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"Alternative Worlds? China, Africa and accumulation with/without dispossession"

William G Martin
Binghamton University

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Much of the discussion focused on China's new relationships with Africa has been confined to whether and to what degree these new ties replicate European patterns of colonial domination, imperialism, or unequal exchange. This essay argues that this approach is a serious mistake, for far from replicating or replacing ties with the North, new forms of accumulation and regional formation in Asia portend a sharp rupture with Anglo-American forms of hegemony, racial formation, and centre-peripheral relationships. The question pursued here is thus not "Is China (or India) the new colonial power?," but rather: what are the possibilities—positive or negative for African development—of the new patterns of state-firm-labor relations emanating from Asia?

Central to the answer to this question is the issue of the commodification of labor and land, most presently pursued in the debate over "accumulation with dispossession." This process is widely held, following most often David Harvey's formulation, to be the driving force behind both the extraction of African resources as well as Asian accumulation based on China's (and India's) large, cheap labor force.

The most concentrated theoretical and historical work on these processes has taken place in southern Africa, from the early writings of Mafeje, Magubane, Arrighi and Wolpe, to more recent studies of globalization and accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Bond, Hart) or, in Arrighi's more recent terminology, China's accumulation without dispossession in sharp contrast to historic accumulation patterns in southern Africa. By bringing these analyses to bear upon present Chinese-African relationships this essay demonstrates the necessity of (1) abandoning European theories of accumulation-dispossession, (2) paying close attention to the opportunities afforded by the displacement of Euro-America from the center of global accumulation, and (3) closely studying the possibilities and hazards involved in linking with alternative forms of accumulation and rule as they spread outward from Asia.