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Critical review

Envisioning African Futures: Development corridors as dreamscapes of modernity

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ABSTRACT

This critical review paper scrutinizes development corridors as ‘dreamscapes of modernity’ and showcases of ‘future-making’. I argue that corridors have become dominant blue-prints for spatial development because of a specific way in which they express, perform and implement ‘desirable futures’. I refer to three strands of conceptual debates. The first discusses how futures are ‘made’ and can be empirically approached through practices of future-making. The second looks at imaginations of African futures in relation to images of the continent itself. The third takes the empirical example of development corridors in Africa to scrutinize their meaning as ‘dreamscapes of modernity’. At the end, I will revisit recent calls for closer integration between economic geography and development studies, to which I suggest to add a concern for post- and decolonial positions and ‘theory from the south’.

1. Introduction

Development corridors are criss-crossing the African continent. Some exist only on paper, others have already become real as zones of investment and accelerated growth. Regardless of their current stage of implementation, they are powerful tools of spatial planning, with far-reaching effects for rural populations and environments (Enns, 2018).

This critical review paper scrutinizes development corridors as ‘dreamscapes of modernity’ and showcases of ‘future-making’ (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015; Appadurai, 2013). I argue that corridors have become dominant blue-prints for spatial development because of a specific way in which they express, perform and implement ‘desirable futures’. The approach is not meant as an alternative to political economy explanations that view development corridors primarily as entry points of global capitalism (for example Bergius et al., 2017), but rather as a complimentary perspective. I refer to three strands of conceptual debates. The first discusses how futures are “made” and can be empirically approached through practices of future-making. The second looks at imaginations of African futures in relation to images of the continent itself. The third takes the empirical example of development corridors in Africa to scrutinize their meaning as ‘dreamscapes of modernity’. At the end, I will revisit Murphy’s (2008) call for closer integration between economic geography and development studies, to which I suggest to add a concern for post- and decolonial positions and ‘theory from the south’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012).

The paper builds upon a newly founded collaborative research

centre ‘Future Rural Africa’, where researchers from the universities of Bonn and Cologne cooperate with African partners in a long-term program to investigate future-making and social-ecological transformation (see website www.future-rural-africa.de). The studies focus on development corridors in Kenya, Tanzania and Namibia, assuming that much of what affects future-making in Africa at the moment plays out in rural areas and becomes visible there in terms of plans and projects, societal negotiations and contestations, and multiple development activities resulting in massive transformations of land-use and livelihoods.

2. Uncertainty, future-making, and the capacity to aspire

The future has always been an intellectual challenge, but nowadays it seems to warrant particularly high attention due to a rising awareness of uncertainty in contemporary ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1999). Uncertainty can be dealt with in diverse ways. One possible response uses ‘fictional expectations’ (Beckert, 2016), i.e. imaginations of future capitalist dynamics that are shared by economic actors (such as a collective wishful thinking), resulting in coordinated action and simultaneous decision-making. Another response is securitization, i.e. a strategy that attempts to gain control over the future by silencing alternative voices and ideas (Ahlqvist and Rhisiart, 2015). In the past, people used divination, sacrifice, or other rituals to prepare for their future, while nowadays they do the same by means of forecasts, scenarios, and development plans. Future-making and development practice are closely related, because they can both be understood as attempts to gain control over the future

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and reduce uncertainty.

In the following, I apply this idea to the observation of mushrooming development corridors in Africa. Like other planning tools, they aim at shaping future conditions by simultaneously projecting visions into the future and into space. Such visionary spatial-temporal projections may well be called ‘utopian’, since the term ‘utopia’ refers to a ‘topos’, a distant place like the cast-away island in Thomas Morus’s famous novel from 500 years ago. The island ‘Utopia’ represents an ideal organisation of state and society in harmony with the natural environment. Utopian thinking has long influenced political debates, most prominently in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century.

The future is essentially a social category, since it is based on shared aspirations and anxieties. It does not simply emerge out of the present, but is socially produced through practices that make it an issue in the present. Appadurai (2013) distinguishes three practices of future-making, namely imagination, aspiration and anticipation; in a similar vein, Jasanoff (2015) describes imagination as a collective social practice. Anderson (1983) had already pointed out in his work on ‘imagined communities’ that social cohesion, the feeling of ‘we’ against ‘others’, and the constitution of communities essentially depend on shared imaginations of a common future.

Making the future an object of collective imagination and community-building, however, needs more than just vision and aspiration. It requires performative action that creates greater visibility for some future imaginations while silencing others. Future visions or imaginations become powerful when everyone believes in them, just like Beckett’s ‘fictional expectations’, i.e., when a sufficiently large proportion of a society or decision makers is convinced (or is made to believe) that particular options of future developments are going to materialize, while others are considered as not feasible, irrelevant, or undesirable. Addressing this performative aspect of future-making requires an understanding of the way how future possibilities are discursively turned into matters of fact, as if the future was already there.

In this context ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ play a crucial role. Jasanoff (2015: 19) defines them as “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures”. Being both fluid and persistent at the same time, sociotechnical imaginaries are “products and instruments of the coproduction of science, technology, and society in modernity” (Jasanoff, 2015: 19). Corridor masterplans can be considered as sociotechnical imaginaries that correspond with particular practices of future-making, aiming at the conquering of underused spaces through ‘development’. However, the question arises whose imaginations are employed, and what this does to the local capacity to aspire.

3. Imagining African Futures

Current discourses about African futures are highly ambivalent. On the one hand a deeply entrenched Afro-pessimism continues to view Africa as a ‘lost continent’ and hopeless case for international development. On the other hand optimistic outlooks have become more prominent over the past decade, expressed in notions like ‘Africa rising’ and ‘continent of opportunities’ that envision African economies as power houses for a stumbling world economy. The growth and development optimism has been driven by conspicuous institutional alliances, including the IMF, the African Development Bank and other international finance organizations, which all have an obvious interest in positive expectations. Bright futures have also been propagated by the African Union and national governments adhering to ambitious national development plans like Kenya’s Vision 2030. It should be noted, however, that these optimistic outlooks cannot simply be discarded as wishful thinking of development agencies and politicians, since they are also, at least to some extent, shared by African intellectuals.

‘Africa is the future’ has become a theme that cuts across recent outputs from publications to arts to movies (see: Sarr, 2016, Goldstone

and Obarrio, 2016, ‘Afrofuturism’, ‘Black Panther’). One of the most prominent authors among the Afro-optimists is Achille Mbembe, who points out that the continent has leapfrogged technological development at an unprecedented speed. Africa appears to have become “the last frontier of capitalism”, which Mbembe (2015) sees as an opportunity for abolishing internal boundaries and for the “reopening of Africa to itself”. Yet, it is hard to believe that Achille Mbembe’s and Felwine Sarr’s imaginations of future Africa do really coincide with the World Bank’s rhetoric of the ‘continent of opportunities’.

Imagining the future of Africa cannot be dissociated from the way how the continent itself is imagined, and by whom. Under colonial rule and the prevailing conditions of ‘global coloniality’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014), Africa has long been the object of foreign imaginations with a focus on underutilized resources, extreme poverty or failed states. Against this backdrop, such imaginations can only envision positive futures as an antithesis to the perceived present deficiencies and backwardness. Deeply entangled in global coloniality, such imaginations are driven by a peculiar ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2007). Prevailing conditions of coloniality lead to practices of future-making that are conceived as an equivalent to improvement, progress, and ordering, as a civilizing mission, or in other words, as development.

Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr (2016) makes a strong appeal for decolonizing the imagination of African futures, and for “a better rooting of the African economies in their respective sociocultures” (Sarr, 2015). He argues that “[w]e need to stop mimicking and dare to reinvent...” (Sarr, 2016), referring to African traditions and their suitability to find solutions for contemporary problems. He asks “to challenge the model provided by the colonizer”, i.e., to be inventive and creative in designing African futures. In his critique of Western concepts of development, Sarr contends that models should not simply “be introduced because they have been successful elsewhere, (...) there is no buy-in from people here”. Yet, the argument should not be misunderstood as a naïve romanticization of an African past, but as a call for independent thinking. Knowledge production and development on the African continent that are largely elite-driven projects tend to copy models of modernization from other parts of the world and paste them into African contexts, without sufficiently taking account of African tradition, culture and vision. According to Sarr (2016), there are alternative ways of shaping African futures, since “our governments are not hand-bound to follow the orders of global capitalism” and he concludes: “We should not necessarily adopt a solution found in Europe”.

Sarr’s position is shared by other critical African intellectuals, but it is certainly not in line with the dominant practice of development. This raises the question how alternative African futures may look like, who formulates them, and whether there is space for them to unfold under the dominant architecture of power. In other words: “Can Africans create African futures within a modern world system structured by global coloniality?” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014: 181)

4. African development corridors as dreamscapes of modernity

Development corridors are planning tools for spatial development, using road and transport infrastructure for better linkages between rural peripheries and urban growth poles. The literature offers a wide range of definitions, each focussing on particular aspects (Gálvez Nogales, 2014, Gálvez Nogales and Webber, 2017, Reeg, 2017). Hope and Cox (2015) for example distinguish between different types of corridors according to the level of regional integration, from simple road and transport corridors through agricultural or industrial growth corridors to integrated economic corridors.

The initial idea of conceptualizing development corridors as planning tools builds upon the observation that roads have always been ‘carriers’ of innovation and growth impulses. Early publications highlight the concept’s response to the problematic spatial inequality of development (Gaile, 1977), and present it as a strategy to combine regional rural development policies with the creation of growth centres

(Richardson, 1978). The concept was first applied for transboundary axes of communication and economic development for European integration (Pottier, 1963). Its applicability for African regional development had already been discussed in South Africa in the 1980s before it was used for the implementation of the Maputo – Johannesburg transboundary corridor in the early 1990ies, i.e. shortly after the abolishment of Apartheid and the end of the Mozambican Civil War (Geyer, 1988). Quite obviously, this corridor between the two neighbouring countries did not only serve economic purposes, but also political interests on both sides. After its successful implementation, the example was soon adopted by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1996 to become a blue-print for another 14 new corridors, and again only a few years later in 2000 the member states of the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) took over the model to promote development corridors all over the continent as a solution for prevailing economic and spatial disparities.

The last two decades saw the adoption of growth corridors in the national development plans of many African countries. Prominent examples are the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT), which was launched as the backbone of Tanzania's agricultural transformation agenda of 'agriculture first' (*Kilimo Kwanza*), or the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor as part of Kenya's Vision 2030. Corridor planning generally goes along with the promise of win-win situations, i.e. the enhancement of economic growth, income generation and improved well-being of the inhabitants, and positive environmental effects. Corridor implementation may, however, also be subject to sudden change, for which the recent experience of SAGCOT is an interesting example.

At first sight, the mushrooming of development corridors in Africa and other continents looks like an impressive success story of regional planning and integration. After its first practical application in Europe, the approach was implemented in Southern Africa and then adopted all over the continent, and also in other emerging regions in the Global South. The most spectacular example at the moment is the Chinese New Silk Road project. This remarkable career can be taken as a typical example of a 'travelling model', i.e. an idea or concept that was "invented" for a particular purpose and geographical setting, and later translated to other purposes and settings (Behrends et al., 2014). However, I would argue, the adoption of that model for corridor-based regional development initiatives all over Africa does not necessarily prove that it has really been successful.

The numerous corridor projects across the continent have so far been quite diverse with regard to their performance and current state of implementation, with some projects apparently doing quite well, some struggling with failure, and many not even getting beyond an early stage of planning. Even if spatial integration and development have positive economic impacts for the countries involved, they may also have disadvantages for local populations (Paul and Steinbrecher, 2013). Contrary to the initial goal of development corridors to ease spatial inequalities, "there may be winners and losers along the corridor" (Gálvez Nogales and Webber, 2017, 30).

Against this backdrop, some recent publications call for a new generation of growth corridors that serve as "territorial tools for agro-industry development" (Gálvez Nogales and Webber, 2017), value-chain integration and the attraction of investment in public-private partnerships as part of neoclassical spatial development initiatives (Dannenbergh et al., 2018). The role of transport infrastructure and growth corridors for development is the object of controversial debates. While development agencies and international financial organisations like the World Bank see infrastructure and technologies as a prerequisite for development, critical voices rather view them as entry points for the penetration of foreign capital (Murphy, 2008: 860). What is critical about the implementation of development corridors and the elaboration of national development strategies is the question of authorship and ownership. The Kenyan newspaper Daily Nation (2015) comments on this question: "While a national dream is conceived by

people, Vision 2030 was not conceived internally by Kenyans but externally by McKinsey & Company of South Africa that has been conceiving and selling 'national visions' to African countries like Kenya. Ours is Vision 2030, Rwanda's Vision 2020, Burundi's Vision 2025, Tanzania's Vision 2025, and so forth." As this comment points out, foreign-produced visions are marginalizing African imaginations, dominating local capacities to aspire, and conquering the future. Development corridors may be understood as "dreamscapes of modernity" in the sense of Jasanoff and Kim (2015), but the modernity they envision is not necessarily the one imagined by the people living there.

5. Approaching geographies of the future

Development corridors are powerful tools of future-making in rural Africa, because they appear attractive to investors, policy-makers, and to some extent also to the wider public. They are presented and enacted as 'dreamscapes of modernity', for example in maps, cartoons, and drawings. What makes them problematic is the fact that they do not originate from the needs and imaginations of their inhabitants, but from foreign blueprints. Their design reflects 'travelling models', i.e., socio-technical imaginaries that have originally been designed for other regional and societal contexts and are now applied for the integration of African peripheries into the global capitalist system.

However, this understanding of development corridors leaves some questions open that require further studies. First, the fact that development corridors have not been designed by local populations does not necessarily mean that they are generally disadvantageous or against local interests. By interpreting them as travelling models, I simply want to draw the attention to the circumstances under which the model 'travels' through contested fields of interest and multi-layered power structures, and to the asymmetric power relations between the Global North and South that determine the translation of such models into space.

Second, I would like to raise the question what makes African futures or positions genuinely 'African'. I have referred to positions of post- and decoloniality that call for African visions and approaches of future-making. Building upon a critique of Eurocentric historicism and teleology, decolonial initiatives propose changes to the perspective of theory-making to be an 'ex-centric site' (Bhabha, 1994: 6). Yet, I think it requires further clarification what makes theory (and the conceptualization of development) actually be 'from the South', and what gives this position more truth and legitimacy than others. Hence, I suggest that we need to overcome North-South binaries from both directions, which requires an 'ex-centric' theory-making not only as 'theory from', but also 'theory with the South'.

Third and my final point is that the future and its translation into space should matter to (economic) geographers, especially in studies of the relationship between the Global North and South. Along with the need to understand the spatial dynamics of the diverse economies in the Global South, there is also a need to appreciate 'Southern' agency, and the way how individuals and societies envision and shape their own futures.

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