Imperialism, subimperialism and anti-imperialism are all settling into durable patterns and alignments in Africa – especially South Africa – even if the continent’s notoriously confusing political discourses sometimes conceal the collisions and collisions. ‘All Bush wants is Iraqi oil’, the highest-profile African, Nelson Mandela, charged in January 2003. ‘Their friend Israel has weapons of mass destruction but because it’s [the USA’s] ally, they won’t ask the UN to get rid of it …. Bush, who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust. If there is a country which has committed unspeakable atrocities, it is the United States of America.’

Mandela’s remarks were soon echoed at a demonstration of 4,000 people outside the US embassy in Pretoria, by African National Congress (ANC) secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe: ‘Because we are endowed with several rich minerals, if we don’t stop this unilateral action against Iraq today, tomorrow they will come for us.’ After the fall of Baghdad, Mandela again condemned Bush: ‘Since the creation of the United Nations there has not been a World War. Therefore, for anybody, especially the leader of a superstate, to act outside the UN is something that must be condemned by everybody who wants peace. For any country to leave the UN and attack an independent country must be condemned in the strongest terms.’

This was not merely conjunctural anti-war rhetoric. Mandela’s successor Thabo Mbeki is just as frank when addressing the broader context of imperial power, for example when welcoming dignitaries to the August 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development: ‘We have all converged at the Cradle of Humanity to confront the social behaviour that has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. This social behaviour has produced and entrenches a global system of apartheid.’ Mbeki’s efforts to insert the phrase ‘global apartheid’ in the summit’s final document failed, due to opposition by US secretary of state Colin Powell,
who in turn was heckled by NGO activists and Third World leaders in the final plenary session. A year later, in the immediate run-up to the 2003 World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mbeki even hinted that Third World governments should align themselves with radical social movements: ‘They may act in ways you and I may not like and break windows in the street but the message they communicate relates.’ Moreover, in light of Pretoria’s centrality to the new India-Brazil-South Africa bloc and the G20 group often credited with causing the Cancun summit’s collapse, the logical impression is that the anti-imperialist movement has an important state ally in Africa.

Unfortunately, these postures can best be understood as ‘talking left, walking right’, insofar as they veil the underlying dynamics of accumulation, class struggle and geopolitics. To illustrate, in early 2003, at the same time as Mandela’s outburst, the ANC government permitted three Iraq-bound warships to dock and refuel in Durban, and the state-owned weapons manufacturer Denel sold $160 million worth of artillery propellants and 326 hand-held laser range finders to the British army, and 125 laser-guidance sights to the US Marines. South Africa’s independent left immediately formed a 300-organization Anti-War Coalition which periodically led demonstrations of 5,000-20,000 protesters in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town. Despite the embarrassment, Pretoria refused the Coalition’s demands to halt the sales. George W. Bush rewarded Mbeki with an official visit in July 2003, just as the dust from the Baghdad invasion had settled. ‘Let us use this visit to impact as best as possible on the consciences of the American electorate’, the South African Communist Party (SACP) secretary-general, Blade Nzimande, remarked. ‘It would, we believe, be a mistake to press for a cancellation of the visit. But it would be equally mistaken to present the invasion of Iraq as a ‘thing of the past’, as ‘something we’ve put behind us’, as we now return to bi-national US/SA business as usual.’

But business as usual seemed to prevail. As Johannesburg’s Business Day editorialized, the ‘abiding impression’ left from Bush’s Pretoria stopover was ‘of a growing, if not intimate trust between himself and president Thabo Mbeki. The amount of public touching, hugging and backpatting they went through was well beyond the call of even friendly diplomatic duty.’ Organizing large demonstrations in Pretoria and Cape Town, the Anti-War Coalition countered: ‘The ANC and SACP claim to be marching against the war … while hosting the chief warmonger, George Bush. The ANC’s public relations strategy around the war directly contradicts their actions, which are pro-war and which have contributed to the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians.’ Public relations finally caught up to realpolitik, as Mandela, too, recanted.
his criticism of Bush in May 2004, because ‘It is not good to remain in tension with the most powerful state.’ A month later, Mbeki joined the G8 summit in Sea Island, Georgia, along with Africa’s other main pro-Western rulers: Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, John Kufuor of Ghana, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. Treated only to a lunch meeting which began late and ended early, the Africans promised the G8 to help unblock the multilateral ‘logjam’ that emerged at the Cancun WTO summit. The next day, Mbeki was in Washington for the funeral of Ronald Reagan – a notorious supporter of the old Pretoria regime, even during the mid-1980s states of emergency – and justified his presence to National Public Radio: ‘For those of us who were part of the struggle against apartheid, it was actually during Reagan’s presidency [that] the US government started dealing with the ANC.’

How can we understand this political inconsistency? How much does it reflect the requirements of a US-led capitalist empire that uses Africa for surplus extraction and the spreading and deepening of global neoliberalism, and that especially relies on South Africa for legitimacy and subimperial deputy–sheriff support? To answer, consider first the context of modern imperialism, which in Africa combines an accumulation strategy based on neoliberalism and the extraction of ever cheaper minerals and cash crops, with increasing subservience to US-led, indirect, neocolonial rule. The next step is to locate South Africa’s position as the regional hegemon, identifying areas where imperialism is facilitated in Africa by the Pretoria-Johannesburg state–capitalist nexus, in part through Mbeki’s New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and in part through the logic of private capital.

NEOLIBERALISM AND SURPLUS EXTRACTION

What does imperialism ‘need’ from Sub-Saharan Africa, whose 650 million people generate just 1 per cent of global GDP? During the twentieth century, a great organic tradition of anti-imperialist political economy and radical politics emerged to explain general and specific cases of African subordination and promote revolutionary solutions. More recently, a revival of commentaries concerning imperialism’s logic has provided at least three strands of argument that are especially relevant for the purposes of this essay. First, the transition from post-War prosperity to the neoliberal era, beginning around 1980, can be traced to problems experienced in maintaining capital accumulation in the core regions of capitalism. Second, these problems were managed from the core – especially the Bretton Woods Institutions and the US state/military – through techniques that amplified uneven development and threatened Africa’s social and economic reproduction. And third, these forms of management left the continent and its main political actors at the
beck and call of imperial power, particularly the US state’s, notwithstanding a variety of multilateral outlets and regional associations.

Recent analyses of the sustained crisis tendencies in global capitalism’s core regions have shown that the current economic conjuncture follows logically from a long structural crisis of capitalism characterized by three decades of lower global GDP growth during a period of persistent ‘overaccumulation’, untenable speculation and periodic financial collapses, frantic outsourcing of production across the world, hyperactive trade, the emergence of system-threatening ecological problems, soaring inequality, and the near-universal lowering of both labour’s remuneration and the social wage. In the last decade, one symptom of global capitalism’s desperation is the extraction of surpluses from the Third World at an unprecedented rate. Thus, from a situation of positive net financial flows of more than $40 billion per year to ‘developing economies’ during the mid-1990s, the East Asian crisis was followed by a $650 billion South-North drain in the four years 1999–2002.

Although Africa is typically given very little attention in contemporary Marxist accounts of imperialism, there is no question that the continent has been drawn deeper into global circuits of crisis management through the irresponsible liberalization of trade and finance that, in turn, cheapened the continent’s products for northern consumption. While some commodity prices – for oil, rubber and copper – have risen in recent years, thanks to Chinese demand, the major coffee, tea and cotton exports many countries rely upon continue to stagnate or fall. Debt servicing also grew ever more onerous, notwithstanding the Bank/IMF ‘Highly Indebted Poor Countries’ (HIPC) relief initiative. From 1980 to 2000, Sub-Saharan Africa’s total foreign debt soared from $60 billion to $206 billion, and the ratio of debt to GDP rose from 23 per cent to 66 per cent, leaving Africa repaying $6.2 billion more than it received in new loans in 2000. Meanwhile, donor aid was down 40 per cent from 1990 levels, and capital flight exacerbated the problem of access to hard currency. James Boyce and Léonce Ndikumana established that a core group of thirty Sub-Saharan African countries, with a joint foreign debt of $178 billion, suffered a quarter century of capital flight by elites totalling more than $285 billion, including imputed interest earnings, leaving Sub-Saharan Africa ‘a net creditor vis-à-vis the rest of the world.’

Drawing upon Rosa Luxemburg’s insights into the interactions between capitalism and non-capitalist aspects of production and social reproduction, David Harvey has provided a nuanced explanation of how the permanent process of primitive accumulation evolves into what he terms a system of ‘accumulation by dispossession’. That process is very important for understanding contemporary imperialism in Africa. Accumulation by dispossession intensifies as a result of the onset of capitalist crisis and the widespread adop-
tion of neoliberalism, as the system seeks to mitigate and displace (though never fully resolve) crisis tendencies. Harvey interprets these reactions as ‘spatial and temporal fixes’ for overaccumulated capital, because they also serve as crisis management tools.20

Beyond these processes, the sphere of reproduction – where much primitive accumulation occurs through unequal gender power relations – remains central to capitalism’s looting. This is especially evident in areas such as Southern Africa which are characterized by migrant labour flows, largely through the super-exploitation of rural women in childrearing, healthcare and eldercare. More broadly, this is part of what Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill term ‘the reprivatization of social reproduction’.21 For Africans, the denial of access to food, medicines, energy and even water is the most extreme result; people who are surplus to capitalism’s labour requirements find that they must fend for themselves or die. The scrapping of safety nets in structural adjustment programmes worsens the vulnerability of women, children, the elderly and disabled people. They are expected to survive with less social subsidy and greater pressure on the fabric of the family during economic crisis, which makes women more vulnerable to sexual pressures and, therefore, HIV/AIDS.22 Even in wealthy South Africa an early death for millions was the outcome of state and employer AIDS policy, with cost-benefit analyses demonstrating conclusively that keeping most of the country’s five million HIV-positive people alive through patented medicines cost more than these people were ‘worth’.23

The imposition of neoliberal policies in this spirit has amplified combined and uneven development in Africa. In macroeconomic terms, the ‘Washington Consensus’ entails trade and financial liberalization, currency devaluation, lower corporate taxation, export-oriented industrial policy, austere fiscal policy aimed especially at cutting social spending, and monetarism in central banking (with high real interest rates). In microdevelopmental terms, neoliberalism implies not only three standard microeconomic strategies – deregulation of business, flexibilized labour markets and privatization (or corporatization and commercialization) of state-owned enterprises – but also the elimination of subsidies, the promotion of cost-recovery and user fees, the disconnection of basic state services to those who do not pay, means-testing for social programmes, and reliance upon market signals as the basis for local development strategies. As Gill has shown, enforcement is crucial, through both a ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’ entailing constant surveillance, and a ‘new constitutionalism’ that locks in these policies in over time.24

Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin point to US empire’s management capacities via the neoconservative petro-military-industrial complex in the Bush
White House and the Pentagon, and the Washington Consensus nexus of the US Treasury, Bretton Woods Institutions and Wall Street. While they do not see this as emanating from the need to displace a structural economic crisis at home, the Sub-Saharan African case seems, in fact, to demonstrate both the structurally-rooted need of global capital to extract surpluses, and the importance of Washington’s political-economic power. However, in a recent survey, Robert Biel identified two central contradictions in US imperialism vis-à-vis Africa: ‘First, central accumulation always tends to siphon away the value which could form the basis of state-building, bringing with it the risk of “state failure”, leading to direct intervention. Second, the international system becomes increasingly complex, characterized by a range of new actors and processes and direct penetration of local societies in a way which bypasses the state-centric dimension.’ Because of the complexity of indirect rule, and the difficulty of coopting all relevant actors, Biel continues, ‘A reversion to the deployment of pure power is always latent, and the post-September 11th climate has brought it directly to the fore. This is a significant weakness of international capitalism.’

Likewise, Panitch and Gindin argue, ‘An American imperialism that is so blatantly imperialistic risks losing the very appearance that historically made it plausible and attractive ….

This is especially important. Since the American empire can only rule through other states, the greatest danger to it is that the states within its orbit will be rendered illegitimate by virtue of their articulation to the imperium.’

Indeed, one critical area of agreement between most political economists today is the ongoing relevance of the national state, not only to accumulation via traditional facilitative functions (securing property rights, the integrity of money, and the monopoly on violence), but also to the ‘coauthorship’ of the neoliberal project, in turn reflecting a shift in the balance of forces within societies and state bureaucracies. South Africa is an excellent case in point, we shall observe.

In sum, thanks largely to capitalist crisis tendencies and the current orientation to accumulation by dispossession, imperialism can neither deliver the goods nor successfully repress sustained dissent in Africa, not least in Sub-Saharan Africa, rife with ‘state failure’ and ‘undisciplined neoliberalism’ (witnessed in repeated IMF riots). The ideological legitimation of ‘free markets and free politics’ requires renewal, therefore. For this, the US needs a subimperial partner, even one whose politicians are occasionally as cheeky as those in Pretoria – and who have become, hence, just as vital for broader systemic legitimation as Washington’s talk-left, walk-right allies in New Delhi and Brasilia. After all, anti-imperial critique continues to emerge throughout Africa, not just rhetorically (as cited at the beginning of this essay) but also in practical form, as when trade ministers from low-income Africa
not the G20 or South Africa, India and Brazil – withdrew their support for a consensus at the WTO’s Seattle and Cancun summits. Thus NEPAD becomes an especially important surrogate for imperialism, as argued below. Next, however, we consider the expansion of US geopolitical and military activities.

WASHINGTON’S REACH

What are US planners up to in Africa? As one illustration, an expert at the US Naval War College recently drew up ‘The Pentagon’s New Map’, highlighting countries now considered danger zones for imperialism. In Africa, these included Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Somalia and even South Africa, sites which could not only ‘incubate the next generation of global terrorists’, but also host interminable poverty, disease and routine mass murder. Benign – or malign – neglect would no longer be sufficient. The period during the 1990s after the failed Somali intervention, when Washington’s armchair warriors let Africa slide out of view, may have come to an end with September 11. Army General Charles Wald, who controls the Africa Programme of the European Command, told the BBC in early 2004 that he aims to have five brigades with 15,000 men working in cooperation with regional partners including South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and two others still to be chosen. NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, General James Jones, confirmed the US geographical strategy in May 2003: ‘The carrier battle groups of the future and the expeditionary strike groups of the future may not spend six months in the Mediterranean Sea but I’ll bet they’ll spend half the time down the West Coast of Africa.’ Within weeks, 3,000 US troops had been deployed off the coast of Liberia (and went briefly ashore to stabilize the country after Charles Taylor departed). Potential US bases were suggested for Ghana, Senegal and Mali, as well as the North African countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Another base was occupied by 1,500 US troops in the small Horn country of Djibouti. Botswana and Mozambique were also part of the Pentagon’s strategy, and South Africa would remain a crucial partner.

Central and eastern Africa remains a problem area, and not merely because of traditional French and Belgian neocolonial competition with British and US interests. President Clinton’s refusal to cite Rwanda’s situation as formal genocide in 1994 was an infamous failure of nerve in terms of the emerging doctrine of ‘humanitarian’ imperialism – in contrast to intervention in the (white-populated) Balkans. With an estimated three million dead in Central African wars, partly due to struggles over access to coltan and other mineral riches, conflicts worsened within the Uganda/Rwanda bloc, vis-à-vis the
revised alliance of Laurent Kabila’s D.R.C., Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia. Only with Kabila’s assassination in 2001 and Pretoria’s management of peace deals in the DRC and Burundi, did matters settle, however briefly, into a fragile peace combining neoliberalism with opportunities for minerals extraction. However, as turmoil resumed in mid-2004, it was clear that coups and outbreaks of strife would be a constant threat, demonstrating how precarious Pretoria’s elite deals are when deeper tensions remain unresolved. Another particularly difficult site is Sudan, where US Delta Force troops have been sighted in informal operations (although not to protect Darfur from genocide), perhaps because although China showed some interest in oil exploration there during the country’s civil war chaos, US oil firms have subsequently arrived. On the west coast, the major petro prize remains the Gulf of Guinea. With oil shipment from Africa to Louisiana refineries taking many fewer weeks than from the Persian Gulf, the world’s shortage of supertankers is eased by direct sourcing from West Africa’s offshore oil fields.

In this context, it is not surprising that of $700 million destined to develop a 75,000-strong UN peace-keeping force in coming years, $480 million is dedicated to African soldiers. But Africa is also a site for the recruitment of private mercenaries, as an estimated 1,500 South Africans – including half of Mbeki’s own 100 personal security force – joined firms such as South Africa’s Executive Outcomes and British-based Erinys to provide more than 10 per cent of the bodyguard services in occupied Iraq. Some African countries, including Eritrea, Ethiopia and Rwanda, joined the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ against Iraq in 2003, although temporary UN Security Council members Cameroon, Guinea and the Republic of the Congo opposed the war, in spite of Washington’s bullying. The Central African Republic proved reliable during the reconciliation of Jacques Chirac and the Bush regime in March 2004, when Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was kidnapped and temporarily dumped there, prior to taking up a cautious residence in South Africa. Africa is also an important site for Washington’s campaigns against militant Islamic networks, especially in Algeria and Nigeria in the north-west, Tanzania and Kenya in the east, and South Africa. Control of African immigration to the US and Europe is crucial, in part through the expansion of US-style incarceration via private sector firms like Wackenhut, which has invested in South African privatized prison management, along with the notorious Lindela extradition camp for ‘illegal immigrants’, part of a highly racialized global detention and identification system.

Of course, the US military machine does not roll over Africa entirely unimpeded. Minor roadblocks have included Pretoria’s rhetorical opposition to the Iraq war, conflicts within the UN Human Rights Commission (especially over Zimbabwe), and the controversy over US citizens’ extradition to
the International Criminal Court. On the eve of Bush’s 2003 Africa trip, the Pentagon announced that it would withdraw $7.6 million worth of military support to Pretoria because the South African government – along with thirty-four military allies of Washington (and ninety countries in total) – had not agreed to give US citizens immunity from prosecution at The Hague’s new International Criminal Court. Botswana, Uganda, Senegal and Nigeria, also on Bush’s itinerary, signed blackmail-based immunity deals and retained US aid.

Competition from other neocolonial sponsors has occasionally been a factor limiting US arrogance, for example in the only partially successful attempt by Monsanto to introduce genetically modified (GM) agriculture in Africa. Zambia, Zimbabwe and Angola have rejected World Food Programme and US food relief because of fears of future threats to their citizens, and not coincidentally, to European markets. Linking its relatively centralized aid regime to trade through bilateral regionalism, the European Union aims to win major Africa–Caribbean–Pacific (ACP) country concessions on investment, competition, trade facilitation, government procurement, data protection and services, which along with grievances over agriculture, industry and intellectual property were the basis of ACP withdrawal from Cancun. The EU’s ‘Economic Partnership Agreements’ (EPAs) under the Cotonou Agreement (which replaced the Lome Convention) will signify a new, even harsher regime of ‘reciprocal liberalization’ to replace the preferential agreements that tied so many African countries to their former colonial masters via cash-crop exports. If the EPAs are agreed upon by late 2005 and implemented from 2008, as presently scheduled, what meagre organic African industry and services remained after two decades of structural adjustment will probably be lost to European scale economies and technological sophistication. An April 2004 meeting of parliamentarians from East Africa expressed concern, ‘that the pace of the negotiations has caught our countries without adequate considerations of the options open to us, or understanding of their implications, and that we are becoming hostage to the target dates that have been hastily set without the participation of our respective parliaments.’ Even Botswana’s neoliberal president Festus Mogae admitted, ‘We are somewhat apprehensive towards EPAs despite the EU assurances. We fear that our economies will not be able to withstand the pressures associated with liberalization.’ But the EU’s substantial aid carrots and sticks will be the final determinant, overriding democratic considerations.

What of Washington’s development aid to Africa? During the early 1990s, numerous US Agency for International Development mission offices in Africa were closed by the Clinton Administration. The highest-profile
measures now relate to HIV/AIDS treatment, amounting to what the State Department called its ‘full-court press’ – including threats of further aid cuts – against governments which made provisions for generic medicines production; something which Clinton only backed away from in late 1999 because of sustained activist protest. Bush promised a $15 billion AIDS programme, then whittled it down to a fraction of that, then refused to provide funds to the UN Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and then prohibited US government financing of generic medicines. Bush also introduced an innovative vehicle to fuse neoliberal market conditionality with, supposedly, greater social investment: the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). With USAID budgets still declining in real terms, the delinked MCA funding will rise from $1 billion in 2004 to $5 billion in 2006, a 100 per cent increase on 2004 spending for all US overseas development assistance. But of seventy-four ‘low income’ countries that are meant to be eligible, of which thirty-nine are in Africa, only sixteen passed the first test of governance and economic freedom in May 2004. Half of these were African: Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique and Senegal. The criteria for funding these countries’ aid programmes have been established by a series of think tanks and quasi-government agencies: Freedom House (civil liberties and political rights), the World Bank Institute (accountability, governance and control of corruption), the IMF and the Heritage Foundation Index of Economic Freedom (credit ratings, inflation rates, business start-up times, trade policies and regulatory regimes), and the World Health Organization and the UN (public expenditure on health and primary education, immunization rates and primary school completion rates). Washington’s attempt to disguise and legitimize imperialism through aid that carries ‘good governance’ and ‘social investment’ conditionalities dates to the Clinton era, but under Bush’s MCA it involves more sophisticated disciplinary neoliberal surveillance, especially in combination with the World Bank.

However, with so few African states receiving MCA funding, and with so much more at stake than can be handled by the expansion of military spending, it is vital for Washington to identify reliable allies in Africa to foster both imperialist geopolitics and neoliberal economics. Does South Africa qualify? There is much to consider in the hectic activities of Mbeki and his two main internationally-oriented colleagues – finance minister Trevor Manuel (chair of the IMF/World Bank Development Committee in 2002-04) and trade/privatization minister Alec Erwin (the leading candidate to replace Supachai Panitchpakdi as WTO director-general in 2005 if his health allows). But the question must be posed: are these men breaking or instead shining the chains of global apartheid?
PRETORIA’S SUBIMPERIAL FUNCTIONS

During an August 2003 talk to business and social elites at Rhodes House in Cape Town, Nelson Mandela offered the single most chilling historical reference possible: ‘I am sure that Cecil John Rhodes would have given his approval to this effort to make the South African economy of the early 21st century appropriate and fit for its time.’ Indeed, in Rhodes’ spirit, Mandela’s less honourable foreign policy intentions were difficult to disguise. Although South Africa can claim one intervention worthy of its human rights rhetoric – leadership of the 1997 movement to ban landmines (and hence a major mine-clearing role for South African businesses which had helped lay the mines in the first place) – Mandela’s government sold arms to governments which practised mass domestic violence, such as Algeria, Colombia, Peru and Turkey; recognized the Myanmar military junta as a legitimate government in 1994; gave the country’s highest official award to Indonesian dictator Suharto three months before his 1998 demise (in the process extracting $25 million in donations for the ANC); and invaded neighbouring Lesotho in 1998, at great social and political cost, mainly so as to secure Johannesburg’s water supply. The latter incident was, according to veteran foreign policy scholar Peter Vale, ‘rash – a rashness born, perhaps, of the power of mimicry and sanctioned by the new world order discourses, a call to policy action encouraged by an ensemble of new controlling values.’

Once the South African government had shown its willingness to put self-interest above principles, the international political power centres placed increasing trust in Mandela, Mbeki, Manuel and Erwin, giving them insider access to many international elite forums. As global-establishment institutions came under attack and attempted to reinvent themselves with a dose of New South African legitimacy (such as Mandela’s 1998 caressing of the IMF during the East Asian crisis, and of Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal), Pretoria’s leading politicians were allowed, during the late 1990s, to preside over the UN Security Council, the board of governors of the IMF and Bank, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Commonwealth, the World Commission on Dams and many other important global and continental bodies. Simultaneously taking Third World leadership, Pretoria also headed the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity and the Southern African Development Community. Then, during a frenetic two-year period beginning in September 2001, Mbeki and his colleagues hosted, led, or played instrumental roles at the following dozen major international conferences or events: the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (September 2001); the launch of NEPAD in Abuja, Nigeria (October 2001); the Doha, Qatar ministerial summit of the World Trade Organization (November 2001); the
UN’s Financing for Development conference in Monterrey, Mexico (March 2002); the G8 summits in Genoa, Italy (July 2001) and Kananaskis, Canada (June 2002); the African Union launch in Durban (July 2002); the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (August–September 2002); the Davos World Economic Forum (January 2003); the Evian G8 Summit (June 2003); George W. Bush’s first trip to Africa (July 2003); the Cancun WTO ministerial (September 2003); and the World Bank/IMF annual meeting in Dubai (September 2003).

However, virtually nothing was actually accomplished through these opportunities. At the UN racism conference, Mbeki colluded with the EU to reject the demand of NGOs and African leaders for slavery/colonialism/apartheid reparations. By all accounts, NEPAD provided merely a homegrown version of the Washington Consensus. At Doha, Erwin split the African delegation so as to prevent a repeat of the denial of consensus that had foiled the Seattle ministerial in December 1999. In Monterrey, Manuel was summit co-leader (with Michel Camdessus and disgraced Mexican ex-president Ernesto Zedillo), but his role was merely to legitimize ongoing IMF/WB strategies, including debt relief gimmicks. From Kananaskis, Mbeki departed with only an additional $1 billion commitment for Africa (aside from funds already pledged at Monterrey). The African Union supported both NEPAD and the repressive Zimbabwean regime of president Robert Mugabe. At the Johannesburg WSSD, Mbeki undermined UN democratic procedure, facilitated the privatization of nature, and did nothing to address the plight of the world’s poor majority. In Davos, global elites ignored Africa and from Evian, Mbeki returned with nothing. For hosting a leg of Bush’s Africa trip, Mbeki became the US ‘point man’ on Zimbabwe (as Bush pronounced), and avoided any conflict over Iraq. In Cancun, the collapse of trade negotiations left Erwin ‘disappointed’, because he and his G20 colleagues hoped for a deal, no matter how contrary it would be to ACP country interests. At Dubai, with Manuel leading the Development Committee, there was no Bretton Woods democratization, no new debt relief and no ‘Post-Washington’ policy reform. This was evident in March 2004 when a new IMF managing director was chosen, amidst Third World elite consternation about the job’s reserved ‘European-only’ designation. Nothing else, aside from the peace-keeping funding and a minor extension of the ineffectual HIPC, was provided at Sea Island, while in contrast, Iraq won debt cancellation worth $87 billion.

There is insufficient space to recount here details of Mbeki’s consistent defeats. In sum, however, Pretoria’s failures left South Africa slotted into place as a subimperial partner of Washington and the EU. Although such a relationship dates to the apartheid era, the ongoing recolonization of Africa
– in political, military and ideological terms – and the reproduction of neoliberalism together require a strategy along the lines of NEPAD.

From the late 1990s, Mbeki had embarked upon an ‘African Renaissance’ branding exercise, which he endowed with poignant poetics but not much else. By 2001, Mbeki managed to sign on as partners for NEPAD’s first draft, the ‘Millennium Africa Recovery Plan’, two additional rulers from the crucial North and West of the continent: Bouteflika and Obasanjo. Both suffered regular mass protests and various civil, military, religious and ethnic disturbances at home. By early 2001, in Davos, Mbeki made clear whose interests NEPAD would serve: ‘It is significant that in a sense the first formal briefing on the progress in developing this programme is taking place at the World Economic Forum meeting. The success of its implementation would require the buy in from members of this exciting and vibrant forum!’ International capital would, in theory, benefit from large infrastructure construction opportunities on the public-private partnership model, privatized state services, ongoing structural adjustment, intensified rule of international property law and various NEPAD sectoral plans, all coordinated from a South African office staffed with neoliberals and open to economic and geopolitical gatekeeping. Once Mbeki’s plan was merged with an infrastructure-project initiative offered by Wade, it won endorsement at the last meeting of the Organization of African Unity, in June 2001. (In 2002 the OAU was transformed into the African Union, and NEPAD serves as its official development plan.)

In early 2002, global elites celebrated NEPAD in sites ranging from the World Economic Forum meeting in New York City to the summit of self-described ‘progressive’ national leaders (including Blair) who gathered in Stockholm to forge a global Third Way. Elite eyes were turning to the world’s ‘scar’ (Blair’s description of Africa), hoping that NEPAD would serve as a large enough bandaid, for as Institutional Investor magazine reported, the G8’s ‘misleadingly named’ Africa Action Plan represented merely ‘grudging’ support from the main donors with ‘only an additional $1 billion for debt relief. (The G8) failed altogether to reduce their domestic agricultural subsidies (which hurt African farm exports) and – most disappointing of all to the Africans – neglected to provide any further aid to the continent.’ Mbeki had requested $64 billion in new aid, loans and investments each year, but South Africa’s Sunday Times reported that ‘the leaders of the world’s richest nations refused to play ball.’

So on the one hand, within a period of weeks in mid-2002, NEPAD was endorsed by the inaugural African Union summit, by the WSSD, and by the UN heads of state summit in New York. On the other, pro-NEPAD lip-service could not substitute for the missing ‘new constitutionalism’ (to
borrow Gill’s phrase) that would translate into long-term, non-retractable leverage over the continent. The main reason for doubt about Mbeki’s commitment to disciplinary neoliberalism and the rule of law was his repeated defence of the main violator of liberal norms, Mugabe. Both Mbeki and Obasanjo termed Zimbabwe’s stolen March 2002 presidential election ‘legitimate’, and they repeatedly opposed punishment of the Mugabe regime by the Commonwealth and the UN Human Rights Commission. The NEPAD secretariat’s Dave Malcomson, responsible for international liaison and coordination, admitted to a reporter, ‘Wherever we go, Zimbabwe is thrown at us as the reason why NEPAD’s a joke.’ Nevertheless, NEPAD was still, in mid-2003, considered by the Bush regime’s main Africa official to be ‘philosophically spot-on’. Just prior to the Evian summit, the former International Monetary Fund managing director Michel Camdessus, subsequently France’s personal G8 representative to Africa, explained NEPAD’s attraction in the following way: ‘The African heads of state came to us with the conception that globalization was not a curse for them, as some had said, but rather the opposite, from which something positive could be derived …. You can’t believe how much of a difference this makes.’

THE CONTRADICTONS OF SUBIMPERIALISM

There were many observers who, like Manuel Castells, thought that ‘the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the potential linkage between a democratic, black majority-ruled South Africa and African countries, at least those in eastern/southern Africa, allows us to examine the hypothesis of the incorporation of Africa into global capitalism under new, more favourable conditions via the South African connection.’ In reality, the most important new factor in that incorporation is the exploitative role of Johannesburg businesses, especially in the mining, construction, financial services, retail and tourism sectors. Those quite substantial investments have been, mainly, takeovers, not greenfield projects. Indeed, in spite of a high-profile mid-2002 endorsement of NEPAD by 187 individuals and firms, led by Anglo American, BHP Billiton and Absa, there were no investments made in twenty key infrastructure projects two years later, only vocal corporate complaints that NEPAD’s emerging peer-review system had insufficient ‘teeth’ to discipline errant politicians. According to the (pro-NEPAD) Sunday Times after a disappointing World Economic Forum regional summit, ‘The private sector’s reluctance to get involved threatens to derail NEPAD’s ambitions.’ Much is made of Johannesburg-based corporations’ malevolent attitudes and extractive orientation. The prospect that these firms will be ‘new imperialists’ was of ‘great concern’, according to a leading
member of Mbeki’s cabinet, Jeff Radebe: ‘There are strong perceptions that many South African companies working elsewhere in Africa come across as arrogant, disrespectful, aloof and careless in their attitude towards local business communities, work seekers and even governments.’

But who, really, is to blame for this power relationship? Ideological backing for corporate-oriented subimperialism can usually be found within the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) at Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand. Yet because SAIIA heartily supports Pretoria’s pro-corporate strategy, its writers have the space to speak a certain kind of realpolitik truth to corporate power. In 2001, a SAIIA researcher warned that Erwin’s self-serving trade agenda ‘might signify to the Africa group of countries that South Africa, a prominent leader of the continent, does not have their best interests at heart.’ In 2003, a colleague issued a technical report on trade which conceded that African governments viewed Erwin ‘with some degree of suspicion’ because of his promotion of the WTO. Indeed, at Seattle and Cancun Erwin stood in direct opposition to the bulk of the lowest-income countries, whose beleaguered trade ministers were responsible for derailing both summits.

A few South African journalists have also picked up hostile vibes from the rest of the continent. In August 2003, the Sunday Times remarked on Southern African government delegates’ sentiments at a Dar es Salaam regional summit: ‘Pretoria was “too defensive and protective” in trade negotiations [and] is being accused of offering too much support for domestic production “such as duty rebates on exports” which is killing off other economies in the region.’ More generally, according to the same paper, reporting from the July 2003 African Union meeting in Maputo, Mbeki is ‘viewed by other African leaders as too powerful, and they privately accuse him of wanting to impose his will on others. In the corridors they call him the George Bush of Africa, leading the most powerful nation in the neighbourhood and using his financial and military muscle to further his own agenda.’

Mbeki’s agenda is not that of the majority of Africans or South Africans. If the largely parasitical – not development-oriented – Johannesburg corporations profit from NEPAD’s legitimation of neoliberalism and lubrication of capital flows out of African countries, these flows mainly end up in London, where Anglo American Corporation, DeBeers, Old Mutual insurance, South African Breweries and others of South Africa’s largest firms re-listed their financial (though not operational) headquarters during the late 1990s. And if Mbeki and his colleagues are benefiting from the high profile provided by NEPAD and all the other global-managerial functions discussed above, the real winners are those in Washington and other imperial centres who,
increasingly, require a South African frontman for the ongoing super-exploitation and militarization of Africa.

The function of Pretoria’s anti-imperialist rhetoric, cited at the outset, is evident: disguising subimperial practices during an encouraging recent rise of social movement protest against neoliberalism at home\(^58\) and across the African continent\(^59\). The African left has expressed deep scepticism about Mbeki’s main strategies, for example in a hard-hitting resolution from a conference of the Council for Development and Social Science Research in Africa and Third World Network-Africa in April 2002\(^60\), and in various independent statements by leading intellectuals and organizations\(^61\). Not only do the left forces nearly uniformly oppose NEPAD, they also openly call for their finance ministers to default on the illegitimate foreign debt. They advocate not only kicking the World Bank and IMF out of their countries, but also international strategies for defunding and abolishing the Bretton Woods institutions. US groups like the Center for Economic Justice and Global Exchange work with Jubilee South Africa and Brazil’s Movement of the Landless, amongst others, to promote the ‘World Bank Bonds Boycott’, asking of their Northern allies: is it ethical for socially-conscious people to invest in the Bank by buying its bonds (responsible for 80 per cent of the institution’s resources), and to receive dividends which represent the fruits of enormous suffering? Other examples of what is being termed ‘deglobalization’ include the successful efforts to deny Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights status to AIDS medicines, to keep GMOs out of several Southern African agricultural markets, and to reject French and British water privatizers. To these ends, the African Trade Network and the Gender and Trade Network in Africa put intense pressure on the continent’s delegates to reject the WTO’s Cancun proposals. And with the US and EU offering no concessions on matters of great importance to Africa, bilateral or regional trade deals are also resisted by both civil society groups and African governments.

On a more local level, inspiring examples of what might be termed ‘decommodification’ are underway in Africa, especially South Africa. There, independent left movements are struggling to turn basic needs into human rights: free anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS and other health services; free water (50 litres/person/day); free electricity (1 kilowatt hour per person per day); thorough-going land reform; prohibition on services disconnections and evictions; free education; and even a ‘Basic Income Grant’, as advocated by churches and trade unions. The idea is that all basic services should be provided to all as a human right, and to the degree that it is feasible, financed through imposition of much higher prices for luxury consumption.

Because the commodification of everything is still under way in South Africa, this could provide the basis for a unifying agenda for a widescale
movement for fundamental social change, if linked to the demand to ‘rescale’ many political-economic responsibilities that are now handled by embryonic world-state institutions under the influence of neoliberal US administrations. The decommodification principle could become an enormous threat to imperial capitalist interests, in the form of a denial of private intellectual property (such as AIDS medicines), resistance to biopiracy, the exclusion of GM seeds from African agricultural systems, the nationalization of industries and utilities, or the empowerment of African labour forces. To make any progress, delinking from the most destructive circuits of global capital will also be necessary, combining local decommodification strategies and tactics with the call to close the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. Beyond that, the challenge for Africa’s progressive forces, as ever, is to establish the difference between ‘reformist reforms’ and reforms that advance a ‘non-reformist’ agenda. The latter would include generous social policies stressing decommodification, and capital controls and more inward-oriented industrial strategies allowing democratic control of finance and ultimately of production itself. These sorts of reforms would strengthen democratic movements, directly empower the producers, and, over time, open the door to the contestation of capitalism itself.

Not only does imperialism stand in the way, however, so do Pretoria’s various subimperial barriers. Notwithstanding occasionally leftist rhetoric and the world-historic damage inflicted by US empire, Mbeki and his colleagues are situating South Africa as the continent’s leading bourgeois-aspirant country, parallel to what Frantz Fanon so poignantly described as the stunted ‘national bourgeoisie’ of a post-colonial African state, i.e., the modern equivalent of an old Bantustan, where the coopted elite prosper under conditions of global apartheid:

Content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie’s business agent, it will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner. But this same lucrative role, this cheap-Jack’s function, this meanness of outlook and this absence of all ambition symbolize the incapability of the middle class to fulfill its historic role of bourgeoisie. Here, the dynamic, pioneer aspect, the characteristics of the inventor and of the discoverer of new worlds which are found in all national bourgeoisies are lamentably absent …. In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial country identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness, or the will to succeed of youth.
NOTES

1 South African Press Association (Sapa), 29 January 2003.
5 The Straits Times, 3 September 2003.
7 Umsebenzi, 2, 13, 2 July 2003.
9 Anti-War Coalition Press Statement, 1 July 2003.

In the case of the vast Johannesburg/London conglomerate Anglo American Corporation, the cut-off for saving workers in 2001 was 12 per cent – the lowest-paid 88 per cent of employees were more cheaply dismissed once unable to work, with replacements found amongst South Africa’s 42 per cent unemployed reserve army of labour. For more, see Patrick Bond, Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa, Foreword to the Second Edition, London: Pluto Press, 2004.


The major dilemma, here, appears to be the very high level of HIV-positive members of the armed forces in key countries. See Stefan Elbe, Strategic Implications of HIV/AIDS, Adelphi Paper 357, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 23–44.

Vancouver Sun, 11 May 2004.

Sapa, 2 July 2003. Other African countries where US war criminals are safe from ICC prosecutions thanks to military-aid blackmail are the DRC, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Sierra Leone and Zambia.

http://www.epawatch.net/general/text.php?itemID=161&menuID=28;
http://www.twnafrica.org/tna.asp.


38 Cited in *SA Institute for International Affairs e-Africa*, May, 2004. These rating systems follow the examples set in the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which by 2003 applied to 39 countries; the remaining 13 African states were vetoed by the White House for various reasons. AGOA conditionalities include adopting neoliberal policies, privatizing state assets, removing subsidies and price controls, ending incentives for local companies, and endorsing US foreign policy.


48 Gopinath, ‘Doubt of Africa’. A few months later, Walter Kansteiner resigned as assistant secretary of state for Africa, but the sentiment remained.


51 For documentation, see Darlene Miller, ‘South African Multinational Corporations, NEPAD and Competing Claims on Post-Apartheid Southern Africa’, Institute for Global Dialogue Occasional Paper 40, Johannesburg,