

Response by Kwame Nimako to Benjamin Selwyn's paper entitled:

Super-Exploitation in the Global North and the Imperial Mode of Living: Some Thoughts

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Introduction

I congratulate and salute Benjamin Selwyn on the completion of his paper. Apparently authors tend to understand their work better than readers of the same. Thus for the sake of our discussion I will not claim to understand everything about all the issues addressed in the paper. This is all the more so since the paper contains a lot of concepts, definitions, and 'theoretical' frameworks and perspectives. My understanding of Selwyn's paper is that in the context of Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis, many authors apply the concept of *super-exploitation* to labour regimes in the Global South. But according to Selwyn this approach has limitations because super-exploitation is not unique to the Global South: it also takes place in the Global North (within the same global value chain?). He supports his thesis with data he has collected and analysed from Eastern Europe, Asia and UK. I will try to raise some issues worth consideration at three levels, namely, context, content and methods.

Context and Queries

This is a challenging paper and gives rise to several questions. One of such query is whether we should consider the Imperial Mode of Living perspective as given. This is relevant because it sheds light on how broad or narrow we should consider the context of the paper. More questions include: What is the unit of analysis of the paper? The world economy? The 'capitalist' enterprise? Global Value Chain? Exploitation and super-exploitation? Wage labour? Organized labour? Minimum wage as defined by the government of a given country? What are the standards of living in a given country? The nature of contract a person signs with an employer? Work place exploitation? Where does unpaid labour fit in the analysis?

These are some of the issues and queries that came to mind as I read the paper. I hope the author and participants would help to address and clarify some of these issues.

Content

There is no need for me to repeat the definitions of the key concepts such as IMoL, GVC and super-exploitation here because participants have also read the paper.

To support his thesis Selwyn makes useful comparative analysis between worker's wages and estimated living wage in 'the former second world' and Asia. The description and analysis of evidence is clear and excellent; his inclusion of the UK case in relation to the COVID-19 lockdown at Leicester workshops is very informative. But it becomes a bit problematic at the level of explanation, especially the comparative aspects of explanation. For example, the 'chain' seems to get broken when we disconnect it from the role of the banking sector, finance capital and pension funds which states use to support banks and finance capital.

To this we should add reserve currency regimes that are manipulated and used to discipline countries outside such currency zones. What about bankruptcies in 'capitalist enterprises' and 'overproduction'? This brings us back to some of the questions raised above, including issues related to basic needs and standards of living. This is all the more so since human beings do not need so much to live on; they do not need cars, private jets and planes, yachts and far away holidays to beaches to lead a meaningful life and existence. There is enough food in the world to feed everyone but it is not going to happen because those who produce food do not do so to help the poor. There are enough shoes in the world but some people still walk barefooted because shoes are not produced to be given to those in need of them. There are enough clothes in the world but some people walk almost naked for the same reasons. What type or kind of solidarities are required to resolve these discrepancies or contradictions? More Missionaries and Charities, 'development aids', Band Aids?

Methodological Issues

The current *worldwide economy* is a convergence of ‘two world economies’, namely, the *Afro-Eurasia world economy* that has been in existence for millennia and the *Atlantic world economy* that emerged in the sixteenth century after the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. So what is our unit of analysis?

Apart from issues of concepts and unit of analysis, we should take the issue of *periodization* into account. Periodization raises questions of *origin, stage and transition*, which in turn depend on how we define and operationalize concepts such as capitalism, unpaid labour, working class and socialism. How far back in history should we go in our discussion of concepts such as globalization and Global Value Chains, and for that matter the Imperial Mode of Living?

I hope some of the issues and queries raised above will help to clarify the topics under discussion. Apparently different nation-states, peoples and persons have different priorities. But in the end, as Bob Marley has made us understand, ‘*everyone thinks his [or her] burden is the heaviest*’.