

The Soft Bigotry of the World's Low Expectations of Africa

When Donald Trump reportedly called African countries 'shithole' in a meeting with a bipartisan group of US senators in January 2018, the media was up in arms. Many Africans rightly felt insulted. But like I [wrote](#) at the time, the reaction, especially of the 'woke' and liberal Twitterati, media and other American talking heads on the liberal left, reeked of hypocrisy. For starters, Trump was not the first person to express these dismissive and racist attitudes of Africa. A disturbingly significant chunk of the liberal worldview of Africa and Africans expressed by Western institutions including the academia, governments, thinktanks and, the biggest of all, the aid industry, is full of bigoted views of the continent, which are not so unlike those of overtly racist right-wing politicians such as Trump and Britain's Boris Johnson.

Unlike the latter who are said to be so racist that they can't help themselves, liberals' views are always cleverly phrased as to not appear bigoted. One of the most perverse ways such views/attitudes are expressed is in the very low expectations they have of Africa and Africans, of its governments and institutions and its leaders. You can tell from the reporting by the media titans from CNN to the New York Times.

The current Coronavirus Pandemic has provided [a reminder](#). When the pandemic hit the world like a ton of bricks in February 2020, the prognostics of how Africa would deal with it were bleak. One estimate warned that up to [10 million](#) Africans might die. As these doomsday scenarios stubbornly refused to come to fruition, the media started 'wondering what could've have gone wrong'. The headlines started becoming creepy and

macabre. “Could Africa’s Poverty be shielding it from COVID-19”? is how the BBC [recently put it](#). Is it its young population? Genes? It never occurred to these naysayers that Africa perhaps did something right in handling the pandemic, which the rest of the world failed to do. We were expected to fail but we did not, so some nefarious act no one knows about must be going on. Africa’s resilience from past experience with managing epidemics like Ebola denied the sceptics a chance at schadenfreude; so something isn’t right, they thought.

The term ‘Soft Bigotry of low expectations’ was first used by President George W. Bush in the year 2000 during a speech he was giving to the civil rights organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP (The irony itself is interesting: a president derided as ‘dumb’ by the same liberal media coined such an important term). He was speaking to the NAACP about his ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB) education policy that aimed at overhauling the education system of the United States to provide equal educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, primarily minority students and those living in poverty, and to close the achievement gap between these students and the more advantaged ones. The No Child Left Behind Act was controversial in part because it penalised schools that didn’t show improvement.

Bush’s argument was that politicians, especially democrats, had in effect hurt poor black kids by lowering achievements targets for schools and students, the main conservative argument even today, against equality and anti-racism efforts such as affirmative action and fair housing rules. Like most conservatives, he believed that making ‘assumptions’ that Black kids are incapable of such school advisements as their White counterparts is racism itself, racism against the black kids (The purpose of this article isn’t to go into the merits of that argument – like most conservative policies, NCLB took

no consideration of fundamental and underlying systemic inequities that led to unequal education outcomes in the first place, and only focused on the outcomes of those inequities, as if slavery and Jim Crow never happened). Even a dead clock is right twice a day, so goes the saying, and there are enough examples of prominent liberal politicians in the US and around the world dismissing the potential of black people and Africans, an attitude that is terribly unhealthy for the self-confidence and its actualisation.

When the then presidential candidate Joe Biden was asked in 2007 what he made of a then young, rising junior senator from Illinois Barack Obama running for president, gaffe-prone Biden dismissively said:

“I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy,...I mean, that’s a storybook, man.” In essence, meaning typical African-Americans aren’t normally “articulate and bright and clean”.

12 years later, now running again for president, Biden seemed to have forgotten that he had put his foot in his mouth. While speaking at a town hall event in Des Moines, Iowa, on August 8, 2019, in the middle of the democratic primary, Biden let slip with a statement that “poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids,” thereby implying that economically disadvantaged persons are all non-white. Realizing what a gaffe it was, he quickly sought to recover from it by saying: “We should challenge students in these schools,” adding, “We have this notion that somehow if you’re poor, you cannot do it. Poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids.”

Realizing immediately that he might’ve dug a deeper hole instead, he added a third qualifier in as many seconds: “Wealthy kids, black kids, Asian kids – no I really mean it, but think how we think about it...”

Just like the colonialist came here with a 'divine' mandate 'to save savage Africans' from their 'heathen ways' and introduce them to 'civilisation', many people in the Global North consider Africa and Africans to be beneath them in intellectual abilities. And many of these are liberals who supposedly have a more nuanced worldview compared to conservatives who haven't been anywhere and don't read any books.

A recent study by Yale University, for example, found that white liberals 'dumb themselves' when speaking to black people even in mundane conversations, using 'small' and 'easy' words to describe phenomena, and present themselves as less competent as a form of 'kind' gesture to blacks to make the blacks feel equal to them. In other words, they "indirectly self-present less competence to minorities than to other Whites – that is, they patronise minorities stereotyped as lower status and less competent," the author of the Yale study professor Cydney Dupree [told](#) the Washington Post in 2018. While this behaviour might be well-intentioned and inadvertent, it is one of those subtle white supremacist tendencies with terrible consensus in the real world.

In Movies, Cinema, Media and Politics

Western popular culture, music, movies, books etc are full of these same stereotypes of Africa and Africans as incompetent and hapless whose only hope is missionary charity. Many politicians do the same.

At the height of the Spanish economic crisis in 2014, for example, the then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy sent a text message to his finance minister amid negotiations with the IMF and World Bank on the terms of a bailout for Spain's banks. Urging him to hold out for a good deal, he told the Minister: "We're the number four power in Europe. Spain is not Uganda." His argument was, of course, that the Bretton Woods institutions can't steamroll over Spain like they do Uganda

with their structural adjustment colonialism.

As a matter of fact, Uganda seems to be a metaphor of choice for both left-wing and right-wing politicians in the west when describing a hopeless case of failure and catastrophe.

The American conservative provocateur Ann Coulter, who I am sure cannot even locate Uganda on a map is a 'fan' of our country in her radio and TV talk show appearances. "The threat facing America right now is we're about to become Uganda," she [warned](#) at the height of the 2015 Republican presidential Primary, adding that 'Only Trump can stop us from becoming Uganda.' Her full quote was even more ominous: "The main problem facing America is no longer the threat of a nuke from the Soviet Union, it's not encroaching communism, the threat facing America right now is we're about to become Uganda." Even in her books, Uganda makes an appearance a metaphor for poverty. "...The country [U.S.] will have the economy of Uganda, but Democrats will be in total control," she wrote in *'Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America'*.

Liberal commentators aren't immune from this disease either. Ultra-liberal comedian Chelsea Handler's 2014 'Uganda Be Kidding Me' book which is set on the back of an African safari tour she had preyed on similar racist tropes, not unlike Kuki Gallmann's 'I dreamt about Africa.' Because what else is in Africa except animals and the jungle?!

Hollywood itself is no exception. They should probably even introduce a category at the Academy Awards for the most Africa-bashing movie. And for some reason I have yet to figure out, Uganda is a hit in these films too!

- In Netflix's 2018 romantic comedy film *'Nappily Ever After'*, Sanna Lathan's perfect hair-obsessed character runs to a salon to fix her hair after an accidental water splash by mischievous kids washing a family car in

the neighbourhood she was strolling through. The salon owner's daughter, seeing the \$200 she's about to pay her hairdresser father, says, 'You...could've helped some Ugandan kids with that money...'

- In *Newsroom*, Alison Pill's character (Margie Jordan) is just back from an assignment in Uganda and everything from her messy hair to her terrible emotional state is blamed on her experience in Uganda.
- Uganda's also mentioned in the *West Wing* by President Bartlett when he's narrating a nightmare scenario. His daughter Zoey is kidnapped by terrorists from a party and smuggled to a cargo shack in Uganda, where they use her as a bargaining chip with the US and Israel over some (presumably) Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails; apparently a play on the actual events of the 1974 Entebbe. In another scene, President Bartlett is holding a joint conference with the Ugandan Health Minister – to talk about, what else, AIDS in Africa.
- In *'Madam Secretary'* Season 4, there's is an anniversary of a terrorist bombing of the US Embassy in Uganda, in which emotions run high (of course you remember the actual events happened in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. It's a movie I know, but still...)

The Asian and Arab popular culture is even more brazen in its [portrayal](#) of blacks as incompetent and barbarian, and the racism there has no filters at all (at least Hollywood tries to 'hide' it).

The portrayal of black people in Arab cinema reflects the widespread anti-black sentiments and racism that exists across the Arabic-speaking world, and the abuses of African workers in the Middle East that have been [documented](#), where they are widely regarded as slaves that don't deserve the worth of their labour, bear a direct relationship with this attitude. A Nigerian worker was recently [put on sale](#) on the internet in

Lebanon!

The Aid Industry and the Humanitarian Sector

Perhaps the most surprising place where these flippant and racist attitudes are found is in the international development industry.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the US is [forcing](#) the international aid industry to confront its own long history of racism. Organizations in the largely 'liberal' development arena are examining their policies to see whether or not they are built on or perpetuate white supremacy.

Several analyses and stories have come out to bring to light shocking incidences of inequality, racism, wage decriminalization, patronage and other malpractices in otherwise reputable humanitarian organizations that have had storied reputations as 'champions' of the poor.

For starters, a study recently found that Northern (European)-based thinktanks and aid organizations receive the bulk of the aid money supposedly meant for Africa and lots of it never get to the continent. Highly paid foreign consultants are prioritized over local actors, denying Africans agency in participating as equals in projects that are supposedly intended to develop their continent.

The global governance of international development is controlled by multilateral and international development organizations, many of which are deeply steeped in the racist idea that Africans cannot set their own development agenda. These include the IMF, World Bank and a coterie of their outsourced thinktanks and aid organisations whose CEOs are handsomely remunerated, while on-the-ground aid and humanitarian workers almost earn slave wages.

The disparity in pay, between the mostly white 'ex-pats' and local staff in these organizations, is nothing short of

stinking racism and supremacy. First, the so-called 'salary benchmarking' some of these organizations conduct (if they are considerate enough to do so) to justify pay disparities between local and foreign-based staff is fraught with racist assumptions that somehow the cost of living and unemployment in Africa means the Africa-based staff can be paid peanuts because after all, "they are even lucky to have the job", considering the 'context' they are in.

The idea that Africans don't deserve or need more money in compensation is one of the glaring examples of a twisted form of the soft bigotry of low expectations.

Many African staff of international NGOs have told nauseating stories of how they've been [overlooked for promotions](#), replaced by volunteers and sophomores, college dropouts and other inexperienced European 'experts' because they are considered to be better at a job than those who've been at it all their lives, both in living the reality of the problem the organization is trying to solve and in experience working in the industry.

Things become worse If you are an African expert with a consultancy and you are bidding for western projects. Hard luck. Especially if you happen to have white, Northern-linked competitors. It does appear that donors tend to think that black professionals simply aren't up to the job. This prejudice can be devastating especially to small firms and individuals without lots of connections in the aid industry.

Measuring poverty

The metrics set to measure development indicators such as poverty reduction is another insult added to injury. The World Bank's 'international Poverty line' of \$1.90, for example, which is the one used to determine a country's rate of progress out of poverty is a pittance that people in the Global North would never take seriously. Leftists in the US

are currently up in arms with their government to pass a minimum wage of \$15 per hour. The poverty line used in the US is about \$15 per day. I know of such things as cost of living, purchasing power parity and different socioeconomic contexts but can anyone really justify how on earth a person is supposed to live on \$2 a day and then is expected to lead a dignified living? 'Africans can, because they are Africans' is the trope. There is a reason many economists are [contesting](#) these metrics, arguing that they are examples of the racist double standards of international development.

International development is a big business. Total global official aid flows to Africa are well over [\\$50 billion](#) annually. However, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. What, for starters, is the definition of 'aid' which in international development parlance is called 'Official Development Assistance' (ODA)? How is it distributed, and how much of it actually gets to Africa, and how much is paid to the mostly European experts, etc? The numbers don't tell the whole story on their face value.

The potential impact of aid is muted by the counter, exploiter practices by international business and investment cartels that come to Africa disguised as donors and philanthropists. Predatory lending and exploitation of resources that lead to illicit financial flows (money leaving Africa through corporations repatriating profits – the figures are staggering: between \$1.2 trillion and \$1.4 trillion has left Africa in illicit financial flows between 1980 and 2009—roughly equal to Africa's then gross domestic product, and surpassing by far the money it received from outside over the same period. The numbers reached a peak of \$114.5 billion in a single year in 2012).

Africa defies expectations on COVID-19 containment

As briefly remarked upon earlier, the story of doomsday predictions of the coronavirus decimation of Africa is another

example of the impact of these low expectations. Basing on these calamitous predictive models, many African countries rushed to borrow billions of dollars supposedly to cushion their economies and livelihoods against the pandemic, money that in many cases some countries neither needed nor wanted, but the global predatory lenders almost force-fed them the debt that will take decades, and in some cases, centuries to pay back, with unspeakable consequences for generations of Africans. Why? Kenya, for example, at the peak of this COVID-19 debt bonanza was [borrowing on average \\$42 million](#) every day! Many African countries are so indebted that the biggest chunk of their annual budgets go to repayment of loans. Debt repayment to government revenue is set to hit 82% by 2022.

If development partners are serious about helping Africa, they need to consider Africa an equal partner in the development project, help support local capacity development and tap into the already existing capacity on the continent, without putting up condescending behaviour that often means Africans lose agency in their own development and control of their own development trajectory and narrative. There are many examples of countries in Africa that have done so much with so little to advance their economic and political development without outsiders' grandstanding and these can be good role models to emulate.