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A REBUTTAL TO AHIAKPOR'S CRITICISMS AND A REFLECTION ON THE HISTORICAL CRAFT

I want to thank Professor Ahiakpor for engaging with my work. A historian rarely experiences the “subjects” of his research talking back to him because we mainly deal with the archival traces that they left. Whereas my first book, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa*, focused on the 1950s and 1960s, my article in the previous issue of the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* is my first foray into the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, I now have the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with Professor Ahiakpor, who claims my article, “contains several misrepresentations and false claims”. He disagrees with my interpretation of people’s motivations as well as my thesis that many classical economists in Ghana supported the “anticolonial capitalism” project: the embrace of the market to further the political project of liberation in the 1970s and 1980s.

I would like to respond to professor Ahiakpor’s claims, which I think constitute a misreading of my argument. I think our interpretations of events are much more similar than he claims. I also believe that the difference in historical distance – James C.W. Ahiakpor is much closer to the events that were discussed in the article than I will ever be – guides us to different conclusions. Ahiakpor and I will ultimately always disagree since I look at this history from a distance, while one of Ghana’s most important economists of the 1980s is trying to analyse the sea in which he has and is floating.

As such, this rebuttal is not only a dialogue with a critic of my work but also a reflection on the historical craft itself.

First, Jerry Rawlings. "Rawlings was not a socialist revolutionary in 1979 but who suddenly betrayed the cause by adopting free-market 'capitalism' from March 1983".¹ The article does not try to make that point. I agree Rawlings was never a full-blooded Socialist, but he did experiment with "Socialism" and wanted to present himself as such to acquire legitimacy.² Moreover, I am not the only historian who has reflected on Rawlings' transformation: Paul Nugent and Jeffrey Herbst asked the same question.³ Where they pointed to betrayal or the influence of advisers, I am trying to understand Rawlings as a man of his time, a time in which neoclassical economics and the market were being embraced as weapons in the fight against underdevelopment. The examples Dr Ahiakpor cites to refute my point that Rawlings started out with – albeit vague – socialist sympathies in 1979 unsurprisingly stem from the 1980s. I agree, "Rawlings questioned the validity of the promises his Marxist teachers and advisers had made to him in the face of the actual outcomes".⁴ The point I am trying to make in the article is that this critical attitude was the outcome of a historical process Rawlings went through, an intellectual development. Rawlings was not born a market enthusiast; his experiences turned him into one. In that respect, Dr Ahiakpor and I agree with each other.

This point also comes into play when looking at the work and ideas of Kwesi Botchwey. Indeed, "Botchwey was a leading advocate of Marxist-Dependency theory's relevance to Ghana until his participation in the policy change by March 1983".⁵ The fact that he had "little technical capability for saving 'development theory and economics'".⁶ Did little to deter him. "Botchwey" did indeed chastise "African critics of Marxism", but he did so because he believed Marxism had not been well executed in the African context. This is one of the conclusions that surprised me about my own research. The embrace of classical economics, the market and capitalism in 1980s Ghana – or those studying Ghana – did not stem from a flat-out rejection of Marxism, but from a deep disappointment with it ("not animated by anti-Marxism, but rather the product of disappointment"⁷). This conclusion, as I admitted in the article, deserves to be explored further.

1 See *supra*, p. 108.

2 "Fashioning himself" in Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 5.

3 J Herbst, *The politics of reform in Ghana, 1982-1991* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); P Nugent, *Big Men and small Boys: Power, ideology and the burden of history in Rawlings' Ghana, 1982-1994* (London: Frances Pinter, 1996).

4 See *supra*, p. 110.

5 See *supra*, p. 110.

6 See *supra*, p. 110.

7 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 26.

This contradiction embodied by Botchwey – a turn to free market economics while defending “real Marxism” – is precisely why I felt the need to develop the concept of “anticolonial capitalism”. Free market economics or classical economics does not seem quite to capture the complexities of this thinker. As I write, Botchwey did indeed make a case for a correct interpretation of Marxism. He believed that, “Marxism had been poorly executed, misunderstood and had been unjustly criticized as Eurocentric and static, by academics who did not understand Marx”.⁸ Dr Ahiakpor and I are in agreement about this. After all, Ahiakpor writes “Botchwey wanted a purer and more effective Marxism than what some on the left had stopped at”.⁹ However, as a historian, I give more weight to historic development while trying to square Botchwey’s ardent defense of Marxism with the free market enthusiasm of the 1970s and 1980s and his discomfort with dependency theory.

Anticolonial capitalism should, therefore, not be taken as a derogatory term as Ahiakpor seems to suggest in his writing. I understand that Ahiakpor is trying to defend classical economics, Adam Smith and the freedom of enterprise. I would not have expected him to do otherwise. However, what I am trying to do is altogether different. I do not take a stance on the morality of free market economics. I do try to capture the contradictions of the time, the intellectual labour of economists and other social scientists who were looking for alternatives in the face of the failure of African Socialism. Unique thinkers in the diaspora and on the continent were turning to neoclassical economics and the market to solve the fundamental challenges Ghana was faced with. That history is not simply the history of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund forcing austerity upon African countries. Rather African intellectuals were very much part of that conversation in serious ways. Like thinkers in the North, they inevitably brought their background, experience and history into their scholarship. As a historian, I am trying to understand the intellectual world they created.

Ahiakpor’s claims are helpful in that light. I am talking about a group and a time period, but we should not lose sight of individual differences. I, therefore, take to heart, “ that observation may apply to Kwesi Botchwey, but not to any African free-market adherent he has cited”.¹⁰

In historical scholarship, we do not make a clear distinction between hard date-driven science and the time in which that science is conducted. Inevitably both influence each other. Similarly, in the present, the ethics

8 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 17.

9 See *supra*, p. 113.

10 See *supra*, p. 115.

of the free market are increasingly being questioned in the face of the high ecological costs that come with free market capitalism. It is something historians in the future will grapple with as well.

I want to explicitly thank Professor Ahiakpor for his engagement with my work. It helps sharpen my thinking, and as a historian, you cannot ask for anything more.