outline as well as specifics, what ought the relevant alternative paradigm of inquiry to feature? Prior to addressing in detail the issue of what type of research method to implement and why, I will attempt first to specify the nature of social reality and evidence of knowledge which closely resonates with my plans in this project.

22 It is the case that Eurocentric universalising renderings of ‘Africa’ and of the concept of ‘development’ itself tend to be problematic. This kind of outsider (ideological) formulation commonly masks vested material and political interests. The dominant Africanist perspective on the region’s apparent social decline turns out to be of questionable scholarly merit and practical promise. As such, it is the subject of this thesis’s critique, not its source of inspiration.
The holistic setup of society

In attempting to come to terms with the significance of lasting African development, I set off by accepting that the concept of society differs essentially from its component parts considered in disaggregation. That is to say, I agree with the viewpoint that we cannot possibly comprehend society and its dynamics by concentrating discretely on its constituent elements. More specifically, I tend to think that development doesn't obtain from how society’s basic elements—people and aspects of social organisation (economy, politics, culture and ideology)—are independently structured and operate within the ‘totality’. I find it particularly instructive to envisage society and, by extension, the development phenomenon, holistically along the line of Marx’s philosophical thought on society. I am accordingly suspicious of assumptions about society that contravene the precept of holism in regard to economic life and social development. In more substantive terms, my broader perception of the nature of society markedly differs from the assertions of methodological individualism; I don’t seek to draw the nature of social reality from the atomistic configuration of society. Furthermore, given this general orientation, the version of economic behaviour and activity associated with methodological individualism should not count as norm, or as universally valid. At the same time, it may seem equally fallacious to exaggerate the place and role of the individual at the expense of an integrated model in which the economy, politics, culture and ideology work to influence social consciousness in particular ways. Ultimately, a paradigm which assimilates rudiments of Marx’s postulate as stated above culminates in a specific form of development knowledge and practice—one at odds with free-market economics whose origins lie in methodological individualism. Methodological individualism, by its very nature, and the theory of societal holism are mutually-exclusive. Social research can therefore only be based on one or the other paradigm, but not on both at the same time. Following Hammersley’s (1995:13) notation, you can, if you will, read the present study’s ‘tastes’ for an integrated model of society as the expression of the author’s personal politics regarding how social research ought to be conducted. In any case, I am of the opinion that politics tends to be unavoidable in the field of social inquiry. Below is a brief synopsis of how I have come to agree with the viewpoint that a conception of reality diametrically opposed to methodological individualism can hold greater potential in fostering our understanding of sub-Saharan Africa development.

The idea of society being constituted of the behaviour and actions of autonomous, ‘rational’ individual human beings, such as suggested by methodological individualism, sounds a
problematic hypothesis.\textsuperscript{23} Equally, a critique could be made of the view that development can be analysed by distinctly considering the levels of society, the economic base and superstructures.

The whims and behaviour of human beings as individual stakeholders seems to diverge in obvious ways from the ‘norms’ of what we think of as social ‘reality’. In other words, a worldview premised on conceptions of reality wherein the apparent concern and aspiration of individuals receives supreme importance possibly comes across as preposterous. A more typical characterisation of social reality could be that reality hardly ever matches the cumulative sum total of how each person as a solitary being thinks and acts, so the modelling of development on such assumption tends to be untenable. This then not only calls into question the founding principle of market economics, but also the entire Liberal ideology—to which incidentally the Commission for Africa appears exclusively indebted. The ramifications for African development don’t end there.

As I have pointed out already, the metaphysical-idealistic conception of human beings as essentialised, pre-social creatures is likely to lead to prioritising the ostensive ambition of individuals. Methodological individualism assumes that the essence of (personal and social) development is the quest for self-gratification on an individual scale, irrespective of how others and the ecosystem may fare. Not surprisingly, the denial in this case of any social aspect to economic activity, and the implication this can have for African development, has background in the worldview of such proponents of neoliberalism as Margaret Thatcher\textsuperscript{24} who was to set the tone for subsequent UK (Tory and Labour) governments. However, there are some enduring lessons that need to be drawn from methodological individualism: firstly, because and in spite of its origins, a development perspective which follows on from methodological individualism can but only be one means of looking into the world. There appears to be then nothing preordained about the approach to reality associated with methodological individualism; this distinct attitude proves specific to the historical and cultural experience of those who propagate it, and; secondly, it is imperative to perhaps remember that an outlook about the development process that arrogates both human eccentricity and a complete disunity among the ‘levels’ of society becomes expressive of

\textsuperscript{23} In other words, the self-seeking Homo economicus suggested by the likes of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and disciples is an oddity of a human being.

\textsuperscript{24} The former British Prime Minister, the late Margaret Thatcher, who was a leading political figure among those who lent unreserved support to neoliberalism, was on record in saying that she didn’t believe in something called society. It is also the case that much of the critical development literature actually blames the neoliberal agenda for much of the tribulations of the South.
residual ideology. Such a position seems to be grounded less in empirical-realistic reflection and more in abstract-reductive analysis.

As an alternative, a position opposed to neoliberalism and methodological individualism implies a reality in which the social group’s and more generally humanity’s interest takes precedence over that of the individual. It is in reverse to the modus operandi of private ownership, consumption and exchange that marks other rival systems of cognition. What is more, an approach to national development focussed on practices of central planning, as in the Eritrean case for example, can be seen as a validation of the integrated character of society and its mechanisms.

The parable of the *Blind men and an Elephant* can be quite didactic in conceptualising society's holism. In this story, a group of blind men come across an elephant. They are asked to describe what is in front of them. Each feels a different part of the animal's body and gives his answers accordingly. The man who feels the tusk, for example, describes the ‘elephant’ as like ‘an arching-tapering stick’. As the legend suggests, it is impossible to provide a full description of a unity on the basis of only partial exploration. Singularly, the body parts (leg, tail, tusk, trunk…etc.) identified by the proverbial blind men don't give a clue as to the existence of an intact living creature that is an elephant.

This style of reasoning applies to conceptualising society and development. Individuals as the basic units of society cannot in isolation possibly make a coherently organised and performing social entity within which development may eventuate. Instead, as Amin (1998) notes, the essence of a social totality seemingly lies in the subsumption into an integrative collective formation of varying group-based identities; their respective loyalties or disloyalties, including any ensuing mutual and reciprocal dynamics. Thus, social reality can perhaps more accurately be imagined if we take into account how, for example, social class, national, gender-based and other collectively-expressed identities align and interact within the web defined by political, economic, cultural and ideological thought and practice. These arrangements, in turn, bear little or no resemblance to the kind of solipsistic way of being that may only characterise the experience of hermits, the Robinson Crusoe types as Samir Amin would have it. Hence, in terms of make-up and dynamics, society appears designed in such a way as to mimic the properties of a complex living organism, the human being for example.25 As an analogy, and again echoing Amin (1998), the countless biological cells in the human body may not be responsible for maintaining the body as an organic whole. Were

25 In philosophical terms, this is commonly referred to as Organicism.
cellular activity not to be appreciated in conjunction with the vital roles performed by the various organs and internal bodily systems, then there could be no point in talking of a holistic entity, a human being, in the first place (see Amin 1998 for more details). So much so for the purport of social development, and if I have resorted to allegory, anecdote and analogy to drive home my message, it is because this kind of language strikes me as succinct metaphor for the concept of social reality.

Normally then, society, as much as the human body itself, appears subject to the organising principle and holistic operating mode of an organism. This is the sort of broad understanding (of reality) that I bear in mind when reviewing the Commission and when considering the Eritrean development experiment. But before ending this opening section, it is important to pursue the implications of such presupposition a step further into a theoretical framework—to promote viable African development, the core theme.

**Solidarity, conflict, logic of the development phenomenon**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1993:78) makes the vital observation that societies become genuinely free and develop “when they control all the tools, all the instruments, all the means of their physical, economic, political, cultural and psychological survival.” He uses the shorthand “means and context” to describe the climate within which a society’s “integrated survival and development” takes place. He further notes that this freedom is contingent on the balance of the internal and external forces bearing on the society at any particular moment in its history. Left on its own, human society ordinarily works out (through consensus or contradiction) the problems internal to it and accordingly sets itself on a ‘development’ course. But as so often happens, the contact with the external environment will also have a major determining impact on the prospect of internal change and development. Depending on the specific scenario, the influence exerted by the external environment can either be constructive or else obstructive, as I expound shortly. Particularly, in situations characterised by unequal power relations (where mutual benefit is perhaps impossible to anticipate as in the existing North-South global setup), the stronger party will always have the edge over the weaker. The powerful player’s relative position of strength further means it can dictate the terms of mutual interaction unilaterally and in such a way as serves its interest.

With regard to the topic of this study, Ngũgĩ draws attention to the integrated and dialectical way of how such an unequal state of affairs comes to pass. By couching his analysis of post-

26 I understand the reference to 'means and context' to be about ensuring simultaneously capacity for technical innovativeness and sovereign ways of political administration.
colonial Africa within the umbrella framework of conflict theory, he urges us to distinguish between *mainly* two clashing influences on the continent—an imperialist system and a liberationist heritage. This conclusion seems to describe reasonably well the nature of the prevailing relationship between the rich industrialised states and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. It is a dynamic which could have far-reaching repercussions for the ‘partnership’ that the Commission is keen to promote with the region, of which Eritrea is a part.

To remain relevant, thus, studies of development in the African context should be consistent with the broader tenets of conflict theory and the techniques of dialectical inquiry. Besides, while economic gain and political control seems to be the main imperative behind the Commission’s Africa venture, evidently it is in the cultural-ideological sphere that this (neocolonial) contest for domination and freedom turns out to be most intensely fought. And it is in this respect then that culture’s potential as a strategic resource in the struggle for and against external domination assumes central significance. There is a distinctive insight conveyed through one of Ngũgĩ’s remarks about culture which I consider crucial when it comes to the dialectic of external control and African self-determination. The likening of culture’s role to a society’s “self-image” as it “sorts itself out in the economic and political fields” could bear special relevance to any analysis of the Commission and Eritrea’s development strategies (Ngũgĩ 1993: xv-xvi). More acutely, I am interested in exploring the hypothesis put forward by Ngũgĩ that “If culture is the product of the totality and continuity of our economic and political struggles, it is also a contributor, a reflection, and a measure of the success of those struggles” (Ngũgĩ 1993:56-57). My reading of this statement suggests that ‘culture’ can be a site for undertaking critical analysis of social, political and economic transformation, or development. The likely merit in Ngũgĩ’s observation is that he seems here to supply an intelligent revision of the base-superstructure conundrum that is neither economic determinist nor dismissive of culture as mere epiphenomenon. I hence intend to systematically expand on its potential signification with reference to the discourse of development and the reality. I am interested to learn how, as an effective tool, culture plays a distinct role in the representations of ‘development’ by both the Commission and the Eritrean Government. In particular, I want to understand the significance of culture in my own project rather closely: culture as the product of the kind of economic and political struggles pitting Africa against the dominant powers, and; culture as an active force in mapping the state of this ongoing struggle. Only when we frame the Commission and the Eritrean Government’s respective positions in the light of this general frame of understanding do we begin to appreciate what may underlie the development agenda of each.
The study traces where the Commission’s conceptual sympathies lie in relation to the “means and context” of sub-Saharan Africa’s integrated survival and development. This is necessary for rendering an overall assessment of the Commission’s potential to bring about development. A distinguishing aspect is that the Commission appears unopen to employing the above (Ngũgĩan) pedagogic principle when explaining the challenges to African development. On the contrary, the Commission’s notion of “means and context” simply reflects and helps sustain its own pro-market discourse. Presumably, the Commission for Africa has elected not to mull the integrated/ dialectical nature of African development even as polarising inequality remains an essential part of neoliberal globalisation. Instead, the Commission has tended to cultivate a decontextualised approach to African development. To carry through with what may be described as a self-mandated hegemonic venture, its strategy has evidently been to close out alternative modes of interpretation. The Commission appears oblivious to how culture, social struggle and economic objectives can be closely intertwined. Moreover, its apparent tendency has been to censor and even deny such understanding among the subjects of development. In the end, given the Commission’s conscious or unconscious circumventions, it is necessary to advance another (more effective) form of development thought and practice. This may compensate for the Commission’s supposed practices of editorialising through omission and commission, if not active obscurantism.

As discussed earlier, African development could be considered for heuristic purposes as a macrocosmic instantiation of the way the human body develops and changes through time. Typically, development in Africa (and in any context) is supposed to integrate a series of mutually-underpinning and interdependent features that extend to economic, political and cultural adaptation and continuity. From this perspective, we can possibly imagine the African development process and the Eritrean experiment in particular as rounded and as responsive to a logic of reciprocal action and reaction. As Ngũgĩ (1993: xiv-xv) argues:

[F]or a full comprehension of the dynamics, dimensions and workings of a society … the cultural aspects cannot be seen in total isolation from the economic and political ones. The quantity and quality of wealth in a community, the manner of its organisation from production to the sharing out, affect, and are affected by the way in which power is organised and is distributed. These in turn affect and are affected by the values of that society as embodied and expressed in the culture of that
society. The wealth, power and self-image of a community are inseparable.\textsuperscript{27}

But beyond simply pointing to the interconnectedness characteristic of the development process, what I attempt is to probe the state of play re the internal and external determinants of African development. I take culture, the “self-image” of society, which develops in accordance with its history, to be the barometer that would mediate this process. I will be applying this principle to the analysis of the Eritrean development experiment (which can be seen as an exercise in self-determination) against the backdrop of the Commission’s plans for the continent (which can be seen as extending neoliberal globalisation).

First of all, there seems to be the imperative to be, that is, for humans to be able to guarantee their being at the local and macro levels. This entails avoiding adversity by safeguarding one’s physical integrity in the face of threat emanating from natural and social sources. But the absence of discernible natural threat, while significant in its own right, may not be enough for continued human survival and development. Hence, parallel with the challenge to remain physically safe, humans need to feed and to cloth themselves in addition to securing shelter from the elements. Through the millennia, the African peoples have achieved this by undertaking productive work, that is, through economic activity that sees them harnessing nature’s bounty using technology.

The capacity to exercise a measure of regulatory influence with the view to resolving any internal discord comes as another central pillar in the nexus signifying successful adaptation and social development. In other words, internal order heralding a harmonised state of existence tends to be a prerequisite for development to take place. It goes without saying perhaps that when an entity, a sub-Saharan African state, effectively manages its internal affairs, a healthy state of being naturally accrues. Inversely, any disequilibrium involving the internal forces at work is likely to undercut the prospect of normal development in the continent. Besides, the whole notion of being should have meaning and purpose to avoid a state of anomie. And pivotal in this connection turns out to be the type of ‘culture’ an African

\textsuperscript{27} In a 2018 article entitled The Significance of Karl Marx, Chris Wright sounds to be making a similar point when he wrote: One has only to reflect that access to resources—money, capital, technology—is of unique importance to life, being key to survival, to a high quality of life, to political power, to social and cultural influence … The owner of the means of production, i.e., the capitalist, has control over more resources than the person who owns only his labor-power, which means he is better able to influence the political process (for example by bribing politicians) and to propagate ideas and values that legitimate his dominant position and justify the subordination of others. See https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/05/25/the-significance-of-karl-marx/ for more details.
society forms in the course of its history which unravels as the product of ongoing interaction with the natural and social worlds.

Nevertheless, survival and continued maturation ought not to be understood purely in terms of contemporary African society working out its internal contradictions as it was the case in the earliest period. As has been suggested already, there seems be a flip side to the story: supposedly, the entire process rests on the type of contact it is likely to undergo with the external environment.

The development of the region's societies, like that of the human body, thus looks predicated on a delicate synchronisation of internal factors and external ones. In each case, the impact of the external environment tends to be experienced normally or as a burdensome and coercive encounter. This could be of utmost importance when thinking specifically about the meaning of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean case. When an entity appears capable of coping with the impact of the external environment and probably even manages to profit from it, then the contact can be described as positive and conducive to its development. Solidarity and cooperation based on ethics of internationalism may be a good example of that. In contrast, if the effect is of a disruptive nature, the contact with the external environment can be deemed detrimental to the development process. Again, I can't emphasise enough the import of this observation in relation to the present study. At this point, I happen to also be conscious of the need to talk, if somewhat metaphorically, more concretely about what I have so far been trying to outline.

I take it for granted that exposure of the body to extreme weather for example results in a person experiencing heat stroke or hypothermia. Not to get sick in this way, it is in turn advised to keep away from drastic weather conditions. In similar vein, it is possible to see that economic, political and cultural subjugation of a society by another emasculates the prospect of that society's development. Speaking of Eritrea in this case, prevailing narratives of Eritrea's socio-political history seem to paint a predominantly negative picture with regard to the country's experience of relations with the outside world. A sense of maltreatment, betrayal and victimhood at the hands of external actors tends to be the abiding Eritrean

28 Rodney’s (2012:224) quite perceptive comment perhaps sums this point up very well: The decisiveness of the short period of colonialism and its negative consequences for Africa spring mainly from the fact that Africa lost power. Power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations within any group and between groups. It implies the ability to defend one’s interests and if necessary to impose one’s will by any means available. In relations between peoples, the question of power determines manoeuvrability in bargaining, the extent to which a people survive as a physical and cultural entity. When one society finds itself forced to relinquish power entirely to another society, that in itself is a form of underdevelopment.
political and cultural sentiment. Britain and the US in particular are believed to be responsible for Eritrea’s postwar political odyssey and continuing troubles. The same narrative, especially in its more contemporary manifestation, also communicates Eritrean self-belief, will and poise as the other condition. So, it seems sensible to view Eritrea’s post-independence development as a corrective agenda involving specific measures to deal with its (imbalanced) past. That is what any Eritrea researcher possibly needs to bear in mind as he or she tries to come to terms with the country’s current development experiment. But just to re-emphasise, given the organic character of society, the principle of dialectical interaction seems to pervade all the levels comprising the social whole. However, what I am most keen to focus on, considering my specific goal, is the dynamics of culture in development, or nation-building as the Eritreans prefer to call it. This is what I intend to elaborate on in later stages of the study. But in case there exists some unease (in spite of the stipulation about society’s integrated setup) about the recourse to ‘culture’ as a key theoretical category, I have to address any probable concern through the following short addendum.

In the first place, I wish to clarify that I am in no way equivocating about the essentially material and cultural underpinnings of African political self-determination and development. Yet, I concede the problem of specifying exactly what research strategy to employ—materialist or ‘culturalist’—may loom large in a work such as this. There seems to be a real danger here of fostering a slanted picture of the state of development in the continent when not carefully weighing up the stakes in either expressing or supressing one or the other research approach. I have thus been obliged to ponder a series of interesting but at the same time very contentious propositions. I sought to establish whether it would have been more profitable to pursue the argument at a political-economy level. Simultaneously, I needed to also check if greater advantage could accrue from adopting a strategy centred on discourse/symbolic analysis. Having mulled the pros and cons associated with both approaches, I have in the end decided on a hybrid research plan, one that joins together materialist and culturalist or discursive mode of analysis. I envisage this methodological approach to be particularly useful in the case of the present project.

My major misgiving extends to how epistemological assumption foreshadows social and political practice and how that conforms to moral and ethical judgement and standards of truth. In attempting to find a way out of this methodological conundrum, I came to realise (as I indicate in the Introduction) that, as well as being guided by critical groundings in the established terms of debate on African development, incidentally I may have further resources in the guise of my autobiographical background. How those two facets, the abstract (or academic) and the personal conjuncture, may facilitate a commensurate theory
of knowledge and action from the point of view of the subjects of development is what I intend to elaborate in more detail in the upcoming sections. At this stage though, I should affirm the need to transcend the unreflexive discourse characteristic of mainstream development policymaking—where historical amnesia, the scanting of power-relations and general intellectual averseness passes for the meaning of social analysis. Equally, and in wishing to find space for my own project within the radically critical literature, I see wisdom in systematically examining the discourse-development nexus. I also think it prudent on the other hand to explore indigenous (subaltern) experience if only to underscore the power of such knowledge and its link to development practice in the material and therefore universal sense.

2.2 The Commission, Eritrea, development: an imperative for a composite methodological policy

I stressed the importance of guaranteeing the robustness of the approach I shall be employing. I intend to fulfil this objective through a narrative strategy spacious and flexible enough to thoughtfully combine a miscellany of analytical categories and devises. This comes as useful to critique the neoliberal agenda in Africa and also to signal potential solutions against the backdrop of the Eritrea model. I have accordingly sought to take advantage of a syncretic, even an eclectic, research approach.

This thesis examines the Commission for Africa and Eritrea’s national development experiment by locating the origin, signification and propagation of African development within the (triple) junction of historical, political and cultural-ideological analyses. As a study in the history and politics of development, the thesis adopts a two-pronged qualitative methodological approach. It looks at development concurrently as a ‘social construct’ and as a ‘transhistorical’ phenomenon synonymous with the human condition. Given the complementarity typifying the current research approach, it is hoped a more or less satisfactory account of African development may be possible.

Realism, constructionism, development

The analytic philosopher and social constructionism theoretician, Ian Hacking, acknowledges that a category can be socially constructed and real all at once, or that also we can be social constructionists about some things and realists about others. In contemplating whether ‘child abuse’ is socially constructed or real, Hacking (1999:29) underlines that the phenomenon is real but that it also was subsequently constructed as a concept. He recapitulates “neither
reality nor construction should be in question”. Hacking’s observation appears fraught with theoretical, political and methodological undertones when extrapolated to the study of sub-Saharan Africa and its future development, and deserves be taken up further. I explore the ramifications with reference to the Commission for Africa, Eritrea and the phenomenon of ‘development’.

Following up on the reality-construction juxtaposition suggested by Hacking, I make the dual observation that (a) there are two discrete categories of ‘Africa’ at the same time as (b) I believe generally what we conceive of as ‘development’ owes entirely to two asymmetrical classes of logic. On the one hand, there exists a real-concrete Africa and, on the other, there turns out to be a fabricated instance of the very same Africa. The former represents a rather definite geographical and social space which we appreciate in terms of the actual historical and contemporary experience of the social populations of the African continent. By contrast, our sense of the ‘second Africa’ derives from what idealising hegemonic discourse about the place seems to paint for us. In addition, the material, existentially describable Africa tends to be about ‘emic’ development aimed at overcoming natural and social challenges by usually mobilising internal resources. Its abstract-formal equivalent, meanwhile, largely symbolises a predetermined externally-originating political plan. It is possible to speak of an Eritrea, a north-eastern African state with a population of some five million inhabitants, and of Eritrea’s sovereign development orientation, in realistic terms for example. In the same way, we could think of the Commission’s policy of stock categorisation of the forty-plus African states as ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ and as ‘developing countries’ as expedient ideological representation. 29

And as for ‘development’ too, our formal knowledge of the phenomenon appears circumscribed within a binary field of conceptual thought and practice. In one respect, the meaning of development has come to find echo in a socially constructed narrower understanding of the subject, typically at the hand of a very tiny but powerful global elite. In another, the essence of development could be posed quite broadly and fluidly so that under the rubric we may account for a wide range of real life social and economic practices. Simply as well as disinterestedly stated, the aim behind this last kind of development can be described as the transformation of unfavourable human conditions into better human ones, less any ulterior motive as the case could be.

29 It is really important to disqualify as problematic the use of ‘Africa’ as a monolithic referent to the myriad of the sub-Saharan countries. It is believed such generic term glosses over and suppresses the immense heterogeneity that characterises the continent south of the Sahara. The Report appears to acknowledge this fact in passing and seemingly somewhat speciously. As such, the Africa Commission appears unfazed in formulating wholesale recommendations that could potentially entrench capitalism in the African continent without due distinctions.
Further, one version of the development phenomenon, exemplified more visibly by the West’s self-ascribed postwar mandate for the then-decolonising South, belongs within the preserve of hegemonic discourse. The other type, however, seems to have a substantive basis as key expression: it is reminiscent of what everyday people seek to achieve within the domain of empirical lived reality and often on their own account. The approach adopted by the Commission for Africa appears indicative of the way in which sub-Saharan Africa as a region and development as a form of social practice are invariably portrayed merely as ideas through the effects of a reigning discourse. All this stands in stark contrast to how the African populates happen to live their material realities on a day-to-day basis, as in Eritrea for example. The pursuit, more or less, of autarkic development by the Eritrean Government meanwhile could be better comprehended as a version of development embargoed by the dominant Africanist development discourse, in particular the Commission's. Obviously, the ‘two Africas’ and the corresponding types of ‘development’ never intersect, nor can it be expected to reduce either to the other. Eventually, what this binaristic way of talking about Africa and development seems to show is the need to adapt a distinctive research formula and design to meaningfully resolve the tension inherent in the reality-construction problematic. And of course the point in all of this is to map out a consistent path of development for sub-Saharan Africa.

**Ideology: its uses and misuses**

In analysing the Commission’s policies, this thesis focuses on the terms of understanding of the Commission for Africa as being reflective of conjunctural ideological and political exigencies—that of neoliberal globalisation. The way the study reviews the Commission’s claims involves the linking of its development vision to the underlying conceptual mode of thought and practice which appears to be rooted in positivism and its derivative scientism.

The main objective is to render apparent the overt as well as covert ideological and political underpinnings of the Commission’s claims. Similarly, the interpretation of the Eritrean approach to development ought to be contextualised within the framework of social struggle against foreign economic and political domination. Even if conceivably a social construct at some level, I hesitate indeed to review Eritrea’s development agenda from within the framework of social constructionism proper. According to Hacking (1999), the Eritrean approach to development appears to diverge in an important respect from the established criteria for when a category can be submitted to social constructionist analysis. Compared to an ascendant, fundamentalist and transnational capitalism, the development model pursued
by the Eritrean Government turns out to be marginal to warrant, strictly speaking, any social constructionist treatment focusing on dominant power dynamics on a world stage. As Hacking (1999:6) would explain it, the stipulation for phenomenon X (neoliberalism in this case) to be considered under the rubric of social constructionist analysis is that: “in the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.” And yet given the prevalence of a firm counter belief that, “X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable” we must also critique X and perhaps seek its radical reconstitution and even supplanting.

Now, this way of thinking about ‘development’ proves more meaningful in respect to the Commission’s program of forcing liberal political systems and market-driven economic growth upon the continent than the more localised and modest Eritrean initiative. Or, to restate the point, I presume it is hard to misjudge that the Eritrean development experiment has been influenced by real experience of collective oppression and exploitation. Likewise, perhaps we should not fail to recall that there can be nothing natural about the brand of development propounded by the Commission. This implies we cannot talk about capitalist development as if it is universally applicable. The primary focus then has to be on how ideology as knowledge in the service of power papers-over enduring material inequalities to normalise the capitalist global political economy. And possibly inseparable from this interest or task is the need to document the responses of those on the margins of the status quo. Our aim should be to explain how they strive to realise sovereign ways of being and knowing. As such, in the first phase, the study looks at the oppositional discourse embodied in the Eritrean national/popular culture. This is meant to illuminate how actual experience of colonial and neocolonial manipulation informs the struggle for social emancipation and development. In parallel, the argument scans the Commission for Africa and any secondary literature sustaining its viewpoint on development for discursive manifestation or symptoms. This study thus draws from the literature and methodology of development as discourse in combination with the approaches of subaltern social narrative and practice.

In development as discourse, analysis of the influence of power on knowledge exposes the role of hegemonic discourse in painting social reality in the image of those who wield power. Escobar (1995:5) explains how power impinges on knowledge to give rise to a “certain order of discourse [which] produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible”. The development model highlighted in the Report will be treated as a form of dominant discourse for the exclusive focus on free-market development in Africa. More deliberately, the power relations underlying its sponsorship by one of the leading agents of the ‘historic block’ still in business, a Northern state with not
only a history as colonial power but also active neocolonialist disposition, will be examined. Similarly, the way in which the Eritrean Government articulates its development agenda must also be scrutinised primarily as resistance discourse to understand its distinctive context, underlying influences and potential implications.

I think the underlying core beliefs, values and assumptions that characterise dominant development discourse such as the Commission’s blueprint can be brought to light through critical textual/ content analysis. Accordingly, this study to some extent is inspired by the closely-related works of Escobar (1995), Fairclough (2003), Foucault (1979) and Said (1994) for their insights into the way hegemonic discourse de-legitimises that which is deemed as irrelevant from the point of view of power. By casting those on the margins of capitalist society in negative light as “victims”, “others” or “undeveloped”, dominant discourse hands control to whoever is in a position to exercise power.

I generally share with these writers the point about the negative role ideology plays in the shaping of peoples’ destinies. My own attitude hence has been never to take lightly what ideology in the hands of dominant groups can do. This is based on a perception that ideology tends to be more than just a passive or innocuous subordinate sphere; given the putative claim to knowledge and expertise, it can justify all kinds of actions, including meting out cruel sanctions on entire populations and even justifying wars of aggression that result in mass killings and destruction.

In the case of the Commission, the major effect of ideology appears to be the inversion of reality head on heel along with the active cloaking of the exact circumstances under which the African majorities subsist.\(^\text{30}\) It is this misrepresentation presumably for political reasons (of the issues relevant to African development) which in many instances helps castrate the willpower of the people and clears the way for others to meddle in Africa’s affairs. As ideology tends to saturate the Commission’s policy proposals, it becomes incumbent that the current study places emphasis on what the role of politics has been in determining the Commission’s findings. I think it proper consequently to mount the critique of the Commission by interpreting its articulations of development from the perspective of social constructionism in the manner Ian Hacking has made use of the concept.

\(^{30}\) As Marx remarks in *The German Ideology*: If in all ideology men (sic) and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.
The virtue of social constructionism is the interrogation of the status quo as merely contingent on a specified socio-political history and the cultural output that may attend to this. In the case of the Commission, constructionism appears responsible for the kind of Eurocentric attitude that leads to a process of mystification of the “means and context” of African development. This seems to be evident in relation to both the substantive side of development and the more academic or speculative aspects. The apparent misrepresentation extends to the background historical context, the proposals on governance, aid and economic growth. Most importantly, it also applies to the significance and power of culture in undergirding the entire development process. In order to unmask the Commission’s tendentious features, it is important to take to heart what Ian Hacking has foreshadowed about social constructionism: that getting the point of social constructionist inquiry reportedly is what turns out to be the most worthwhile thing about constructionism as a research paradigm. And why would that be the case? It is because the sole imperative for pursuing social constructionist research consists in “raising consciousness” among those subjects who find themselves on the receiving end of oppressive social relations with the view to attaining liberation eventually. As Hacking (1999:6) would argue, “the point is less to describe the relation … than to change how we see those relations … [by fostering] new perspectives.” And that specifically is what I hope the critique of the Commission’s poetics and politics of development is geared to achieve.

While the analysts of dominant discourse provide important insight into the basis on which knowledge is projected, they are often criticised for falling short of systematically elaborating alternative pathways or solutions. In my own study, I explore alternative approaches that place greater emphasis on the African nations’ own capacities to determine their futures, while at the same time subjecting these alternative discourses to scrutiny. Therefore the tendency to approach African development from the perspectives of poststructuralism or related ‘postisms’ only furnishes half of the story. The limitation in scope common to discourse-based social constructionist analyses seems to arise from certain epistemological incoherencies. Ultimately, the focus on discourse is unlikely to adequately address the question of how knowledge potentially contributes to social (and political) practice that can

31 Escobar is criticised for conflating ‘development’ exclusively with the postwar development project, thereby ignoring the material promise for the poor in the global South that can derive from other forms of developmentalist options. Likewise, Said’s Orientalism came in for strong criticism not only from the expected Orientalist quarters (Bernard Lewis and company) that the book accuses of scholarly underperformance, but also from the very side Said advocates on behalf of. Critics from this last category identify Orientalism as a work that turns the peoples of the “Orient” into passive subjects devoid of any will (to self-determination) outside and beyond the one prescribed for them by Western Orientalist discourse (among others, see for example Sadiq al-Azm 2000). It took a different endeavour—Orientalism’s sequel, Culture and Imperialism—before Said could redress what he overlooked earlier and offer examples of agency from around the global South.
impact the real world. The static interpretation of language and other symbols on the part of a literary scholar or analytic philosopher may not in any direct way change the fact that a great deal of the African masses remain economically poor with limited or no access to proper health care services and education. Similarly, the tendency of relativising knowledge particularly as concerns reality and truth tends to contradict the experience of those who suffer at the hands of an oppressive absolute global capitalism. For all these considerations, I can’t be so remiss as to not recognise the need for additional measures to enhance the approach followed in this study.

**Development, collective experience and the tide of history (from below)**

In further examining the Commission’s model of development beyond the theoretical frame of development as discourse, I will refer to ‘development’ particularly in the Eritrean context heuristically and from a national historical-materialist perspective. This in turn calls for a multi-disciplinary framework that is broadly historical and ethnographical. The purpose here is to emphasise not only the historicism inherent in the concept of development, but also the role of human agency and culture in motivating alternate visions of development.

The historian Edward Palmer Thompson, credited for his seminal approach of writing history “from-bottom-up” and considered as having greatly influenced subaltern historiography, admonishes against perceiving social categories (class in his situation) as a “structure” (Thompson 1966:9). Thompson goes on to indicate that class “… entails the notion of historical relationship … which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure” (1966:9). For her part, Sarah Pink, leading authority on digital ethnography, tracks the way “experience can be mobilised as a particular way of knowing other people’s world through a digital ethnographic approach” (Pink 2016:20). As she explains, the main purpose in researching experience through digital means is to perceive of “experience as a critical component of addressing … research problems … about what it is like for other people to ‘be’ in the world, and how we know and learn about this …” (Pink 2016:39).

So too the current study aims to explore African/ Eritrean development as a dynamically constituted phenomenon rooted in popular experience, not to mention history. A deliberately ethnographic and historicised expression of development is therefor particularly useful to understand the Eritrean Government’s beliefs and practices regarding development; why and how it is thought that linking the past to the present helps drive the prospects of Eritrean nation-building and development. Or, to use that celebrated quote of Marx’s, *men (sic) make
their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. This study will also closely adhere to the approach developed in works of the subaltern studies group in its more social and historical (early) form.

Again, as with the approaches to textual analysis highlighted in the previous section, I do not pretend that this second and complementary research path could be free from drawbacks either. While the historian’s empirically-based method often proves strong precisely on those areas that don’t merit the attention of the textual theorist (for example, the role of experience in inducing change), the approach can however be criticised for ignoring the effects of ideology on consciousness and thus on reality. To be more specific, in the historian’s schema the individual tends to be pictured as a pre-existing entity instead of subjectivity being something contingent on amorphous and irreducible interaction with the social environment. Also, the overemphasis on experience by writers like E.P. Thompson and heirs fails to adequately answer why members of a supposedly ‘discrete group’ develop uneven experiences and choose to pursue discrepant agendas, or even end up acting and behaving against their own self-interest. Or, why disunity and internal strife often prevails among otherwise ‘homogenous’ social groups and that social struggles may not always turn out victorious. The fact that neoliberalism appears to have found currency and rejection at the same time among portions of the populations in Africa can, in part, be explained in those terms. So too the prevalence of political opposition in Eritrea (against the EPLF then and the Eritrean Government today) perhaps has much to do with the unstructured, loose and indeed capricious character of how consciousness develops. At last, the point that needs to be made is the following: that it can be hard to imagine fulfilling the stated aims of the current project based on an incomplete research approach. And that is the reason for insisting on a two-fold or mixed methodological option encompassing critical discourse analysis and historical materialist narrative.

The use of these tools of critical analysis in informing the present study provides a point of departure from the existing literature. I envisage the Africa Commission document(s) as political text to be interrogated on theoretical grounds. To this end, I will analyse the Report's content in order to identify the questions it poses and the answers it offers at the expense of what it tends to bypass or censure. As a point of contrast, the development ‘discourse’ of the Eritrean Government will likewise be interrogated and used as a platform for exploring the significance of culture and history and the force of individual and collective agency in impacting social change.
2.3 The research process

In terms of periodisation, this thesis contextualises the Commission for Africa and Eritrean socio-political and national development history within the postwar international order. Not only has the conjuncture witnessed the dawn of the development project and a turn to a neocolonial chapter in the evolution of imperialism, but the period also coincides with the onset of the Eritrean peoples’ campaign for national self-determination. Nevertheless, what ought to be kept in mind is that the postwar setting need not imply a discrete timeline. When we think of African development in the present period we have to also take note of how the preceding precolonial, colonial and anticolonial history also impinges this prospect.

The literature spawned by the development phenomenon proves so vast as to turn the researcher’s information sourcing effort truly daunting. It seems obvious that in formulating its proposals, the Commission for Africa consulted a body of knowledge about ‘development’ amassed over the decades, if not centuries. All of that appears to have been blended into the content of the Report.

Even if it is impractical to revisit the bulk of the literature informing the Commission’s outlook, still it would be wise for any sensible review of the Commission to grasp its tenor. More to the point, it is probably superfluous to attempt to reference the broader literature concerned with capitalist development (and its ripple effect across the globe) dating back to the late 18th to early 19th centuries, or even earlier. Not only can it be impossible to cover all the material on account of its sheer volume, but also the overt study of the history of capitalist development and its reciprocal impact on the peripheries might not be novel; a great deal has already been written on that score, starting with Karl Marx himself and disciples at one end of a pole and Adam Smith and his liberal heirs at the other, through to the present moment. Only by way of a highly selective and focused initiative can the process of sourcing the necessary material admittedly be carried through.

On the other hand, where the Eritrean literature is concerned, the converse seems to be the case. Indeed, an obvious aspect about studying Eritrea seems to be the dearth of sources with a focus on development as topic. This fact about sourcing suitable Eritrean material poses a real dilemma for anyone wishing to research Eritrea today. It is perhaps not surprising consequently that there tends to be diminished interest in studying Eritrea. Coincidentally, and for reasons I have alluded to already, I see myself as better equipped nonetheless. In this regard, my personal advantage to access a range of publically available (vernacular) Eritrean sources should make it easier to complete the analysis. Also, given that
my stated aim is to try to make perceptible the Eritrean people’s world, it is necessary that
the data selection and analysis policy reflects this desire. In my judgement, a sound
approach to interpreting Eritrean development therefore should come in the shape of
‘ethnography of experience’ along the lines mapped by Pink (2016). This means I will need
to present the ‘ways of being and knowing’ involving the Eritrean people using my own
experience. In the end, as a distinct way of studying contemporary Eritrea, a digital media-
based ethnographic approach comes with the added benefit of achieving two goals at once.
Firstly, by carrying out the research in a digital space one can get around the thorny issue of
collating information about Eritrea. Also, as a method of gathering evidence, it turns out to be
safe, realistic and very much ethical. Secondly, this choice of method proves useful in
fostering other peoples’ senses of what it is like to be in the shoes of the Eritreans in the
present time.

In terms of method, this study distinctly focuses on two main sources of information for
analysis: the Commission for Africa publications, including the Report, and literature
produced by the Eritrean Government relating to political self-determination and national
development (for example, website material and reports featured on the Eritrean national
television station (EriTV) which is broadcast in Australia32). These various resources will be
used both for analysis and as tacit reference points for elaborating alternate development
strategies.

With regards to the primary sources of information, I will draw upon the English language
report, Our Common Interest, and accompanying material by the Commission for Africa as
the primary unit of analysis. Relevant secondary sources, including the literature directly and
indirectly concerned with the Report itself will also be consulted. I have set out to analyse in
depth not just the reports of the Commission for Africa but also the role of the
Commissioners and the other aspects. It appeared to me not enough to focus largely on the
final published documents without also looking at the submissions by stakeholders and the
deliberations by the Commission members. I was concerned that any such ‘partial’ focus on
the Commission might misrepresent the situation. To that end, I made some effort to be
comprehensive in how I wanted to study the Commission for Africa and its findings. I was
interested to know about the submissions the Commission received and about other
information relating to its work. In the early stages of the research, I wrote to the

32 The Eritrean Government rarely produces publicly-available official reports of a nature comparable
to the Commission for Africa report. However, Eritrea’s Ministry of Information, the state-run media in
particular, is extremely active and there are ready sources of information in the public domain about
Eritrea’s national development that can be exploited as useful dataset.
Commission for Africa on two separate occasions specifically requesting such additional information. I didn’t receive any replies from the Commission in this regard. As I couldn’t get a response from the Commission, I was left with no choice but to carry on with the inquiry into the Commission using the only material available to me. This may mean my analysis of the Commission for Africa remains somewhat curtailed as I have been unable to reference the non-publicly available portion of the data.

For the Eritrean Government literature, my main source remains the internet which is home to a large volume of original Eritrean material on self-determination and development. I have been keenly following the production and growth of this literature over many years, out of general interest and well before embarking on the present project. In the last period, I had to devote even more time going through the bulk of the material to select samples for this research. The digital field site I am most (but not exclusively) interested in is constituted by audio-visual records in English, Arabic, Tigre, Tigrinya and some of the other Eritrean languages. In particular, both modern and archival material featuring pervasive use of patriotic revolutionary and protest performing arts/music shall be given special consideration. My task will involve translating and analysing the content of relevant audio-visual material and other texts in the different Eritrean languages. The data-sampling process will cover sources closely aligned to the Eritrean Government’s point of view (Eritreacompass.com, Alenalki.com, Eastafro.com, Dehai.com, Shaebia.com, Erigazette.com, Madote.com, and Tesfanews.com) together with select literature on the broader topic of self-determination.

2.4 Reflexivity

The overarching message in Ngũgĩ’s life work is a call to combat and overcome what he identifies as mental colonisation, or else metaphysical empire. In Ngũgĩ’s supposition, the economic exploitation and political subjugation of the continent has been expedited because cultural imperialism has succeeded in making many of Africa’s elites see reality through its prism. According to Ngũgĩ, obscurantist cultural policies and practices prove the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of those who seek to enmesh Africa in neocolonial relations. In his own words:

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief … in their heritage of struggle … in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance
themselves from that wasteland ... to identify with ... all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph ... are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish.

Ngũgĩ's (1986:3)

My interest in the present study grew out of a number of interlocking reasons. Given my African (underdog) heritage, a major incentive is a personal and political desire to guard against the pitfall of intellectual co-option. For far too long, Africa (of all the parts of the world) has been the province, the playground and guinea pig, on which outsider word and action has had a free run.33 Specific to the Chair of the Commission and its auspice, the then-UK prime minister, Tony Blair, I will have to express some real reservations as to this figure’s suitability to be conferred with the magnanimity of instituting a development commission for Africa.

Today, around the globe, there appears to be increasing consensus that neoliberalism stands as the villain that the Majority World, including Africa, has to grapple with and lay to rest before real development eventuates. I puzzle over how an individual of the caliber of Tony Blair would qualify for the role of Chair of a commission on development. Blair has proven himself to be an ardent neoliberal ideologue and an extreme proponent of the market. So, for him to authorise a development commission for Africa sounds truly enigmatic. As former UK prime minister, Blair’s public record evidently speaks volumes about his zeal for the neoliberal cause, so much so that as he was convening the Commission for Africa, his government was mercilessly prosecuting an unprovoked war of aggression against a stricken developing nation that is Iraq. What is more, according to a 2017 article, Tony Blair’s Ghoulish Last decade, Blair’s most recent conduct in pursuit of self-enrichment has been even more unethical, something which adds to my concern as I have stated.34

33 You can’t anticipate the Northern states to authorise a commission of development on say the Central America region or South Asia, but it is taken for granted to hold one on behalf of Africa. Aren’t levels of underdevelopment and poverty comparable to that found in some parts of Africa also common to particular countries in both these regions? Is Honduras more prosperous than Ghana for example, or can Bangladesh be considered to have attained a higher socio-economic level of development in comparison to Tanzania? Of course my question is purely rhetorical in nature.

The virtue of fundamental human dignity enjoins people to assume personal responsibility in matters of self-determination. Undoubtedly, the question of African development (or lack thereof) holds significant ramifications to my life as I have tried to indicate at the beginning of this study. It is gravid with direct and indirect consequences that I have to endure and live with. Particularly, as an Eritrean born in the second half of the 20th century, great power politics in the name of ‘modernising’ the continent has had a lasting impact on the experiences of my life; In 1952, US geopolitical interest dictated that Eritrea involuntarily be federated with its ally Ethiopia, a decision that led to the Eritrean War of Independence and subsequently to my own flight as a child in search of refuge. To not have a say in such an important life-and-death topic is tantamount to shirking one’s responsibility and duty. Similarly, to best serve the interests of Africa, it is incumbent to proceed from a sovereign vantage point that embodies intellectual rigor and moral integrity. I intend to combine textual critical pedagogy with what I would like to call the personal dimension to enhance the findings of this research.

Also an additional impetus for the current project is a shared humanism to turn around existing (dreadful) African conditions. Grievance abounds over the large-scale human suffering and waste of life characteristic of most of contemporary Africa. The steady decline that plagued Africa escalated to fully-fledged crisis in recent decades. Every day now, the continent’s reality continues to plunge into a kind of incapacitating morass from which Africa appears unable to extricate itself. Once stable and prosperous countries such as Libya and Nigeria have now become badly unsettled, joining the likes of Congo and Somalia. Crippling debt in combination with catastrophic wars has thoroughly impoverished Africa, undermining the whole continent and its peoples. Africa evokes images of endless calamitous disease, famine and related misery. Disconcert over this unedifying state should rightly prompt us into action on behalf of the peoples of the continent. Supporting the cause of African political and economic emancipation is all the more urgent considering that the global ideological backdrop against which the continent finds itself is constituted by an ever intensifying neolibera imperialist onslaught.

35 The 2014 Ebola pandemic is the latest scourge to strike parts of the continent. Also the refugee crisis and the tragic way many of them die while crossing the Mediterranean Sea in route to Europe is another example. And, following the NATO destruction of Libya, it has been reported migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are being ‘sold at open slave markets in Libya’ in 2017! This, when we thought humanity has left the practice of profiting from the slave trade behind it centuries ago (for more details see http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/iom-african-migrants-traded-libya-slave-markets-170411141809641.html).
Still a further consideration, one more pertinent to the subject matter, is the need to entertain the Commission for Africa’s particular proclamations—among many others—that are based supposedly on the fact that it has studied and learned from the “vast wealth of analysis over the last fifty years”. In the same vein, the Commission declares that it strove hard to be “blisteringly honest” and thus its recommendations can be “held up to public scrutiny.” (Commission for Africa 2005:22). Citing this as lending support to the viability of its mission, the Commissioners enunciate that theirs is:

a. New kind of development through new kind of partnership based on mutual respect and solidarity (Commission for Africa 2005:17);


This study contributes to the existing body of literature on African development. The findings of this study are intended to provide (another) opportunity to hold this Commission up to scrutiny, and hopefully give rise to alternative modes of thinking about African development. Driven by a desire to resurrect a subaltern agenda, Emma Miller36 urges contributions that critically address the subject, in particular from African scholars. Miller (cited in Miller ed. 2005:3) underscores the “… need to ask Africans what they see as both the problems and the solutions facing their continent ....” Miller’s plea aligns very much with my own concerns about the fate of Africa in this so far very eventful new Millennium.

That sums up the type of methodology that I will be relying on to conduct the inquiry into the prospects and problems of African development. I will apply the above methodological insight and techniques to the next chapter on Culture and Development and also throughout the rest of the study.

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36 Emma Miller is the editor of The Alternatives Commission for Africa Report (2005), an online anthology compiled within four weeks of the Africa Commission Report’s appearance by the Spinwatch website, documenting mainly African responses to the Blair Africa Commission and its Report from all over the continent.
3. CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

The business of obscuring language is a mask behind which stands the much bigger business of plunder ... Everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand.

- Frantz Fanon

This chapter contextualises the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean story of development. Given the perception of the development process as internally-directed and independent of unduly external influence, the chapter describes what the Commission and the Eritrean approach represent. The chapter also focuses on how this could possibly further our knowledge of ‘African development’. The present chapter is made up of two parts. In part one, I recount the genesis of the Commission for Africa and provide a summary of its Report’s main content. Part one also features a review of the Commission’s theoretical pronouncements on ‘culture’ in the context of African development. I do this in order to explain how the allusion to culture by the Commission slants the narrative strategy according to the underlying political and economic imperative. As a comparative act, meanwhile, part two gives an overview of Eritrean society and its modern history. It begins with a brief account of the wider geopolitical processes that culminated in the formation of the modern Eritrean entity. This section then touches on the origins and progress of Eritrea’s national struggle which led to an independent Eritrean State together with a basic outline of the post-independence political setting. The presentation here highlights the dynamics of the Eritrean peoples’ struggle for self-determination, the construction of ‘national culture’ and its relation to current Eritrean development policy and practice. Ngũgĩ’s precept relating to the interplay of culture, politics and economic life serves as the general frame for my argument about the importance of sorting a congenial African development.

3.1 Commissioning an ‘ultimate’ commission on African development

The equation of Africa’s contemporary fate with a story of economic and social stagnation has provided justification for repeated outsider probes into this continent’s future development trajectory. The 2004-2005 British Government initiated Commission for Africa comes as the latest in a series of Western interventionist manoeuvres that purport to characterise and remedy the crisis of development in Africa.
The Commission for Africa owes its being to the former The Boomtown Rats singer-turned-Africa advocate, the Irish celebrity Bob Geldof (Williams 2005:529). The latter’s activism to end African poverty dates back to the Live Aid Concert in the wake of the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s. When Geldof visited Ethiopia in 2003 and saw then that there was not much change in the life of the people in almost a generation, he resolved to take up the needs of Africa with the British Government (Bush 2004:17). Though Blair had once famously declared “Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it”, apparently the continent’s dire state had since slipped from his foreign policy agenda list. It took Geldof’s lobbying before Blair could be convinced of the urgency to address the continent’s lack of progress by putting together a development commission (Bush 2004:17). So, in February 2004, the British Government set up a commission for Africa to scope the measures needed to put Africa onto the developmental track. And, a year later, the Commission for Africa published its analysis and recommendations as *Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa*.

Before I venture further, it is important to note one basic fact about the origin of the Commission for Africa. In terms of the potential for African development, there seems to be something quite suggestive in Geldof, Blair and the British Government’s self-delegation. The very act of their sponsoring a development commission on behalf of Africa probably bespeaks to a long-held tacit assumption: that, without the significant involvement of the West, the African states may not be able to take care of their own affairs. Those behind the Commission for Africa consequently appear to grant that African development has to come largely from without at the same time as they play down the continent’s own resources and potential. For precisely this sort of residual reason, we should review the Blair Commission critically and against the Eritrean case as a contrast. By doing this, we can hope to know the likely implications for real African development.

**The subject-matter of the Africa Commission Report**

The Commission’s stated objective is “to define the challenges facing Africa and to provide clear recommendations on how to support the changes needed to reduce poverty” (Commission for Africa 2005:1). The Commission for Africa *Report* is divided into two parts. Part 1, entitled *The Argument*, is designed to serve as a “call for action” by evoking ongoing (appalling) African conditions and by summarising the Africa Commission’s

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37 I am citing here Tony Blair’s speech to the 2001 British Labour Party Conference, in which he outlined his government’s Africa policy.
recommendations. Part 2, with the heading of Analysis, “lays out the substance and basis” of the recommendations in the pages of the ten uninterrupted chapters (Commission for Africa 2005:1).

The Report enumerates the steps that both Africa and the rich Northern states must follow to stimulate African development through a mix of economic growth, social and political reforms, increased bi-lateral trade and donor aid, and debt review. It envisages African development as predicated on a joint effort involving African states working in partnership with the Northern states. Varying emphasis is placed on internal and external causes as precipitating the African development crisis (Commission for Africa 2005:113). Problem areas internal to Africa and (un-)helpful practices by the rich industrialised states are identified as deserving immediate attention. What is it, then, that on the one hand, Africa is advised to take care of, and, on the other, Northern donors are entreated to observe in the drive to develop the continent?

The ‘do-it-yourself’ component of Africa’s development

Through its Report the Commission addresses the African states to improve public performance in at least five interrelated areas; governance, peace and security, investment in social capital, growth and poverty reduction, and in their trade capabilities.

Good governance is presented as a core requirement within the Report’s African development strategy. Despite the general sense that Africa needs to register concurrent progress in all the areas for the wheels of the “big-push” to start turning, the Commission places far greater emphasis on governance. According to the Report, improved governance creates conditions which are conducive to economic growth. Good governance is also about African states expecting acceptable standards of rule of each other and exercising the mandate to deal with those who create or contribute to instability (like Eritrea?). More significantly, enhanced governance as defined in the Report entails individual African states adopting principles of transparency as opposed to condoning corruption. The Report recommends African states rally behind what it considers a rejuvenated African Union (AU) which apparently has superseded its less effective predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). To take governance to a higher level, the valuable work of the AU’s New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and its African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) are recognised as needing further support. Improved governance, ultimately, is sought after not only for its positive contribution to the African states’ capacities to formulate
and deliver effective policies, but also for its repercussions for peace and security, without which there can be no development.

In a similar vein, the Report insists that the welfare of the social population be attended to. Access to education and health services is perceived as human rights issues for the peoples of Africa. In fact, a whole chapter, Leaving No-One Out: Investing in People talks about this as an important development target. The Report underscores the role of the state in guaranteeing education for its citizens. The need to upgrade public health services is also raised in the Report as key to containing and eliminating preventable diseases such as Tuberculosis, Malaria and HIV/AIDS. The Report equates a healthy and skilled workforce with efficient and increased economic output. In short, the Commission for Africa’s wish is to see African development which is truly inclusive.

To reduce poverty through growth, the Report’s formula is for the public and private sectors to work together to “create a climate which unleashes the entrepreneurship of the peoples of Africa...” (Commission for Africa 2005:15). This is expected to translate into domestic and foreign investment and to impact positively on employment, leading to prosperity in the long run.

The last concrete issue that the Report raises is Africa’s share of trade within the global market. The Report recommends that Africa produces more goods in addition to the need to diversify its export commodities in order to compete more effectively in international markets. It calls for the African states to put in place the infrastructure and to undertake reforms in relation to tariffs, customs and bureaucracy so as to facilitate trade within the continent and beyond.

Before rounding off this section, it is important to note briefly that the Report also raises the question of how to source the necessary resources that would underwrite the implementation of the Commission’s program. It has been calculated that annual budgets of US$37 billion and US$75 billion will be required during the first (2005-2010) and second (2010-2015) phases respectively. In each case, Africa is required to contribute an amount equivalent to one third of the annual budget. And finally there is this crucial reminder too about the Commission’s work: that ‘cultural awareness’ has been the all-encompassing underlying feature of its process.
The scope of Northern collaborative action

According to the Commission for Africa, where African development is concerned, the rich world’s cooperation in the three spheres of trade, debt and aid has to be secured simultaneously (Commission for Africa 2005:27). The Report notes that Africa’s share of global trade has steadily declined from six per cent in 1980 to only two per cent in 2002 (Commission for Africa 2005:27). According to the Report, the external causes of this decline in African trade are the twin hurdles of subsidies and protectionism which the rich states consistently employ. Subsidized Northern goods drive commodity prices down and high import tariffs frustrate Africa’s chances of gaining greater share of global trade. The Report recommends that the rich world expedites the removal of the existing trade barriers that disadvantage Africa.

The Report also touches on the inertia that debt generates as a significant contributor to Africa’s struggle to advance forward. It is acknowledged that debt repayments drain the national budget of most African countries and makes it hard for states to fund the vital sectors of health, education, infrastructure … etc. The fact of onerous debt is what other sources also corroborate as impeding African development. A Statement by Jubilee South, an advocacy network from the global South, for example highlights, “the financial burden of debt servicing … [which] results in the violation of our people’s basic rights and impoverishes our countries” (Jubilee South, in Miller, ed. 2005:19). The Report recommends multilateral debt relief of varying scale for the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, in the case of the very poor states which fall under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) label, the Report favours 100 per cent debt cancellation (Commission for Africa 2005:328).

The third element that the Report looks at relates to aid which Africa receives from the North. The Report describes how in the past aid has been ineffective due both to internal mismanagement and donor policies of politicising aid in pursuit of their own self-interest. Of late, the Commission asserts, the case has been reversed. The Report states, “… the evidence on the effectiveness of aid… shows it is simply untrue that aid to Africa has been wasted in more recent years” (Commission for Africa 2005:28). The Commission recommends that the quality of aid to Africa should be improved to correspond with the specific needs of the recipient African country. Likewise, it proposes that the quantity of aid

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38 It was even lower at 1.7% in 2016 according to Evita Schmieg. See https://www.swpberlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/projekt_papiere/Africas_Position_in_Global_Trade.pdf
needs to be doubled to US$25 billion initially, and tripled to US$50 billion over the period spanning 2010–2015.

Thus the Commission for Africa lays out its vision of development for the sub-Saharan Africa region. It has presented its model as quite paradigmatic, other possible approaches to African development notwithstanding. As part of the search for alternate development, it becomes therefore necessary to scrutinise that model further to appreciate its likely potential. In particular, it bears to talk about the model’s Western origins and capitalistic form to see how this might align with African realities.

3.2 The Commission for Africa’s moot openings

The official custom of instituting a commission as a means for investigating a complicated issue and coming up with a plan of action raises as many questions as it answers. Legitimate questions posed in relation to any commission of enquiry are likely to revolve around its rationale, independence, and the terms of reference it is governed by (see chapter five in this study). Further, the fact that commissions often tackle highly sensitive and divisive topics adds to their contestability. Therefore, it is not uncommon for a given commission to raise polarised views in relation to the overall status of such a formal body. The Blair Commission on African development is no exception in this case.

As many of the commentators have stated, the Commission for Africa warrants our attention for a variety of different reasons. For my part, I locate the source of interest in the Commission’s initiative outside the range of the reasons hitherto mentioned in the various exchanges. Moreover, to convey what could be important about this Commission, I do not, at the same time, resort to revisionist interpretation; any retrospective evaluation made on the basis of final outcomes (from the vantage point of the due date of 2015 and beyond) perhaps smacks of simplistic vain exercise. And nor does my concern with the Commission see me dwelling on the substantive side of African development, important as this can be.

Instead, my emphasis exclusively is on how the Commission’s tacit economic and political aims apparently justify a distinctive approach to ‘culture’ as the bedrock for its work. In rationalising this focal tendency, I simply point out that a stable edifice anticipates a solid foundation. As it turns out, the overriding economic and political fact induces the Commission to place strictures on its conceptual horizon about the ‘essence’ of culture. How

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39 For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa during the 1990s dealing with political crimes committed during the Apartheid era.
the Commission appears to be keeping tabs on its conceptual contours (to accommodate its particular development model) is what I attempt to tease out by reflecting on one core but fairly typical statement from its Report.

We try in this report to tell a story. It is inevitably a complex story, for many of the issues impact one another and cannot sensibly be addressed in isolation. The path we pick through this thicket of interactions is this. We begin by telling the world how the problem looks through African eyes, for the cultures of the continent are all too easily brushed aside in the rush to offer pre-packaged solutions from the developed world.

(Commission for Africa 2003:23)

In the preceding extract, the last sentence makes for a moot point. Indeed, “how the problem looks through African eyes” proves to be the very assertion which provides stimulus for my own thoughts on the Report. Accordingly, I ponder what the Commission’s definition of ‘culture’ possibly entails. Likewise, I assess whether the Commission shows any tendency to scant, if not dismiss, the role of culture in Africa’s economic and political transformation. This, in turn, should enable us to decide if the Commission’s blueprint itself represents pre-packaged development from without. Alternatively, we may be able to indicate whether the plan symbolises a novel approach to African development, with which the continent’s populations could possibly agree.

In fairness, I should commend the Commission for insisting on the need to have culture play a central role in African development. The Commission sets itself apart by categorically calling for cultural understanding to be at the forefront of all African development policy. Indeed, the Commission in its Report devotes a major chapter, Through African Eyes: Culture, to the continent’s cultures as integral to development. Therefore, its message of wanting culture to define “… the terms of the development debate and the actions that follow” will have to be well-received (Commission for Africa 2005:130). Similarly, the Commission deserves due credit for spelling out, on the one hand, the practical advantages of incorporating culture into development policy, and, on the other, for highlighting the consequences of failing to do so. We need not have to agree with the Commission’s finer points to appreciate what is being advocated in this case. It thus makes sense for the Commission to declare that “… cultural urgency underpins [its] findings across the report …”

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40 Authenticating the validity of this claim becomes all the more necessary as a way of testing the self-assured tone with which the Commission sets to fulfil its mandate.
(Commission for Africa 2005:130-131). And what could be even more positive is the Commission's counsel to look at the role of culture in development, considering that the topic is “relatively less studied in Africa” than in other regions.

Be that as it may, some significant problems seem to beset the views on culture as laid down in the Commission’s Report—with important consequences for practical African development. There is apparently a major reason though as to why the Commission’s articulations come unstuck; the delinking of culture and social struggle on purely ideological account. This then not only appears to be against the holistic setup of society, but also it likely flouts the organic sources of the development process. And because of this basic weakness, whatever effort the Commission subsequently expends to bring its idea of ‘culture’ up to date, including the many rhetorical manoeuvres, visibly fails to bear fruit. Let me expound by being more specific in terms of some of the actual ‘language’ that the Commission employs and the relevance hence to African development.

Among other things, the Commission speaks of culture as being about “how the past interacts with the present” as part of the process of collective identity formation and of imagining the future. To my mind, not only does this statement sound very incisive, but also it can be deeply consequential where the development process in the case of sub-Saharan Africa (and especially Eritrea) is in question. Apart perhaps from simple gesture or slogan, the Commission seems coy however to say how exactly the relevant link ought to be thought through.

Radical African theory of culture, to say nothing of critical anthropology, progressive historiography and the field of Cultural Studies, teaches us that people actively fashion their collective identities by endorsing particular versions of the past. The selection of certain cultural traditions normally follows from what a social group’s present and future political aspiration may involve. Those who happen to be socially oppressed invoke aspects of the past in a manner that usually furthers the cause of their economic, political and cultural emancipation. It may not be uncommon then for the peoples of Africa in their present fight for a better economic and political future to tap into legacies of struggle handed down from earlier phases of African history. As Rosaldo (in Kaye and McClelland eds. 1990:103) explains, “the analysis of traditions so conceived becomes the historical narrative of their struggle, not the synchronic analysis of static cultural forms … ideology, not social analysis, has created the dichotomy between vital culture and inert tradition.” Essentially, it is the spirit of struggle and hard work which Africa evidently needs to preserve and even intensify, albeit the form and content of the relevant traditions may undergo adaptation to meet newer
urgencies. However, rather than continue on general theoretical terms, it is proper to substantiate what I have so far been saying about the significance of culture for achieving economic and political objectives. Hence, in light of the Commission’s conjectures around the key themes of ‘South African apartheid’ and ‘African political leadership’, it is possible to set forth a competing historical narrative of the African peoples’ struggle—in accordance with the principle of the purposive reconstitution of cultural traditions as historical narratives of peoples’ struggles.

The Commission and the South African conjuncture

The Commission for Africa states that its work has been sustained by far-reaching economic and political changes that began to take shape in Africa and the wider world since the mid-1970s. The evolution in politics, in particular, is what the Commission gives primacy to as precursor to a climate conducive to Africa’s economic development in the new Millennium. The Commissioners appear to have been inspired by these changes in politics to the point of proclaiming that “a singular moment has arrived for Africa” (Commission for Africa 2005:25). In order to understand the Commission’s interpretations and the implication for African development, it is necessary to quiz how the Commission through its Report frames this background political context as watershed.

The assertion about the developments in African politics sounds somewhat subjective and may be open to debate for a number of reasons. It not only puts under the spotlight how the composition of the Africa Commission came to be determined, but, more tellingly, it can explain how and why the Commission advocates a particular brand of development for the continent. This susceptibility to interpret those political changes in biased and triumphalist light could be fundamental to forming an overall picture of the Africa Commission’s development discourse.

The Commission’s rather sanguine representations of the changeover from apartheid to democratic rule in South Africa turns out as major point of contention with regards to its questionable portrayal of African history as commonly understood by the peoples of this continent. According to the Commission, the demise of the apartheid system in South Africa “has brought a new confidence to the whole of the continent ... [it] has reminded Africa ... that no injustice can last for ever.” (Commission for Africa 2005:23). Most people in Africa and elsewhere rightly felt sincere joy at the end of (legal) apartheid in 1990-1991. So, the Commission’s statement of a post-apartheid new dawn can’t be inaccurate on first account. The trouble with the Africa Commission however seems to be the following: firstly, the
Commission distinctly fails to mention who was propping up the apartheid regime against the wishes of the majority population and how it was forced to relinquish power, and; secondly, it shows a certain tendency to muddle the essence of social justice by conflating formal institutional rights with substantive equality. Put simply, the Commission tends to whitewash the whole aim of the South African liberation struggle against apartheid—the radical redistribution of the nation’s wealth in the interests of those who produce it.

Apartheid South Africa found staunch external allies in the administration of Ronald Reagan in the US and the government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK at the time (1980s) when most of the world had turned its back on that regime. Throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, the economies of the front-line states of Angola, Botswana and Mozambique suffered as a consequence of Pretoria’s ‘border wars’. Apartheid South Africa appeared untroubled in its offensive against the neighbouring states partly because it enjoyed solid diplomatic and political backing from the US and the UK governments. To counter the continued South African aggression, these front-line states had to divert resources away from vital national development programs and into the defense effort. Eventually, the South African apartheid state, in addition to the worldwide campaign against its racially-motivated segregationist policies and practices, also came under enormous military pressure in Angola in the late 1980s at the hands of the Peoples Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola, FAPLA, the internationalist Cuban troops, and the liberation forces—the African National Congress, ANC, and South West Africa People’s Organisation, SWAPO (cf. Gleijeses 2013; El-Tahri 2007; Deutschmann 1989).41 The Report tends to crowd out, possibly for utilitarian reasons, vying characterisations of the political history of the southern Africa region, including the role of Western powers in supporting the expansionist South African regime and the active struggle by African peoples (and their friends) for self-determination. The Commission’s apparent omissions notwithstanding, it is normally along these very lines that the popular African political narrative frames the period in question.

As part of the process of arriving at a negotiated political settlement, the ANC made historic compromises by downgrading its stated commitment to socialist principles in so far as this applies to the economy. It appears that the imperative of securing peace limited the ANC

41 The military setback at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in south-eastern Angola (1987/1988) has been described as a major cause for subsequent political developments in Southern Africa—the signing by the apartheid regime of the non-aggression pact with Angola, agreeing to the independence of Namibia and the dismantling of the apartheid system itself in South Africa. For further details, the reader can refer to http://www.democracynow.org/2013/12/11/the_secret_history_of_how_cuba. Also, to learn more about southern Africa political history, it is worth checking Piero Gleijeses’s (2013) text, Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1999.
leadership’s bargaining capacity to demand the complete adoption of its Freedom Charter in the early 1990s. Nelson Mandela and his colleagues accepted to carry on with the capitalist economy in the post-apartheid era. Nevertheless, the then-ANC leadership saw no wisdom in completely abandoning the objectives of the liberation struggle, especially the obligation to social justice for the majority. As Patrick Bond (in Subiros 2007:91) explains, “…the [ANC’s] Reconstruction and Development Program (1994) reflected the influence of trade union and leftist social movements, and served as the ANC’s first electoral campaign platform.” In the early post-apartheid years, the ANC clearly recognised the need to improve the conditions of the majority by the means available to it. Theirs was a longer-term reformist strategy of reducing economic inequalities through political office.

In contrast, the later ANC leadership, Cyril Ramaphosa, Jacob Zuma, Thabo Mbeki and Trevor Manuel included, looks keen to promote the business interests of the few (blacks and whites) at the expense of the South African masses. Substantively speaking, it would seem that there has not occurred noticeable transformation in employment, health and education in the lives of many South Africans since apartheid despite this country’s bounty. As Patrick Bond (2017) comments:

By the 2000s, Ramaphosa had earned a reputation for seeking profits at any cost. The worst incident was at the Lonmin platinum mines at Marikana … On August 15, 2012 Ramaphosa emailed a request to police … demanding “concomitant action” against “dastardly criminals,” against whom police should “act in a more pointed way.”

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42 In addition to Mandela, the leadership concerned comprised of the likes of Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani, Joe Slovo, Ahmed Kathrada, Mac Maharaj and Walter Sisulu, to name a few.

43 South Africa under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (and followed by Jacob Zuma) not only embraced neoliberalism at the national level, but also in the early 2000s Mbeki and four other African heads of state (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and Senegal) endorsed neoliberalism (through the NEPAD Initiative) as a ‘suitable’ development model for the African continent (see NEPAD website). Trevor Manuel, one of the African Commissioners, was the South African Finance Minister in 2005. He urged Africans to “own” the recommendations of the Commission for Africa. Apparently, there can be little doubt that the current ruling ANC elite is deeply committed to neoliberalism so much so that, as Patrick Bond writes, it has been prepared to gun down protesting South African mining workers calling for better pay and conditions.

44 As Saul (2011:77) observes: Important as it was to overcome apartheid and similar racist structures in southern Africa, it was easy to see that people in southern Africa were also seeking to liberate themselves from class and corporate oppression … These goals came readily to seem to be at least as important to any true liberation as was national self-assertion. Nonetheless, the fact is that these attendant goals were to fall by the wayside; indeed now, some decades after the fall of the most visible forms of colonial and racial domination, it has become ever more apparent just how narrow the definition of ‘liberation’ has been permitted to become … For liberation in any expansive sense is, quite simply, something that has not occurred in southern Africa.
He was referring to 4,000 desperately underpaid miners who had been on a wildcat strike the prior week, during which six workers, two security guards and two policemen had died in skirmishes. Neither Lonmin officials nor Ramaphosa wanted to negotiate. The day after the revealing emails, as strikers peacefully departed the strike grounds for their homes in nearby shantytowns, 34 men were shot dead by police, and 78 wounded … Ramaphosa’s role was especially unconscionable given his struggle history.

The South African government as led by the new ANC elites then appears to have chosen to be answerable to the overseers of neoliberal globalisation rather than defend the interests of the majority of its people. This apparent abdication of responsibility when it comes to the ideals of the liberation struggle seems now more typical despite on-going discontent and opposition at the grass-roots level. A PRESSTV piece (2016), *Leftists blast out of Zuma address*, observes that “… criticism against [Zuma] has reached its height over his expropriation of public money for private expenditure … and corruption within his government.” In the parlance of proponents of underdevelopment theory, the phenomenon of a comprador African class (exemplified by the likes of Cyril Ramaphosa and Trevor Manuel) acting as an agent of capitalism seems to be well alive in the contemporary South Africa.

Such possibly ought to read a meaningful account of the background political context involving in particular the southern Africa region as well as South Africa itself. It becomes hard to imagine the Commission for Africa as being ‘on the same page’ as the African peoples given its policy to sanitise the relevant historical narrative and the present reality. Moreover, it is probably in this that we get a glimpse of the essentially reactive nature of the Commission’s agenda for African development. This same story of vetoing contending explanations seems to repeat itself in other ways as well. It plays a significant part again in relation to the Commission’s discourse on African governance. The following comment therefore represents an alternate view on how we could have equally approached the topic of good governance and corruption in Africa.

**Inadmissible tales of governance and development initiatives**

Again, the Commission’s description of African politics and corruption does not seem to produce a rounded picture despite the adamance that the Commission has worked hard to
be “blisteringly honest” and “frank about corruption and incompetence...” (Commission for Africa 2005:22). There could be a flipside to this story of corruption not prefigured in the Report, and that is that Africa has also had its fair share of good leaders who demonstrated integrity and honesty.

There was, inter alia, the nationalist Patrice Lumumba in the former Zaire, the pan-Africanist Julius Kambarage Nyerere in the beacon of hope and freedom that the Tanzania of the 1960s-70s once represented, and the youthful and proud revolutionary Thomas Isidore Noel Sankara in Burkina Faso. Granted that the Commission’s preoccupation is with Africa’s present and future development, and allowing that there are few contemporary African leaders renowned for their stance in actively fighting corruption, yet historical reflection can be (going by the Commission’s own standards) central to any understanding of development. As M. Babu (cited in Rodney 2012:284) comments, to understand the present “we must look into the past and to know the future we must look into the past and the present.” The inclusion of positive experiences involving honourable African leadership is meant to prevent the smothering of hope and self-belief among the current generation of Africans. By learning from such historical examples, the African peoples can influence their present and future in accordance with their desires. A brief word seems to be in order on the leadership characteristics of the trio of Lumumba, Nyerere and Sankara, if only to explain why their style of governance does not rate a mention in the Commission’s Report.

The Report talks about how corrupt Mobutu Sese Seko was in misappropriating aid and in plundering the wealth of Zaire, without ever referring to Mobutu’s predecessor, Patrice Lumumba, in the same context. It would have been appropriate to concurrently allude to both leaders’ legacies when considering the development journey of the post-independence Zaire/ Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Unlike Mobutu whose regime was complicit in the underdevelopment of the former-Zaire for over three decades, Lumumba was a nationalist patriot who led his country to independence from European colonisation. Lumumba’s quest to consolidate Congolese national self-determination ran a collision course with the vested interests of the former colonial powers, Belgium and France, as well as with that of the United States. His patriotism was perceived as posing a threat to the interests of these foreign powers and culminated in the decision to get rid of him (see Witte 2001). The local agent responsible for executing the foreign assassination plot was none other than Mobutu himself, who turned against Lumumba by

45 In the Report, Mobuto is now referred to as the Zairian ‘dictator’ which contrasts with the previous label of ‘ally’ when in power from the early1960s-mid 1990s.
staging a coup that had been masterminded from abroad. Lumumba paid the ultimate price defending the Congolese people’s right to their national wealth. Across Africa today, Lumumba is remembered for his integrity and selflessness as a leader and is considered a formidable moral force. Mobuto, in contrast, seems to have been consigned (deservedly) to the dustbin of history as a mendacious kleptocrat, a sort of malignant memento of post-colonial African political leadership. Almost six decades on, the DRC despite its immense riches remains underdeveloped largely because of the legacy and continuing impact of Western policy.

Julius Nyerere is another example of a visionary African statesman who should be appreciated in relation to the goal of post-independence African development. In his book of the same title, Simon (2006) regards Nyerere as one of the ‘fifty key thinkers on development’. Both during his reign as Tanzania’s president and after formally resigning from politics, Nyerere was commended in as many ways. The United Nations General Assembly, for example, bestowed upon Nyerere the title of “World Hero of Social Justice” for championing the cause of the world’s poor.

In his native Tanzania, Nyerere is credited with forging a sense of national unity and harmonious coexistence among the hundred-plus cultural and linguistic groupings that make up the Tanzanian population. In recognition of his exceptional contribution to their nation, Tanzanians have come to confer upon Nyerere the twin Kiswahili accolades of Baba wa Taifa and Mwalimu—‘Father of the Nation’ and ‘Teacher’ respectively. But above all, Nyerere is admired in Africa and around the world for his humility and personal integrity. Nyerere took a great deal of care not to abuse his powers, nor was he tempted to misuse public funds for personal self-fulfilment. In resigning office voluntarily, he set a rare example of an African politician willing to forego power when one’s presidency became untenable. In contrast to Mobutu and Nigeria’s Sani Abacha (in between them, the two embezzled around $US10 billions of public money) who tenaciously hang on to power, Nyerere peacefully retired to his birth village in rural Tanzania and was living off a small government pension to the end of his life (Meisler 1996). Seriously ill with leukaemia, Nyerere initially declined the Tanzanian government’s offer to fly him to London to receive palliative care for his illness. By the time he accepted to travel to London, it was too late as he had only a few days to live. Nyerere died in October 1999 and, given the example he set, his posthumous canonisation as a saint by the Catholic Church of Tanzania has been earnestly considered (cf. Mesaki 2011).

46 The economic warfare that the IMF waged against Tanzania was part of the reason why Nyerere had to step down.
The third African head of state that I consider, a leader notable for his profound contributions to develop his country, is Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso\(^{47}\), formerly Upper Volta. Sankara came to be recognised both for his (unassuming) personal code of conduct\(^{48}\) as well as for his mettle to face up to the challenge of lifting Burkina Faso out of its underdeveloped existence.

Sankara was noted for his modesty and political temerity, traits seldom attributed to fellow political leaders. When serving as government minister before his ascent to the helm of power in 1983, a common habit of Sankara’s was to ride his bicycle to and from work on a daily basis (Benson 2007). Later, as president, one of his early acts was to sell the government’s fleet of Mercedes Benz and order his ministers to instead use the less-expensive and fuel efficient Renault 5s (Thomas Sankara Website 2008). Years after his physical\(^{49}\) demise, Sankara’s devotion to the public good does not appear to have been forgotten. As Harsch (2013:263) notes of Sankara’s enduring legacy:

> In South Africa, for example, a Black Consciousness-inspired group has drawn explicitly on Sankara’s ideas to demand that President Jacob Zuma and other leaders of the ruling African National Congress give up their mansions and live by the same standards as the majority of the people.

Meanwhile, the Sankara government actively worked to restructure Burkinabé society, which was deeply conservative, to facilitate the leap to ‘development’. The state legislated against traditional practices such as female circumcision and polygamy at the same time as it enacted additional laws to protect women’s rights (cf. Dembele 2008). Under Sankara, the state implemented agrarian reforms to assist the poor and abolished many of the privileges of tribal chiefs. By the time Sankara’s deputy, Blaise Compaore, conspired with the former colonial power, France, against his leader in 1987, Sankara had led his nation through four momentous years of far-reaching social transformations. Sankara was aged only thirty eight at the time of his murder during a bloody coup d’état instigated by Compaore, who was forced to relinquish power some twenty seven years later in the wake of the popular protests of late 2014.

\(^{47}\) Upon assuming power in 1983, Sankara renamed Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, literally the “Land of the Upright People”.

\(^{48}\) According to Harsch (2013:363), Sankara kept his own children in public schools and rebuffed relatives who sought state jobs. Would it be thinkable then to label Sankara’s politics as neopatrimonialist?

\(^{49}\) As Sankara himself would have it, “while revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas”.

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Perhaps now it becomes easier to understand why the lessons of history featured in the Africa Commission Report may have been couched in such a way as to express a single development discourse. To broaden the range of Africa’s political-historical experience could have entailed allowing for the possibility of development outside the parameters defined by the Report. This could have led the Africa Commission into uncharted territory. It would possibly have obliged the Africa Commission to revise its terms of reference which, in turn, may have meant exposure to different visions of development, including contemplating socialist alternatives which contrast to the largely neoliberal agenda evident in the Africa Commission Report. Once more, such manifest lack of interest to engage in a thorough discussion about African history and politics speaks much about the nature of the development agenda on offer. The whole plan thus can possibly be viewed more as a mechanistic gesture than a carefully considered response to the problems facing Africa.

Culture and the Commission’s policy of ‘wagging the dog’

Oddly, the Commission appears to neglect this readily accessible enhanced way of looking at the dynamics of culture as history. Instead, the Commission invokes a type of outmoded conception of culture to promote the ‘discussion’ on African development. Much is made, for example, of how the abolition of the Tol system, Somalia’s traditional court of elders whose job it is to dispense clan-based justice, played a major role in fuelling the civil war there whilst its continuation in neighbouring Somaliland has meant a semblance of relative peace and order. The question begs: why, of all of Somalia’s rich historical and cultural traditions, would this particular institution merit the Commission’s attention? Or still, who determines which (Somali) traditions are worth adopting and which ones deserve discarding, and for what reasons? Taking the case of England’s industrial and social revolution as precedent, wouldn’t the ‘modernisation’ of the African states necessitate a radical break with the past and on their own terms too? Even if we are not versed in Somali national history, it is imperative still to call to accounts the Commission’s style of composition regarding the past and its relevance to the present. Instead of accentuating the Tol system, the Commission could have brought to light the Somali people’s history of popular opposition to foreign incursion into their sovereignty. This certainly can be one possible way of making sense of the current turmoil in the country. In fact, despite their persistent and complex domestic issues, the majority of Somalis seem to think that external interference is the main reason for

50 The Commission’s admission that the background to Somalia’s political turmoil is complex seems of secondary importance here. Presumably, it is designed to fend off criticism of its version of the story.  
51 The resistance put up by General Farrah Aidid and his fighters against the US intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s can be cited as an example here.
the continued state of warfare in Somalia today (cf. Hallinan 2015). No other writer so vehemently objects to the Commission’s quite mediocre and ad hoc way of treating this critical issue than Frantz Fanon who, long ago, penned these words:

Culture has never the translucidity of custom; it abhors all simplifications. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attach oneself to tradition, or to bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one’s own people … When a people undertakes … a political struggle, the significance of tradition changes … In an underdeveloped country [embarked on ‘progress’] traditions are fundamentally unstable and are shot through by centrifugal tendencies.

Fanon (1967:180)

Since the propagation of development as a ‘social construct’ in line with a desire to uphold certain interests is what apparently underlies the Commission’s effort, it probably comes as no surprise that the Commission talks down the importance of the complex interrelation governing the economic, political and cultural spheres. But there may still be further twists and turns to the Commission’s presentations as it strives to offset the limitations that ideology seems to impose on its renderings of culture. Here, I particularly concentrate on the Commission’s textual expressions vis-a-vis the published work of leading voices in the field of African theory of culture.

And so on another level what also appears interesting about the Commission’s writing style is its manifest pretence, that is, the outwardly adherence to what reads like a liberal and even progressive understanding of culture. The fact that the Commission’s language seems to affect what others have elaborated in contexts at variance to its own, possibly gives a sense of artificiality to the Commission’s ways of operating. Specifically, the Commission at given points tends to closely simulate the prose of celebrated (anti-imperialist) African advocates—those who, because of their radical politics, either were thrown in jail (Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’) or paid the ultimate price (Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral). To substantiate my point, it befits to include alongside each other direct quotes of what the Commission, Ngũgĩ, Fanon and Cabral have to say on the role of culture in the life of society and in promoting political and economic change.
[C]ulture is more than [arts] … culture is about shared patterns of identity, symbolic meaning, aspiration … Culture is also about … how … values are formed and transmitted …. From the outset, as Commissioners, we were determined that the Commission for Africa would do all it could to avoid [omitting culture from development policy]. Culture could not be some bolt-on extra to our enterprise, or a dutiful nod to a worthy ideal. We were determined to build it into our process.

(Commission for Africa 2005:121-122)

What holds [a] society together is the culture it develops in the course of its struggle for economic and political survival … culture is an integral part of our growth …. Culture in other words is not something extra, like say a sixth finger on a human hand. Culture has rightly been said to be to society what a flower is to a plant. What is important about a flower is not just its beauty. A flower is the carrier of the seeds for new plants, the bearer of the future of that species of plants.

(Ngũgĩ 1993:77 and 56-57)

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people’s true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by the people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom …

(Fanon 1967:188)

We were concerned constantly to examine our assumptions to discover whether in them we might be mistaking incidentals for essentials …. As we listened, we were particularly attentive to where cultural factors helped distinguish what succeed from what failed. We heard that …
Profound knowledge of the culture of the people ... [makes it necessary] to discern the essential from the secondary, the positive from the negative ... All this, with a view to the various demands of the struggle, and with the aim of being able to concentrate its efforts on the essential without forgetting the secondary, to arouse the development of positive and progressive elements and to resist flexibly but stoutly, negative and retrogressive elements; and finally, with a view to utilising the strengths and eliminating the weaknesses or transforming the latter into strengths.

(Cabral 1974:16)

In each of these passages, there clearly is a high degree of affinity in the form of the language employed. At the same time, there seems to be a gulf separating the Commission from the trinity of Cabral, Fanon and Ngũgĩ in terms of substance—as in what exactly it is that their respective languages are intended for. Whereas, Cabral, Fanon and Ngũgĩ's immediate concern happens to be with the dialectics of culture in the context of social struggles against colonialism/ neocolonialism, the Commission (artfully) pushes the issue on a different tangent. Conspicuous by its absence from the language of the Commission is not only the theme of struggle, but also the entire question of the role of culture in influencing the other social fields (and in turn being affected by these) becomes exteriorised if you will. Judging by how this appears to force the Commission to depart from its professed objective of ushering in meaningful change, it can be argued that the Commission’s strategy comes across as unoriginal.

All the same, the Commission does its utmost to present an up-to-date seemingly enlightened uptake on culture. The Commission seems to realise that contexts and conditions have changed which meant it had to avoid uncouth openly colonialist discourse. What the Commission attempts to do nonetheless is straddle a position from which it can possibly describe African culture in lofty, liberal cultural relativist terms whilst being careful about any underlying agenda it might have. The Commission preaches: it is wrong to think of African culture as “the expression of unchanging tradition ... as regressive and tribal and

52 Stuart Hall’s work on “encoding and decoding” discourses can be a useful guide and resource in this connection.
therefore inimical to development … an irrational force that generates inertia and economic backwardness. This is contrary to the evidence …” (Commission for Africa 2005:32). This rhetorical exercise of uttering very edifying stuff to then perhaps resist carrying what that might imply a step further to its logical conclusion, or else changing the trajectory all together, can have the net effect of diverting from the pursuit of serious development ultimately. And this may well mean that the Commission’s fairly dated theoretical conjectures on culture can be expected to impinge, in a proportionate way, practical African development. But how the Commission takes the clout from what genuine development ought to be, in addition to identifying sound strategies for potentially unmasking this, is the question that needs to be addressed in due course.

3.3 **Eritrea: society, political history, culture**

Eritrea is a relatively small Horn of Africa country with a population of around five million people. Its neighbours include the Sudan to the north and the west, Ethiopia and Djibouti to the south and the Red Sea shores bound it to the east.
Eritrea is socially and culturally heterogeneous. Diversity and variation is along religious as well as ethno-linguistic divides. In terms of the first, there is roughly equal split with respect to adherents of the two main religions: Christianity and Islam; in addition, animism is observed in some parts of the country, albeit on a limited scale. The Eritrean population is made up of nine distinct social groups. Each of these groups has its own language, leads a more or less distinctive cultural way of life and it occupies a relatively well-demarcated geographical territory. Besides, there is of course a mixed urban population in the capital Asmara and the main towns making up the bulk of the national population. The Eritrean linguistic groups are; Tigrinya and Tigre, together constituting some 50% and 30% respectively of the total population which also includes the other minority groups of Afar (4%), Blin (2%), Hedareb (4%), Kunama (2%), Nara (4%), Rashaida (2%) and Saho (4%).

As for the interrelationship between religion and ethnicity, there is no one easy arrangement to serve as a simplifying pattern. In some instances religion and ethnicity completely overlap, but this is not so with most of the population; the supposedly Christian and Muslim Tigrinya and Tigre nationalities, include Jeberti Muslim and Mensa’e Christian minorities within them respectively; and the Kunama are either animists, Christians or Muslims. The present author identifies as a member of a ‘minority within a minority’ in that whilst I generally hail from the Blin, I nonetheless claim, unlike most Blina who either are Christian or Muslim, a dual heritage on the basis of my bi-religious parental backgrounds. Broadly speaking, religious affiliation in Eritrea doesn’t appear as accentuated partly due to the intermixed ancestry of much of the population and also due, as I will explain, to the unifying dimensions of the modern Eritrean nationalist experience.
Socio-political history and nation-formation

The modern Eritrean national identity has gradually taken shape in the wake of political-military developments during the last five hundred years or so. The more recent and pivotal history of Eritrea begins with the arrival in the sixteenth century of the Ottoman Turks on the port of Massawa on the coast. Around this time, the area partially became an extension of the Ottoman Empire. It is assumed that contestation between rival powers such as the Turks, Portuguese and Ethiopian rulers from the south which marked this period, constitutes the first step in the formation of Eritrean society in its current structure and form. Upon the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Egyptians had briefly made their presence felt in the land before they too were swept away in the late nineteenth century by the Italian conquests of east Africa. Extending for five years from the moment in 1885 when they set foot on the coast to 1889 when they consolidated their grip to establish their colony of Eritrea, the Italians had to fight hard to overcome the resistance put up by the Abyssinian emperor Yohannes IV and his lieutenant Ras Alula Engida to whom Eritrea was the northern most part of Abyssinia proper. Victory over the latter (who had to fight on many fronts—
against the Sudanese Mahdists and the rival Amhara war-lord who was encouraged by the Italians) enabled the Italians to claim Eritrea as their colony (cf. Connell 2011).

For some fifty years, until their defeat by the British in 1941 in World War II, the Italians ran Eritrea as their colony. As with much of Africa, half century of Italian colonialism helped redefine completely the region’s loose social and geographical makeup. Arguably, it is within this short period of European colonisation that the colony of Eritrea was transformed into a modern political entity, delimiting the Eritrean nation and its physical boundaries in the process (cf. Negash 1987). For the next ten years, administration of this former Italian colony passed over to the British who, along with the USA, eventually decided to provisionally federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. Haile Selassie, the then emperor of Ethiopia, counting on active support from the western powers, abruptly terminated the federal arrangement and annexed Eritrea to Ethiopia in 1952. The takeover by Ethiopia and the unforeseen and coercive manner by which it was imposed on Eritrean society, paved the way for modern-day Eritrean nationalism and struggle for political self-determination (cf. Venosa 2014).

**Eritrea’s struggle for national independence: culture’s scope and constraint**

Initially, Eritreans sought to regain their (usurped) nationhood through peaceful political means only to be confronted with violent repression at the hands of the forces of the occupation. The failure of this decade-long campaign to reverse the annexation in turn prompted drastic shift in the resistance strategy; the armed struggle was launched by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) under the command of Hamid Idris Awate. Despite the national consensus that the ELF initiated the struggle for Eritrean statehood, the ELF’s role, past and present, falls outside my remit on this occasion; the ELF simply could not see the struggle for Eritrean independence to its closing stages for reasons that again I can’t delve into here.\(^{53}\) It is a different national milestone rather which is commonly acknowledged as having a lasting legacy on the nation’s future political course. Eritrean history records that around the early 1970s ideological differences and power struggle within the umbrella ELF forced the leadership of what was to emerge as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) to split and form its own movement. From its humble beginnings as a splinter run-away and marginal group, the EPLF evolved into a formidable (Maoist) guerrilla movement by the 1980s and early 1990s. Having shouldered the brunt of the independence war (since

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\(^{53}\) In the early 1980s, the ELF was to spectacularly unravel when, expedited by the many compounding internal problems it has been plagued with, a combined external assault that brought together the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front and its close Ethiopian partners-in-arms dealt it a final death blow.
the cessation in 1981-1982 of the ELF as an active fighting force), the EPLF was able to conquer state power and usher in Eritrean (de facto) independence in 1991.

The leadership of the EPLF considered it necessary to reproduce the dynamics of the Eritrean decolonisation process in a ‘national culture’. By national culture, I refer here to “the whole body of efforts made by the people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon 1967:188). On the topic of national culture, the anti-colonial struggle and future development, the Eritreans appear to have made, with varying degrees of success, practical use of the teachings of Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon. Evidently, the EPLF’s was nothing short of a carefully prosecuted strategy in which Eritrean history in the making becomes blended with the idea of national culture itself. Enshrined within the elaborate framework of the EPLF’s 1977 National Democratic Program is a call to nurture an Eritrean national culture to undergird the claim for national self-determination and statehood (cf. People’s Front for Democracy and Justice 2007). In part, the Program presses the case for the serious appreciation, enhancement and refashioning into a symbolic national whole, the existing traditions of Eritrea’s fairly disparate socio-cultural groupings. It is entirely plausible that this Eritrean project could have been modelled on what Cabral (1974:16) in particular outlines as the essential organisational tasks and responsibilities of the anti-colonial movement:

The liberation movement must be able to bring about slowly but surely, in the course of its political program, a convergence of the levels of culture of the various social categories which can be deployed in the struggle, and to transform them into a single national cultural force which acts as the basis and foundation of the armed struggle.

The standard Eritrean refrain of Unity in Diversity, a slogan immensely popularised by the EPLF-cum-Eritrean Government, seemingly recapitulates the essence of the Eritrean national culture: it signifies, not to mention prescribes, national integration which is supposed to cut across the social divides mentioned. And of all the official Eritrean resources put out then and now, nothing more so manifestly conveys what this culture is about than the numerous audio-visual material produced by the EPLF and the Eritrean Government, a dataset hitherto untapped and which is explored further in chapter four in this study.
3.4 Historicity and the post-independence setting: continuity, misperception or total diversion?

Needless to say, the invention and propagation of national culture in Eritrea’s case has been in response to the threat of external hostility and domination. At all times, pre- and post-independence, a focus on the ‘national interest’ broadly articulated has helped imbue the form and substance of what typically passes for Eritrean national culture. As officially conceived, Eritrea’s national culture has been adapted to (contend with) a miscellany of economic, political, ideological and military contingencies that the society has to bridge in the course of its recent development. Nevertheless, closer observation of the current Eritrean national scene leads the observer to register a vital notation concerning the status of Eritrean national culture: two self-evidently disputatious accounts seem possible when considering the history of this nation on both sides of the divide marking national independence. These will be briefly introduced now before moving on to recount the different ways in which the current Eritrean political and economic reality has been interpreted.

There is no doubt that during the armed struggle, the EPLF skilfully exploited culture to buttress the cause of Eritrean political independence. Although the components of the Eritrean population are the many social groups separated along ethnic and religious lines, this diversity and variation was to prove subordinate to the ideal of national self-determination and independence. In fact, Eritrea’s national culture in its socially- and culturally-inclusive formal appearance has worked to instil the impression of a heterogeneous nation which has managed to harmonise cultural diversity and social contradictions. The basis for this national culture lay in the fact that, for the overwhelming majority of Eritreans, colonial Ethiopia represented an existential threat, in turn justifying a cohesive Eritrean response. The imperative of national unity, as opposed to fragmentation along sub-national line, became the linchpin of a ‘true’ Eritrean identity and its ‘ethos’. That is, then the Eritreans understood quite well the perils that attend to a factionalised domestic front vis-à-vis the colossal foreign occupier as Ethiopia was referred to. Not only was this the

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54 This appears to be in line with Fanon’s (1967:196) understanding of ‘national culture’ where he writes: Culture is the first expression of a nation, the expression of its preferences, of its taboos and of its patterns.... A national culture is the sum total of all these appraisals; it is the result of internal and external extensions exerted over society as a whole and at every level of that society.
exclusive sentiment insofar as the elites who steered the nationalist struggle were concerned, but also the same attitude reigned among the bulk of the civilian population. Eritrean independence from Ethiopia was the pinnacle of the whole nation working in unison for decades toward that common goal which cost upwards of 65,000 fallen combatants in addition to the many massacres perpetrated mainly against the Eritrean rural populations. With independence, a historical injustice committed by external powers against this country and its people was at last set right by Eritrean collective agency.

The Eritrean Government today insists on the contiguous character of the Eritrean dream as it were. In other words, the primary concern of the Eritrean Government is to uphold what, from its perspectives, is the fundamental identity of the nation’s past and present struggle for economic and political self-development. The Eritrean Government even has come up with a unique designation for this: the *Wafry Warsay-Yika’alo*, literally *Heir-Indomitable Campaign*. In this Eritrean phrase, the word *Warsay* or Heir refers to the post-independence generation engaged in (indefinite) national service and development and who are considered to have taken over from the *Yika’alo* or Indomitable, otherwise the (heroic) EPLF fighter of an earlier epoch. From what I have noted so far, it is perhaps not hard to grasp why the Eritrean Government sees the significance of national culture as a continuum; judging by how the EPLF succeeded in organising the motley-formed Eritrean society into a sort of unitary wholeness and set the Eritrean nation on the path of self-determination and statehood, there can be no doubt about the galvanising role of a national culture when it comes to collective undertaking, like development. Not only had the heightened sense of shared national destiny helped propel the cause of Eritrean independence along purely political and military lines, but also that by pulling together the Eritreans managed to accomplish moderate development in certain fields in the zones the liberation movement controlled (see chapter four in this study). The prevailing mindset on the part of the current Eritrean leadership hence goes something like this: if the EPLF, under the austere and precarious conditions of the armed struggle, could mobilise the entire Eritrean society and accomplish so much, there is no reason to think that Eritrea won’t be able to attain even greater development now under the more propitious reality of formal statehood (the reader can consult Eyob 2012 on the EPLF’s economic and social achievements).

All the same, from a broader point of reference, it is possible that there could be another side to this official story. Given the evolution lately of Eritrean politics, it is obvious that the sense of national purpose that worked so well in favour of this country’s cause for self-
determination has begun to be increasingly questioned and even rejected from within. Of course, there are both internal and external contributing factors to this recent development even if (depending on who you speak to) the exact effect of either of these causes tends to be a moot question.

On the one hand, the pursuit of its development vision within the present global system, while not entirely illegitimate, has meant that in practice the Eritrean Government’s policies are accompanied with significant human and political cost to the Eritrean population. Among other things, the features of this internally-derived reality are; Eritrea remains under the authoritarian grip of a one party political system with absolutely no room for any dissenting domestic voices. Moreover, Eritrea excessively relies on a drastic policy of national service (targeting men and women between the ages of 18 and 48 years) for defence and development purposes. Initially planned in 1994 to last for only a year and half, in real term ‘national service’ in Eritrea drags on for an indefinite period of time. As pointed out already, more than anything else, the system of national service in its existing form accounts for the current refugee exodus from Eritrea, believed to be per capita one of the highest in the world. And it is here that we come across a dilemma of sorts so far as the Eritrean story of development is concerned; the lingering tension between what, on the one hand, is the Eritrean leadership’s belief in and demand for absolute self-denial, and, on the other, the civilian population’s questioning of the level of self-sacrifice it is willing to make as ‘true’ measure of its (Eritrean) patriotism. In other words, for the Eritrean Government, this becomes in effect a question of how to mould a ‘new human being’ who can renounce all capitalist sentiment in favour of (enforced) socialist morality and way of being. Despite the achievement of a number of development targets, those kinds of policies have resulted in a host of problems for the Eritrean Government whose long term effect is as yet to be determined. Also, for the first time ever perhaps, there began to emerge a sense of marginalisation among some of Eritrea’s socio-cultural groups like the Afar and Kunama particularly, a reaction to what other Eritreans perceive as a Tigrinya-g geared cultural and political dominance (cf. Raji 2009; Kibreab 2008).

Meantime, the internal situation in the country has been seriously impacted by the progression of regional and international politics. In the year 2000, Ethiopia launched a

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55 This is not to say that there haven’t been Eritrean critics (Tesfatsion Medhanie and the late Mikael Ghaber being prominent examples) who sensed problems with the Eritrean nationalist experiment even earlier on, in the very mode of the armed struggle waged by the EPLF. For someone like Medhanie, the social, political and economic challenges confronting post-independence Eritrea have a great deal to do with (insinuations of) past history: extreme centralisation of power, excessive preoccupation with the military aspects of the national struggle and the intense anti-intellectualism of the organisation’s core leadership.
large-scale military operation against Eritrea apparently over a disputed border territory with devastating effect on the economy and people of Eritrea. Following that war and the signing of the Algiers Peace Pact, a part of Eritrean land, including the flash point hamlet of Bademe, has remained, contrary to the findings and decision of the court of arbitration, in Ethiopian hands. Eritrea has been on a war-footing with Ethiopia ever since and the consequences of this in terms of the impact on development (and individual rights and political freedoms) cannot be ignored. And as previously indicated, Eritrea has been singled out by the United Nations Security Council for tougher economic and other sanctions ostensibly for its role in compromising the peace and security of the Horn of Africa region, specifically that of Somalia. Likewise, the attitude, more often in proxy than in sovereign capacity, of some of Eritrea’s neighbouring states, including Ethiopia (until very recently), Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and Uganda, has led to the further isolation and ostracisation of the Eritrean Government internationally. No doubt, the implication for Eritrean development of these internal and external problems has been enormous and the relevant discussion needs to note down this context.

**Changing perceptions of Eritrean self-determination and development**

Up to this moment, my focus has tended to be on the genesis and (lately contested) role of national culture in the Eritrean journey for independence and political consolidation. It is fitting at this point to make one final observation. My statement here concerns the views of various players to whom, one way or the other, Eritrea’s current and future political and economic direction likely matters.

For its part, the Eritrean Government itself squarely lays the blame on Western policy in Africa and the global South more generally, while it absolutely believes in the justness (on all levels) of its mandate. In the approach that the US and its allies have adopted towards it, the Eritrean Government sees dogmatic intolerance, to say nothing of external plots of destabilisation, with regard to the choices that other nations make—a perspective which may not be any further from the truth. Yet, given this drive toward independent political and economic development, Eritrea’s official rhetoric and action comes across as somewhat inexplicit and inconclusive on the question of what a ‘sound’ anti-globalisation posture may mean or ought to be eventually. In terms of site, agency and imagination as regards the hoped-for change, the Eritrean Government’s narrative does not clearly justify how its

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56 As I have alluded before, this situation appears to be changing now after the recent upheavals in Ethiopia that saw the reconfiguration of political power in that country. Beginning in June 2018 and following the reconciliatory overtures coming from the new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Ahmed Abi, there seems to be some let-up in this two decade-long state of no-war no-peace.
domestic experiment fits with the current Left-geared global resistance to capitalism. I will attempt to say more on this in time (chapter six) given the importance of the issue but will have to leave it at that for now.

In contrast, the critique of the Eritrean Government’s policies coming, for example, from the diasporic opposition, tends to categorically fault the government for the challenges presently confronting Eritrean society. Among other things, the Eritrean Government is reproached for reneging on what is described as the ‘ideals’ of the Eritrean revolution (as it was then called), embodied principally in the question of political pluralism and citizenship rights.

That makes for a fair criticism of the Eritrean Government given in particular how it brooks no dissenting opinion at all, even by those who fought hard for the country’s independence like those EPLF Central Committee members who were rounded up in 2001 to never be heard of again. But what is perhaps debateable is that, with little exception, the opposition’s assessment tends to be somewhat problematical, both theoretically and politically. In calling attention to this though, I am not in the least motivated by a desire to denigrate the efforts of some Eritrean human rights advocates who may well be driven by a genuine concern for the wellbeing of the civilian population; I can’t possibly feign ambiguity in relation to the heavy-handed style of rule characteristic of the Eritrean Government which is indeed a real problem for many Eritreans.

In any event, the understanding of the Eritrean opposition of the sources of underdevelopment and the solutions needed appears rather ingenuous and thus contentious. The opposition’s argument seems susceptible to certain weaknesses, for it proceeds from an intellectually and politically tenuous perception of the problem of African underdevelopment. An undemocratic national political dispensation aside, the very position of dismissing the role of the capitalist global political economy means that this vying Eritrean force may find it hard to realise its professed mission of bringing about improved economic and social conditions. A closer look, further, shows that this group tends to lack the wherewithal (conceptual and practical) to pierce through the opaque represented by the discourse of liberal humanitarianism and its underlying agenda. Having internalised the North’s rhetoric regarding the virtue of ‘good governance’ and the ‘free market’, Eritrea’s diaspora-based opposition appears unable to suspect (never mind detect and counter) any potential disjuncture between what may likely be in the interest of the Eritrean people and the interests of those pushing a neoliberal agenda. Worse still, and unlike the stridently nationalistic, secular and on the whole revolutionary stance of the Eritrean Government, Eritrea’s political opposition seems more interested in rallying around sub-national causes
and in-fighting for petty projects. Even if one considers the Eritrean Government as Tigrinya-centralist and even if most of the Tigrinya-speaking opposition tend to be oblivious to the reality of Tigrinya cultural and linguistic supremacy in today’s Eritrea, my thinking is that any effective political dissension needs to have a national character and reach under all circumstances.  

As for the non-Eritrean opinions, broadly this comprises a mixed bag of detractive and supportive positions concerning the model of development pursued by the Eritrean Government. Most (academic, journalistic and policy-driven) critique of Eritrea’s development strategy can generally be distinguished by its antipathy to the idea of the state controlling the economy at the expense of private sector interests. Someone like Martin Plaut (and possibly Thomas Friedman) can be considered as case in point here. In contrast, the pro-Eritrean Government’s writings, particularly that which is overly positive (see Thomas C Mountain and Andre Vltchek for instance) appears oblivious to issues of ‘democracy’ and human rights in Eritrea despite the ideological hijacking and vulgarisation of these otherwise tranhistorical values by the dominant Western discourse. In the end, what I aim to achieve in this study is to adopt a point of view that not only takes into consideration all of the currents of opinion, ideology, historicism and interests, but also deepens understanding of what the Eritrean case signifies in this regard.

So a closer look at Eritrea’s modern political history turns out important to grasp the genesis and context of its post-independence development policy. Attending to the Eritrean development experiment are some critical questions about the development process. Among other things, it is possible to infer that the pursuit of development (by African states) doesn’t occur in a void but under a set context.Likewise, we can see that development is normally informed by local concerns and expectations (even if it is impossible to exclude the bigger picture). And a further point to remember about ‘development’ may be that the process itself doesn’t unfold in a smooth fashion because of the amorphousness of experience among its subjects. But, ultimately, what the Eritrean example means is that we can’t make a priori claims about the ‘character’ and ‘trajectory’ of the development process. All this applies to any project in the name of African development, including the Commission for Africa.

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57 I am not suggesting here that the Eritrean Government is somehow lenient towards those who identify as Tigrinya-speakers; indeed, the Eritrean Government metes out equal punishment to anyone who opposes it and the individual’s culture, language or religion doesn’t matter at all in this respect.
3.5 Conclusion

Chapter three gave an overview of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean Government’s approach to national development. To serve as background, I touched on certain details about the Commission for Africa and its Report and the Eritrean development experiment. I highlighted, thus, not only the genesis and substance of the two development programs, but also the underlying ideological frame of reference.

For both the Commission and the Eritrean case, my task initially entailed introducing the corresponding development approaches by stating their basic features. Besides a descriptive outline, the presentation at this level traced how the development agenda was set in motion on each occasion and the specific reasons for this.

I noted that, based on a particular reading of the state of sub-Saharan Africa, the Commission resolved that capitalist economic and political development was the answer to the region’s decline in recent times. The detailed plan that the Commission drew up, including the various measures and actions, has been shown to follow in from its distinctive (read subjective) understandings of the region’s problems and the likely solutions. Opting for the private sector alongside liberal democracy, the recommendations made to the African states and external ‘partners’, the soliciting of personnel and information that enabled its work, for example, all of this came in the context of the Commission’s endorsement of a capitalist development model for Africa. Throughout, the Commission doesn’t seem to have tried to be reflexive about its choices.

On the other hand, where Eritrea was in question, what became clear was that the development premise resulted from a totally different set of (historical) circumstances. Accordingly, it was possible to see how Eritrean development had taken its particular form in response to ‘local’ factors. Essentially, the Eritrean approach to development was found to be closely bound to the country’s story of political self-determination in the postwar period. This explains why, from a comparative point of view, it can be claimed that the Eritrean development process has been forged in the crucible of social struggle. And, unlike the Commission whose primary aim was to promote market-based African development, what distinguished the Eritrean approach instead was its collectivist description. Also, another element about Eritrean development was that the entire process appeared directed by the one-party Eritrean State. So, the disparities that I have just highlighted remain the first consideration when reviewing the Commission for Africa against the backdrop of the Eritrean approach to development.
As a further step and to set the tone of the argument, I also delved into some of the underlying assumptions that bear apparently directly on the prospect of African development. In particular, the chapter looked at the concept of ‘culture’ which both the Commission and the Eritrean Government posit as the centrepiece of what it means to undertake development. The attention was on the way culture, politics and economic concerns intercombine to potentially lend the development agenda in both instances its distinct signification.

By imagining culture to be the “self-image of society as it sorts itself out in the economic and political fields”, I was able thus to draw parallel conclusions about the two development strategies in terms of the inherent objective. In the Commission’s case, my observation was that the significance of culture and of cultural analysis depended on the West’s implicit desire of dominating, politically and economically, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Simultaneously, it was possible to see that the role assigned to culture by the Eritrean Government stood in stark contrast to how the Commission framed the meaning as well as the practical value of culture. In the Eritrean case, culture and cultural practice appeared as intricately woven into the process of national political and economic self-determination. This chapter then illustrated the difference in the underlying motive for pursuing development in each of the Eritrean and the Commission’s cases. It showed how the Commission deploys culture, and language as the carrier of culture, to mystify rather than to edify. And that is the second element to consider when coming to terms with the argument in this study. My next chapter which focuses on the Eritrean development experiment will carry that argument a step further.
4. ERITREA, HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE, ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT

*History ought never to be confused with nostalgia. It's written not to revere the dead, but to inspire the living. It is part of our cultural bloodstream, the secret of who we are. And it tells us to let go of the past, even as we honour it; to lament what ought to be lamented; and to celebrate what should be celebrated.*

- Simon Schama

The present chapter explores the significance of history and culture to the Eritrean example of development. This chapter focuses on the Eritrean development experiment to show the state in sub-Saharan Africa can undertake indigenous (non-capitalist) development. Also, the chapter uses the Eritrean case to explain that such development depends on careful ideological choice that is consistent with one’s experience. Informed by the argument for credible African development, the chapter thus reports the findings based on analysis of the Eritrean material as an alternative development discourse. The chapter is divided into two focus-areas of varying scope and substance. An opening statement briefly sheds light on the state/quality of the Eritrean data and justifies the method and the narrative line chosen for this specific case. This is followed by an extended presentation of the official Eritrean material which forms the main body. This section is implemented over two consecutive stages, and considers the theoretical framework of Eritrean development and its everyday practical features while drawing implications for African development. A brief concluding statement sums up the story that the analysis of the Eritrean discourse of development produces.

4.1 Researching Eritrea: preliminary note

Before carrying through with the analysis of the Eritrean material in this chapter, first I should acquaint the reader with a specific consideration about studying Eritrea at this juncture. The first point concerns challenges around sourcing current Eritrean data, whereas, the other element relates to the efficacy of one’s analytical strategy given the nature of that material itself. I will deal with each of these complexities in turn so the reader can realise how the issue of data sampling and narrative design has been approached.
Sources

Generally speaking, anyone researching Eritrea at this moment in time has to contend with the practical problem of accessing up to date information relating to the country. The cautious and secluded nature of Eritrea’s political culture not only means that largely data about Eritrea is scarce, but also it makes the likelihood of generating new data all but impossible. This data sourcing difficulty aside, there is a way around to pursue the research aims of this project using existing Eritrean material. In this connection, I see the researcher’s first step as consisting in locating the likely data sources on Eritrea out there in the public domain. Next, what I have thought is worth doing is to carefully weigh the material one uncovers to ascertain its quality, that is, its potential compatibility. Fortunately, my ‘insider’ status means that my task seems to have been made a little lighter by eliminating the need for a third-party (a research assistant) to act on my behalf.

A broad survey illustrates that there are a (limited) number of data sources on Eritrea that researchers can tap into. Moreover, depending on the individual types of sources, the format of the published material ranges in a way that reflects the purpose for which that material has been documented.

For example, there is the material gathered by some of the international financial institutions and development organisations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program and similar bodies. The data from these agencies comes mainly in the form of statistics that shows actual outcomes of development in Eritrea. Depending on one’s research topic, it is possible to derive useful knowledge from their reporting on macro- and micro-economic development in Eritrea. Anyone interested in studying Eritrea and who is willing to implement a quantitative research approach could benefit from these sources.

In addition to the data from multi-lateral bodies such as those mentioned above that has clear policy-implications, there is a variety of strictly academic writing on Eritrea focusing on social, political and economic aspects, for example, nationalism, state-building, education, gender issues and the like. One of the leading scholars and longstanding authority on Eritrea obviously is Dan Connell. As Eritrea observer, Dan Connell has published highly informative academic (and journalistic) work about the country dating back to the era of the armed struggle in the 1970s. His prodigious contribution can be considered a vital source of...

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58 Ideally, the Research and Documentation Centre located in the Eritrean capital Asmara should have been the place where to begin sourcing information for this research project, but for reasons beyond the researcher’s control this has proven an unlikely possibility. A quick online glance indicates that this Centre has in store a trove of material (archival and modern) that can be of great benefit to anyone interested in learning about Eritrea and its recent history.
information on certain dimensions of modern Eritrean history and politics (see www.danconnell.net). Other, perhaps less prolific but just as notable, Eritrean and non-Eritrean academics have also made significant additions to the literature on Eritrea. The list here is likely to feature such writers as David Pool, Gaim Kibreab, Richard Reid, Bereket Habte Selassie, Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe, Roy Pateman and Tesfatsion Medhanie, to name only a handful. Furthermore, some of the titles (by several of these writers and many more) appearing in the Africa World Press and the Red Sea Press provide useful perspectives into Eritrean issues, the Horn of Africa region and the continent at large. The same can also be said of David Bozzini’s logbook, a miscellaneous compilation of ‘Eritrea References' which aims to keep track of the availability of academic work on Eritrea. Together with some of the material coming from a couple of specialist journals, such as the Journal of Eritrean Studies (till recently that is), the Horn of Africa Journal and possibly Review of African Political Economy, the value of these academic sources in continuing to enrich our knowledge of Eritrea remains great. In its totality, the diverse work that can be grouped under the label ‘academic’ forms an essential collection of secondary sources of knowledge on Eritrea.

And finally, on top of the existing literature from all types of non-primary sources, there is that original Eritrean data found mostly online which documents both the Eritrean Government’s and the national opposition’s perceptions concerning the politics and economy of Eritrea. This Eritrean material encompasses the large volume of resources published by the EPLF/ Eritrean Government and the diaspora-based civic and political opposition.

Now, given this multiplicity relating both to data source point and quality, the question of the relevancy (to this study) of the available types of Eritrean material becomes really important. For the purposes of this project, the dataset I shall be heavily drawing on consists of primary Eritrean material scattered in the public domain in which only the official government literature is given disproportionate consideration. There are some obvious technical and non-technical reasons for why I have chosen to do so. First, there is the dominant fact that all research tends to be affected by some unavoidable constraints which necessitates knowing what a specific project ought to include and exclude. In this case, limiting the research scope to the Eritrean Government’s sources appeared suited to the study exclusively of two contrasting models of development. So, it is possible that a particular sense of pragmatism has influenced the data sampling process as I explain it. Second, this whole measure doesn’t imply that the literature selected constitutes the only legitimate Eritrean discourse available. Naturally, like all discourse, the official Eritrean discourse co-occurs with other rival indigenous Eritrean political discourses. Be that as it may, there tends to be good
reason as to why focusing on the official Eritrean material serves as a sound data selection strategy. My reason for prioritising this data category stems from the fact that the material in question represents the principal Eritrean counter-narrative vis-a-vis the Commission’s dominant development discourse. More than the Eritrean opposition’s, the official government discourse typifies the socialist dimensions of the Eritrean story of development. The unofficial Eritrean side of the story is not taken into account simply because the Eritrean opposition, which practically is diaspora-based, can't be said to be involved in any form of national development in the literal sense. And, as I state, if my main aim is to describe the historical roots of Eritrean development rather than emphasise the substantive features, then I must present its indigenous intellectual and political underpinnings as officially summarised. In other words, if the intention is to produce a close/ realistic picture of Eritrean development, it becomes necessary accordingly to look at the assumptions and theories underlying the principal Eritrean discourse of development. Though a difficult vocation, considering my vernacular skills and other life experience, I would like to think I may be competent to interpret the central ‘message’ communicated by the primary Eritrean data. This should make it possible to eventually offer fresh insight into the meaning of Eritrean development. What is more, by drawing out the nuances of this information and thus making the story intelligible to a wider audience, I hope this work will acquire certain merit and therefore originality.

Narrative frame

In terms of rendering efficient the analytic narrative, meantime, the presentation of what the Eritrean data signifies necessitates an account that can draw together two distinct but closely interconnected chapters in modern Eritrean history. In line with the need to understand the genesis and context of current Eritrean development policy and practice, it is essential to analyse the relevant material diachronically by looking back at the pre-independence struggle as seminal phase. This is imperative since the Eritrean Government actually uses the past as a yardstick to judge the future.

As I touched on, the more recent (mainstream) history of Eritrea appears as a story of external hostility and internal Eritrean struggle for self-rule. In particular, Eritrea’s thirty year War of Independence from Ethiopia had a definitive effect in the way subsequently this country’s economic and political policies have come to be determined. By spawning a comprehensive body of unofficial oppositional discourse, the Eritrean armed struggle and its accomplishment acts as repository for the kind of social transformation being sought in
today’s Eritrea. It is to say that the form of development that we have come to witness in post-independence Eritrea has been mapped through the experience of that earlier milieu of collective struggle and sacrifice. Accordingly, only if we succeed in highlighting its historical scope can a proper interpretation of Eritrea’s post-independence development strategy be possible. It becomes important thus to visualise the Eritrean approach to development as being about coming to terms with “the present through the past, and the future through the present and the past.” So the reader deserves to be informed beforehand why it bears stating that there are important judgments that need to be made regarding how to access which Eritrean data and why, and also what kind of narrative strategy to adapt.

Having cleared the ground, the rest of the chapter explores the significance of the Eritrean discourse of development by focusing on its abstract as well as its more substantial quotidian manifestations. As a first step, I consider it vital to explore how particular strands of the Eritrean material anticipate the type of worldview which informs the Eritrean Government’s concrete development plans. The idea is to follow how the Eritrean development discourse weaves together a set philosophy of being and a theory of social history, including ways of bringing about political change. To delineate the conceptual foundations of the Eritrean development undertaking eventually is to facilitate our sense of what its underlying premise is. Following this, I offer a more specific account of the practical imperatives that mark the Eritrean approach as the embodiment of a discourse of resistance. Besides, now as then, the topics stressed in the Eritrean discourse range broadly. These deal with social, cultural, political, economic and militaristic exigencies, all bearing on self-determination, statehood and future national development. Characteristically, the Eritrean narrative evinces such (asymmetric) standpoint as: sense of being connived against and short-changed, a sceptical disposition, denunciatory tone, resentment, lamentation (or, in a word, a mindset betraying general feeling of being wronged); buoyancy, devotion, veneration of virtuous conduct, capacity to overcome rough times, positive self-image, affirmation of women’s emancipation and participation in change (or, in brief, a celebration of the epics of the Eritrean peoples’ potential and will to change their lot). And this whole ‘dualistic’ way of thinking and acting naturally has direct repercussions on the choices and decisions made about current Eritrean development.

4.2 The world, its basic operating rules, social history, Eritrean development

There appears to be a grand motif to the Eritrean national discourse during the armed struggle and thereafter that manifests as an expression of the human condition. The dominant Eritrean postwar trope can be summarised in a collective quest for freedom from
domination—by natural and social forces. The will to turn this mission into reality is what seems to have given the Eritrean national cause under the aegis especially of the EPLF its moral and political authority. Judging by the Eritrean Government’s rhetoric and action, the same call appears to have been carried over into the post-independence stage, where the principle of independent political and economic development is being fully advocated and defended. On paying close attention to the Eritrean narrative over the two consecutive phases in the country’s history, we start to sense that the quest for freedom and development depends on a distinctive mode of thinking about human society and its fundamental principles. This same thinking also extends to those aspects that map the ‘trend’ of historical development and change. In its more specific expressions, that major theme can be distinguished by: first, representations of society as a self-contained internally coherent system; second, the conviction that, in accordance with certain established philosophical belief/ reasoning and the evolvement of history, human will and action can resolve the problem of ‘alienation’, and; third, the corollary fact that Eritrean development policy presupposes the preceding dual premise. These closely interconnected themes are taken up in more detail below.

The philosophical groundings of the Eritrean development claim

It is possible to come across examples, be it in the EPLF’s or the Eritrean Government’s literature, which indicate that the normal progress of society, while inevitable, must first overcome specific challenges consequent to a dialectical process. That is taken as the starting point for any conception of human society and its development across time and space. Be it the group’s early 1970s founding manifesto, Our Struggle and its Goals, information relating to the essential views of the Eritrean President himself, Isaias Afwerki, or political seminars organised by the ruling party’s top cadres, the message is always the same and clear: comprehensive Eritrean development leading to lasting freedom and happiness can only materialise in the wake of Eritrean society as unity managing and deciding on its own affairs, outside influence notwithstanding. In all of the ‘language’ emanating from the Eritrean side, the central object is to justify both the endogenous and historical dimensions of Eritrean development. The intention here is to refute as well as supplant any decontextualised external diktats. For this first part of the presentation, I will use as sample material an example of a YouTube speech by an Eritrean Government minister and TV interviews with the Eritrean Head of State together with the Front’s manifesto. I will reference this material both to describe and analyse what underlies the
Eritrean approach to change on an intellectual plane. In combination, these three sources appear emblematic and can be used to canvass what needs to be gotten across.

The essential materiality and dialectical tone in Eritrean development

From time to time, officials of the Eritrean Government, either individually or as part of a formal delegation which includes the government-sponsored cultural troupe, travel abroad and meet with diaspora Eritreans. Genealogically, this tradition was thought up during the armed struggle to assist with its growth and consolidation. In addition to its fund-raising potential, the main purpose of those expeditions is to ensure that the diaspora populations are kept (politically and ideologically) abreast vis-a-vis the government’s national program and objectives. The visiting Eritrean official’s task thus is to brief the diaspora communities about important matters that concern their home country, not least the state of development, with the aim of winning their allegiances.

In one such trip, recently, former EPLF commander and current Eritrean Minister of Energy, General Sebhat Ephrem, toured a number of European cities. While in Stockholm, he gave a speech in which he highlighted the underpinnings of the Eritrean Government’s social and political philosophy and its bearings on the national development drive (see Dimtzi Eritrawian Stockholm v12 2015). Not only did the Minister discuss what lies at the core of Eritrea’s socio-political system, but, more tellingly, he also endorsed the Eritrean system of politics. The complex challenges presently facing the country together with a sense of responsibility on his part to allay the audience’s fears about the future of Eritrea, is the framework and background for that particular speech. Interestingly enough, he described the essence of the Eritrean official attitude thus: *mis hizbkha trekhbo ma’et ge’at eyu*\(^{59}\) (a difficulty situation when faced by the people as a whole becomes easy and surmountable). But based exactly on what broader postulates is this Eritrean stand advanced? And how could that impinge the national development plan?

Autonomous development choice, supremacy of a materialist objective reality

At the heart of Ephrem’s 2015 Stockholm seminar is the question of the implication of Eritrea’s collective experiment in political self-determination and economic development. His

\(^{59}\) In its culturally-specific sense that Tigrinya phrase means “a problem encountered with one’s people is (to be enjoyed like feasting on) porridge”. For the sake of the reader who may not be versed in that Eritrean vernacular, communicating the spirit, rather than the literal text, of what has been expressed seems to me to be more helpful.
point of view seems notable both for its breadth and detail. In what reads like a rehearsed reference to ‘laws’ that govern the natural and social realms and their import to Eritrean development, Ephrem specifically talks about the (animate and inanimate) world operating according to its own well-defined independent laws. Speaking in the Tigrinya language, kid’m ezi alerna h’gitat alewo … ezi alerna khulu b’program b’higi eyu z’kheid, he makes his very point. To elaborate, he metaphorically evokes what manifestly comes across as natural in the case of ‘roosters’, ‘chicken eggs’, ‘glass cups’ and ‘corn grain’. He also brings up the ‘Napoleonic wars’ and ‘Nazi wars’ along with the ‘rise of the European Union’. Ephrem accordingly announces a series of observations, and here I directly quote portions from his speech:

(a) Whether we time it or not, a rooster always crows at 6:00 o’clock in the morning, that is its job …

(b) … It takes twenty one full days for a chicken egg from the minute it is incubated till it reaches a hatching stage … and,

(c) A glass cup suspended from hand when dropped on a floor breaks up into pieces …

When you think a little deeper about the examples that this Eritrean official cites, you slowly begin to gather a number of things, inductively. In the first place, the commentary seems to offer proof that there is indeed a (antecedent) material world out there which we perceive through our sensory faculties—our eyes, ears and other senses. That, for example, roosters are real creatures and that they are capable too of crowing at set time of the day is an undeniable existential fact. Likewise, noting the absence of any reference to extrinsic forces,

60 At the same time, he notes a couple of what one understands to be derivative or qualifying points whose relevance mostly arises in the field of practical activity: first, that, at given junctures in their history, humans only partially comprehend the workings of these laws, but can increase their knowledge over time and that the trick for them is to fathom how to act in the face of existing limitation in human knowledge; second, the fact that (unsolicited) external force inevitably produces a disruptive effect. Ephrem sees religion and science as being capable of aiding our understanding of these laws to a degree, but he concludes it is philosophical reasoning that furnishes lasting/ conclusive answers where the former’s explanatory power is found to be wanting. The Eritrean Minister relates that neither religion (a David conquering Goliath) nor scientific rational analysis (political craftsmanship) can meaningfully explain the Eritrean peoples’ struggle that, against all odds, saw them prevail over the might of the Ethiopian State and its superpower backers. According to Ephrem, only a philosophically-inspired and profoundly assured attitude can help avoid potential confusion in how we think and intend to act. In Eritrea’s case, he attempts to simplify the meaning of that approach using certain typically Eritrean refrains: mis hizbkha trekho ma’et ge’at eyu (a difficulty situation when faced by the collective will of the people becomes easier to deal with); kalsena newih eyu, kalsena mareir eyu, awatha gin nay gidin … ezi ayterfin eyu (our struggle is protracted and bitter, our victory is certain, that is inescapable), and; kulu gizie haki eyu z’ewet (in the end, truth always prevails, or right defeats might).
what we might also read into the Eritrean point of view is that it is naturalist. That means the world may not necessarily be the result of supernatural design; it doesn’t therefore befit to describe it from the perspectives of metaphysics. Second, we learn that a material world implies an objective reality that cannot be reduced to transcendental human attributes—like a discretely existing and functioning mind or spirit. Most significantly, however, one also gets the impression that people develop their ideas (consciousness that glass splinters on hitting a hard surface) as a consequence of practically experiencing the real world around them, not the other way round. Or, in a word, it is determined that practice commonly precedes thought. Lastly, it is possible to think it is the speaker’s assumption that the laws of the world we inhabit are knowable to us. Our knowledge of both nature and society (even if incomplete at any one moment in time) is treated as objective and truthful. But what does all this mean in reference to Eritrean development itself?

From the details that this Eritrean Minister ventures, it is apparent that the Eritrean initiative to transform the natural and social world has its basis on a thoroughly materialist, as opposed to an idealist, approach to reality. In other words, to better their existential conditions, it means the Eritrean people will have to harness their own productive labouring capacities and not just fall back on the power of (imported or divine) ideas to continue surviving. If experience is anything to go by, launching the nation on the path of hard struggle is what the Eritrean Government’s effort on the political, economic and military fronts has been about for already many years. Meanwhile, it turns out that any subjective posture (on the part of whomever) has limited or no bearing on the nature of reality understood in such impersonal terms. Consequently, we are left with no doubts that the development ‘discourse’ propagated by the Eritrean side takes its cues from the real world, bound as it is by certain inherent principles outside human volition or whim. For Eritreans, like subaltern groups everywhere else, the real world too embodies their distinctive historical experience of struggle against oppressive power—in its formal colonial manifestation. And, as final point, it is of interest to also note that this past experience has become the precursor of the present Eritrean development reality as impacted by the balance of internal and (neocolonial) external forces. That is the first of a two-part instalment of information about the world and its governing laws that Ephrem converses about, and here follows its second layer.

**Dialectic, social change, trajectory of Eritrean development**

The other ‘law’ that the Eritrean Minister identifies is a point about twosomes/ binary opposites (*Tsm’ditit/ Ants’arat* in his words) whose effect he considers in the context of the
self-directed nature of change toward some climax. Ephrem explains that it is only natural for things to exist as pairs and as opposites (two eyes per person, living beings as males or females, atoms as combining electrons and neutrons … etc.). Reportedly, the fact of duality also means it is impossible to come across somebody with three eyes, legs, kidneys or who might be transgender for that matter, an alarming probability to quote the Eritrean himself. It seems there is no scope here to think in terms of grey areas according to such schema.

What this, when combined with a materialist approach to reality, amounts to is a kind of exclusive monopoly of the ‘truth’ on the part of the Eritrean Government. Parenthetically told, a position such as this can be seen as justifying the proscription by the Eritrean Government of all other contrarian (anti-realist and relativist) views. Especially, the policy has been aggressively pursued against the influence of religious evangelistic tendencies which the Eritrean Government considers a threat. I may here add that Eritrean advocates of Pentecostalism and Islamism are routinely hounded by the authorities and, following arrest, often get harshly treated without due process. From the Eritrean Government’s perspective, all contending thought and practice whether religious or secular has to be sidelined for it is deemed to hinder development as officially defined. The above comment serves as a slight but necessary detour. It is intended to show how the Eritrean Government tends to rationalise its (repressive) actions domestically based on its sole claims of the truth. Still, what gives Ephrem’s speech added importance by this stage is the inclusion of a discussion of the history and development of (Eritrean) society and the crossover with the other two (and certainly many more) sources. I will expound on how the fusion of philosophical thinking and social analysis works to give the theoretical paradigm at the centre of the Eritrean development initiative its definite form.

**Eritrean development and its historical materialist methodological core**

Adopting a distinctively classical social evolutionist terminology, the Minister frames the central thesis of his lecture as: *Men ena nihna? Beyen halifna? Ab meweda’eta kemey elna ena nikheid zelena?* Translated roughly from the Tigrinya text into the English language, the expression corresponds to: *Who are we? How have we gotten to where we now are? And, in the end, how are we journeying into the future?* Ephrem’s is a tacit reference to Eritrean

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61 This has been the case with some of the teaching staff of the Islamic schools in the town of Keren in the early 1990s where many of the teachers there were made to disappear. Also, a similar fate has met members of the Pentecostal Christian groups who have fallen foul with the various (secularist) policies of the Eritrean State.
society—its originations, the stages of development it has gone through and its likely future
course and maybe final destination.

The full speech makes for an interesting account of how and why Eritrean society has come
to develop in the way it is developing at the moment. In his speech, Ephrem also reflects on
whether this particular course of development can be viable in the long run. As he
deliberates, he makes particular mention of the internal and external forces that have been
responsible for the respective historical outcomes. And it is at this juncture that the views of
the Eritrean President on society and politics and the full meaning of the Manifesto also
become useful for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the Eritrean quest for
autonomous development. The Eritrean President's outlook doesn't seem to diverge a great
deal from his Minster's on this score, and the thoughts of both can be traced back to the
Manifesto. Historicism, or the idea that human history is governed by immutable laws, is
what one deciphers as at the centre of the official Eritrean mode of thinking.

Whereas the Eritrean Minister's proclivity is to celebrate exclusively the power of
philosophical reasoning, the text obtaining from the President’s interviews in comparison can
be judged as of interest from the point of view of day to day conduct of (radical) politics. Just
to orientate the reader as to Afwerki’s way of thinking, here is a flavour of what he has to
say:

I say there is a law that governs communities. When individuals
came together in primitive communities, there has to be a law
that is acceptable for everyone. They came together to live
together, to mobilise resources collectively and to achieve
collective goals … The status quo of any community at one
particular historical moment [doesn’t] allow a minority to grab on
the resources of the majority and make the poor poorer while
they accumulate at the expense of the majority. This has been
the struggle of communities since millennia. This is a rule of the
game, we are not inventing anything—you don’t invent
anything.62

Meantime, on the question of how societies develop and, further, on what grounds we might
judge development as ‘sustainable’ or not, the Eritrean leader’s understanding can be
summed up through these words:

62 In declaring that there is in place “… a rule of the game, we are not inventing anything—you don’t
invent anything” it appears that Afwerki might be eliciting Marx’s philosophical materialism which
states that the laws of the world, in its natural and social states, don’t lie beyond the bounds of human
understanding and knowledge. See Dantò (2015) http://www.eastafro.com/2015/04/07/video-
You want to talk about a community at a particular historical moment, then you have to ask these very simple questions: Who creates wealth? And how do people share wealth created by the majority? And do they share wealth fairly and equitably? That is where the problem comes …

In Afwerki’s assessment, these are the sort of questions that need to be asked at all times and in the case of all societies to establish the ‘legitimacy’ of development. For him, the real meaning and object of development is to ensure the welfare of all members of society. The view held by the Eritrean Head of State seems to be that the subsequent development of society ought not to drift away from that earliest ‘contract’ that humans have entered into out of their own free will to secure a livelihood. According to the Eritrean formal understanding, the objective of social harmony and global peace follows on from a just and equitable redistribution of the common wealth of humanity. That is to say, this same outcome cannot otherwise come from a (capitalist) social order characterised by individualism, greed, racism, exclusion, polarisation and wars of plunder. As the Eritrean President elaborates:

These are not the product of the 20th or even the 19th century when industrialisation came …. We have now the information age, we can talk about globalisation, but the same questions remain all along and the rules are always the same.

On the basis of the content of those ‘texts’ we can surmise the following. On the one hand, everything in this world comes with two discordant sides and the ensuing tension triggers the kind of change that would offset their effects and transcend them ultimately. On the other, that things continue to grow and attain a healthy higher state of being when they fully complete their natural course of development without (undue) interposition from the outside. Basically, it is not implausible to think that this exactly is the sort of abstract reasoning which presages the Eritrean social development experiment. I shall expound by adhering to what has been reported in the Speech, the Interviews and the Manifesto.

First, as a way of explaining how binary opposites work, in particular, the Eritrean Minister invites his audience to think about Eritrea’s political and economic experience during the last decade or so in which the country came under foreign military aggression and economic sanctions. The specific phrase he uses to contrast Eritrea’s difficult past experience with the (presumably) positive about turn in more recent times, is this: key tselmete meret ayberiHEN

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63 See the link at footnote 62.
64 Again refer to the link at footnote 62.
eyu (one has to go through periods of darkness before it is possible to savour the light of day). If we cast our gaze back into the not-so-distant Eritrean past, it is possible to appreciate the implication of what is being said (in 2015) as the extension of an earlier position as has been stated in the Manifesto: There is ... oppression and struggle within [and between] societies ... But in time, oppression is invariably met with resistance. The impoverished and the workers rise against the rich ... and the new erupts over the old. This is a historical truth. As far as the nature of change goes, that is, in terms of identifying its sources, causes and likely direction, the notion of enduring first adversity before experiencing improvement in one’s conditions, resonates as a basic and unvarying philosophical principle of what it means to be an Eritrean. On top of anything else, it reinforces the view that social conflict is the engine of historical change. We also seem to glean here that historical development tends to be patterned and purposive in that a teleology of emancipation sits at its centre. So, it makes sense to think about the Eritrean approach as an example of development by contradiction in line with certain aspects of the anti-globalisation critical literature and praxis.

Likewise, it is by way of augmenting further that very thinking that the Eritrean Minister afterwards evokes the other examples—this time to underline at once the autonomous, internally coherent and transcendent nature of change. Quoting Ephrem again, in the case of a grain of corn, his observation is that people, generally speaking, may have two choices as to what to do with corn grain: corn can either be ground into flour for baking, or else the seed can be planted in the soil. When cultivated, under the right conditions (ample water and sunlight), corn seed gradually gets transformed first into a seedling and thereafter into a fully blossomed kernel-bearing maize plant. It is reported, all one needs to do is just stand aside and observe as the entire evolutionary process takes care of itself.

Besides, we are told that this very dispensation is duplicable and can be envisaged in other settings, including human society. As he contends, the same principle holds as far as, for example, the formation of the European Union goes. The rise of the EU, it is preached, was the culmination of a self-promoting indigenous process reflecting its member states’ ambition

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65 Mind you, this particular attitude is not limited to the Manifesto and Ephrem’s Speech of 2015 only; this key political belief often features in some of the other material produced along the full course of the Eritrean armed struggle for self-determination as well. During the height of the Ethiopian push in the 1980s to dislodge once and for all the EPLF from around its strong-hold of Sahel in northern Eritrea, for example, the celebrated Wedi Tkhul composed one of his memorable lines about the Front’s capacity to persevere in the face of adversity. In part, the Eritrean singer has this to say: midrin semayen ente telagebe, kem ayni merfi’e kulu ente tsebeba … rahwa ni rekhbala hanti ma’elti ala ye (even if we were to get caught in a situation in which the sky and earth would have to close down on us; even if everything were to turn out so critical and gloomy to the point of the likelihood of survival shrinking into a needle’s eye before us; even if … Still there is that day when we shall experience a let up). Wedi Tkhul (‘Nqhatyu Wesani’, c1983, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DZr-IceG5I).
to come together in a block and out of their own volition.\textsuperscript{66} Hitler and Napoleon, according to the same argument, could not remodel Europe (and the rest of the world for that matter) in their images. Despite the huge war machine at each one’s disposal, their coercive strategies for the continent could not bring a EU into existence; instead, it only left a trail of death and destruction and ended in their shattering defeats.

Shifting his analysis to more contemporary topics, he extends that conclusion to America’s 21\textsuperscript{st} century overseas adventures which saw this power invade countries like Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of a ‘war on terror’. Irrespective of the underlying reasons, for Ephrem, the attempt by NATO to (artificially) reorder Afghan society will fail. The explanation he offers is that the external actors concerned appear to be coming from a position of power to enforce their agenda on an unwilling population. As such, theirs turns out to be a policy that interferes with the process of society’s organic development which is usually characterised by reciprocities of give and take among equals. In and of itself, the response of the Eritrean President also appears to champion the theory of independent social development adumbrated by members of his government, including his Energy Minister. Now, undoubtedly, this whole deliberation is evocative of the vision guiding the development process in Eritrea: from the government’s point of view, not only will Eritrea inevitably experience change at the hand of its people, but what is also equally factual about this prospect is its gradual and cumulative nature. That said, as an afterthought, it is necessary here to iterate that the Eritrean understanding of ‘independence’ doesn’t seem to be about development under ideal conditions. Despite and perhaps because of the affirmation of ‘self-regulation’ in change, the Eritrean Government seems to realise that development today doesn’t transpire in a vacuum. As the Eritrean official narrative makes clear, there is a rigidly structured global political economy in the context of whose power imbalances countries seek to gain control of their destinies and develop. And so in the words of the Eritrean President:

That [ideal development] doesn’t happen in the real world …

those who have the muscle to impose their will … have their interests and we have ours. Do we go with them, or do we go our own way?\textsuperscript{67}

Granted the weight of empirical evidence, it is the latter option that the Eritrean Government appears more or less keen to pursue—with what all that might mean in practice. Eventually, the choice by the Eritrean Government of such sovereign ways of being and knowing follows from the twofold belief in the concurrently independent and interdependent character of

\textsuperscript{66} Brexit, the vote by the British people in 2016 to voluntarily leave the European Union, also proves this point albeit in a reverse way.

\textsuperscript{67} Source is the link at footnote 62
social development. Up to this point, we have seen how given aspects of the Eritrean material opens a window into the type of conceptual frame of reference that seemingly underwrites Eritrea’s version of what ‘development’ means and how it may be effected. Just before concluding this first part, I will need to flesh out what I think are the finer connotations of the investigation by referring to the current state of development in Eritrea.

**Eritrean development: combining autarkical thinking and praxis**

In scrutinising that material with the view to determining its semantic scope as regards the Eritrean development process, it is possible to register a couple of specific nationally-relatable facts.

Most of all, it sounds an avowed Eritrean position that a defining attribute of our world is its dynamic nature as opposed to stasis; growth and change as intrinsic to nature and society. Human knowledge, about social development or anything else, comes as a function of that reified universal principle. The essence of reality (as reflected in a continual process of interaction and change) must be equally obvious to all is what seems to be the point of the Eritrean claim. The Eritrean official perspective on the entire question of development thus reads something like: people embark on ‘development’ because they can think for themselves that what they set out to achieve amounts to exactly such a thing. As Eritrea’s (typically caustic) President would have it:

> One good thing we have done is we have never made a mistake. We have not relied on outside intervention ... The lessons we have learned are assets for us ... Unless we write our own programs, we can’t imagine achieving anything.68

The hint in Afwerki’s message here being that there is no obligation to solicit ‘expertise’ (from a self-proclaimed outside authority) to articulate on behalf of others what reality is supposed to represent. Claims to privileged or esoteric perception are, on this score, harder to justify. The case for autonomous development in the Eritrean situation not only appears predicated on that presupposition, but it also tends to be validated by it.

In terms of its fundamentals, the development process in Eritrea therefore appeals to universal epistemological standards albeit in accordance with specific influences that are

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68 Again see link at footnote 62
exclusive to the local environment. I think that, in the Eritrean case, the meaning of development appears premised on Hegelian dialectics via its materialist adaptations within the Marxist intellectual tradition.

I believe that this is so based on the fact that the Eritrean outlook clearly exemplifies the two core propositions of dialectics, namely that change is embodied by: a quantitative versus qualitative interrelation, and; a model involving thesis and antithesis resulting in synthesis as a way of bridging the ‘alienation-history’ gap if you will. Revisiting the example of the transformations that see corn grain turning into a maize plant, it can be suggested that this particular simile reflects the doctrine of quantitative input (turning over soil, absorption of water, nutrients and sunlight) bringing about a qualitative change (a whole new plant). The same process also symbolises change as the cessation of one thing and the becoming of another. What went into the postwar Eritrean political and armed struggle in terms of human and material investment was a quantitative contribution. In turn, this brought about a qualitative transformation represented in the death of foreign domination and the birth of Eritrean statehood.

In similar vein, it is possible to think of the Eritrean Government’s claim that its major responsibility is to improve the quality of life of the people beyond subsistence to a more sustainable standard of living in the future along this line. The focus on expanding the agricultural sector to achieve long-term food security, for example, could be understood from this perspective as well. As the Eritrean Government insists on a policy of self-reliant development and since the country lacks year-round major river systems, a key government strategy to ensure food security involves the micro-damming of seasonal streams using the national service force. The story repeats itself where development in other fields (health, education, transport infrastructure) is at issue. Every able-bodied Eritrean is expected (compelled is the right word here) to lend their fair share of effort towards the achievement of the national development goals as set by the Eritrean Government. This cumulative activity is what the Eritrean Government counts on as the quantitative input which will presumably usher in a qualitative transformation in the form of enhanced living standards for the population.

In turn, the vexed issue of foreign aid as key to stimulating sub-Saharan African development becomes a moot point; Eritrea hence only selectively accepts official

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69 Asked, on another occasion, if there is any uniquely Eritrean style of management, the Eritrean President is reported to have said: There is no such thing as an Eritrean philosophy, it’s based on realistic approaches to dealing with challenges and I believe this is universal (New Africa, November 2011).

70 The current indefinite character of the ‘national service’ and the controversy it has helped generate has much to do with the government’s belief in this respect.
development aid, and most foreign NGOs have been asked to wind up their work in the country. That conditional aid usually cripples society and that such ‘aid’ ought to be avoided at all cost is a strongly-held belief of the Eritrean Government can’t therefore be overstated. Given, on the other hand, the Eritrean Government’s direct involvement in the national economy, the Eritrean development model flouts the North’s development paradigm authorised for the global South. We learn from Ephrem, for example, that materialism and attendant dialectical process not only is the natural order as far as poultry and seeds go, but the very mode of reasoning is what also powers the Eritrean desire for substantive development. Afwerki’s analysis and his movement’s Manifesto also seem to underline this very point. The application of dialectical materialism to Eritrean society and its history again means that the Eritrean development process is infused with the teachings of historical materialism. Because of this, Eritrea’s post-independence political and economic course is bound to be in conflict with the interests of the dominant capitalist powers. That fact in part explains Eritrea’s current fraught relations with those same powers. Furthermore, since the Eritrean posture conforms to a form of universality advanced within the work of (the early) Marx, it means that its intellectual conception of progress (largely socialist) locates it at the opposite ideological pole to Liberalism. Or, more exactly, the Eritrean approach to development comes across as a total negation of the neoliberal model propounded by the Commission for Africa. That, in the end, is the theoretical tenor of the material I have been examining which should pave the way to my next task where I look at its more experiential dimensions.

4.3 Struggle, culture, everyday development activity by contradiction

In the first part of the analysis of the Eritrean material, I elected to lay out the conceptual parameters of the Eritrean approach to development. At the centre of the Eritrean development agenda can be located a dialectical and historical materialist understanding of the social world and how it evolves over time. The vital lesson I gleaned points to the fact that a full and healthy state of development obtains when things are permitted to run their natural course. Also, by extension, anything that stands in the way of that prospect obviously elicits resistance in the form of active human counter action. The EPLF and consequently the Eritrean Government appear to have approached the ‘modernisation’ of Eritrean society from this angle. At this point, I would like to complement what I have already noted with the subtext deriving from the sort of day to day empirical practices that give the process of development in Eritrea its distinct characteristics. Such everyday practices nourish, and are
nourished by, certain widely disseminated Eritrean ‘cultural traditions’ directly implicated in national development, a fact which enhances their importance.

**Alienating power and the course of Eritrean history**

Typically, the backdrop to the range of empirical evidence that I examine signifies a hostile eminently exploitative political environment founded on power imbalances; those who wield power inevitably use their position to hold down the weak and the impoverished who in turn have no option but to resist and win their freedoms. A state of ongoing strife, not illusions of functionalist consensus, turns out to be the abiding understanding of how the world as construed by the Eritrean lens operates. In Eritrea’s lived experience, the principal sphere in which unequal relations of power play out is the global context as it pits this country’s desire for self-development against powerful outside forces.\(^7\) Alienation, or else a state of estrangement involving a quest for endogenous development and external opposition, represents the underlying theme insofar as the substantial response coming from the Eritrean side is concerned. There seems to be good ground for saying that alienation remains a major issue in the life of the Eritrean nation as the following brief statement may illuminate.

Anyone who has closely followed the Eritrean scene can’t fail to register that the Eritrean journey has been all about facing and defeating the alienating effects of hegemonic power politics. Eritrea’s political history details how this society has previously been denied its independence in the aftermath of European and later Ethiopian expansionist interests in the

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71 This is not to say though that the problem is absent from the domestic scene. Albeit it on a minor scale, oppressive relations tend to occur locally with reference to gender issues and patriarchal power for example. If I have to remind the reader of the problem of alienation regarding gender relations in Eritrea, it would have been only proper to give a taste of some of the Eritrean material that focuses on women’s participation and empowerment as the equals of their male counterparts. **Dehan Kuni Wushate** (Tigrinya for: *Bidding you good bye my domestic life* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_hcc_w8_jg) together with *Hirimit Et Ana Nabr Aiko* (Tigrayit for: *I have been enduring an oppressive life* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C-hBqlsf4Q), each performed by female Eritrean combatants, present a resentful mood, highly disparaging of traditional gender roles assigned to the Eritrean woman. The image profiled in one of the clips (**Dehan Kuni**) is that of a stern-faced proud-looking Eritrean female fighter wearing a tight short with her sleeves rolled up and an AK-47 firmly clutched close to the body. It had probably been chosen to give the impression that Eritrean females can perform any duty assumed by males including frontline combat. The significance of the message in these two pre-independence era audio-visual pieces can be said to lie in its foreshadowing of women’s inclusion and role in the post-independence development program. Also while on the same note, I should make certain that I don’t ignore the question of alienation as relates to economic class and internal class-based social relations. Interestingly enough, the issue doesn’t appear to be an essential part of the Eritrean socio-political landscape since classes (capitalist/ working) don’t seem to be accentuated within Eritrean society which isn’t that industrialised anyway.
territory. Perhaps inescapably, we find out too that what incited the Eritrean political and armed response then was colonialist subversion of the right of that people to nationhood and a self-governing homeland. More recently, the problem of alienation in the context of an independent Eritrea is shown to result from the constraints of the global political economy and accompanying international relations. It is no wonder then that the practical expressions of the Eritrean case for alternate development appears rife with language which is critical of the status quo. In terms of its main thrust, such language tends to be targeted at the way the capitalist global system is structured and operates—to the detriment of the countries of the South, like Eritrea. Instead of continuing on a general theoretical tangent however, I shall flesh out below the relevance of this larger framework in terms of the effect for the implementation of Eritrean development. This requires delving into the specifics of Eritrean ‘cultural politics’ in order to draw links with real development.

**Oppression and self-emancipation: reciprocal basis of Eritrean development**

In the case of the present author who incidentally is articulate in Eritrea’s major languages and can claim some first-hand experience of the nation-building process, there is plentiful of Eritrean material that can be used to study the mechanics of Eritrean development. Of the material that addresses the (compound) theme of alienation, I shall reflect on the content of some of the more current sources of information to promote the analysis. For the Eritrea observer, what is noteworthy about this data is the complete alignment of current context with historical memory. The bulk of the Eritrean material accentuates a range of closely-articulated concerns which overlap and form a continuous thread that furnishes some overall thematic coherence.

A 2014 Tigrinya live musical performance entitled *Ma’akēb* (*Sanctions*) by Berekhet Mengisteab and another, *Et Sheferna Helena* (*Whilst At One’s Abode*), in the Tigrayit language by Ibrahim Wad Goret from 2010, for example, seem particularly instructive in terms of their potential to expose what the Eritrean Government considers the charade and shenanigans behind the confrontational tone of the ‘international community’ towards it. Another two (non-audio-visual) texts, an official press statement "*Commission of Inquiry* Report: Cynical Political Travesty that Undermines Human Rights* (2015) challenging the recent indictment of the Eritrean Government by the UN body for human rights violations, and an editorial *Unprovoked US Hostilities Against Eritrea* (2012) appearing in the ruling Party’s mouthpiece Sha’ebia Website, also come in the same line. Akin to the numerous other (archival and contemporary) material, those four sources of information offer a glimpse
into Eritrea’s external relations as concerns the West, in particular the US and its regional allies led (at least until very recently) by Ethiopia.

In its own way, each piece seems to raise qualms about the prospect of positive rapport with these external powers given the latter’s exploitative track record against Eritrea. Directly and indirectly, a critique of the role of imperialism in the internal affairs of Eritrea is the focus point. Simultaneously, this dataset stresses what sounds a uniquely Eritrean self-assurance, not to mention grit, regardless. And it is precisely here in connection with issues of having faith in one’s mission that we discover a case of obvious thematic intersection with even more of the Eritrean material. As a topic in its own right, the question of agency (being able to ‘do your thing’) presents itself in a most unalloyed form in such Eritrean productions as Kurub hala kherna (Tigrayit: Auspicious times are upon Eritrea—any minute now) and Ke kewn eyu kemy zeykewun (Tigrinya: There is a will, there is a way) by Sham Geshu (2014) and Rimdet Alem (2006) respectively. Using language accessible to the average person, each of these live performances tells how everything in this world is possible if you work hard for it, all along insinuating that Eritrea is living proof of such a philosophy. Ultimately, Eritrean development is imagined outside the dominant paradigm as a purely Eritrean question whatever the ramifications.

Before taking the next step, a little more contextualisation of this material might be useful to facilitate the reader’s senses.

Against historical amnesia and latter passivity: Experience as impetus of development

The context for the song by Berekhet Mengisteab is the imposition of sanctions on Eritrea by the United Nations Security Council (egged on by the US government) as punishment for the country’s supposedly destabilising regional politics. In fact, Ma’ekerb stands somewhat as monument to the way Eritrea has been frequently sinned by foreign powers across the decades. From the point of view of its producers, what likely turns Ma’ekerb into an effective ideological tool is the superimposition of miscellaneous yet strikingly pertinent moving imagery as the main event unfolds; the juxtaposition of old footage capturing pivotal moments in Eritrean political history with newer video reflecting contemporary events that touch on the development course of the country. Berekhet’s opening line, Ma’ekerb

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72 Kurub was performed as part of the 53rd anniversary celebrations of the launch of the Eritrean armed struggle on the 1st of September 1961, whereas, Ke kewn eyu… in its original version came out to coincide with the 2006 celebrations of Eritrean Independence Day. As such, it is hard to ignore their political and ideological value when it comes to the promotion of national development.

73 Flashes of black and white footage from around the middle of the last century shows the sort of political developments that helped seal Eritrea’s fate in the postwar period. For example, there is the
nay’mintay sebeb … (or, Sanctions for what reason?) succinctly communicates the prevalence of ‘acrimonious’ experience within Eritrean society to only then launch a celebration of the Eritrean people’s power of resisting external aggressors. Performed in the style of a riddle, Ma’ekteb is about lingering Eritrean grievances at the same time as it is about throwing down the gauntlet to Eritrea’s past and present adversaries. The lead vocalist takes advantage of the song’s simple and engaging lyrics to rhetorically ask what offence could Eritrea have committed for her to be (gratuitously) slapped with economic sanctions. And the rhythmic recurring technique of intoning that inaugural tune (by the backup female vocalists) works to lend weight to the sense of incredulity and irony that is part and parcel of conveying the intended message.74

Ibrahim’s composition, likewise, comes across as a ‘plea’ to leave Eritrea alone to make its own decisions whilst simultaneously cultivating a cynical stance concerning the motives of hegemonic power. Reminiscent of a posture endemic (then if not now) within Dependentista circles and as if borrowing his language directly from their jargon, the Eritrean singer proclaims: Man’tu ibukum la raha ka aser senet jakafa? … Na’ameru tarikhkum dib makten ashwak la atrafa (Tell me what country ever managed to prosper on account of your generosity? … We in Eritrea are all too familiar with your past deeds that left us with a thorn on the side!). More or less, Et Sheferna can therefore be read as a cautionary tale against Eritrea dropping her guard when dealing with her traditional foes and turning into a satellite.

Moving on to the Editorial and the Press Statement, again this material is notable for the way it catalogues a litany of violations that sums up Eritrea’s vexation with the attitude of those same nemeses over the decades whilst also highlighting the resistance of the Eritrean people that has gone along with this. And to conclude this part of the exposition, the contributions coming from Sham Geshu and Rimdet Alem celebrate through a decidedly buoyant vibe the subaltern’s capacity for own development. Both pieces appear to be designed as powerful antidote to the insinuations of dominant power. In each instance, promises of what can be termed a utopic future punctuate the verse.

74 Perhaps Bereket has in mind states which from the Eritrean (and possibly others’) perspective can be regarded as worse offenders in terms of their actions and yet somehow seem to get away with it all simply because of their close and cosy relations with those who happen to oversee the status quo.
The Eritrean musician, Rimdet Alem, performing *Ke kewn eyu kemy zeykewun* on ERI-TV (source: YouTube)

Significantly, the general picture that emerges strongly echoes the prevailing Eritrean mindset insofar as the pursuit of development in this country is the objective. Among other things, an embittered tone common to the greater part of the material calls attention to the unethicallity with which great power politics is exercised, making a victim of Eritrea and its people now as then. Much of the ‘text’ laments the double standards at the heart of Western policy toward Eritrea. The lyrics of both *Ma’ekeb* and *Et Sheferna* speak of how (innocent) Eritrea has gotten a rough deal in the immediate postwar period when US geostrategic interests dictated that the country be denied political independence. Moreover, both are matched by the *Editorial* and the *Press Statement* in their round condemnations of current hostile Western official attitude toward Eritrea.

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75 Eritreans often cite with a profound sense of consternation the words of the US Ambassador to the UN in the 1950s, John Foster Dulles: “From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and the considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally Ethiopia.” Now if it weren’t for that fateful decision, Eritrea probably would have been one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to gain its independence; instead, Eritrean independence came as the last in the continent toward the draw of the 20th century.
On the one level, then, an essential (if partial) theme arising from this material bespeaks of injustice and victimisation endured by Eritrean society historically as well as in the contemporary period. As a result, Eritrean development in its conception and application integrates the obtrusions of the external (and only at times the internal) world. At the same time, through its irreverent, assured and upbeat air, almost the entire material has the obvious (positive) effect of shoring up the resilience and unity of the Eritrean people to potentially achieve common goals. And so, on another level still, the very material captures unremitting Eritrean yearning for political self-determination and egalitarian economic development as a continuing mission. The ensuing narrative about future development comes thus couched within the language of unity, patriotic ardour, ingenuity, self-help and related offshoots of radical Eritrean politics. In any case, custodian vigil toward a sovereign homeland is billed as the ultimate condition.  

To recap then, in terms of its thematic tendency, the Eritrean development narrative seems to hinge on a dual premise; an internalisation of a near-absolute view of the depredatory character of foreign power (in its many guises) and a recalling of Eritrean wisdom and agency, all as part of a comprehensive strategy to avoid falling into a state of dependency. That, more or less, is the core of the Eritrean active strategy for dealing with the hegemonic threat to the desired objective of fostering a viable national community. In the end, if there is a constant lesson or consideration that can be drawn out from the Eritrean literature, it is this: naturally, the development text reflected in everyday representations of Eritrea’s patriotic culture/ history summarises the aspiration of a small ‘developing’ state grappling to free itself from the shackles of the dominant system despite the cost. So, based on the presentation up to here, what we have been able to fulfil is catch the general drift of the Eritrean narrative. However, to develop a more particular or fuller picture, it is important to address the following (exhilarating) question: how does this whole Eritrean strategy involving collective memory, resistance and reconstruction supposedly work? What are the ramifications for development in the practical sense?

4.4 Eritrean development: drawing together the past, the living and posterity

That diverse, deeply interwoven and cross-cutting material epitomises the standard or official Eritrean discourse of development. It frames the nature of the relationship that binds Eritrea
and the forces of global capitalism and imperialism as fraught, involving Eritrean desire for genuine self-determination and external hegemonic compulsion.

Analysis of forms of Eritrea’s national culture points to some interesting revelations about the choices relating to development. In terms of its implication, what this material broadly demonstrates is that there is a distinctive context for thinking about and practicing development in Eritrea’s case. This context is described by a historical and dialectical understanding of change, symbolised through Eritrea’s contemporary quest for self-determination more widely considered. A key measure of Eritrean development accordingly is its holistic, rather than fragmentary, approach to change. More specifically, we realise that in practice the Eritrean development process responds to the interplay of a dominant structure in (chiefly) the guise of global capitalist interests and subaltern Eritrean agency designed to guarantee maximum autonomy. Additionally, from the perspective of the current study, the representation on a cultural platform of the contested spirit of Eritrean development possibly constitutes a novel step which invites proper exposition. Following is a summary of what the subtleties are of Eritrea’s strategy in this respect.

Berekhet Mengisteab in concert, singing *Ma’ekeb* (source: YouTube)
Culture, politics, economic activity: freeing development from simplistic ad hoc policy

Relative to development initiatives elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, there seems to be a ‘curious’ aspect to how Eritrea intends to actualise its preferred development plan. As far as the core of the development question goes, what makes the Eritrean approach somewhat distinct is a conception of the integrated nature/ framework of change.

Careful analysis of the Eritrean development discourse demonstrates that economic, political and cultural influences ought to be concurrently exerted (in the same and/or in an opposite direction) to produce change. Or, to put it differently, not any one influence needs to be reduced to, nor isolated from, the effects of the other determinants of development. It also shows that for Eritrea’s development program to be successfully implemented, it is incumbent that the country’s past and present be linked with the future in a dialectical manner. Here, it appears as though the Eritreans have heeded Amilcar Cabral’s broad edict: we must act as if we answer to, and only answer to, our ancestors, our children, and the unborn. And most importantly, we learn that the sort of cultural traditions that grew directly out of Eritrea’s historic struggle and are fully maintained today hold the key to future Eritrean development. I believe these notations carry vital information and as such call for some unpacking.

Culturalism and materialism: not-so-odd bedfellows in reality

Apparently, in the Eritrean case we encounter the classic example of the deployment of cultural traditions in a way that buttresses the actual social, political and economic struggles of the people. Despite being incredibly elaborate and ever adaptable, such traditions commonly coalesce around the singular philosophy of self-reliance. Eritrea’s cultural traditions have been systematically worked out to thus give the Eritrean people a determinate identity as forged through a long and continuing struggle for freedom from domination. Empowering Eritreans to see themselves as resourceful and in charge of their own future appears to be the ultimate purpose to this identity reconstruction exercise.

If nothing else, the Eritrean case then arouses interest in the relation of culture and economic development. Its placing of the issue in the spotlight likewise depends on imputing a materialist slant to the concept of culture; cultural input as comprising the other side of the development coin, so to speak. Specifically, what makes the Eritrean development process somewhat ‘particular’ is the way cultural, social, political and economic forces work

77 See https://www.azquotes.com/quote/808697
alongside, as well as against, each other in an integrated and reciprocal mode to transcend internal and external challenges. The model of development followed in Eritrea therefore appears to be expedited by a dynamic, as opposed to static, understanding of culture and cultural processes.

In line with this, the Eritrean Government, like the EPLF in former times, has been able to render the form and substance of the many existing local cultures susceptible to experimentation. Such adaptation of culture has allowed the government to articulate its economic and political objectives in ways that contradict the free market doctrine. Furthermore, to set in place a cultural milieu commensurate with national development has necessitated that the government concocts potentially constructive ideas and values to be subscribed to by the population. Using a proactive strategy, the desired culture-development nexus is brought into existence by scouring the Eritrean past for relevant traces and reworking these into a unitary cultural matrix on behalf of all the Eritrean people. Analysis of what those traditions consist in, how they came to be and why they appear fundamental to Eritrean development practically conflates with the story of this country’s complex postwar political trajectory and its possible future(s). From a political and economic angle, focusing on the past as a launching pad seems to trace out for the Eritrean story of development its subsequent course. This last point is taken up in some detail below and with reference to some of the ascertainable features of Eritrean development.

**Rudiments of a radical Eritrean tradition: political self-rule, living within one’s means**

There seems to be good reason to think that the Eritrean Government is unlikely to discontinue the development program it has initiated. If anything, it is hard to imagine future Eritrean development as drastically different from the presently known form, and evolving into something resembling capitalism instead. Of course, this judgement obtains from the distinctive nature of the Eritrean approach itself which depends on a historicised/ dialectical consciousness to effect development. But in looking for explicit clue, it can be claimed that the assessment follows directly from the way the Eritrean Government uses cultural traditions to promote development.

As they carried on with the national struggle, Eritrea’s iconoclasts seemed to believe that genuine change presupposes autonomy in both political and economic term at all time. Based on this understanding, certain cultural traditions have been wilfully crafted to push forward the cause of Eritrean self-determination and statehood. Being resolute, diligent, optimist, non-ethno-centric, altruistic and even warlike are just some of the values animating
that culture. Among others, *Mehherbay Asa-kara*, or *Battle Cry* sang by Hamed Idris Jabara sometime in the 1980s stands as a typical example which communicates the attitude in question. Also, what you tend to observe in this instance is that such social mores continue to be viable, not redundant, as time passes by. You only need to situate side by side some of the pre-independence era audio-visual sources (for example, Akhililu Tefeno’s *Tsnat’i Stoicism* and Estifanos Abraham Zemach’s *Biddhoi Ultimate Showdown*) and the recent material to recognise that thematic unity. Often, they continue to be moulded and remoulded in the framework of the struggle that impels itself from the Eritrean past to an imagined non-capitalist (purportedly bright) future. To understand how the relevant traditions are made amenable to development, it becomes therefore necessary to analyse Eritrea’s historical narratives of struggle.

Exceptionally, those traditions have the effect of making us picture the dynamics of Eritrean development like the work of a pendulum in a way. Like a pendulum that swings from one end (through a centre) to the other and back again, social conflict as anchor to the Eritrean development process appears to traverse time; it joins without disjunction the past, present and the future. Obviously, the demands and conditions of the pre-independence struggle necessitated measures to deal with the centrifugal tendency of Ethiopia’s colonial policies and practices. Along with active armed resistance, careful political and ideological input during that earlier stage helped guarantee the integrity of Eritrean society against the odds. You can moreover argue that what has been sown then impacted the outcome of the Eritrean struggle positively in that it paved the way for national independence. If I read the official Eritrean position correctly, I would be inclined to think that the current leadership seems to believe that being truthful to EPLF heritage can unlock current and future Eritrean national political and economic problems. As I have stated previously, the Eritrean struggle is to be credited for ushering in fundamental political, economic and social transformations. For example, in its wake, the hitherto mostly traditionally self-identifying ethno-linguistic groupings accepted to take on a unitary Eritrean national identity (without necessarily renouncing their individual cultural heritages). The various components of Eritrean society were made to feel a sense of common purpose in the form of fighting for national liberation. From the Afar to the Tigrinya and any one group in between, the population was made to see that power concedes nothing without demand, and that only through careful organisation, unity, self-discipline and hard work can oppression be reversed. We might here mention too that the roots of the popular Eritrean slogan, *hade hizbe hade libi*, or simply *unanimity about the common interest*, so vital to Eritrea’s post-independence development.

78 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VOiuM7-kKY
drive lie in that earlier effort; its frequent invocation is meant to ensure all of Eritrea’s socio-cultural groupings participate in and contribute to national development.\textsuperscript{79}

What also seemed to have played into the evolving scenario was the fact that Eritrean independence was viewed unfavourably within much of Africa and beyond. Whereas, for the majority of Africa’s then political leaders, the Eritrean cause represented an attempt at secessionism of the sort that undercuts pan-African unity, elsewhere, especially within the internationalist Left, Eritrea was seen as breaking with the logic of the Cold War to draw possible sympathy. Even as Ethiopia benefited in turn from the backing of one or the other superpower, the Eritreans missed out on any substantial outside support and had to fend for themselves instead. Yet, not only could the EPLF survive, but also the movement continued to gain momentum and to achieve real success without being beholden to others all along (cf. Connell 1997). It went on scoring important victories against the Ethiopian State, at the time one of the most powerful in sub-Saharan Africa. As has been reported in the \textit{Press Statement} (2015), “few supported [Eritrea] during [her] legitimate struggle for freedom. The powerful tried to denigrate [Eritrea’s] cause and bomb [the country] into submission. [Eritreans] were routinely written off. And yet, by dint of [their] determination and humanity, [they] emerged victorious.”

And parallel with the military effort, vital civilian development initiatives were also implemented which would cater for the needs of the EPLF itself and the population at large (cf. Hollows 1997). In Sahil, the EPLF’s fortified sanctuary in mountainous northern Eritrea, the movement managed to set up underground factories, schools and hospitals that delivered basic goods and services. In particular, pharmaceuticals were produced and distributed, as were other essentials such as tampons (remember females made up a third of the Eritrean fighting force and that their sanitary needs had to be met) and Shidas (those trademark plastic shoes worn by all fighters). For their part, hospitals and schools provided much needed health care and educational services. While the war raged on, medics working in underground hospitals treated not only war wounded fighters, but also civilians. At the same time, through the \textit{Bet Timhrti Sawra} system (Schools of the Revolution) and the many Adult Literacy programs thousands of Eritrean children, men and women were able to receive important education. And so we follow the planting of seeds of a culture centred on political sovereignty as well as the need to harness internal Eritrean resources to accomplish social and economic goals during the historical period in question.

\textsuperscript{79} But so as not to idealise the Eritrean nation-building process, I shouldn’t perhaps discount the fact that, despite the country being socially diverse, culturally and linguistically Tigrinya indeed predominates within the Eritrean body politic today; often the invention of nations involves deciding through some sort of a pre-emptive strike as it were the question of official language at the hands of the nationalist leadership which in Eritrea’s case chiefly comes from the Tigrinya social group.
Shida, an Eritrean plastic sandals, a symbol of the long- and arduous-journey to Independence, adorning a major roundabout in the capital Asmara (source: internet)
Igla–Demhina bypass in the Southern Zone, Eritrea (source: internet)

Filfil–Solomona road (aka Northern Red Sea road), outside Asmara (source: internet)
Now, we can’t possibly work out the importance of the culture at the centre of current Eritrean development policy without tracing the whole thing back to the Eritrean struggle that went before. Or, more correctly, we need to be able to identify what has been actively selected for consolidation into an essential culture whilst eliding anything peripheral or supposedly non-instrumental. In particular, the basic configuration of this culture seems to point to clear precedents in modern Eritrean history. For the reader’s benefit, it is essential to allude to some of the salient features of the culture under consideration here.

Accordingly, to vacillate, back away and otherwise entertain defeat under testing circumstances, for example, is typically frowned upon and consequently the attitude has to be expunged; since resilience proved the winning Eritrean formula in the face of those repeated large-scale Ethiopian military campaigns of the 1980s to crush the Eritrean insurrection, its place in contemporary Eritrean political culture seems to have been secured. In Eritrea, the state of ‘lacking spirit’ has come to be judged as negative culture precisely because it is thought to risk weakening the willpower of the people to pursue development as underdog. Unless people can demonstrate courage, the official line holds, they don’t have to expect to prevail in a political contest. Eritrea’s rather bold rhetoric and her more or less matching actions consequently appear in line with its tradition of political and economic independence. And so any ‘aberrant’ posture whatsoever becomes the subject of censure, if not outright derision.
It is no mere accident then that, in the light of the imperatives of post-independence development, the tendency has been to discard all that is unflattering in this nation’s history. Accordingly, 19th century and subsequent collaborationist history of Eritrean forefathers with Fascist Italy against Ethiopia’s anti-colonial wars, while hard to deny completely, has to be scanted nonetheless. Similarly, the in-retrospect discreditable record of another Eritrean group from the 1950s, that of Mahber Andnet (Unionist Bloc), which strongly campaigned for unification with Ethiopia seems to be treated as of no consequence. The same tends to apply in the case of Eritrea’s current political opposition which is thought of as having no physical presence whatever, let alone a stake, in the nation’s affairs. In its place, what we have is the fostering of specific cultural traditions that are then duly celebrated at a national level. A culture of resistance to injustice (reflected through the Eritrean slogan of nihh, or staying power), gets hailed as a correct stand against perceived neocolonial encroachment. Again, the honouring with much gusto of the record of Eritrean self-determination pioneers like Abdul-Kader Kebire, Ibrahim Sultan and Woldeabe Woldemariam follows in this vein. All three (not to mention the countless fallen Eritrean combatants remembered on Martyrs Day every June) are considered national symbols and their politics has been whole-heartedly embraced as fundamental to independent development. As the quote by Simon Schama which opens the present chapter impresses, Eritrean society apparently uses history “not to revere the dead, but to inspire the living … to lament what ought to be lamented; and to celebrate what should be celebrated.” This is what Yaret Gona Min Ta Hale, or Wish You Were Still Among Us, a recent homage by the renowned Eritrean musician Ahmed Wad Shek actually encapsulates. In the piece, the Eritrean artist both laments the physical absence of the fallen freedom fighter and celebrates his/her legacy to posterity.

Meantime, on the practical development side, recent major infrastructural undertakings such as the Filfil–Solomona Road, the Igla–Demhina Bypass and the myriad of rural schools, clinics and other social services also seem to take cues from the self-reliant attitude commonly associated with the era of the armed struggle. Despite the difficult conditions during those years, the EPLF was noted for setting up a network of roads that became its life-line. As the ruling Party’s representative in the Southern Zone, Saleh Mohamad Omar, says of the Igla-Demhina Bypass (a tortuous stretch of road built by an Eritrean construction company and which drops some 2500 meters in a very short distance to connect the town of Adi Keyih in Eritrea’s Southern Zone with the Red Sea Zone), the project brings to memory earlier ventures such as Tsirgiya Aynemberkikh (Will Never Kneel Down Road) and Tsirgiya Biddho (Tenacity Road) completed amid the war of independence. Even if modest

80 See http://homepage.eircom.net/~odyssey/Quotes/History/Historians.html
say by Swiss or Japanese standards, what seems to matter from an Eritrean perspective about these sorts of development projects is the aspect of *wushtawi a’qmi*, or *homegrown capacity*. The Eritreans themselves seem wont of reiterating this factor which in an original sense encapsulates the whole Eritrean policy of post-independence development.

Adult Literacy class, Eritrea (source: internet)

### 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the details of the process by which Eritrea envisages to forge an independent development path in the face of the dominant forces arrayed against it. To render a robust account, my starting premise has been that the development process in Eritrea needs to be treated as an experiment in counter hegemony. This approach was considered advantageous for the capacity to affirm the many challenges the country and its people have faced and continue to face from (mainly but not exclusively) without and the resulting Eritrean formal response. In particular, strategies of socialising the Eritrean population as per certain acclaimed political and cultural imperatives have been singled out for proper study as the designated mechanism of nation-building and development by the Eritrean Government. A conceptual framework combining Marxist philosophy of nature with historical materialist understanding of social change has been identified as the core influence for the entire Eritrean self-determination and development effort.

The Eritrean narrative was shown to be largely about alienation as the underlying theme in this nation’s historical and present reality. Here, the question of alienation tends to present
as typological if we also recall how the challenges to development across sub-Saharan Africa appear closely related. It was noted that alienation in Eritrea’s case concerns colonial and post-colonial coercion whose effect has been the stalling of the nation’s aspiration as popularly expressed. Again, it is perhaps plausible to see this as the broader trend characterising contemporary sub-Saharan Africa realities. The source of the problem was located in all those factors that have impeded and appear to be complicating now the process of self-determining Eritrean development.

From within the official Eritrean literature, evidence was dug out which amply explains that victimhood/ oppression is a sentiment held in common among generations of Eritreans. This too turns out to be something which other Africans, for example the Congolese, the Saharawi people and the South Sudanese, could relate to. At the same time, the analysis showed the Eritrean people as having the capacity to undertake self-redemptive action based on optimism about a better future. It was pointed out that almost the entire Eritrean material has as its hallmark these two antithetical facets in tandem. In some respect, it is thus possible to think of this kind of awareness as a broad basis for practical development in the sub-Saharan Africa context. Analysis of aspects of the material has shown that the development project in Eritrea is conceived and implemented as an ongoing active process. Central to the reconstitution of Eritrean development is the role given to experience in the wake of social conflict. The mode of expressing this experience moreover is through vital cultural forms that directly reproduce the people’s living reality. Finally, it was implied Eritrean development may not witness major reconfiguration in form at least for the foreseeable future. Or, the development trend in Eritrea is likely that the collective interest gets prioritised over individualist ambition. That prediction too is about the Eritrean development program remaining consistent with its roots in historical materialism which confirms that the coordinates of the (Eritrean) journey into the future lie in the country’s present and past. In the end, there seems to be certain significance for sub-Saharan Africa in the way the Eritrean Government puts a historical materialist twist on the development process.
5. THE COMMISSION AND THE NEOLIBERAL CONSTRUCTION OF ‘AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT’

A word or concept cannot be considered in isolation; it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used: its problematic … which determines not only the questions posed and the answers given, but also the problems omitted …. Given that this theoretical “unconscious” is present in, yet absent from, any particular segment of the text, only a symptomatic reading can (re)construct it.

- Louis Althusser

In chapter three we saw how the Commission approaches the topics of culture and the background African political history to argue the ‘novelty’ of its development program. Based on the earlier discussion, I came to speculate on the purport of the Commission in the long-run. The presentation in this chapter takes up from where the previous investigation left off, and develops the analysis as necessary. I draw on an inclusive historically and politically centred approach to outline viable African development outside all dominant and improvised trends.

The point of the analysis is to determine the scale and scope of the Commission’s plan relative to the prospect of change on the ground. In mapping the course of the analysis, there are a number of tasks I intend to accomplish: I proceed first by echoing a specific fact about ‘development’ to prefigure the main argument about the voluntaristic, as opposed to prescriptive, essence of African political and economic transformation. This relates broadly to how we may possibly, indeed meaningfully approach the study of development, and as such concerns the Commission, its assumptions and methods. The idea of a prelude of course is to ease the reader into what follows next. In the main body, I construct a detailed account centred on the implication for African development of the Blair Commission. I treat more systematically the model of development that the Commission for Africa touts as its vision for the continent. Strictly, I explore the conceptual apparatus in the light of which the Commission views Africa’s development crisis as ‘anomaly’. The analysis revolves around the system of knowledge presupposed by the Commission to understand how a specific rendition of reality elevates (arbitrarily) capitalist development to an ideal. Also, as I ponder the Commission’s theoretic premises, I equally allude to the consequences for practicing real development. Or else, I unpick how its abstractions tend to underwrite certain substantive interests at the expense of others—by rationalising a known version of reality and a
corresponding course of transformative action. So, by combining these two facets (proposition and practice), the goal is to state how internally consistent the Commission’s development template appears. Once we match the ‘language’ with facts on the ground, we could appraise more realistically the significance of the Commission’s proposals. Having set forth the basic configuration of the presentation, I would now like to consider the relevant parts in order. Accordingly, I commence with a brief note on the basic characteristics of the approach I plan to continue on with. Next, I turn my attention to the primary business of describing and analysing over two consecutive stages the Commission’s blueprint.

5.1 In search of a comprehensive theoretical approach

Approaches to development differ based on the underlying agendas of those to whom the prospect matters. Depending on whether the focus is a conservative or a progressive social order, it is customary to come across disparate ways of conceptualising ‘development’. Taking the Eritrean case largely as versatile, in my opinion, a sound analysis of the Commission’s blueprint ought to draw two key principles together: acquaintance with how this particular model of development came to be in the first place, and; recognition, in parallel and otherwise tacitly, of the possibility of other legitimate forms of development. For the purposes of this review then, history and politics needs to be placed at the forefront—to clarify the significance of the Commission’s proposals.

There seems to be grounds to believe that a substantial account of how the Commission handles the topic of development both reaches into the past as well as highlights the question of heterogeneity. On the one hand, development as concept and practice need not owe its origins exclusively to the Commission for Africa in the new Millennium; manifestly, the phenomenon predates Tony Blair’s interest in Africa by decades, if not centuries. Most notably, inasmuch as the Commission follows in the footsteps of a long-standing Western development doctrine, it can be more fruitful to consider the initiative in a retrospective spirit. So, due attention instead needs to be given to the West’s comparative ascendency, scientifically, economically as well as politico-militarily, in the modern era. In particular, it is important to retain a sense of the evolution of conventional intellectual thought and practice during the intervening time-span. And, even more explicitly, what deserves possibly greater scrutiny within that wider trend is the way leading theories and ideologies about human beings, society and change have been periodically invoked and the ramifications thereof generally. So, there clearly seems to be an advantage to moving with one’s account forward historically to get to the present moment. For one thing, the strategy makes it possible to follow the inception of the Commission’s neoliberal agenda against the backdrop of earlier
development philosophy. This also points to potential flaws that originate with forms of synchronic quasi-scientific interpretation which we must discern and oppose. Correspondingly, we can view in the proper context the existing relationship between the Western powers and the continent of Africa. Thus, if it is true Africa’s present relationship with these powers appears unusually one-sided, it is also possible that the source of the problem goes back to the (colonial) past. Or, reference to the past shows that the way that relationship came to be structured and acted out can’t be preordained. A historical/genealogical rendering of the concept of development thus seems to represent one important tier of what a viable approach should be like.

On the other hand, nor perhaps can a generous treatment come from missing the multifarious and contested essence of development. Often, forms of development embody group interest of one sort or another. As such there tends to be disagreement as to what counts as ‘development’. The model heralded by the Blair Commission for example can’t be expected to accommodate the interests of all Africans. In the same way, a different model (brought forward say by the South Commission) may not appeal to the Commissioners and anyone else in favour of neoliberalism. Ultimately, any effective approach to development ought to reflect the discrepancy that is part and parcel of the phenomenon. It is important otherwise that researchers and practitioners give particular thought to the politics of development as a matter of course. And so, by being mindful at once of the genesis, range, politics and ideology involving ‘development’ can we hope to study the subject in its full dimensions. What I have tried to explain about the development process so far represents the (all-round) strategy that I will use to analyse below the Commission and its Report.

Making the most of such an eclectic definition of development, in the remaining space I will focus on the Commission’s potential for promoting African development. As I speculate over its likely promise, I call up the notion of a ‘paradigm’ as originally elaborated by Thomas Kuhn and readapted as ‘discourse’ in the case of succeeding scholars, for example Michel Foucault. My task in this case is to illuminate concurrently the interim and ideological root of social thought and action. So, initially, by referring to the underlying concepts and practices, I shall point out the Eurocentric pedigree of the model of development being foisted upon the African continent. This obliges looking at certain claims made in the name of ‘science’ and ‘modernity’ together with the successive revisions and re-presentations of ‘Liberalism’ as umbrella framework. Next, rather than accept at face value the universality/timelessness of the Commission’s version of development, what I hope to reflect is the quite localist and temporal triggers for its rise. Or, I will try to expound that the neoliberal moment simply signifies a transient phase called for by the crisis-ridden but very adaptative dynamic nature
of the capitalist system itself. To that end, I shall retrace how the switch to neoliberalism as the latest chapter in the long-drawn out saga of conventional development thought and practice has been facilitated. And, finally, as well as conceiving of neoliberalism as an impermanent juncture within the totality of bourgeois thought and praxis, I intend to unmask any inherent ideology that is the manifestation of vested economic and political power. Moving on, I begin with a descriptive summary of the evidential basis for the analysis of the Commission and its Report, including the key assumptions and related methods. In this regard, I relate how ‘omniscient’ the Commission comes across given its putative avowals concerning African development which also conditions its practices in search for solutions.

5.2 The Commission, ‘rare’ vista into the continent, devising potential solutions

The Commission’s stance on how to stimulate African development provides an opportunity to once more mull the ramifications of donor-instigated programs for the region. Generally, a review of the Commission’s blueprint brings to light a few different things in relation to the conception and actual propagation of development. In the context of the present analysis, accordingly, two correlated issues in particular deserve noting; its classic assumptions concerning the prospect of society and the modelling of ‘levels’ of social development and supposedly any requisite action owing to this. These mutually complementing elements (covered under the subdivided parts of Argument and Analysis respectively) furnish the Report with a distinct sense to therefore be the focal point of the analysis. The discussion that follows thus seeks to unpack the ideas and practices underlying the Commission whilst pointing the real signification for African development.

Confronting a lapsing sub-Saharan Africa: current state and future direction

It is not hard to see that a galvanising factor for the Commission for Africa is the basic notion that Africa’s regression for such a long time not only is anachronistic, but also morally indefensible. The prevailing view seems to be that, with the onset of the new Millennium, no other region but Africa remains in the doldrums contrary to ‘our common humanity’81. In encapsulating the enormity of present-day African socio-economic conditions, the Commission for Africa (2005:21-22) notes:

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81 That is the phrase the Commission for Africa invokes to highlight both the urgency as well as inappropriateness of the situation prevailing in the continent.
The world is awash with wealth .... Yet ... in Africa millions of people live each day in abject poverty and squalor .... We live in a world where new medicines ... have eradicated many diseases and ailments ... yet in Africa [millions of] children ... die each year ... from illnesses which cost very little to treat .... There is a tsunami every month in Africa. But its deadly tide of disease and hunger steals silently and secretly across the continent .... The eyes of the world may be averted from their routine suffering, but the eyes of history are upon us ... future generations will look back, and wonder how could our world have known and failed to act? [Africa's contemporary misfortune] is the greatest scandal of our age ....

It would appear that, for the sponsors of the Africa Commission, the optimism about social progress which accompanied African political independence has long since dissipated. Likewise, they seem to reckon that subsequent ‘possibilities’ that begun to open up following full-blown ‘globalisation’ have failed to stimulate Africa’s revival. Now, it is in that precise regard that the region is presumed (by them) to have therefore bucked the expected trend of change elsewhere around the world. Even if not directly talked about, we can still educe the likely intention is the embedding of the capitalist order in Africa. Such turns out to be the background belief, residuum of a distinct paradigm of development, in accordance with which the Commission unveiled its plan of action to resolve the deadlock of African underdevelopment. But, to remind the reader, the idea of transforming Africa ostensibly into a better place itself may not however signal a concern unique to the Commission. Rather, the attitude sounds quite common in that apparently it is what has helped shape Europe’s dealings with the continent from the beginning. Of course, the roots of the mission to ‘civilise’ Africa go back a long way. However, in its more contemporary informal form, we can trace this back to the postwar development project as has been conceived to ‘modernise’ the then-decolonising states of Africa. Those seem to be the conspicuous and not-so-conspicuous assumptions of the Commission for Africa that we must keep in mind when assessing its potential.

The Commission for Africa: operationalising the fact-finding mission

Meanwhile, the way the Commission went about addressing the problem has also been influenced by the requirement for Africa to ‘catch up’. Based on the preconceived notion of what Africa’s setback consists in, the Commission appears to have systematised its effort to achieve its projected end result. This seems to be the case in respect of the personnel
makeup of the Commission as well as the type of evidence considered, the ensuing analysis and the findings.

My reading of the Commission for Africa suggests that the manner in which its membership was worked out involved carefully recruiting (a certain breed of) candidates. The Commissioners totalled 17-members, more than half of whom were Africans both from the public and private occupational circles. Naming some names and identifying member formal titles and career records can be a useful indicator as to why these particular Africans may have been invited to join the Commission for Africa.

It appears that the various African Commissioners tended to carry the correct neoliberal credentials; each and every one of them could have been scouted for their (solid) efforts to further neoliberal globalisation in one way or another. Beginning in the 1990s, both Benjamin Mkapa and the-now-deceased Meles Zenawi (then-heads of state of Tanzania and of Ethiopia respectively), for example, were known to have deferred to the Bretton Woods institutions on the question of sovereign national development decision-making. The same can’t however be said of their respective predecessors, Julius Nyerere and Mengistu Hailemariam, who have been adamantly opposed to the policies coming from the IMF and the World Bank. Or, of Eritrea, as the following (extended) quote from an interview with its president suggests:

I remember in 1994 … when experts from the World Bank came and said, ‘We’ll write the country programme for you’; we never had any experience, we were a new nation, but the question came to my mind, so I said, why do we need someone else to write our country programme? Why can’t we write our own one? We know our reality better than anybody else. We can identify our needs and specify what we need to change in reality; we may not have the resources but we want to develop institutions and the capacity to write our own programme. If we need someone else’s support then we can outsource but ultimately we would be owners of our own programme. I remember the discussion we had with those experts, they couldn’t even explain or give an answer to the question. They said the World Bank writes country programmes for everybody and particularly in Africa. That led to a very controversial discussion, and finally we said we have to write our own programme.

(Afwerki cited in New African, November 2011)

In addition to those two former statesmen, some of the other members also seem to have been judged suitable nominees given their positive professional affiliations as far as the
neoliberal globalist agenda goes. The line-up here includes bureaucrats like Trevor Manuel (at the time South Africa’s finance minister and chair of the IMF/World Bank Development Committee), the Ghanaian Kingsley Amoako (former high-ranking civil servant at the World Bank and the Economic Commission for Africa) and Linah Mohohlo (Botswana’s then-Central Bank Governor who also liaised with the IMF on behalf of African countries). Still others, such as Tidjiane Thiam, Fola Adeola and William Kalema, could have caught the Blair Government’s eye considering their prominent roles within the private sector as businessmen or as major company directors. To be sure, visibly absent from this list though are any persons or groups who could have disagreed with the potential of capitalist globalisation to reduce African poverty; advocacy groups such as the Africa Social Forum, Jubilee South and the myriad of grass-roots organisations found across Africa concerned with fighting poverty; politicians, activists and academics (for example, contributors to the Alternatives Commission for Africa Report and others) who have dedicated the best part of their lives demanding justice for Africa. And as to the Commissioners from the North and their supporting crew, these, not unlike their African counterparts, too mainly consisted of politicians or career bureaucrats with professions in the finance and development sector. Further, the real power wielded by Tony Blair, his then-deputy Gordon Brown and the Minister of Development at the time, Hilary Benn, presumably smacks of the UK Government’s effective control of the mandate of the Africa Commission. Despite appearance, it can be claimed that outside actors, not Africans committed to the continents real interest, who seem to be calling the shots. That is the structure of the Commission for Africa in terms of quantity and quality.

Being especially selective seems to account for the work of the Commission in some other ways as well. This aspect can be discerned from the evidence and the analysis which issued in those policy proposals featured in the Report. So, whilst the Commission seemingly included ‘evidence’ that aligns with the hoped-for change, it probably saw no need to burden itself with ‘peripheral’ information. We could see this being followed throughout the Commission’s research process; in resolving what appears to be relevant or irrelevant to future African development, and why. The Report contains ample clues in many of its parts. A case in point can be the way the Commission casts the African crisis and its resolution as regards economic growth and political governance. For the Commission, growth and governance encompass the two areas which impact the prospect of African development most significantly. So, the issue of growth and governance deserves taking up further to check the link with the basic agenda of the Commission.
On account of its set assumptions about development as Westernisation, evidently the Commission approves of no other force but the private sector as the primary driver of economic growth. Its sounding a call for Foreign Direct Investment to compensate for Africa’s seeming lack of internal resources moreover appears in line with its perceptions about the ‘correct’ path to economic success. And the same apparently goes with regard to the issue of governance whereby the Commission collapses good governance with the Westminster parliamentary system. Other determinants of development, as is maybe asking different questions and offering alternate solutions, however turns out to be beyond the Commission’s methodological orientation. Given the level of “theoretical unconsciousness” characterising the Commission’s text, we might not know what other possibilities and facts relating to development there are. It is almost impossible to tell, for example, if any non-capitalist pathways to economic prosperity exist, or else quantifying economic output in GDP terms glosses over worker exploitation by corporations. Included below is a quote that could illustrate the sort of problem I am referring to:

Last Thursday evening, Amazon’s billionaire CEO Jeff Bezos made $3.3 billion when the tech giant reported its eighth consecutive profitable quarter ... To acquire $3.3 billion, a US Amazon worker making the average $12.41/hour would have to work 133,064 years—roughly the length of time modern humans have lived on Earth. It would take Amazon workers in China, Brazil, India, and Mexico who are paid even lower wages much longer than that.

Blake (2017)⁸²

Or still, it remains unclear what a fair business contract between a foreign investor and an African state ought to be like, and the environmental protection standards that must be observed as part of those same deals. I raise this last point in light of some of the major accidents responsible for the destruction of sensitive ecosystems and peoples’ livelihoods in Africa and elsewhere in the global South; Shell’s catastrophic oil spills in the Niger River delta in southern Nigeria (cf. Pegg and Zabbey 2013); Texaco/Chevron’s reckless conduct that resulted in the contamination of parts of Ecuador’s Amazon rainforest, dubbed the ‘Amazon Chernobyl’ (cf. PR Newswire 2012) and; the environmental disaster wreaked by the Ok Tedi Mine in New Guinea, causing untold harm to nearby river systems and the people who depend on them (cf. Swales et al 1998). So too the synonymity between good governance and representative democracy seems to leave no room for any diversity in modes of political organisation and rule. According to the Commission’s assumption, China

⁸² See Blake (2017) https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2017/05/06/amaz-m06.html
with its one-party political system (just like Eritrea) can't be considered to be following standards of good governance. This fact alone should make it truly problematic for China to develop. Yet, rather than lagging behind, China today ranks as the second economy in the world, before the likes of Japan and Germany. We infer, consequently, that in the end the governance agenda may prove to be simply an ideological conception.

In parallel with that kind of bias, and where the Commission's research method is at stake, here too the Commission seems to have favoured investigative techniques that go along with what has been originally premised. We tend to see this in the Commission largely valuing quantitative, rather than qualitative, means of analysis. This appears to be the case, for example, with the key issue of ‘poverty’. Concerning the prevalence of (economic) poverty in Africa, the Commission’s principal focus is on the incidence and scale, as opposed to the underlying causes, of the phenomenon. Or, as the Commissioners themselves seem to believe, Africa remains mired in poverty “ultimately because its economy has not grown” but not perhaps for some other ‘oblique’ reason (Commission for Africa 2005:15).

To sum up then, what we tend to get upon analysing the Commission and its Report is a fractional story, a truncated version of an otherwise intricate reality. That, in brief, also appears to capture the text of the Commission’s core proposition which then regulates its practices. Nevertheless, it pays to remember that there is more to the development process than has been suggested through the Commission’s approach. And that is because the Commission’s account turns out to have been advanced from within the closed domain of a particular discourse. But before bringing the current section to a close, we must realise that the Commission has outlined a broad and detailed plan (albeit of a certain classification) in an attempt to speed up African development. So, it becomes important to explain why the Commission views the problem of African development the way it does, and what its solutions may bode eventually. I address what the Africa Commission’s vision of development consists in over two mutually-augmenting stages; first, by introducing the overarching theoretical paradigm by which the Commission seems to be guided given its portrayal of the fundamental nature of reality and its processes. This obliges coming to terms with the abstract pronouncements, theories, ways of doing research, as well as the criteria for verifying knowledge implicit to the system of knowledge in question. It also implies that we think through here the import to future African development. Second, by explaining that in the case of human society specifically, there tends to be a link rather between knowledge, power and particular social practices. With reference to the Commission’s approach
therefore, it is necessary to revisit the ideological, in contradistinction to scientific, basis of the actions it has proposed in order to see what (unspoken) interest is likely being served.

5.3 Conformist ideological overture or levelling the development playing field?

The Commission for Africa centres its plan on a vital premise from which seem to ensue other auxiliary propositions. Typically, it is granted capitalist economic development (plus individual political freedom) not only is inevitable, but also universally desirable. At the same time, it is assumed that the Northern states remain the exemplar in terms of how the South, including Africa will have to potentially develop. That being the case, the African states are supposed to work out the ‘formula’ that will see them attain full-fledged capitalism (together with ‘democratic’ rule) and eventually close the developmental gap. However, since sub-Saharan Africa has yet to sort out the relevant ground rules of development, the hypothesis seemingly goes, the Commission under the patronage of the UK government can show it the way forward by outlining what needs to be followed and done. Such, in a few words, appears to be the overall tendency with which the question of African development has been approached. In all of this, the Commission turns out to be commanded by the twin verities about ‘man’ and society which typifies Liberalism in its political and economic guises. Equally, the Commission seems to have also taken the reins from those whose mission was to theorise, on behalf of the US government, the economic and political modernisation process for the decolonising world in the mid-20th century. Regardless of all other things hence, the essential validity of that proposition looks as the default position; it can’t otherwise be controverted by any distinctive manifestation of social reality within the many individual African states. Throughout its operation, the Commission tends to rest its case on the unflinching assumption about the ineluctability of capitalism and democracy. It also appears to think that capitalism/democracy is in the interest of all societies and that there is a tried and tested universal code by which (acceptable) change may come about.

Homogenising the development experience and the view from the other side

On close inspection, the Commission’s mandate to ‘oversee’ African development therefore appears the product of some transcendent underlying principle. In terms of key thematic feature, a normative agenda, in contrast to a radicalist impulse, thus tends to symbolise its remit.
As with any normatively-grounded policy pronouncements, the Commission is all for continuity—even as it ‘advocates’ change. Consequently, its approach sounds as quite formulaic, and the focus turns out to be on technical questions in the lead up to a known outcome. This seminal choice evidently comes at the expense of a discursive analysis that could have been possible by expanding the terms of reference of the enquiry. Ultimately, the Commission, by virtue of its definition of what a ‘prototypical’ society looks like, tends to believe that it can readily and even definitively account for ‘dissonant’ trends such as African underdevelopment. At the same time, the Commission seems to consider it entirely within its means to come up with measures that can steer sub-Saharan Africa towards a ‘normal’ course of development. Especially though, it emerges, the Commission appears to be about rationalising to the African states the status quo, expecting that they accept capitalism as fait accompli.

Practically, you can argue that it mattered not to the Commissioners what the peoples of Africa might actually think and desire re the future. Or, you could further make the claim that the Commission has been unwilling to consider whether oppositional internal and external forces have a part to play. As I have alluded previously, this self-evidently paternalistic posture vis-a-vis Africa appears to be symptomatic of the longstanding relationship between a politically weak continent and a strong Western world. We could add, given the impression that the continent’s development has been assigned to others, that the initiative sounds determinist. Or else, the apparent denial to the African peoples the option to be the authors of their own futures might render, by design or accident, the Commission’s blueprint decidedly anti-humanistic. Arguably, the plan may even hold a potential to compound, not lessen, the problem of economic alienation across the sub-Saharan Africa region. Lastly, the likelihood of continuing the subjugation of the continent and its peoples by outside forces can’t be underplayed given the proclivity for the capitalist status quo in this instance.

That, in general, turns out to be the immediate impression that the Commission produces when approached from a certain (dissenting) angle. But, most tellingly, we observe that the attempt to justify the status quo as norm seems to result from a distinct mode of conceptual thought and problem-solving practical strategies involving reality itself. Notably, the Commission appears to carry on from a simple yet entrenched premise about how the world, human society in particular, really looks and functions. As such, the expectation apparently is for sub-Saharan Africa development to pan out commensurately. But whence possibly does such a normative thesis come? What exactly can its essential distinguishing features be, including the assumptions about reality and the specific ways and means by which change may be instigated? To deal with this key question, it seems important to scrutinise
the constitutive presuppositions underlying the Commission by chronicling their genesis and continuing clout. Offering a plausible answer to this question helps to appraise the potential of the Commission and its various proposals.

5.4 Development in the modern era, origin in West’s socio-cultural and historical experience

Certain details about the Commission and its proposal facilitate a better picture as to its insight concerning change or development. First, by its own reckoning, the Commission sees the process of revitalising sub-Saharan Africa as both extraordinarily ambitious and truly achievable still. Its stated aim thus turns out no less than the complete overhaul of the economies of the 40-plus countries in one attempt. What is more, it took the Commission only one year to come up with a sweeping plan that would promulgate the intended changes. As a grand and possibly peerless gesture, you could even say the scheme comes with a degree of uncanniness.

Be that as it may, it is important to realise that the sense of overconfidence on the part of the Commission anticipates excessive generalisation and simplification. Or, to put it another way, the Commission sounds rather oblivious that it can be problematic to speak notionally of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ when in actual fact the region spans the alphabetical gamut from Angola to Zimbabwe through the many countries in between. Ultimately, at no point does the Commission seem to doubt its potential, or shows any inkling about the appropriateness of its development framework. Now, to fully comprehend why the Commission approaches sub-Saharan Africa as a generic space facing generic problems to which can be tailored ‘one size fits all’ type of borrowed solutions, it becomes important to get a measure of the paradigmatic core of conventional development thought. It also turns out imperative to try and assess the scope of the Africa Commission by thinking outside the bounds of the dominant development discourse.

The intellectual and methodological moorings of conventional development policy

Although you may not get the idea straightaway, following an in-depth reading of the Commission’s Report, it is possible to note that a distinct theoretical tradition underlies the text. Consequently, its case for African development appears to hinge on some inherent

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83 This is not to suggest that the commission is unaware of the diversity of Africa, nor is it to claim that it treats its recommendations as a ‘uniform template to be applied to all countries” (Commission for Africa 2005:95). The point rather is that the commissioners don’t appear open to a program other than theirs.
assumptions about the meaning of reality in general and the historical process and seemingly its end-point. In terms of source or inspiration, meanwhile, the underlying thinking turns out particularly Western in character. More instructively, when you critically review the Report, you can realise that contemporary mainstream development knowledge and practice lays claim to distant lineage in ideas about progress as elaborated from within the Enlightenment project and onwards. And just as significantly, you could also make the point that this manifestly Eurocentric outlook appears of ambiguous relevance to the situation in Africa. Having pointed that fact out, I shall address below the essential streaks of the relevant paradigm in the form of the postulates about reality and in regard to the process of change/development.

**Idealism, sub-Saharan Africa and the development question**

Conventional knowledge, not least the Commission’s approach to sub-Saharan Africa development, seems to be nurtured by a specific orientation towards its object of study. This tends to be true not only of sub-Saharan Africa and the concept of development, but also practically everything else in the universe. The fact that the heterogeneity of sub-Saharan Africa (and what this might hold for the development process) receives little or no attention from the Commission thus probably bespeaks a set doctrine vis-à-vis the fundamental nature of reality.

In the first place, we may have good reason to think that the Commission has chosen not to premise its development agenda on a sub-Saharan Africa out there having prior absolute existence. That could be because, more than the physical world itself, what seems to count (from the Commission’s standpoint) is the representation of that world through mental constructions without coming into actual contact with it.

Anyone who subscribes to this philosophical doctrine, and the Commission can be said to be on board here, becomes prone to assuming our knowledge of reality is a matter of consciousness. Given its particular logic, the view taken by the Commission seems to be that the only reality that can probably truly be ascertained is the mind itself and the perception the latter makes possible. Likewise, to the extent that objects have absolute reality, this for the Commission cannot be independent of, but rather contingent on, our thinking faculty. In the end, where conventional development thought is at stake, the depiction intuitively of the fundamental nature of reality apparently serves as a necessary first step from which issues forth other attending speculations. So, having thus perceived the basic meaning of reality, the next logical move in the Commission’s process could have
involved learning about the actual ‘constitution’ of things which make them what they ‘are’. And that would seem to have entailed forming definite ideas about the ‘characteristics’ of what the Commission was dealing with in order to articulate the best possible policy outcomes. I find it sensible here to think it might well be the Commission’s supposition that entities (living and nonliving) are made up of essences that they hold in common with other entities that fall under the same broad ‘classification’. More precisely, the category of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ as applied by the Commission (and by others with a similar turn of mind) to a significant part of the continent appears in line with this kind of extrapolation. So too the characterisation of what is called sub-Saharan Africa as a ‘developing’ region could have much to do with viewing the world in terms of possessing essences. The affirmations of a monolithic singular reality, self-same development in all situations, the attempt to duplicate the West’s experience elsewhere around the world and how this ultimately clears the way for the formulation of blanket policies, all of that needs to be appreciated in the light of those very much loaded (and in reality dangerous) propositions.

Reductionism and the African development process

The other thing to keep in mind is that this particular form of conceptual thought also gets extended to the processes by which complex phenomena or systems work. With reference to the Commission as such, that point seems to find resonance at two intersecting levels: firstly, in the approach that assumes of sub-Saharan Africa development as reducible basically to the North’s own experience, and; secondly, in relation to what the ‘big push’ seems to be all about and how it is supposed to materialise.

To begin with, you may be aware that in much of what I have tried to say up to this point, I sought to convey how moulding Africa in the image of a ‘developed’ West appears to be the abiding proposition. In this vein, the sweeping endorsement of market-led economic growth and representative democracy hence sounds an allusion to the policy of envisioning African development through the prism of the West’s peculiar line of development. That of course is the position doubled down on by Blair and his Commissioners in the face of other possible explanations. For example, an account could be rendered of the predominance in the West of liberal political and economic formations that attributes the whole thing to the vagaries of history; a liberal capitalist West as an arbitrary rather than inevitable historical outcome. But it would in any case be a long shot to expect the Commissioners positing this type of argument for that can prove counter-normative and thus politically problematic. So, from without the dominant narrative framework, it can be almost impossible to justify liberal social formations on a transcultural/ pan-human scale.
Second, and in close association with the above observation, it may help to recall that the Commission has undertaken to bring about aggregate or full-scale transformation by focusing on the individual factors that presumably contribute to African development. Similarly, we also ought to remember that the Commission has counselled about the need to push at once from all fronts as it were. That is to say, the Commission has been quite clear about the fact that anybody willing to promote African development cannot afford to, for example, concentrate on improving governance whilst possibly neglecting to stimulate the economy or else tackle the continent’s debt problem.

When you take stock of the reasoning and the practical policies typifying the Commission for Africa, you tend to develop a sense of how this Commission sees the gist of social development, beside its replicable quality, as a complex process having its own autonomous logic. At the same time, it becomes apparent that the solution to Africa’s development problem depends on getting each and every aspect of the process to work in a mutually-complementing fashion to have a concerted full effect. The very idea of trying to understand how a complex phenomenon works by reducing it to another more readily explicable phenomenon and to the interactions of its component parts seems to come with a long history to boot. It certainly is an example of the reductionist school of thought that marked the scientific revolution which emerged in Europe before and around the time of the Enlightenment. So, what could the implications of this epistemology be in relation to the development process in Africa? I think there are a number of pertinent issues that need to be teased out here.

**Mainstream development script and Africa's future: a transplanted largely parodic enterprise**

The main thing that ought to be stated in this case is that we are dealing with manifestations of a Rationalist, as distinct from Historicism, approach to what African development may ultimately signify. Also, considering the process by which natural and social phenomena such as development tend to unfold, we could again be contending with the lingering dregs of what one suspects is a positivist (quite blinkered) mind-set. Now if this reading of the Commission’s fundamental approach turns out to be correct, then a number of important lessons relating to African development can be drawn from it.

First, based on the appraisal thus far, the central thesis I am willing to impute to the Commission for Africa is the following: that it is somehow possible for it to tackle the
question of development purely at the level of intellectual and deductive inquiry whilst totally sidestepping sub-Saharan Africa—as a real place teeming with a myriad of communities and their equally miscellaneous life styles. This, in turn, hints the Commission probably saw no wisdom to include experience as it designed the relevant policies. In other words, what got omitted from the development picture in the race to come up with a narrowly formalistic argument seems to be the (historical and cultural) realities intrinsic to ‘sub-Saharan Africa’. What is more, the representation of reality along an idealist line seems bound to raise some profound questions as to the Commission’s fundamental claims. Being evidently the outcome of intuitive, rather than experiential, judgement, it is doubtful for example to guarantee a correspondence between the Commission’s development blueprint and the external world that is ‘sub-Saharan Africa’. Naturally, a disjuncture of this sort may have much to do with the very nature of deductive reasoning implied by the Commission’s methodology. The many interlocking and mutually-anticipating premises accepted by the Commission (the inevitability of capitalism; the dichotomous classification of a developed West as exemplar and a developing Africa as oddity; the belief in a game of catch-up) themselves can’t possibly be upheld outside the closed ‘theoretical and ideological framework’ in which they tend to be invoked. As such one might as well dismiss them as superfluous to the everyday concerns of the peoples inhabiting a real Africa. Or, in more substantial term, it may not be an exaggeration to think the solutions on offer will in most (all?) likelihoods fall foul of the needs of sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, the key concern in the Commission toying with the idealist tradition can be that its account appears to risk upending reality. Alas, it often is this warped version of reality, not that lived by the subjects of development themselves, that the Commission’s effort seems to be all about. And yet it is vital to realise that perhaps this whole tendency of portraying Africa in an idealised fashion could be far from a fortuitous misstep. We suspect that this tends to be the case by the demonstrable negative effects on African development in the everyday sense.

In addition, the act particularly of essentialising entire peoples itself ought not to be seen in isolation from being a justification for practices that do not always involve benevolent or altruistic intent. Those with a desire to colonise and otherwise control other peoples’ lives and resources often deploy essentialising, that is pejorative, language as cover for their exploitative actions (cf. Said 1994). Speaking of Africa, we observe that the exact labels with which the continent came to be described may have changed over time though not the adverse consequences of doing so. In earlier times, the category of a barbarous dark continent undoubtedly cleared the way for the transatlantic slave trade and the colonisation of Africa. Meanwhile, usage more recently of subtler variations of that epithet has provided the pretext for continued neocolonial meddling in Africa’s affairs. The historical and
contemporary record tends to be such that many in Africa are likely to take a dim view of the Commission and the solutions it elaborated. That is one side of the argument on the ‘importance’ of Blair’s Commission for Africa. I would like to add below its other and related part, centring specifically on the concept of change assumed by the Commission for Africa.

**On vulgarising a vital process to formalise the status quo**

My comment here pertains to the basic meaning of development, or more exactly to how the development process tends to play itself out. When you think closely about how development is supposed to come about as far as the Commission for Africa is concerned, it can be interesting to know that the process takes place in the same way across cultures and histories. Ultimately, the Commission advocates African development in line with what it obviously imagines is the design and purpose underlying all societies.

Human society is believed to advance linearly along a line from what you might call a less developed to a more complex stage on the basis of an ever-increasing rationality. This passage from a simpler state of being to a more advanced phase comes as a consequence of amassing ‘knowledge’ over time. In addition, the conclusion can be drawn (given the West’s example) that what normally bolsters the cause of development is, beside scientific and technical know-how, the cultivation of ‘optimal’ economic and political ideas and practices. And together with progress on those two specific fronts also goes another qualitative transformation; diffusion within society of a culture of consensus. A discordant posture, on the other hand, would have to be mitigated and otherwise repressed using available ideological channels. In a word, for the architects of the postwar development plan to which the Commission is a faithful heir, Africa appeared to them to be sitting somewhere along a line that the West itself has passed through at a particular point in its history. And here it is perhaps impossible to miss the imprints of modernisation theory in the Commission’s analysis of development. Underlying its thesis thus appears to be the kind of grand-narrative about the way traditional societies develop into modern ones that is the highlight of early postwar development literature. Ideas of ‘economic take-off’ and ‘modern political culture’ elaborated by American social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s seem to have been reproduced in more contemporary discourses about ‘growth’ and ‘improved governance’ for example. So, what makes the development project rather complex and seemingly contentious is that its forerunners have been an integral part of the American foreign policy establishment. Prominent theorists of the modernisation school, for example Walt Rostow, Lucian Pye and Samuel Huntington, collaborated closely with the US government, enabling the latter to project power abroad typically at the expense of the
wishes and desires of the peoples of the Third World. That the Commission turns out to be the beneficiary of work originating with ‘scholars’ who doubled as agents of power may suggest that the development agenda also proves to be about the making and remaking of hegemonic power. But what precisely does such a reductionist vision tell us about the possibility of change or development broadly understood?

A case of misplaced objectivity and its (negative) fallout

As you ponder the Commission’s purposes, you start to suspect that the dominant model of development gets peddled on the basis that general laws underlie all phenomena. Further scrutiny reveals that this in fact is something reminiscent of how the natural world presents itself to us. It can also be indicative of the mode of inquiry we commonly employ to understand its dynamics.

Again, it seems to be the case that the story of modelling social inquiry after the methods observed in the natural sciences goes a long way back to the likes of August Comte, Herbert Spencer and others who followed in their footsteps, for example Emile Durkheim and his disciples. The point that needs to be made about these thinkers is that their work was essentially motivated by a desire to maintain societal cohesion and stability; they were not, in other words, committed to bringing about radical transformation of a grass-roots type which (a thoroughly exploited) African continent could have found potentially useful. So, the Commission had the benefit it seems of referring back to these early exponents of conservative sociology to ‘understand’ Africa’s problems and to ‘map out’ its future. It meant, accordingly, the Commission had to discern the causes that brought the continent to the state it is in by appealing to the (impeccability of the) scientific approach. And because the natural sciences are thought to provide the ground for social research, the Commission moreover could have been satisfied with constraining its effort simply to observing and explaining what lay immediately before it. By the same token, there seems to have been no need for the Commission to be too inquisitive about more ‘intractable’ causal factors.

In terms of theoretical predisposition, this is the system of belief we associate with positivist philosophy and its offshoot functionalist social analysis. As a result, questions emphasising power imbalances between the North and Africa plus the legacy of a disruptive colonialism, instead of being paid due attention, are treated as irrelevant. In all of this, the vital point to bear in mind is that in the process of extrapolating the scientific method to the workings of human society, the concept of social change ends up being explained away. Rather, what
we seem to have is a social evolutionist trend from a lower to a higher stage of being based solely on the argument about instrumental rationality-cum-organic solidarity.

Now, you don’t need to question the fruits of science in furthering our knowledge of the natural world to argue against the claim that social change too must follow from applying the scientific method. This is because, unlike the case with natural phenomena, people are capable of making their own social and cultural worlds through active choice, hence the imperative for an altogether different (hermeneutic) approach to studying society (cf. Thompson 1966; McClelland eds. 1990). It therefore proves not only reductionist, but possibly also tautological to suggest that this higher state of development represented by today’s Western society is where sub-Saharan Africa history seems destined to end.\textsuperscript{84} In the end, for the Commission to insist on such an exclusive line of development, one suspects that there could be a different rationale to its stated mission. So, to uncover the ideological kernel of mainstream development policy which gets obscured by the appeal to scientism, I shall present below a social constructionist alternative reading of the concept of development. This can be achieved by discussing how the West rationalised its experience by creating a model of social development for all, and by arguing simultaneously how untenable this whole process could turn out to be.

5.5 The reified discourse of development and really existing world capitalism

In the first part of this chapter, I mapped the conceptual system underlying the Commission’s work. My intention was to see where the Commission might ultimately be coming from on the question of change broadly and African development more particularly. I implied that its approach thus points to the influence of the model of inquiry followed in the natural sciences. The casting by the Commission of the capitalist order as the only and true human reality was recognised as in line with the scientific convention of having certainty in a conception of reality through necessary propositions. I also touched on some of the problems that could be traced back to its (mute) assumptions, including its ‘theory’ of historical development. In the following component, my concern is with the practical side of African development; I reflect on how this could possibly be realised given not only the Commission’s intellectual orientation, but also the character of really existing capitalism, or the global political economy. So, contrary to the tendency that African underdevelopment constitutes an awkward state whose causes can be remedied using (positivist) scientific analysis, I interpret

\textsuperscript{84} The work of Francis Fukuyama, \textit{The end of history and the last man}, is a notable example in this case.
the development agenda as a social construct. The idea of development as social construct means we no longer can afford to think of ‘development’ on a par with inert things out there. Rather, constructionism alerts us to the fact that the concept of development signifies a man-made myth, an ingenious step originating with particular social agents. The analysis that follows hence focuses on uncovering how neoliberalism as an inclusive economic and political doctrine came into being. This necessitates looking at the ways through which the neoliberal phenomenon was invented, institutionalised and made into a dominant tradition. The same task also involves pointing how the unravelling of postwar capitalism amid a complex international political order allowed an ascendant US to push ‘development’ as a universal project. Simultaneously, the analysis needs to show that the neoliberal order cannot, in and of itself, represent reality and should instead illuminate that in practice the project serves exclusive ends of which the popular masses may not always be clear about.

A reflexive strategy for inducing African development: prospect and problem

In order to ground the analysis on the substance of the Report, I begin by conveying how exactly the Commission envisages African development to come about in reality. It is vital thus to emphasise a key claim the Commission makes about its plan for inducing African development.

Precisely, the Commission touts its initiative as being about a “new kind of partnership” between two equal sides. At the same time the Commission presents this as a move away from previous failed contractual and conditional approaches. As the Commission for Africa (2005:88) states, its inquiry into Africa's challenges and its recommendation at once for a big push “imply that success will dependent on [a robust] partnership between Africa and the world community.” Consequently, fostering mutual understanding, cooperation and even solidarity is thought indispensable to any bi-lateral dealings between the North and the African states.85 Meanwhile, because we are speaking about African and not the North’s future, for the Commission due process also means that the continent’s development must be mandated by Africans themselves. And so, right on the first page of its Report, we hear the Commission enunciating that its “starting point was the recognition that Africa must drive its own development” while the North simply has to lend a hand in this.

No doubt, that is the language the reader intermittently comes by as far as the Commission’s argument goes. In light of these definite claims, and against experience, the immediate

85 That was the very same sentiment echoed by US President Harry Truman on the eve of launching development as a universal project, some half century before Blair came up with his own idea of sponsoring a commission for Africa.
challenge therefore is to check whether what the Commission has set out is a realistic proposal. Beyond the rhetoric of partnership, equality and a resurgent Africa in full control of its future development, I argue that the dominant agenda doesn't appear completely removed from the logic of capitalism, or of expansion, throughs and the need to reinvest surplus profit. Eventually, this is likely to cast doubt on the significance of the Commission's policies to practical African development.

The making and dissemination of neoliberalism: issues and their bearings

Needless to say, the dominant development policies of our time which the Commission for Africa embodies are those of a neoliberal type. So, attempts to judge the Commission's potential should show the relevance of its policies to promoting real African development. In this regard, it is important to begin by summarising first what distinguishes the neoliberal model of capitalism whilst thinking about the practical actions recommended by the Commission. Secondly, as part of the focus on the neoliberalist caste of the Commission's policies, it is important to state when and where neoliberalism appeared, who has been behind its rise and why. To grasp the essence of the neoliberal project, the time and place of its inauguration along with the background of those responsible and their reasons, implies adumbrating the overall trajectory of the capitalist system. Likewise, this enables us to sort the different models the capitalist system adopts along the way. Accordingly, we could report more accurately whether neoliberalism represents a universal approach which makes its espousal by the African states unavoidable.

Coming up with a timely program: who benefits at whose expense and in what way

I made the point that the Commission for Africa appears inspired by neoliberalism. What this says about the Commission is that its development program has been drawn up around a philosophy of the rule of the market. The idea of the hegemony of the market ordains that the economy be completely liberalised—in the interest of the private sector (cf. Friedman 2007). Typically, economic liberalisation policies tend to be pursued in the name of increasing efficiency, or to boost growth from which supposedly all members of society benefit. The relevant policies seem designed to impact the way the capitalist political economy operates in a number of interrelated ways. Ultimately, at the root of the neoliberal vision can be located intense distaste for communal ways of being and a predisposition for individuals to think and decide for themselves as autonomous agents. Against the backdrop
of the broader neoliberal agenda, the section below looks critically at some of the actual policies enumerated in the Report itself.

Above all, neoliberals like Tony Blair officially and unofficially argue for freeing private enterprise from the state’s controlling arm. The drive to maximise profits through unregulated markets is something they strongly endorse no matter the human, social and environmental costs. Yet, whilst seemingly uncompromising on the sovereign and self-promoting character of markets, neoliberals also call for ‘good governance’ to keep markets dynamic. The question for anyone studying neoliberalism, and hence the Commission, then is to clarify what this combinatory proposition usually entails, that is, how the market-governance nexus manifests in concrete situations. Are the neoliberals being incoherent in simultaneously championing the market and allowing for a semblance of public control, or can there be some logic to the story?

To make sense of the issue, it is useful to look at things from the vantage point of the neoliberals themselves. Ultimately, what appears at first as a paradoxical policy in fact turns out to be a conscious choice. It can be interesting to realise hence that ‘good governance’ as commonly perceived by the neoliberals appears to signify a code: arguably, it implies a political framework or system that has the potential to foster global capitalist interests. The reason for stating this comes from the understanding that it can be quite problematic to specify objectively what ‘good governance’ represents. Apparently, the proponents of neoliberalism take good governance to mean only one thing out of many possible considerations. Accordingly, they mostly wind up manipulating the concept for their own ideological needs. In general, the neoliberals’ subjective stance leads to the selective application of what passes for good governance or ‘democracy’ in various real world scenarios. Examples abound whereby the type of governance and the prospect for capitalist growth manifest in inverted ways. Often, what most people are likely to view as bad governance may not matter as capitalism finds the opportunity to flourish. Meanwhile, where the push for global capitalist expansion meets political opposition from some country, the question of ‘democracy’ may become all the more urgent. Bolivarian Venezuela, first under the democratically-elected Hugo Chavez and more recently under Nicolas Maduro, can be considered as a case in point here. As Etler (2017) 86 explains:

Talk about ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ in Venezuela is trotted out whenever the US wants to remove a thorn in its side. But when US

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surrogates attempt to seize or consolidate power, all those concerns fly right out the window.

Eventually, the governance agenda appears aimed at excusing or scorning national politics as “good” or “bad” depending on the orientation towards capitalism. The logic of capitalism remains such that the entire political field encompassing the Right tends to get affirmation over the political spectrum represented by the Left. This could explain why the overseers of global capitalism seem to also have no scruples in coddling to the worst political rulers (the Pinochets, the Suhartos, the retrograde Saudis …etc.) while helping oust popular leaders (like Allende, Árbenz, Mosaddegh, Sukarno, Zelaya and the like) opposed to the imperialist game (cf. Chomsky 1999; 1992). In the case of the Commission, this kind of ideological straitjacket appears responsible for how its discourse on governance ends up distinctly placing the ‘cart before the horse’ as it were. One can isolate specific evidence of this in parts of the Report. You only need to follow how the Commission assumes African development can truly come about if the continent gets its systems right through improved capacity and accountability. To my mind, the idea of coming up with enhanced capacity and accountability from almost nothing sounds like a complete inversion of the meaning of development. It can strike one’s senses as odd to think the African states might achieve greater capacity and accountability without the benefit of the necessary material foundation. Isn’t the absence of capacity, accountability and related resources and skill-sets likely a symptom of underdevelopment, rather than its cause perhaps? And that by no means should be an argument against the need for better capacity and African (and all) governments becoming accountable to their peoples. My point is simply about making clear the order in which development commonly transpires.

Another related feature of neoliberal ideology also underlined in the Commission for Africa is the principle of global free trade and investment; the unrestricted movement of goods, services and financial capital. Commentators like Martin Wolf argue that globalisation works for all, for those in the South as well as the North (Wolf 2004). But the globalisation thesis tends to be contentious too given the impact of the process on the majority (cf. Driscoll and Clark eds. 2003). In practice, the promotion of this specific policy goes against the interests of local producers and against the rights and occupational health and safety of workers worldwide (cf. Robinson 2004; 2014).

Even though the Commission makes a call for ‘more trade and fairer trade’, it is important then to remember that there are real problems with the idea of ‘free trade’ as currently understood and practiced. Given the inequitable and exceptionally rigid setup of the global political economy, it is perhaps simplistic to think of international trade as free. The reality
seems to be that trade and crude power go hand in hand as the policies of the World Trade Organisation, a vehicle for the rich, tend to illustrate. For example, while preaching free trade, the rich nations do engage in protectionist practices and they don’t even have to answer for it. Of the many measures within their disposal, we understand that they not only subsidise their own industries, but also they typically impose forbidding tariffs on African goods, the better to shield their own national markets. The African states may be permitted, consistent with the so-called (Ricardian) principle of comparative advantage, to export those commodities that the Northern markets don’t provide locally. So, under the existing arrangements, Africa finds itself usually producing what it doesn’t consume (for example flowers) and consumes what it doesn’t produce (for example military hardware). And even when any limited trade is possible, the price of whatever products the continent exports normally gets set by the importing (Northern) side. The late Tanzanian president, Julius Nyerere, summed it all up when he spoke to a congregation of European audiences:

This year the rains in Tanzania were quite good. The peasants in our major cotton-growing regions have more than doubled their cotton compared with that of last year. We are desperately short of foreign exchange with which to buy essential imports, and cotton is one of our major exports; we were therefore pleased about this big output increase. But the price of cotton on the world market dropped from 68 cents a pound to 38 cents a pound on a single day in July this year. The result for our economy—and the income of the peasants—is similar to that of a natural disaster: half of our crop, and therefore of our income, is lost. Our peasants—and our nation—have made the effort, but the country is not earning a single extra cent in foreign exchange. That is theft!

(Nyerere, cited in George 1989:99)

There is also the requirement to follow fiscal austerity measures to ‘accommodate’ the demands of markets. A direct result of any budgetary cut-backs of course is a reduction in a government’s capacity for public expenditure and social services. The education and health

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87 To have a sense of the problem, it is recommended that the reader consult the following articles: BAE deal with Tanzania: Military air traffic control—for country with no airforce (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/06/BAE-tanzania-arms-deal); Flowers: Symbols of Love in Europe that Bring Food Insecurity to the African Nations that Produce Them (https://www.globalresearch.ca/flowers-symbols-of-love-in-europe-that-bring-food-insecurity-to-the-african-nations-that-produce-them/5640151) and; Chilean villagers suffer water shortages because of Europeans’ love for avocado (https://www.rt.com/news/427388-chile-avocado-drought-petorca-uk/).
care systems together with other vital services tend to therefore suffer considerably as a consequence (cf. Giroux 2015). In this connection, it is important to point that the Commission urges the African states to treat the educational and health services needs of the poor as basic human rights. It certainly is a positive gesture for the Commission to take interest in the welfare of poor people in Africa and to insist that all are taken care of. Despite such good intention, neoliberalism’s demands for austerity calls into question the Commission’s recommendations about “leaving no-one out” by investing in people. Again, not only does the proposition sound rather redundant, but judging by the actual record of neoliberalism in Africa, it seems ingenuous to think that this development outcome can be met. To give an example, the 2017 Grenfell Tower blaze in London that killed so many and the curtailed capacity of the emergency services to do their job properly in containing the disaster comes as a pertinent reminder of how neoliberal policies undercut the public safety of those marginalised by capitalism. This tends to be even more the case if we recall how neoliberals use financial capital to indebt the countries of the global South in order to influence their future political and economic ‘development’. According to the New Statesman (February 7, 2005):

During the cold war, the developed nations lent willingly to Africa. No worries then about how corrupt dictators might misuse the money or line their own pockets: the US gave millions to the notorious Mobutu regime in Zaire. The fear was that, without cash, these countries would go over to the other side. Once the cold war ended, the debts were smartly called in and, if countries hadn’t got the money, they had to borrow again at higher rates. That essentially is the origin of the developing world’s debt crisis. We dug ever deeper holes for these countries throughout the 1990s.

In numerous cases, debt servicing therefore has helped erode the capacity of the African states to meet the social and public needs of their populations during the last four decades. So the rhetoric about the autonomy of markets coming from the Commission can be one thing and the way real capitalism operates tends to be quite another.88 This makes it hard to envisage meaningful African development under the current global political and economic order. Having outlined how unsuited to Africa the neoliberal model looks like, in the following section I intend to emphasise the provisional and politically-motivated character of neoliberal development policy and practice. In this case, I see a particular need to frame the discussion

88 One may have good reason in asking the following question: Has Blair taken any steps to undo the policies of Margaret Thatcher … the widespread privatisation of public assets, her war on the working men and women of Britain? If as the UK’s prime minister Blair was unable to address the issues confronting his own nation, then how can it be expected that he may succeeded in solving Africa’s even more complex development problems? And that in any case is a rhetorical question.
about the significance of the Commission’s development policies within a bigger picture that is the progress of capitalism over the decades and centuries.

**Capitalism: the wider historic and structural context**

Typically, neoliberalism emerged some four decades ago in Western Europe and North America owing to limitations intrinsic to the capitalist system. In terms of its inception thus the model has no roots whatever in the realities of Africa. If this says anything about neoliberalism, it possibly highlights the model’s dubious footings ultimately. And that, in my opinion, can be the decisive question when considering the significance of neoliberalism generally. This particular observation deserves elaborating to understand what neoliberalism might portend for African development.

Furthermore, history records that the background to the rise of neoliberalism saw the ending of a preceding era of intense capitalist growth and prosperity known as the Golden Age (cf. Hobsbawm 1995). Meanwhile, the 1970s global energy crisis has been also cited as further justification for the shift in a new direction. So, not only is neoliberalism foreign to Africa, but more importantly the model appears to have been conceived to transcend a ‘crisis of excess capacity’ basic to the capitalist system. As anyone can possibly tell, Africa (and indeed the overwhelming majority of the populations in both the North and the South) has neither a hand in nor control over the turn of events in question.

Again, the story of the neoliberal moment cannot be complete without also saying who its protagonists happen to be. It can be interesting hence to follow how the conjuncture brought together numerous players in a spectrum encompassing pro-market ideologues and groups. Those who came to champion this latest chapter of capitalism included economists, political theorists, hitherto obscure neoconservative elements and leading state figures—collectively referred to as the New Right (cf. Harvey 2005). What united them all seemingly was their commitment to untrammelled individualism that directly translated into strong antipathy toward (the role of) government. Undoubtedly, both Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman of the Chicago School of Economics have had a major (academic) impact in the institution of neoliberalism as a political and economic project. Like the modernisation planners before them, this second-batch of theorists also proved to have been closely implicated with power. theirs was a strictly ruling class agenda that run contrary to the interests of workers in terms of decent wages and working conditions. Similarly, the ascendance to power in the US and the UK of Ronald Reagan (1980) and Margaret Thatcher (1979) has been just as momentous. Both these politicians chose to throw the
weight of state power behind the evolving neoliberal consensus at a crucial junction. Under the Reagan administration and the prime ministership of Thatcher, the neoliberal project came to have a staunch enforcer at the politico-military level. In terms of self-mandate, the neoliberals’ collective desire was (and still remains) nothing less than the radical reconfiguration of the existing political and economic order in western countries. It appears that they were totally frustrated by what they saw as the inability of capitalism to move forward under a dominant statist model. Not only did the advocates of neoliberalism manage to push the boundaries of classical liberalism in new and extreme ways, but they also seemed prepared to downgrade some of its key features. That, in general, is the genesis and context for this most recent form of capitalism which again only obliquely involves the African continent and its peoples.

With regard to the Commission for Africa, what this tends to impart is that its program has been guided by the pressures of the market; the peoples of Africa and their social needs thus seem to come second to the diktats of a market-based economy. That history and the social forces implicated in its making however ought to be treated as tangential. On the whole, those changes remain extraneous to Africa and indeed to the bulk (99%) of humanity. Ultimately, the remarkable thing about neoliberalism seems to be that, despite its fringe and localist beginnings, the phenomenon nonetheless has spread far and wide. Before long, the neoliberal influence would filter through to the countries of the global South via the policies of the relevant multilateral financial and development bodies. In reality, hence, neoliberalism as the figment of the capitalist class had to be enforced through coercive means by this class’s political proxies and inspite of the majority. Now, in presenting this rather rudimentary account about the genesis of neoliberalism, my point obviously is: even if neoliberalism appears to be widely accepted at the moment, this doesn’t however preclude that the model stands as a perfect gambit by a privileged minority for the project to have any world-wide lasting application. This latter point in fact invites further exposition. Accordingly, the generally tenuous character of neoliberalism can best be explained if we take into account the evolutionary course of capitalism as defined by continual expansion and recurrent contraction.

**Neoliberalism as interim phase in the development of capitalism**

To come to grips with capitalism and its various expressions—as a contingent rather than lasting reality—it is important to have a sense of the internal logic of the system as a whole. It is this same logic which in turn influences the adoption of specific national and
transnational economic and political policy at any one moment in time. Amin (1998:29) for example teaches us that:

Among the entirety of conceptions making up bourgeois thought, that one which responds best to the demands posed by the particular phase of capitalist development under consideration easily wins its place of intellectual dominance; it becomes the 'single thought' of the moment.

As I have tried to explain elsewhere in this study, we need then to reflect on the genesis and context of the Commission’s program to know the import to African development. And so, to find out whether the Commission can impact African development positively, it becomes necessary to take a longer-term view of capitalist development while paying specific attention to its shifting fortunes in the postwar period.

It is perhaps common knowledge that throughout its history capitalism has been dogged by self-repeating cycles of growth and slump. This alternation of expansion and contraction is a systemic/structural condition that can’t be wished away for good. Given the prevalence of this unresolvable contradiction, the many policies the capitalist class may hatch instead seem akin to a coping mechanism; generally, policies tend to be conceived and enacted reactively and in ways that facilitate the next round of expansion and profits generation. In that sense, the development of the South needs to be considered as of secondary importance. Prior to the neoliberal juncture, capitalism underwent significant crises on various occasions in its development course, a fact outlined below.

One of its earliest crises occurred around the turn of the 19th century as capitalist development then couldn't be confined to the European central territory. In order to overcome that initial impasse, the leading European powers set out on another round of imperialist expansion and conquest. In particular, following the Berlin Conference (1884—1885) and the subsequent ‘Scramble for Africa’, the African continent was divided up and was turned into a source of raw material and a market for goods made in the metropole. A policy of formal colonialism therefore was crucial for national capitalism to overcome its internal limitation at that particular juncture. Even if somehow rationalised as a positive development, the indisputable fact is that Africa had to live through the physical, cultural and psychological ravages wrought by the colonial encounter. Colonialism thus was far from the civilising mission it is sometimes claimed to be; it was instead a low point in the continent’s history that left in its wake a lasting cost, namely an arrested development. This shows that the rhetoric coming from those in positions of power as justification for external intervention and the experience of the dominated don’t normally match up. And so for the next four
decades, capitalist growth proceeded more or less steadily by exploiting the colonies till another hurdle in the form of the Great Depression of the early 1930s brought that expansion to an abrupt halt.

The Great Depression led to the immiserisation of vast numbers of the American population in particular. To deal with the resulting crisis, the US as the leading capitalist powerhouse adopted the Keynesian approach to economic recovery. Under the model, the US government oversaw the national economy and was able to offset the negative social and economic consequences of the preceding laissez-faire capitalism. Not only did the economy picked up fairly rapidly due to greater input by the state, but also the provision of welfare was made an integral part of the public policy of the day. The US of the late 1930s and 1940s lived through the success of that model, which heralded immense national economic riches. This was also around the time when the US emerged as a major political power following its participation and subsequent victory in World War II with comparatively minimal loss and destruction to itself. The achievement of unprecedented economic wealth together with manifest political-military supremacy led to the US reorienting its place globally. Instead of carrying on with the somewhat isolationist pre-war foreign policy, the US now saw an opportunity to play a bigger role in world affairs. Such a comparative position of strength made it possible for the US to contrive a plan for the reconstruction of war-torn Europe. The idea of the US taking responsibility for transforming the futures of other nations gained increasing currency among policy decision-makers subsequently. Beyond Europe, the same policy would soon be extended to the countries of the periphery in the name of modernising their political and economic structures. Such was the constellation of some of the key events and forces which culminated in the institution of the development project. If we consider that history as contingent rather than inexorable, it becomes possible to look at the development project as perhaps reflecting some other (unstated) interest. This last point calls for clarification.

For the US, the development project was a means by which to uphold its position of power vis-à-vis its rivals, in particular the former USSR and a rapidly-transforming new China. So, in the context of the Cold War, development was used by the US government as lever against its ideological nemeses. By promoting economic development with liberal political values, the US sought to contain what it saw as a threatening expansion of world communism radiating mainly from the Sovietist camp. And so ‘development’ was to be particularly targeted at the newly decolonised states of Africa and Asia in an attempt to woe them away from the spell of socialism as it seemed. In turn, development proved an instrument of US imperial power masquerading as an economic and political program for the entire world. On balance, the development agenda therefore appears, even if cloaked in an
intellectual and moral discourse of eradicating Third World poverty, the product of real concerns the US had about its global position in the immediate postwar period. It was articulated strictly in response to the exigencies of the period and in a manner that can serve the US at the expense of the rest. However, given the very nature of capitalism, the postwar economic dispensation couldn't last of course. As I have tried to illuminate previously, the long postwar boom ended in the crisis that cleared the way for the onset of neoliberal globalisation.

Globalisation in this case acted as conduit for surplus financial capital to tap into new markets. Through offshoring, manufacturing was relocated from the original home of capitalism in the West to where it would be possible to reduce the cost of production elsewhere around the global South. Outsourcing and the exploitation of cheap labour have to go hand in hand to facilitate once more the re-expansion of capitalism. I guess therein seems to lie the essence of Blair's Africa Commission as one more channel for the promotion of capitalism in the contemporary moment. But common sense tends to show that any form of expansion whenever appears bound to prove a temporary remedy, so much so that following the Global Financial Crisis (2007/2008) we could already be witnessing the unravelling of neoliberalism as a distinct episode in the long saga known as capitalism. The GFC is of course the outcome of unsustainable lending, itself dictated by a compulsion to overaccumulate at a time of unsteady employment. Accordingly, it becomes really interesting to guess how capitalism regenerates next time round if this most recent crisis doesn't deal it a final death blow. As Feffer (2018) writes:

Such an unwarranted economic boom was hardly something new, so it was easy to predict what would happen next. Periods of irrational exuberance—whether the dot-com expansion, Dutch tulipmania in the 17th century, or the housing bubble in America of the 2000s—have always led to a sudden crash and a serious hangover.

At the time of writing, a sense of foreboding fills the air as the early signs of what might follow sound unencouraging indeed. A rapidly escalating trend featuring radical forces of reaction, for example xenophobic nationalists, fascists and neo-Nazis, is the manifest outcome of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Aggravating this identity-based type of political atavism also are newer wars of plunder, mass migration and acts of wanton terrorism. All this turmoil has now become synonymous with imperialism in the age of neoliberal

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89 This is not to imply however that neoliberal capitalism will end by tomorrow.

globalisation. Amidst all of this, it is important that we try to find another path forward not only for the African peoples but also for all of humanity. This I will be focussing on in the next chapter and as a way of rounding off the study.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter looked at the Blair Commission and the development roadmap it authored on behalf of sub-Saharan Africa. The analysis focussed on the potential of the Commission to bring about the announced development outcomes. Having closely studied the physical composition of the Commission and the text of its findings, I noted that the initiative to promote African development betrays a normative concern. Based on the sense that preserving the status quo is the underlying agenda, I thus questioned the Commission’s promise to fundamentally transform Africa.

I argued in more detail that there exists a considerable gap between what the Commissioners avow and what can possibly be achieved on a practical level. This discrepancy was believed to result from limitations specific to the development paradigm employed by the Commission. In particular, I alluded to how a combination of conceptual baggage and correlated practice, not to mention lasting ideological inertia, renders the Commission’s program unviable in African contexts.

On the one level, the analysis found that the Commission’s vision to be unrealistic because of the ‘incommensurate’ nature of its approach. The original misstep has been that the Commission assumed capitalist development to be natural and indeed the only reality. In addition, the portrayal of African underdevelopment as an aberration to be accordingly resolved appeared deduced from the dubious notion of capitalism as norm. To get to the root of this exclusivist viewpoint, the analysis thus was targeted first at the constitutive presuppositions underlying the Commission’s way of operating. It was shown that behind the Commission’s account of development lay the influence of a long-established Western intellectual tradition of thought and practice. From this perspective, as Comte’s positivism and then Durkheim’s sociology foreshadow, human society can presumably be studied in exactly the same way as the natural world. In accordance, the Commission was thought to have (unduly) drawn on the methodology of the natural sciences to diagnose and remedy Africa’s economic and political challenges. Most of all, the analysis revealed the Commission’s approach as being simultaneously idealist as well as reductionist, and ultimately lacking in terms of the capacity to contribute to real change.
On another level, when the development agenda otherwise was reviewed from a social constructionist standpoint, the inquiry resulted in an altogether different understanding. Here, as the focus of the analysis shifted to the genesis and context of the Commission’s program in place of the absolutism of the market, it became possible to see the strictly ideological groundings of development as advocated by the dominant capitalist powers. Likewise, submitting development to a social constructionist analysis led to the realisation that self-interest, more than perhaps anything else, seems to blinker its advocates to empirical reality. Based on what I have recounted, this applies for example to the choice of the Commissioners who seem to have been vetted as loyal neoliberals whilst shunning anyone who might have other views. The same self-serving ideological impulsion seems to explain too why the Commission remains keen on the neoliberal project despite the worldwide discontent extending over its 40-year long (ruinous) history.

Finally, the gist of the analysis has been that neoliberalism runs counter to the prospect of autonomous African development in about every respect. So, more than proving a step in the right direction, the neoliberal model has been interpreted as a truly backward-looking response to Africa’s ‘development’ challenges. Whether known to those seeking its imposition on the continent or not, neoliberalism’s demonstrated tendency has been to stall radical change. As Africa however needs more of the latter to break free of a vicious status quo, the question of meaningful change ought to be given due attention. It is the subject of my next chapter.
6. THE BROAD DESIGN OF A ‘HETERODOX’ DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Chapter six, the final component of the inquiry, focuses on the implications for sub-Saharan Africa development of the Blair Commission and the Eritrean case. The aim is to figure what a sound development framework for Africa should encompass, and how this could work in reality. Besides, given that neocolonial domination remains a key factor in African underdevelopment, a coherent development policy and action should therefore come along a broadly anti-imperialist line. The chapter is divided into three sequentially organised areas: to keep track, I start out with a short summary of the key findings made over the course of the investigation; next, against the backdrop of the Eritrean story, I (con)test the veracity of the Commission’s thesis on African development, and; finally, and most consciously, I venture some tentative thoughts and strategies toward a plausible development theory and practice within sub-Saharan Africa contexts.

6.1 Recapturing the spirit of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean experiment

Based on the analysis of the two sets of material, it has been shown that the Commission and the Eritrean example express diametrically opposed approaches to development. The Eritrean Government’s radically autonomous position stood in reverse to the Commission’s normative theory of development. In each case, a discrete conceptual and practical frame of reference justified the (conflicting) meaning of development. Also, in both instances, the attitude to development arose as a result of specific historical conditions and political exigencies.

The Eritrean vision of development was found to have been inspired by the Marxist philosophy of nature and socio-historical evolution. In this particular case, the development process thus proved to be undifferentiable from social conflict—over material resources or in the wake of social oppression generally. Also, in opting for a policy of integrated and dialectical change, Eritrea’s modern history came to be the bedrock for the current development experiment. Having grown directly out of the preceding problematic experience, now as then the Eritrean bid has typically been for fully sovereign economic and political development. Here, the ideal of self-development presents as so paramount, which
is why Eritrean development today entails central-planning at the hands of the sole ruling People’s Front party, thereby signalling the extension of the socialist revolution launched by the EPLF. The Eritrean Government’s perception of development accordingly features a political discourse necessitated by the (perennial) quest to offset the complications of hegemonic power. In contrast, it turned out that the development plan concocted by the Commission for Africa owes to concepts of the individual and society intrinsic to Liberalism more generally considered. The whole question of development therefore appeared predicated on, not to mention dictated by, the imperatives of the so-called free market. Again, just as a revolutionary tendency dominates the Eritrean approach to development, the development agenda on this occasion presupposes consensus around a pre-defined framework of change. Accordingly, not only does development anticipate a particular kind of rationality, but also the entire process has to be technically directed and regulated in ways that ensure global capitalist interests.

To sum up, we could categorically state that the disparities between those two approaches to development remain completely unbridgeable. But, beyond the mere sense of mutual-incompatibility, there could be something more fundamental at stake for Africa here. Indeed, the two initiatives bear differently on the practical question of how Africa may oversee its own political and economic transformation. Distinctly, the mechanistic ‘copy and paste’ style of the Commission comes out as misemployment of the concept of development. Or else, the attempt by the West to typically superimpose its experience of (capitalist) development hardly works in an African context. The Commission’s problem seems to be that it assumed wrongly that what ensued in another place and time will replay itself in the Africa of the new Millennium; history normally doesn’t eventuate in such a fortuitous manner. On the other hand, it may perhaps be difficult to deny the more spontaneous ‘by trial and error’ mode underlying the Eritrean approach to development.

From an alternative development standpoint, the likely merit in the Eritrean strategy then is its indigenous and transcultural credentials to an equal measure. This seems to render the Eritrean case somewhat versatile—despite its problems. We could accordingly argue about the adaptability (not transplantability) of Eritrea’s self-determining development policy to other cases across the African continent. Finally, in contrast to the Commission’s evidently absolutistic and redundant outlook, the Eritrean story possibly deserves spotlighting if only to check its import to African development outside and against the status quo.
6.2 Peering into the Commission for Africa through the lens of Eritrea

The objective behind the present study is to draw attention to the African peoples’ potential for self-development. In that regard, the priority has been to augment the self-consciousness of the African peoples as agents of historical change. In view both of the Eritrean case and Blair’s Africa Commission, this task necessitated highlighting the multiplicity and unity of social reality. The analysis thus has been guided by the combined interest of unmasking the contingent character of the dominant neoliberal reality while lending credence to other (marginalised) ways of being and knowing. Specifically, it is considered that real development comes with recognition of the pan-human side of African knowledge and a rebuttal of the claim of universality concerning capitalist development.

The canard of an exclusive neoliberal reality

It has been suggested how the Commission for Africa believes in the transcendent idea that there is only one optimal development track before all societies. At the same time, the analysis has shown that this core premise comes as the by-product of a Eurocentric intellectual tradition vis-a-vis reality and its dynamics. The categorisation thus of African underdevelopment as ‘objectionable’ reality to be accordingly resolved is seen as being anticipated by that grand myth. Inevitably, we saw the Commission for Africa preoccupy itself with ways of finding certainty in a representation of reality by means of propositions. Similarly, behind its practical effort to ‘solve’ African underdevelopment lay the residual belief that positivist analysis uncovers the true causes of any type of problem. The argument in favour of capitalist reality as natural and therefore mandatory is thought to be rooted in that sweeping claim. But lest it be forgotten, the Eritrean Government’s indigenous and otherwise discretionary way of doing things meantime has been recognised as lending a different meaning to ‘development’. The case demonstrated that there can exist other (contrarian) ways of effecting economic and political change. As will be explained below, the assumption then that capitalist development is inevitable and obtains from following a designated template remains far from the (whiggish) case that it is made of.

In order to counter the notion of a singular neoliberal reality, it was essential to problematise the concept of development, including the accepted wisdom of a developed North as model/patron for a developing Africa. This led to a discussion about how the whole saga of development came to be normalised, whilst allowing for other ways of organising society politically and economically. So, by treating the development phenomenon as a social construct, it was possible to realise that ‘development’ actually takes place within, not
outside, human history and real power relations. Accordingly, it turned out no longer problematic to distinguish the ideological side of what goes for mainstream development policy and action. Moreover, it became apparent that development arose as a historical- and cultural-phenomenon with a geographic epicentre somewhere in the Western world. Ultimately, it was resolved that the pursuit of so-called development can’t be a definitive answer to whatever the rest of the world including Africa presumably lacks.

That is the general tenor of the argument informing the present study. It censures the dominant development framework as being contrary to meaningful African development. Of course, we ought to keep in mind that interest in the broader question of power, knowledge and social practice goes a long way back. Typically, the problem (of dominant representation) has been widely studied from within certain left-leaning perspectives, resulting in a pool of theoretical knowledge.

For example, there is that substantial body of thought symbolised by postcolonial and postdevelopment theory, poststructuralism and (a portion of) Subaltern Studies which has shown great promise for the capacity to identify the ideological foundations of hegemonic knowledge and practice. Since the central premise of this study partially consisted in theoretically challenging the dominant development model (as first step in the overall objective of eventually moving beyond capitalism), it is hardly possible to discount the relevance of this form of abstract analysis to the present study.

When taking stock of what this project originally sought out to accomplish, it is probably true then it mostly aligns with much of what has been captured through this closely interconnected but varied literature. As initially Foucault, then Said and more recently some of the postdevelopment writers have speculated, the secret in systematically analysing the Commission and its development text has been the tendency to also view knowledge produced by those in positions of power as mere discourse. In this case, discourse analysis as a distinct mode of inquiry has proven advantageous for tracing the essentially Western character of the narrative of development highlighted in the Commission’s Report. A theoretical critique of the Commission’s development text hence made it possible to underline its non-organic underpinnings. Likewise, this has translated into an opportunity to unmask the vested political and economic interests promoted by the Commission at the expense of the peoples of Africa. More than that, the analysis capitalised on the insight deriving from that broad body of knowledge to dispute the entrenched subject position of the African as far as the dominant development discourse goes. In the process, it became
possible to think, based on the present researcher’s personal experience, of opening up space for an alternative beyond orthodox approaches to African development.

The conclusion that could hence be drawn was that, generally told, there are plural realities, all of which jostle for truth and legitimacy. As such, the capitalist political and economic order can’t be said to represent reality in the absolute sense. Not only does capitalist development not represent reality, but also the development project itself reeks of being fictitious apparently, a complete invention at the hands of its advocates. Contrarily, it made sense to see that people (anywhere and at all time) as active subjects do make their own social and cultural worlds, which in turn influence their thought patterns and practical actions as well. That is what turns out to be positive about analysing dominant knowledge as discourse; we can see that the push for an exclusive reality becomes untenable due to moot ideological factors. But then in stressing the provisional character of the neoliberal order and the facts of diversity, one needn’t have to be a complete relativist. In other words, it is important to avoid making the (ultimate) contention that reality is in flux, arbitrary or even countlessly reproducible; it is better advised to think otherwise. So, regardless of how theoretically incisive discourse analysis proves to be, there is limitation to what can be fruitfully achieved through the approach. And, as far as this study is concerned, herein possibly lies the importance of adding Eritrea as an empirical case. Its incorporation into the present study is intended to buck the idealist trend that constructionism and the emphasis on discourse is bound to foster.

**Of historical materialism and its spatiotemporal latitudes**

No doubt, submitting the dominant model of development to critical discourse analysis taught us some important lessons about the basic nature of ‘development’. By focusing on development as discourse, it was possible to penetrate the artificial, but potentially impactful, reality that results from the manipulation of language. We thus saw how discourse plays a not-so-negligible part in empowering some groups as it disempowers others, often representing the majority.

All the same, it was deemed sensible to venture beyond the limitation that the use/ misuse of language imposes when discussing real economic development, a life-and-death question for the poor all over the global South. Unlike the discourse analysts, it was therefore felt that it can be a disservice to the African peoples to purport that their problems (however portrayed) will cease once we dissect the dominant development discourse for what it is. It was never considered to be wise and otherwise satisfactory to address concrete
development in a manner that is simply reactive—to what Africa’s detractors have said and written about the continent, its peoples and their future. A deep-running (theoretical, methodological and political) concern forces the serious Africa advocate to desist from going along too far in that course. That is why, in commencing the present study, it was thought useful to have a dual mandate in mind—of not just critiquing the Commission’s development text, but also outlining a suitable alternative by including empirical evidence from the real world of the African continent itself. Perhaps uniquely among the sub-Saharan African states, Eritrea in this case tends to be an opportunity to look at the dominant paradigm of development in a totally different way, using the ABCs of political economy.

Despite the Commission’s avowals, the Eritrean case appeared relevant to tackle crucial questions about the nature of development thought and action. Following the Eritrean example, we could infer that in a none-egalitarian world like ours development is suggested universally by the dialectic of desire and coercion. And here too, the study recognises that the topic of African and ‘third world’ economic and political development in the context of unequal relations with the dominant powers has its own expansive history. In that respect, the present study shares common ground with the more formal Marxist empirical analyses of unequal social development centring on the capitalist political economy. In particular, the contribution by such diverse Africa scholars as Lionel Cliffe, Colin Leys, Giovanni Arrighi, John Saul, Patrick Bond, Issa Shivji, Ray Bush and Samir Amin is what this research also sought to build on. Over many decades, this collective’s on-the-ground generated accounts have helped shine an important ray on the various dimensions of the African development crisis. Indeed, it is possible to see some overlap between the present (empirically-informed) study of Eritrea and the way many of these Africa specialists have approached the continent’s development problem. But at the same time we could also point to where the argument somewhat diverges from the standard set by the political economy writers. The main point of difference (particularly with the overly materialist among them) is that they tend to be economic determinists who downplay the obscuring power of discourse and any oppression which isn’t grounded on social class. In the end, and despite its many limitations, the Eritrean model of development therefore served as a lens for interrogating the dominant approach to development. It has done so in the following specific way.

Accordingly, a more accurate account of development instead is set to capture a people’s struggle for freedom from domination (subtle or crude) as timeless and universal human experience. Against this all-encompassing principle, the Commission’s position that sub-Saharan Africa transformation is bound to come only from free market economics and a liberal political culture tends to be fallacious. Such a monolithic approach to development is
shown to be antithetical to the fundamental right of self-determination of the peoples of Africa. It reinforces the view that imperious external tutelage and meaningful internal development inevitably run a collision course. In other words, the very step of a Northern state patronising an African development commission means that such initiatives detract from the organic and popular underpinnings of the development process. In particular, it can be cause for scepticism when the Commission insinuates its development paradigm is of universal validity. It is contended that the mix of assumptions, methods and conclusions all of which endorse a free market development model for the region sounds like no accident. The analysis pointed to the fact that the whole initiative tends to be a façade for the cultivation of material interests on behalf of a very tiny minority of transnational elites, not the African masses. Ultimately, the Commission for Africa could be explained as peddling a dominant global order that intensifies the grip of neocolonialism in the continent.

This study thus was conceived to support the right of the sub-Saharan African countries and their peoples, of which Eritrea is just one example out of many, to resist and transcend the neoliberal global order heralded by the Commission for Africa. Most importantly, the study reclaims the meaning of development in the interest of the subjects of development whilst simultaneously corroborating the latter’s culture, consciousness and agency. The endorsement, not in absolute terms to be sure, of the Eritrean take on development meanwhile served as a reminder of what possibilities there seem to be before the majority world—were it to renounce the model of development specific to the West’s historical and cultural experience. In the Eritrean domestic experimentation with development tends to be present rudiments, and only rudiments, for a different form of African development, and indeed universality. Rather than being constrained like the capitalist approach to development by the misapplication (at the hands of the bourgeoisie) of Enlightenment rationality and the positivist methodology, Eritrea’s (historical materialist) definition of ‘progress’ through struggle against natural and social hurdles reflects a pan-human way of being and knowing. The case appears useful to show the universal value of local knowledge where alternate African development is question. So, in light of the story that emerged following a discussion of the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean model, how possibly can we redraw future African development?

6.3 Beyond past and present actualities: towards a realistic African development framework

The comparison between the Eritrean approach to development and that of the Commission for Africa engendered some important questions about the nature of development thought
and practice. In the wake of the analyses, we have been obliged to reconsider the correlation between: endogenous versus exogenous, bottom-up versus top-down and holistic versus reductionist approaches to development. Equally, what loomed large was the question of power in development and the agents responsible for effecting change.

The essentially prescriptive policies contained in the *Report* gave the impression that the Commission’s recommendations may have been made on an ad hoc basis, in turn mirroring the underlying concern of pushing capitalist globalisation. By contrast, what came to light following the analysis of the Eritrean ‘discourse’ was this; first, that it is possible to dissent from the status quo and to pursue instead development that is in one’s self-interest; in addition, that there tends to be at all time a more practical, if by no means ideal, path to development before any one country despite the apparent immanence of the capitalist system. As has been noted already, the question then is to clarify what lessons the Eritrean case possibly offers vis-à-vis sub-Saharan Africa development. In this regard, there are a number of interconnecting issues that we should try to resolve. In the first place, the search for an alternate development obliges stating what type of development could be appropriate in African contexts. Equally, it becomes important to discuss the means for carrying through the required change together with the spatial reach or scope at which this may have to take place. These concerns are addressed in succession below.

**Envisioning a congruous development model**

Typically, the belief about the organic makeup of the development process means any realistic African development has to originate from within the continent itself as key player. Also, according to this criterion, it becomes important to specify the essential features of the relevant development theory and practice. Following is a rather seminal note on how future African development can be conceptualised and practically implemented. But, before we hope to map out the necessary development framework, we must clear the ground first by reviewing the continent’s present broad economic and socio-political state. So, the focus initially is on why the neoliberal model should be denied a place in Africa’s future and on certain pitfalls (intellectual and political) that have to be simultaneously addressed.

**Shelving the neoliberal model as irreformable**

As a matter of practical necessity, any vying theory of African development should be endorsed based on its capacity to prevent the African peoples resigning to their present lamentable fate under neoliberal globalisation. This turns out to be even fundamental
knowing how the advocates of neoliberalism present their case in the most complex language (ahead of direct physical coercion as the case can be).

Often, the rhetoric of neoliberal globalisation comes across as highly persuasive for it is coated in rather benign-sounding terminologies. It is hard to say much against such clichés as ‘growth decreases poverty’ or that ‘good governance is the precondition for all-round development’. This may explain why many governments as well as non-governmental bodies around the global South have been co-opted by the seductive discourse of neoliberal capitalism. And that is why too this study doesn’t downplay the power of discourse as part of the current analysis of the African development problem. If we were to succeed in our task of charting a better future for Africa, possibly the first step is to unpick the underlying agenda involving capitalist globalisation. That is to say, we have to be able to see into the thicket that the reified jargon of capitalism really stands for. Think here of how ‘the market’ gets portrayed as a self-enclosed congenial domain and as if independent from (negative) external influences such as those which gave us the GFC. It is even claimed an ‘invisible hand’ structures its operation. And to cap it all, its exponents assume the market has a life of its own when they talk about it in anthropomorphised ways (markets were nervous this morning but settled down later in the today). That of course doesn’t necessarily reflect the way markets actually work. As Curcio (2017) argues, it is not the “invisible hand” but rather the “foreign visible hand” of the market that has the most decisive role when speaking of the economies of the South. In reality, this thing called the market then appears designed to cater primarily for the interests of powerful groups who don’t have to abide by its ostensive rules. The Commission’s delicate articulations stand as a clear illustration of this problem. Through vague generalities (growth rates, improved governance, balanced partnerships, debt review … etc.) the Commission hopes to normalise the record of neoliberal capitalism in Africa, but evidently the real legacy speaks quite for itself. And it is this latter point with which I concern myself for now.

Time and again, the neoliberal model has proved incapable of furthering prosperity and human happiness. It has been shown to contribute to the enrichment of the very few and then only so at the cost of immiserising the multitudes. Wherever it has been applied, the general trend has been predictably the same globally—even if the absolute poverty found in parts of the global South remains starkly incomparable to the relative poverty levels prevalent in much of the North. The reason for this apparently is the yawning gap between the rhetoric of neoliberalism and the way the model operates in reality. One routinely hears the common refrain in favour of neoliberalism that in the end ‘all boats will be lifted’. Instead, it can be argued that the worldwide impact of neoliberalism has been felt more like a tsunami
tide that washes everything in its path into undifferentiable debris. Judging by its track record in Africa and elsewhere around the world, it is perhaps natural then to reject the neoliberal model as something not liable to reform. Even the IMF itself, in a 2016 paper titled *Neoliberalism: Oversold?* has come to wonder about the ‘potential’ of neoliberalism to usher in economic growth and prosperity. Now, if the IMF seems to be willing to revisit its long-held stance, this ought to be reason enough for the African states to also rethink the significance of neoliberalism as a suitable development model.

Post-independence Africa has fared badly under the grip of neoliberalism. The problems of neoliberalism in Africa became even more acute following the weaponisation of financial capital in the era of so-called globalisation. From the early 1980s onwards, debt has given Africa’s creditors a rare lever to determine the continent’s economic and political trajectory. Through the Fund and the Bank, the major powers have been able to pursue intrusive policies vis-à-vis the continent that came to be (euphemistically) known as structural adjustment programs or SAPs—probably aptly acronymised for sapping any vitality the region previously had. The indebted African countries have been forced to place their economies at the mercy of a capricious system whilst the demand for austerity helped further exacerbate the already regrettable social conditions. At the same time, the few African states (for example, Libya before 2011, Zimbabwe under Mugabe, Sudan and Eritrea) which refused to fully play by the rules of the game were made to live with the debilitating effects of economic sanctions and other forms of punishment. That is the neoliberal actuality that the African continent would do better to forget. But what could the solution to the problem of African underdevelopment be in the end? Here, it is important to distinguish between false pathways that almost immediately run into dead-ends and more realistic strategies as we think about the continent’s future. I begin with what we must avoid as inadequate responses to Africa’s economic and social difficulties before thus saying something about a possible way forward.

**Traps in misemploying the past**

The rejection of the neoliberal order and the pursuit of alternative development strategies ought to be one and the same project. That certainly can’t be any easy, knowing how deeply-running the internal and external challenges to ‘African development’ turn out to be. It is nevertheless essential to retain ideological clarity along with radical economic and political praxis to get Africa closer to that final destination. In this sense, the focus particularly is on the types of responses that the enduring crisis of African underdevelopment may tend to
elicit. The discussion at this point then relates to what we ought to rule out as incompetent responses and resolutions to the problems faced.

Basically, it is incumbent upon Africa’s advocates to censure all regressive measures rooted in an insular perception of the past and of oneself. Occasionally, the past witnesses a revival in some unwelcome ways, wherein it interferes with on-going efforts to build a more inclusive and promising future. In case there is residual tendency to hark back to the past, the pursuit of development that is apparently in Africa’s interest may not permit recreating what was once. There seem to be a couple of complicating factors that we should particularly be aware of and do all we can to limit. On the one hand, Africa can’t anticipate restoring its pre-colonial ways as antidote to her post-colonial woes. Nor, on the other hand, should the continuing African development predicament be exploited by outsiders for this continent’s potential re-colonisation. In the end, the quest for veritable development obliges that the African continent sets its gaze firmly on the future. It can also mean that Africa has to be cautious against being physically reconquered which seems possible at this point in her history. These two key themes about the past and the present are taken up in turn below.

**Against atavism**

At one level, the injunction not to go against the current of history comes from the specific understanding that the world has undergone an irreversible shift since the so-called Age of Discovery. The end of the 15th century marked a major milestone, ushering in its wake unprecedented changes that have swept the entire globe over the intervening five centuries. All hitherto autonomous and semi-autonomous societies were suddenly engulfed by that unforeseen development. Needless to say, things have never been the same again for the non-European world.

Since taking effect that very long, globalisation drew humanity forever closer, at more cost to some than to others. Like the other parts of the world outside the European circle, a flourishing (but far from idyllic) pre-colonial Africa got emasculated by the uneven contact with the classical European empires. Although a legitimate claim can be made about pre-colonial African development, that erstwhile path to progress has permanently now being blocked. Today we all live under a world system constituted as an objective reality owing to the forces of globalisation. That is why the formulation of a credible theory of African development ought to anticipate this new global reality. It is to say that any viable approach to African development has to be free of all fundamentalist/primordialist trends. A call like
this seems all the more urgent at a time when (unthinking) identity politics is in ascendance everywhere in both the South and the North.

Accordingly, we must reject as throwback to medieval times certain distinct phenomena that have become largely a familiar feature of the African social and political landscape. To be more specific, the emphasis here ought to be on ‘opposition’ to foreign economic and political domination which draws inspiration from a religious fundamentalist tendency. Also, we must include in this connection that variety of African ‘national politics’ which tends to be practiced along a deliberately sub-national line.

To be sure, it makes no sense to be against people self-identifying as who they are in everyday life setups. However, it seems proper to have reservations against personal affiliations becoming the basis for public affairs. Identity can best be seen as a double-edged sword in the sense that it can be a force for good or bad depending on how it might be invoked and for what sort of reasons. It would be helpful to the reader to explain here how identity politics in Africa tends to be hijacked for negative purposes in certain contemporary situations. Whatever the underlying grievances, it is hard to see anything positive accruing to Africa and her peoples for example from the putative beliefs and actions of the Boko Harams and the Lord’s Resistance Armies. The same goes for outfits like Al-Qaida in Mali and surrounding areas. Their particular brand of politics only tears at the social fabric of the nation which then undermines its unity and therefore its capacity for development. The fact that they are especially virulent as their arbitrary violence makes clear has a further complicating dimension beyond the immediate suffering of their local victims. The bigger danger for Africa seems to be that their very presence and activities has given munition to outside forces to intrude into the continent’s affairs in a post-9/11 global environment dominated by a heightened sense of anxiety and fear. Ultimately, their perceived dogmas and the political actions inspired by it tend to be self-defeating. By choosing to step outside of history, those espousing a fundamentalist worldview often end up confusing the real sources of the African peoples’ exploitation. They are condemned to fighting marginal battles and on the wrong side of history to boot. Their exclusivist tendency makes it impossible for them to reach out to others who otherwise might have better understanding of Africa’s social and economic problems, and who could have wound up being their allies in a common secular struggle for Africa’s second and final liberation. If religiously-motivated ideas and practices are to be effective, there seem to be some conditions under which this might be possible, as I discuss below.
When religious thought and action is given a progressive spin, its adherents can be expected to have a positive input into society’s affairs. Indeed, beyond the virus that the Boko Harams and co. symbolise, apparently there are live examples from around Africa and elsewhere of how religion can play a constructive social role. This often comes about when faith causes one to engage with the real world, not retreat from it.

The liberation theologians of Central and Latin America, who bridged religion and revolution in the form of a preferential option for the poor, seem to provide a succinct example here. Even if the phenomenon of liberation theology proper may be missing from the African context, we could still think of what appears an African equivalent of deploying religion as a generally helpful social resource. Both Desmond Tutu and the late Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, for example, possibly come in this line. Tutu’s Anglicanism didn’t stop him from actively campaigning against apartheid in his native South Africa, just as Oscar Romero and Ernesto Cardenal did then against the repressive Salvadoran and Nicaraguan regimes respectively. Presently, Tutu stands as an uncontested moral authority on matters relating to human rights in particular, the very same cause for which Archbishop Romero gave his life. For his part, Taha sought, through his project of New Islamic Mission during the 1980s in Sudan, to confer a radical humanist tone on the Muslim faith. Taha was concerned and was quite unhappy indeed about invoking Quranic scripture in its literal sense some 15 centuries on. In particular, he was averse to the hijacking of Shari’a law by today’s political authority whilst consistently calling for a more pragmatic re-reading of the Islamic texts. Taha was accused of corrupting the minds of Sudan’s youth and of being impious. Also, reminiscent of Socrates during his own plight, Taha refused to disavow his stance despite the dire accusations he faced. Although Taha himself was executed for his ‘heretical’ beliefs, and the movement he inspired has subsequently lost momentum, his legacy lives on through the scholarship of the contemporary thinkers Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. More than any time before, the predominantly Muslim part of Africa needs the ideas and insights of Taha, An-Na’im and Abu Zayd if it were to counter the fanaticism of an expanding Salafist/Takfiri influence and its negative repercussions on development.

**Against the spectre of re-colonisation**

At a related level, the objection to the thought of re-colonisation seems to derive from the conviction that it can be impossible to solve Africa’s development problems by also going back in time. On the face of it, talk of Africa’s recolonisation by the West and in the 21st century may be odd-sounding. But judging by the turbulent state in which global capitalism finds itself in today, such a concern needs to be taken seriously and not just as
overstatement. There seem to be intersecting economic and geopolitical reasons for why the question of Africa’s physical recolonisation can perhaps no longer be talked about in the abstract or hypothetically. Of course, this latest project of domination over Africa may not come across as a patently vulgar scheme. Rather, it represents a venture that appears to be proceeding under a subtle strategy, one typically involving claims of security, counterterrorism, failed states, human rights, illegal migration … etc.

Starting a decade ago and continuing on neoliberal capitalism has run into a deepening structural crisis of its own making from which it has hitherto failed to free itself. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007/2008 has been particularly decisive in causing the current worldwide economic and political confusion. The crisis has dented the ‘normal’ operation of global capitalism as overseen by the traditional parties within the major Western powers. Meanwhile, what has tended to complicate the present crisis further are apparently certain specific factors. Compared with previous experience, this latest crisis comes at a time of shrinking possibilities for further capitalist expansion and in the context of intense competition for resources and markets from powerful players (US, EU, China, India, Russia). And, underlying this whole picture one finds the neoconservative political-military agenda of world domination in which the principles of international law and state sovereignty have been subordinated to American exceptionalism. So, in terms of the ramifications for Africa and the rest of the world we could be talking here about an extraordinary historical conjuncture.

It is under this fraught global reality that the system’s guardians must somehow find a way forward, since stasis spells the end of capitalism. Again, the structural nature of the current crisis means capitalism can possibly only go forward by instituting drastic measures. So far, the political fallout from the GFC has been particularly unsettling in both the North and the South. As the system continues to writhe from its self-inflicted wounds, we simultaneously observe Western political culture regressing into its most unpleasant forms. In the case of Africa, evidently the shift in the fortunes of global capitalism has translated into an increasingly militarised policy toward the continent. Consistent with the nature of capitalism, already wars and conquests have proven effective in mitigating the crises of the system. Given Africa’s comparative political weakness and considering the topsy-turvy state of current global politics, the very same option appears unavoidable this time around. This seems to be the gloomy prospect faced by many nations around the world as a consequence of the neoconservative/liberal interventionist agenda in the 21st century world. As early as the first half of the 1990s, the neoconservatives, through their Project for the New American Century, made it clear that nothing will stand in the way of raw American power. This composite group, which counts itself as the (self-appointed) overseer of the
global order, appears intent and indeed willing to stamp its authority by whatever means necessary as the destruction of Yugoslavia (1999) and the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq (2003) for example have demonstrated. Presently, the on-going conflict in Syria represents one of the clearest and deeply disconcerting examples of the way this interventionist policy operates. Even though the Syrian nation has so far managed to weather the assault against it by the jihadist proxies of western imperialism, the US, NATO and their regional allies couldn't resist throwing every obstacle in the way of the Syrian State asserting its full independence. These external aggressors even went as far as trying to physically insert their militaries on Syria’s sovereign soils as a way to thwart a Syrian full victory. As Giraldi (2018)\textsuperscript{91} comments:

\begin{quote}
... the United States presence in Syria is completely illegal both under international law and under the U.S. government’s War Powers Act. Syria is a sovereign state with a recognized government and there is no U.N. or Congressional mandate that permits Washington to station its soldiers, Marines and airmen within the country’s borders. The argument that the recent Authorizations to Use Military Force (AUMF) permitted the activity because groups linked to al-Qaeda were active there and the local government was unable to expel them is only thinly credible as the U.S. has also attacked Syrian Army forces....
\end{quote}

It seems clear then that we could be on the cusp of a unique point in world history in which the use of ‘soft power’ has likely been eclipsed by the threat of violent aggression and reoccupation due to the exacerbating state of global capitalism. And, as Con Sal (cited in Telesur 2018)\textsuperscript{92}, adds:

\begin{quote}
These vicious, cynical assaults to destabilize—and, if necessary, destroy—whole countries cloak the inescapable global economic reality that Western corporate capitalism is hopelessly uncompetitive compared to emerging rivals Russia and China.
\end{quote}

So, the reconquest of certain parts of the global South in the new Millennium seems to be still on the agenda. In the end, how we conceive of and intend to act upon the problem of

\textsuperscript{91}See \url{http://parstoday.com/en/radio/middle_east-i74729-destroying_syria._why_does_the_us_hate_bashar_al_assad}

\textsuperscript{92} See \url{https://www.telesur.net/english/opinion/Nicaragua-Parade-of-the-Hypocrites-20180502-0022.html}
African underdevelopment should force us to take into account the new global reality of militarised imperialist intervention and expansionism. We should be able to know what might be required as a post-GFC neoliberal capitalism looks to fundamentally reorganise itself all over again, and right at a time when talk about, and indeed concrete moves at, recolonising Africa seems to be already in the air (cf. Gilley 2017).

**An intelligent synthesis of Africa's past into a contemporary outlook**

But all shouldn’t be doom and gloom. In fact possibilities abound as to how to forge ahead. Africa on a local scale and humanity on a more universal level may embody what it takes to bring about balanced/abiding development. Similarly, the point about the new type of development has to be that it does not have to be defined by unlimited growth and mindless consumption. Such ‘development’ may not be sustainable over the long run.

Instead, development in the future has to be based on ideals of social justice and environmental protection with the long-term survival of humanity itself as the ultimate goal. In an earlier notation, it was pointed that the past is unalterable, which is generally true. Still this doesn’t mean that there can be nothing interesting or valuable in the African continent’s history which could have relevance for the contemporary world. Those who portray the African past in negative light don’t seem keen on giving minimum thought to real history; their ideological blinkers tend to stop them from trying to understand Africa and its peoples objectively. Certainly, the African continent has been home to a range of civilisations that dotted its vast territories. As the Guyanese scholar, Walter Rodney, has meticulously documented, these were made up of a number of vibrant empires and kingdoms like the Aksumite Empire, Ashanti Empire and the Zulu Kingdom, to name just a few at random. In their wake, some of them have left invaluable legacies. So what possibly is there that is quintessentially an African heritage and which can be taken on board for the purpose of working out a contemporary development outlook?

Throughout Africa, from Cape to Cairo, Mombasa to Monrovia, one comes across certain vital concepts and practical everyday behaviour patterns that are part of the cultural reservoir of the continent. It is not improbable that the existing trove of African knowledge and practices can be harnessed to outline a more appropriate development theory and practice for our times.

Among other things, we should be able to tap into such time-honoured African philosophies and ‘customs’ as Ubuntu (southern Africa, cf. Hailey 2008), Ujamaa, Harambee and Shama-
Shama (eastern Africa: Tanzania, Kenya and Eritrea respectively) and Takaful (northern Africa). In particular, the definition of humans as socially anchored implicit in these concepts could offer a genuine alternative to the in-ward looking socially unmoored (gluttonous) homo economicus who is the centrepiece of economic theory. And then again why maybe confine one’s search to what can only be located within the territory of Africa proper. Indeed, other opportunities seem to present themselves from outside the African world. In this connection, it suffices perhaps to mention the Quechua concept of Sumac Kawsay, or Buen Vivir and Well Living in Spanish and English respectively (cf. Philipp 2017). The interesting aspect about these closely related paradigms of being may be the notion that for development to be well-balance it has to feature several things simultaneously. Precisely, the harmony in this form of collective development seems to come from seeing individuals, society and the natural environment as an integrated whole in which no single dimension takes priority over the others (cf. TeleSur 2017). It is thus hard to overstate the value for a more practical form of development associated with such distinctly non-Western perspectives amid the continuing crisis precipitated by a rampant capitalism. The observation probably makes even more sense if we consider how capitalism has given us alienated individuals (or cheerful robots according to C. Wright Mills), communities rife with social ills and environmental pollution and destruction. As Rockstroh (2017) explains:

... a greater number of Americans died ... from drug overdoses, last year, than were killed during the course of the Vietnam War .... All part and parcel of capitalism's war against life itself. The emotional and physical pain, anxiety, and depression inflicted by the trauma inherent to a system sustained by perpetual exploitation has proven to be too much for a sizeable number of human beings to endure thus their need to self-medicate.

It is clear from Rockstroh’s and others’ accounts that capitalist development seems far from guaranteeing the health and wellbeing of individuals, society and the ecosystem. But what could the alternative to capitalism be? And how might we build on existing indigenous knowledge and practices as we try to unlock the future?

Since these community-based and -inspired beliefs and practices run counter to the acquisitive individualist mentality so central to capitalism, incidentally that seems to sit well with the basic tenets of socialism in which the needs of human beings are given precedence

94 See https://www.mintpressnews.com/late-stage-capitalism-denying-the-imperium-of-death/234765/
over the economy and profit-making. So, socialist development has to be seriously contemplated here.

Yet, what sort of ‘socialism’ can we possibly be talking about this time around? As Levine (2018)\textsuperscript{95} would have it, “the ambiguities and imprecisions that have clustered around the notion … are especially severe nowadays.” Clearly, experience shows that the idea of socialism could be problematic in practice; socialism tends to degenerate into authoritarianism in the absence of due checks and balances. We know for example how 20\textsuperscript{th} century state socialisms such as those which emerged in Eastern Europe and in Russia itself under Stalin have proven themselves too bureaucratic and politically oppressive to be viable in the long run—despite the many real social and economic achievements. It is to be noted too, in parenthesis maybe, the following in reference to Eritrea’s economic and political model. For all its appearance of unconventionality, post-independence Eritrea closely echoes the sort of political reality associated with the socialism of that era. A significant anomaly about the Eritrean version of socialist development is the total absence of democratic space due to dogmatic centralism. Being a late starter in the race for national development may have contributed to the rather limited form and character of the Eritrean and some of the previous socialist experiments. Also, in the context of a global order controlled by the major imperialist powers, the idea of socialism in one country, never mind in an underdeveloped one like Eritrea, means political pressure and economic difficulties could leave such countries prone to losing their initial revolutionary momentum and even becoming corrupted. Eritrea’s recent alignment with the reactionary politico-military agenda of the Saudis and the Emirates to subjugate an impoverished Yemen can be a good example of how the banner of ‘socialism’ doesn’t always guarantee what goes on in reality. So without necessarily abandoning the idea of socialism altogether, it is important to understand how the concept might be adapted to have more practical relevance for our present time. Again in the words of Levine (2018), ”because ‘socialism’ can mean all kinds of things or nothing very specific at all, there are a lot of possibilities.” The African countries thus should take seriously how far socialist economic policy in combination with participatory political democracy can go in bettering the conditions of their peoples.

Another type of development: its means of delivery and its spatial configuration

Having roughly outlined what sort of development might be appropriate in African contexts, it is necessary to discuss its other integral aspects. We should be able to work out the ‘at what

\textsuperscript{95} See https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/07/27/behold-socialism/

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level and by whom' part of the development equation. When it comes to saying which force or pool of forces could have a role in advancing meaningful African development, one's reflex is that all entities (African and non-African) impacted by the capitalist system have a stake in countervailing and in helping with its supersession. Similarly, capitalism being the world system that it is, the expectation is that lasting development needs to also have a universal dimension. Even so, such a transnational project can't be imagined to go against the diverse modes of struggles that exist in the many parts of the world. Of the various types of struggles involving distinct protagonists, the following section looks only at the role of the working class, progressive states, social movements and lastly intellectuals.

**Working class**

No doubt, the working class remains a major contender in the struggle to overcome capitalism. The universal question relating to the human need of earning a living through labour makes class as a distinct category the most qualified force of change. The decisive advantage in working class politics could be that the class struggle bridges more of what unites than separates those impacted by the capitalist relations of production. Class, by its very definition and nature, proves blind to race, culture, locally distinguishable and frameable allegiances and the like. As such, organising along class lines enables working men and women in Africa, the South as well as the North to mount serious challenge to the interests of the ruling classes that stymie egalitarian development. Because of this far-reaching potential, no wonder the labour movement has been subjected to intense pressure from the state as the agent of capital. In the so-called Third World, including Africa, leaders of trade union movements are often targeted for their role in defending the interests of workers. In the North itself, in places like France for example, the working class has come under sustained attack lately following the introduction of emergency laws to stem ‘terrorism’. These same laws can of course also be exploited to achieve other goals of the capitalist state, like pushing in austerity measures domestically and waging wars of choice abroad.

So, definitely the working class has a significant part to play in the struggle for a different society, one based on economic justice and political equality. It can therefore be looked upon the working class anytime to mount effective global anti-capitalist resistance. Yet, in highlighting the central role of the working class, it is also important to grasp that today the labour movement may not be as influential as in its heydays during the 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s. Similarly it helps to cognise that in Africa (excluding South Africa perhaps) the working class lacks in pronouncement which is a sign of the underdeveloped state of the African countries. Finally, even in assigning greater weight to class and class-based politics,
we need not reserve exclusive privilege to this particular mode of social struggle since the push against capitalism can also come in other equally legitimate forms and ways.

**States**

States too tend to play a major role in development. That is true for the North as it is for the global South. The development of the Western European countries, Canada, the US, Australia and Japan, all came under the aegis of the state. More recently, the impressive development achieved by the Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs) has also been credited to the active role of the state.

The state in Africa thus can be central in achieving development. Libya, before NATO turned it into a failed state in 2011, seems a good example of how the state can have a significant hand in the promotion of development. Whatever one thinks of Gaddafi, under his rule the North African country witnessed a level of development not encountered in much of the African continent. The then-leader of the Jamahiriya made a point of reinvesting Libya’s huge oil revenues into national development projects, like the Great Man-Made River which brought freshwater supplies to a number of Libyan cities and towns. Libya's national wealth was immense that, outside Libya itself, it could be shared with the less affluent sub-Saharan Africa sister nations. If we were to venture further afield, we are likely to come across similar examples of state-led national development experiments in the global South. Cuba, and despite the implacable blockade for almost six decades now, has been able to register important development in key areas. The tiny island nation’s achievements in the field of education and the health sector stands as a source of envy for a greater number of countries in the global South, if not the North. Meanwhile, Bolivia’s and Rafael Correa’s Ecuador (2007-2017) 21st century socialist-oriented development strategies have been instrumental in reducing poverty and overall social deprivation. One of the deepest impacts of the Ecuadorian model of development under Correa has to be the enshrining of the rights of nature in the national constitution. Clearly, individual states are in the end anticipated to have a role in development. The bigger the state in terms of its political and economic muscle, the more it can hope to achieve its development goals with relative ease. But the road forward can be tortuous and bumpy; the threat of reversal always lurks in the background. This last point is taken up below.

Experience indicates that individual states, however progressive and otherwise commanded by popular will, may not be a match to capital and the US military as its preeminent enforcer. Numerous African and non-African countries have been harshly dealt with for daring to
follow an independent political and economic path. This has been catalogued extensively already to perhaps require retelling here (the reader is encouraged to consult Noam Chomsky’s massive oeuvre on the subject). But to give an overall sense, the recent and ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Libya and Syria, in which NATO and its regional allies chose to engage in unprovoked wars of aggression, confirm what may generally happen when individual states try to pursue independent policies.

At the time of the assault against it, Libya was on its own, which made it an easy prey; the country’s huge treasures, both cash and gold, now are gone, that is to say, stolen. Consequently, if states can come together into blocks they stand a better chance of defending themselves, and can continue to develop in ways that are meaningful for their populations. The BRICS bloc, its neoliberalist tendency notwithstanding, is one contemporary example. But a more appropriate approach for the countries of the global South to organise collectively could come in its own specific guise.

Indeed, there exists already one notable experiment in how to pursue shared political and economic objectives that can possibly be adapted in the African context. Specifically, the example of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) might offer a sound alternative development framework for sub-Saharan Africa. The ALBA alliance was initiated in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela and over the intervening years it succeeded in attracting more member-states to its ranks. ALBA was launched in response to the wide-spread economic and social stagnation that has befallen Central and Latin America after years of neoliberal policies. ALBA envisions freeing the Latin American continent from the despotism of neoliberalism through regional economic and political co-operation. As an alternative strategy to NAFTA, ALBA seeks to promote development based on the needs of the people using barter-like trading. The whole ALBA initiative centres on the principle of socialist solidarity among equals, as opposed to competition, exploitation and profit-making. This regional development scheme has expanded further with the establishment later on of the Bank of the South and a television channel, Telesur. In contrast to the IMF and World Bank, the Bank of the South provides loans to ALBA members on favourable terms. For its part, Telesur acts as antidote to the propaganda waged against the global South by the Northern corporate mass media.
Although the effectiveness of the Bolivarian alliance appears susceptible to the outcome of political developments within its member nations,\textsuperscript{96} this notwithstanding ALBA comes across as a very practical arrangement. ALBA’s lessons, both political and economic, for the global South hence can’t be overstated. Sub-Saharan Africa in particular could profit from an ALBA-like collective body. In its current titular identity and form, the African Union (AU) seems not ready to shoulder the historic responsibility involving the continent’s radical economic and political overhaul. Like the Organisation of American States (OAS), which for seven decades has been used by Washington as a tool for the subjugation of the countries of the hemisphere, the AU has been manipulated and otherwise co-opted to be an effective vehicle for African majority interests.\textsuperscript{97} On the other hand, Pan-Africanism, as the ultimate unifying vision, deserves to be resuscitated and accorded the central role it once played in ensuring the political sovereignty of the African states. It is worth repeating the point again: individually, most of the sub-Saharan Africa states lack the power to enforce their development agendas within the global system. And without political clout, sub-Saharan Africa’s development will always prove elusive. On the economic front too, the continent’s resources and the African peoples’ potential can be harnessed and channelled towards the goal of an African version of ALBA. As oil-rich Venezuela is obliged to cover the energy consumption needs of ALBA members deprived of this commodity, so too Nigeria’s and Angola’s considerable oil output be made accessible to the sub-Saharan countries which need it. Sudan’s vast agricultural output could be enough to secure the food needs of a number of the countries in its immediate radius. The same goes for livestock, whereby a country like Somalia could supply the meat demands of the Horn of Africa region. And for advanced technical and industrial expertise, meanwhile, sub-Sahara Africa could tap into the giant South African economy for cooperation in that field. In short, were Africa to adopt a development strategy of an ALBA equivalent, the potential development benefits that could derive from the initiative can truly be immense. In order to move forward, sub-Saharan Africa needs to seriously contemplate the implementation of an Africanised ALBA as one of many key development policies.

\textsuperscript{96} This is what happened with the other related regional body, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), conceived to transform South America into a bloc of independent countries. Now, Rafael Correa is no longer in power in Ecuador and his successor Lenin Moreno has totally reversed course by welcoming the IMF back to take charge of the Ecuadorian economy. Similarly, many of the governments like that of Brazil and Argentina which had an active role within UNASUR in the past have since taken a turn to the Right and have once more embraced the neoliberal agenda though not without resistance.

\textsuperscript{97} The AU’s impotence in the face of the 2011 NATO aggression against Libya is perhaps indicative of this.
Social movements

Even though 'social movements' come in a variety of shapes and forms, the types that should concern us most ought to be those that espouse a progressive agenda. In other words, our focus should be on the kind of movements that are engaged in struggles for fundamental economic and political change. Also, any movement motivated by a sense of environmental justice on behalf of planet earth should occupy an important place in the overall struggle to overcome capitalism. When you scout the global scene, you are likely to be faced with a myriad of movements scattered around the length and breadth of the place. Some of these operate on the global stage like the World Social Forum and Greenpeace for example. Others, such as the Landless Workers Movement (Brazil) and Landless Peoples Movement (South Africa), are known more for their focus on local issues and causes. It can’t be denied that all, local and transnational, have a stake in making the world a better place for everyone. That is because these social movements happen to wield the right ideology in that it is clearly recognised that international capitalism and its national configurations remains the main cause of economic and political injustice, not to mention environmental degradation. But the global anti-capitalist campaign can be made even more effective. At the moment, the apparent tendency is for compartmentalisation as different groups and movements seem to preoccupy themselves with particular agendas. That can even play into the hands of the oppressor classes who use strategies of divide and conquer to stay in power. Instead, all those forces on the opposite tracks to capitalist domination will need to coalesce into a single mass movement if we were to get closer to that other world.

Intellectuals

The role of the organic intellectual and all other intellectuals not co-opted by power in contributing to African political and economic liberation also deserves highlighting. During the colonial period and following independence, it is African intellectuals committed to the continent’s struggle who have been key in lifting the scales clouding the popular classes’ vision. Whether in the capacity of full time partisans, or as redoubtable academic scholars, their lives’ mission has revolved around this fundamental goal.

Cabral and Fanon, for example, made it clear that Africa’s political salvation and economic development takes African sweat, tears and blood. They not only theorised but also undertook concrete steps to help set Africa on the path of economic and political freedom.

98 For further consideration, see Gramsci (1971) and Said (1993) on the role of this type of intellectual.
And judging by how they have paid the ultimate price, both of them lived true to what they preached. Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o meanwhile have provided in their own ways a powerful anti-dote to the cultural/ideological onslaught perpetuated against Africa from the usual imperialist quarters. In between them, the two embody the kind of self-esteem that Africa can’t afford to go without. Before he could be credited father of modern African literature, Achebe had to prevail over and make a sceptical (cynical?) British literary establishment reconcile itself to his point of view. His seminal *Things Fall Apart* was published after overcoming this earliest resistance; it has since been translated into over 50 languages and had sold not less than 10 million copies. Throughout his ‘career’, Achebe came across as a tireless advocate of African knowledge and without sounding parochial or chauvinistic it must be said. So too the effort of Ngũgĩ has been equally instrumental. Perhaps Ngũgĩ’s lasting contribution has been his will to reinvigorate African agency, something reflected in his decision to drop the name James in favour of Ngũgĩ and then altogether abandoning the English language for Gikuyu and Kiswahili. This may be what Olufunke Ogundimu (2018)99 had in mind when he wrote:

Ngũgĩ’s enduring rallying cry has led Jalada Africa, a Pan African writers’ collective, to curate a translation issue in which Ngũgĩ’s fable “Ituĩka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ: Kana Kĩrĩa Gĩtũmaga Andũ Mathũũ Marũngũũ” (“The Upright Revolution: Or Why Humans Walk Upright”) was translated into thirty languages, making it the most translated short story in the history of African writing. Most of the languages were African [emphasis mine].

Ngũgĩ simply and logically stated his position by admitting that he couldn’t go on producing ‘African literature’ using a foreign language while he has access to his own (splendid) cultural and linguistic heritage. The new crop of would-be African scholars and activists would do well in taking a leaf from the rich and encouraging legacy of this earlier generation. The latter’s thoughts and perceptions ought to benefit any future theory and practice of African development, even if it is true intellectuals as individuals cannot change society on their own. Finally, it is not the colour of their skin or birth-place but rather their moral and intellectual integrity and rigor which has to be taken into account when discussing the significance of the African intellectual’s contribution for a better Africa. And, as long as this is the case, no one can quarantine intellectual labour within any racial or geographic confines.

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99 See [https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/by/olufunke-ogundimu/](https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/by/olufunke-ogundimu/)
6.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the implications for African development of the Blair Commission and the Eritrean model. This objective was in line with the obligation to map a sound development framework for the continent vis-à-vis the immediate offensive by global capitalism/imperialism.

The chapter began by recapping the key findings of the research. Accordingly, it was stated that the Commission for Africa and the Eritrean case embody two mutually-opposed development strategies. The difference over the gist of development was shown to be due to the nature of the underlying conceptual and practical frame of references, which is itself a feature of discrete historical and political processes. The Eritrean approach to development, reflecting a broadly Marxist core, appeared as the direct extension of the country’s past experience centred on the quest for political self-determination. In terms of its basic character, it was related that the Eritrean approach not only demonstrated a materialist consciousness, but also benefitted from the assumption of integrated change following from social contradictions. In both form and substance, the Eritrean development model therefore totally contrasted with the Commission’s preference for the free-market, a position sustained by notions of the individual and society intrinsic to the ideology of Liberalism. In place perhaps of a due realist and dialectical premise, it was implied thus that the Commission adhered to an idealised account of sub-Saharan Africa and its political and economic conditions. In the process, the Commission not only abstracted the meaning of development, but also reduced the prospect for practical African development to a specific rationality, one typified by consensus around a pre-existing policy of change. It was further remarked that the manner in which development (as concept and practice) was operationalised and otherwise technically manipulated by the Commission had the distinct effect of ensuring global capitalist interests over the long-run. Finally, the Commission and the Eritrean example were said to hold different import for the African development process.

As the next step, the chapter specifically dwelled on the importance of the Commission to stimulate the African development process. It was argued the Commission for Africa appeared to have been concerned mainly with perpetuating the dominant global order, irrespective of the aspirations of the majority of the African populations. This sort of perception made it also imperative to reconsider/ discount its potential. Again, the ‘anomalous’ example provided by the Eritrean model of development was a factor in making this critical assessment. Having looked at the Commission through the prism that is the
Eritrean story, it was possible to reaffirm a twofold broad truth about the development process otherwise eclipsed and occluded from the dominant narrative.

In the first instance, it bore clarifying that the neoliberal economic and political order was far from signifying reality in a definitive way. The attempt to negate the dominant order as absolute owed to the fact that ‘reality’ appears both contingent and provisional, comes in many possible guises and that all ways of being and knowing can be equally justifiable. Or, to put it differently, we could see that essentially it proves odd to conceive of human history and culture as homogenous. No one thus has the privilege to make categorical claims on behalf of a specific reality as legitimate at the expense of others. So, to assume differently, as the Commission ostensibly has done, only risks going against the grain of practical sense. Accordingly, it was admitted that the push for an exclusive neoliberal reality can’t therefore be isolated from the (tacit) fact of the capitalist classes wanting to uphold their interests. Further, the chapter regarded this as something that limits meanwhile the cause of development in Africa and the global South.

In parallel, it was also necessary to go a step beyond limiting one’s responses simply to the dominant account of the development process. Based on the analysis, it was possible to call attention to another (probably less disputatious) form of universal reality despite the Commission’s assertions. Also, it was concluded that there seemingly was something positive about this other universal reality which could outstrip vying claims about the development phenomenon. Subsumed under this inclusive alternate reality can be located the sort of conditions that are pan-human which the rigid bourgeois version fails to consider. Most importantly, this illustrated that the pursuit of development can’t go on outside its proper context which typically spans history and power politics. And, on top of that, it was possible to work out that there is apparently a lasting lesson about how development transpires: rather than coming from adopting a specific foreign script, the reality tends to be that all societies develop properly when they successfully deal with various natural challenges and when they manage their internal equilibrium, despite any centrifugal influence.

Finally, the discussion in this chapter was undertaken with the single most pressing intention of wanting to identify a practical development course for the African continent. In this connection, the focus came to be on two aspects; the form of development, including its fundamental character as well as the actual mechanism by which such development could be promoted.
The chapter detailed that the pursuit of sound African development depends on a clear understanding of the local African scene and the global reality of capitalist expansion and exploitation. Also, to outline a congruous African development, the chapter first touched on what Africa must simultaneously reject and embrace given its history and indigenous cultures. In particular, the analysis pointed to the need for a discerning attitude towards the African past whilst sounding alarm about the risks of exploiting the continent’s existing weaknesses by powerful outside actors. The chapter argued in favour of tapping into the positive aspects of indigenous African knowledge and practice. It also pushed for this to go with other human contributions to ensure the best possible development scenario. To round off, the chapter talked about the type of players that could be tasked with effecting the required development whilst specifying the site at which this change is meant to occur. In particular, it was decided to reserve a positive role for the working class, the progressive state, some social movements and intellectuals not beholden to power or driven by petty interests. The conclusion was drawn that given the global exploitative reach of capitalism, it is incumbent that the pursuit of change also be commensurate—on a wider scale linking the global South and North. That is how the present chapter saw the possibilities that could open up before the majority world beyond the model of development specific to the West’s historical and cultural experience.
7. CONCLUSION

My study was prompted by a specific desire. I felt it was important to revisit African development in the new Millennium. I wanted to understand the factors affecting the course of African development. I needed to make sense of the interplay between the external and internal determinants of African development. In particular, I was interested to learn more, through case studies, about the dynamics of great power politics and African economic and political self-determination. I sought to know what the British Government-sponsored Commission for Africa and its report may signify for the continent’s development. Also, I was keen to find what the Eritrean State’s approach to development possibly means in terms of alternatives in African development contexts. In this way, I hoped to come to grips with the history and politics surrounding ‘African development’ before I could outline what I regarded (from the vantage point of my life experience) as a more realistic approach to African development.

In terms of scope, I don’t purport to have addressed the question of African development in all its magnitudes. My study is in some way limited in that the focus exclusively was on African development in the context of this continent’s asymmetrical relation with the West. I chose to do so because of the clear link with my own life circumstances. Beyond the West’s role, there are of course other factors that bear on African development, if in somewhat different respects. For example, this study says nothing about the growing influence of China in Africa, or about the emerging South-South as well as intra-Africa relations. To have a full picture, I should have touched on all the relevant determinants of African development. For not being comprehensive, in the end, I could only point to the impossibility of encompassing all the issues within the body of a single academic thesis. Meantime, a possible reason for the relative neglect of China’s expanding role in the continent may still be historical. Without denying the element of self-interest about its current policies, China, unlike the ex-colonial powers, can’t be said to have played a part in the underdevelopment of Africa. In any event, it should be interesting to follow how Africa fares economically as a consequence of ongoing massive Chinese investments. Will China ‘fix’ the African underdevelopment problem, or will it turn into another hegemon eventually? And in what ways will the intensifying global rivalry between a rising China and a visibly ebbing but militarily unmatched US empire likely affect the future of Africa? Similarly, it would have been sensible to allude to the South-South as well as intra-Africa dimensions when grappling with the question of African development. For example, would an ALBA-like project or a prospective African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) be in the interest of African development? And what would it take to come up with such bodies if one thinks that to be positive? This is a seminal area not covered by the
present study into the dominant Africanist discourse of development and in which there are possibilities for future research input.

The literature reviewed for this project, the broader established literature as well as empirical evidence from inside the continent indicated that ‘African development’ was, in theory and practice, a strongly contested question. As chapter one illustrated, the main fault line runs through and separated two loosely aligned oppositional blocs and their specific appraisals. One side’s sense of African development arose from a generally conventional line of thought which contrasted with the other’s broadly progressive uptake. Some commentators seemed to insinuate that Africans themselves have somehow failed to achieve development. Conversely, others appeared to acknowledge essentially the role of non-intrinsic factors. My study demonstrated that ideology, not impartial scholarly interest, actually governs the way the continent’s development problem has been approached differently within the relevant accounts. Furthermore, my study underscored that, without forgetting the bigger picture entirely, reflexivity affords the African as the subject of development greater insight into the continent’s development problem and any likely ways out.

For instance, the interpretations of African development by Africanists like David Booth, Tom Porteous and Zoe Ware, who turn out to have been constrained by their privileged/bourgeoisie backgrounds and concerns, proved unreasonably deferential to the status quo which is what the Blair Commission also wanted to uphold. These commentators ended up providing what in effect were tautological explanations. By focussing exclusively on internal causes and by totally exonerating global capitalism, their ‘analyses’ confused effect with the cause of African underdevelopment. In addition, since the trio (and some others in their league such as Percy Mistry and Ian Taylor) considered Africa incapable of realising her own development, they reckoned that outsiders should be charged with that very responsibility. On the other hand, those looking at African development from the other side of the divide, like Ray Bush, Paul Cammack, Ankie Hoogvelt and Dot Keet, mostly correctly identified the underlying issues. Yet, telling by the example of Eritrea’s domestic development experiment, their accounts left much to speculation re the role of the African peoples in mapping out their own futures, as Fanon and Cabral readily granted.

Speaking more generally or abstractly, there is a dominant consideration that goes with the study of development and that straddles all social inquiry which is that it is impossible to claim to be producing pure, as opposed to mediated, knowledge. In other words, subjectivity, along with the facts of politics, always bears on what those dealing with the social world and its processes (this author included) say or write. As my study has pointed out, this is the
reason that we have the diverse and conflicting narratives of 'African development' in the first place. Moreover, as chapter five and particularly chapter six showed, the rationale for questioning capitalist development as the absolute norm is provided by that same fact, as is the reason for endorsing alternatives. Eventually, although all the focus happens to be on the self-same topic of African development, the reality is that 'development' as a social construct indeed differs from naturally-occurring inert phenomena in that it does not have any exact or stable signification.

In addition, the inquiry in chapter six into the history and politics of African development brought to the fore some complex questions. These centre on the nature of the development phenomenon as a specific form of knowledge and practice; whether or not development constitutes a science, and so whether or not development depends on universal ideas and practices. Similarly, my study raised questions about the status of 'discourse' in debates about history and change which typically involve the intellectual left. Can social reality simply be a matter of perspective and thus be thought of as relativistic, or is it helpful to recognise a more overriding external common human condition despite the prevalence of specific experiences? Would the focus on 'discourse' and 'difference' alone be enough to understand and reverse global capitalist oppression, or should meaning be sought in an external referent by adopting a more inclusive materialist approach to reality in all circumstances?

Theorists like Rostow, Huntington and Pye approached the study of society, how it evolves politically and economically over time, as something liable to scientific study and experimentation. From their perspectives, all traditional societies must first satisfy given (modernisation) preconditions before a breakthrough could occur—as history presumably foreordains. As reported in chapter five, this putative universalism, a classic orientalist case of essentialising and lumping diverse groups of peoples together to justify sweeping policies, has been the central plank of mainstream development policy and practice ever. This is also indicative of the lack of any historically-informed explanations of social change. Albeit for a wholly different reason, many (classical) Marxists too saw society as following a clear evolutionary pattern that can be studied objectively—by focusing on the mode of production, relations of production and class-based social conflict. For both, the story of how society develops, according to certain teleological imperatives, also corresponded with a type of totalising knowledge, or metanarrative. Meanwhile, postdevelopment theorists like Escobar typically have been known for their antipathy toward the idea of development as science and for their objection to any overarching epistemological claims as well as broad historical trajectories while extolling local forms of knowledge and practices. Finally, there are also
those who like Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’ (and possibly Achille Mbembe) tend to occupy the middle ground in that their projects simultaneously are about the local and the universal.

I had to take into account these ambiguities concerning the meaning of development and the historical process as I tried to unpick ‘African development’ in the wake of the Blair Commission and the Eritrean case. Such attitudes reflect the kind of disparities that are part and parcel of the history and politics involving development in the modern era. I assumed, as the basis for my inquiry that the African peoples needn’t have to be the passive recipients or victims of history—because and in spite of the manipulating policies of their detractors who often see them as an unvaried and unvarying mass. Meantime, I anticipated those who do identify with the continent’s cause to join in the intellectual battle that has to be fought on behalf of the African peoples and against the smokescreen that is the dominant ideology and its local purveyors. It was this positivity if you will that prompted me to insist that Africa embraces a vision of change that isn’t in anyway imitative nor insular, but rather at once organic and transcultural. And that I believed was necessary for addressing the multifaceted question of future African development in the context of the enduring capitalist global order. Taking my cue variously from Marx’s philosophy of being, his theory of history, a neo-Marxist reworking of the relation between base and superstructure along with certain ‘home-grown’ radical approaches to African political self-determination, I drew on a conceptual and analytical framework that problematised ‘development’ as concept and practice. I learned consequently that at root African development is characterised by the dialectic of external domination and internal self-determination, that it features an unresolved tension involving the ‘local’ and the ‘universal’ and that how the continent ever develops is something of an open-ended question, reflecting the fluidity of the historical process itself.

I make the claim that practical African development plays out in the context of two mutually-opposed basic trends. On one hand, validated by its own Eurocentric experience, the West’s official policy has been to prescribe for Africa and the rest of the world capitalism as the universally desired economic and political system. On the other, knowing the truly heterogeneous and locally-definable African reality, it was doubted that this narrowing of the scope for development to just such a model could have any general validity whatever. In addition, I contend that ‘African development’ works out as a rather contingent enterprise, requiring a delicate articulation of the local and the universal in accordance with specific political ambitions/priorities.

As the discussion in chapter two as well as chapter five revealed, I found the dominant capitalist approach to African development to be in keeping with the liberal utopian vision
focused on a distinctive yet universalisable image of the human being and a type of social life that is a perfect foil for this a priori depiction of him (sic). This helps to clarify why then the propagation of development on the basis of this outlook enshrines ‘individualism’ as the essence of being and ‘self-interest’ as rational human behaviour. Likewise, we also get to understand why from this same perspective ‘success’ tends to be defined as the acquisition of material wealth whilst ‘happiness’ is presumed to derive from unbridled consumption. Perhaps naturally, we can further see how social reality takes its specific form supposedly after the market, and why social life also comes to be reduced to just a medium for the achievement of strictly individual projects. Or, in a word, we notice how everything revolves around a sovereign self-regulating market from which also social life derives its ultimate significance.

I also found that the idea of Africa having no choice but to go along with the dominant version of reality to be far from a foregone conclusion, that therefore the search for alternatives by an Africa whose interest is not served by capitalism goes on regardless. And that is largely because the type of assumptions so integral to liberalism can’t be said to hold true in a universal sense. When speaking of development within an African context, as chapter four imparted, we need to remember that the philosophical musings of liberalism actually run contrary to enduring African norms of collectivism, sharing, ethics of being rather than of having, and admonitions against overconsumption. In other words, not only does the image of the individual sanctioned by liberalism turn to be controversial, but also a wilful reversal of the order in which the individual and society interrelate appear to have been committed in this case. For, despite the assumptions to the contrary, normally it is social being which for the most part has the greater effect on the individual's life rather than vice versa.

No doubt, ‘African development’ is far from a settled prospect since the existing conceptions and practices of it differ in fundamental ways. In its essential manifestation, the contest over the purport of African development today pits externally-designed visions of change against internally-inspired ones. This disjuncture in the perception of African development at the same time indicates the core stakes of those for whom African development matters in one way or another. As I highlighted early on in chapter three but also throughout the course of the study, the dominant development policy has been conceived in ways that align with the West's underlying objective of moulding the rest of the world in its image. Now, knowing this means we can also tell if and when 'development' is being used to promote the powers of the few instead of liberating the majority from oppressive social, economic and political conditions in much the same way as sub-Saharan Africa currently hopes for. So, if we are to
witness the continent attain genuine social transformation, it is important to understand not only what ‘development’ denotes, but also how this whole process actually works in practice. We need to pay close attention to the determinants of African development, in particular the interplay between the external and internal forces. That becomes even more urgent at a time, like this very moment in history, of worsening capitalist crisis and amid arguably a ‘new scramble’ for an Africa rich in resources but alas poor in terms of the capacity to exercise political power to enforce her development interests. This study constitutes my humble contribution to the search for alternative approaches to African development and in which I attempted to draw distinctions between more promising and less practical strategies using the parallel and inversely-motivated development discourses of the Blair Africa Commission and the Eritrean State.
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