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MISREPRESENTING OCCURRENCES AND PERSONALITIES IN GHANA, 1979–1983: A COMMENT ON FRANK GERITS' INCORRECT AND MISLEADING CLAIMS

ABSTRACT

Frank Gerits' article contains several misrepresentations and false claims about events and personalities in Ghana during the turbulent years of 1979 through 1983. The most serious of these are his treatments of Flt Lt Jerry Rawlings and Dr Kwesi Botchwey. Gerits ignores Rawlings' own explanations for his actions and misrepresents Botchwey's arguments in two essays. The important lessons for economic policy formulation and governance in the Third World to be learned from the painful experiences Ghanaians went through in those years are distorted by Gerits' attempt to craft an interpretive perspective he calls "anticolonial capitalism" or "anticolonial liberation." My comment clarifies.

Keywords: *Dependency theory, Marxism, neoclassical economics, economic policy reform*

1. INTRODUCTION

Frank Gerits seeks to draw some general conclusions about policy formulation in the Third World from the turbulent events in Ghana, especially during the years 1979 through 1983. He makes references to numerous commentaries on the Ghana episode but appears not to have paid sufficient attention to important details in them. His article thus ends up containing mostly misrepresentations and false claims about

events and personalities during those years. Most significant among the misrepresentations are his treatments of Flt Lt Jerry Rawlings and Dr Kwesi Botchwey. It would be a tragedy if readers of his article took as correct his claims.

Rawlings was not a socialist revolutionary in 1979 who suddenly betrayed the cause by adopting free-market “capitalism” from March 1983 onwards, as Gerits claims. Neither was Botchwey a neoclassical economist who taught economics to Rawlings, as Gerits asserts. Gerits’ describing analysts who point out the beneficial effects of free-market policies on economic development as “anticolonial economists” or “anticolonial capitalists” is also misleading. Classical Marxism and its variants are inconsistent with human nature and cannot yield economic prosperity. That is why policies derived from them can only be implemented with brute force, as was the case in Ghana. My comment elaborates.

2. JERRY JOHN RAWLINGS

Gerits’ incorrect and misleading claims about Rawlings include the following,

- a. Rawlings fashioned “himself as a revolutionary with socialist sympathies”.¹
- b. “As head of the Provisional National Defence Council, [Rawlings] [...] instigated a dual process of economic and political reform in 1981”.²
- c. “Rawlings wanted to succeed where Nkrumah had failed and create a genuine socialist society. However, reforms were introduced, neoliberal solutions became more important, and advisers like Kwesi Botchwey acquired more influence”.³
- d. “Rawlings [...] started out as a socialist”.⁴

Rawlings’s own explanation for his attempt to overthrow the military government on 15 May 1979 contradicts Gerits’ claims. The explanation is partly contained in the case laid out by the prosecutor at his General Court Marshal on 28 May 1979. Further details are contained in the address he intended to make to the nation had his attempted coup succeeded⁵; his

1 F Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism: How Ghana came to embrace market-led development theory (the 1970s-1990s)”, *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 47 (1), 2022, p. 5.

2 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 16.

3 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 16.

4 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 18.

5 See, K Yankah, *The trial of JJ Rawlings: Echoes of the 31st December revolution* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1986), p. 17.

address to the nation after the success of the 4 June 1979 insurrection⁶; and his subsequent speeches till the handing over of power to the elected civilian government on 24 September 1979. His explanation shows that Rawlings wanted to “clean house” by punishing the senior military for their corruption and restoring the dignity of the military before the planned return to civilian rule that year.

He did not seek to undertake a socialist revolution. Rather, the “revolution” he called for was that of “social conscience”. Thus, at the handing-over ceremony, Rawlings concludes his remarks with, “We go back to our vocation in the Armed Forces, ready to assist the incoming Government from our modest positions. [...] We make our exit and trust God that our Revolution of Social Conscience may serve as a propitious wind to sail the Ship of State to a safe and new haven of political stability. [...] Long Live the Revolution”.⁷ Also pertinent is Rawlings’ response to a question after the transfer of power, “I don’t know what it means to be a Socialist – as is referred to [in] the Eastern countries, or a communist or a capitalist”.⁸ Rawlings’ explanations were carried in newspapers (foreign and local), *West Africa* magazine and *Ghana News*; Kojo Yankah’s *The Trial of JJ Rawlings* (1986) contains other details. Such it was that Kwesi Botchwey regarded the actions taken by Rawlings’ Armed Forces Revolutionary Council as, “motivated by considerations of personal vengeance and instigated by comprador elements” and that the Council, “left the direct and still substantial imperialist interests untouched”.⁹

It was Rawlings’ forced retirement from the military in December 1979, at the age of 32, the discharge of his associates from the military, the close surveillance of himself and his associates subsequently, the tutoring he received mostly on the campus of the University of Ghana, Legon, in Marxism-Dependency Theory, and the continuing poor performance of the economy that led him to buy into the Marxist-revolution narrative. That conversion, half-hearted it might have been, led to his 31 December 1981 overthrow of the Third Republic.

The actions taken in pursuit of the 31 December 1981 (Marxist) revolution in 1982 up until about March 1983 proved economically disastrous.¹⁰ Shortages of goods and services increased, along with their prices, while imports and exports declined. The economic destitution in

6 *West Africa*, 11 June 1979.

7 Yankah, *The trial of JJ Rawlings*, p. 48.

8 Yankah, *The trial of JJ Rawlings*, p. 47.

9 K Botchwey, *Transforming the “periphery”: A study of the struggle of the social forces in Ghana for democracy and national sovereignty* (Tokyo: The United Nations University, 1981), p. 25.

10 JCW Ahiakpor, “The success and failure of dependency theory: The experience of Ghana”, *International Organization* 39 (3), 1985, pp. 535-552; JCW Ahiakpor, “Rawlings, economic

Ghana reached the point of peoples' collarbones showing; they were referred pejoratively to as "Rawlings' chain". Having proclaimed his readiness to face a firing squad if he was not successful in improving the lot of the ordinary Ghanaian with his second coup¹¹, Rawlings questioned the validity of the promises his Marxist teachers and advisers had made to him in the face of the actual outcomes. Had Rawlings firmly been committed to Marxism as the likes of Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, Kim Il-sung, and Pol Pot, he might have persisted with the ruinous policies in spite of their failure to create prosperity. Kwame Nkrumah certainly did that until his ouster by the joint military-police coup of February 1966.

All of these accounts are reported in Ahiakpor¹², to which Gerits refers. The real puzzle then is, why does he make the above assertions, including the claim, "Rawlings' shift from socialist revolutionary to market enthusiast is difficult to understand?"¹³

5. KWESI BOTCHWEY

Gerits' incorrect and misleading claims about Dr Kwesi Botchwey include the following,

- a. "Like Frimpong-Ansah [Botchwey] also wanted to save development theory and economics from the clutches of dependency theorists, Marxists and Keynesian economists through a re-evaluation of statistics and the new science of market economics".¹⁴

False. Botchwey was a leading advocate of Marxist-Dependency theory's relevance to Ghana until his participation in the policy change by March 1983. He trained in Law and also taught Law at the University of Ghana. He had little technical capability for saving "development theory and economics."

- b. "As an economist at the University of Ghana in 1977, Botchwey had already criticised "fangled vulgar Marxism", which referred to the spate of Afro-Marxist theories that had gained popularity in the 1970s. Marxism had been poorly executed, misunderstood and had been

policy reform and the poor: Consistency or betrayal?", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29 (4), 1991, pp. 583-600.

11 *West Africa*, 11 January 1982, p. 70.

12 Ahiakpor, "The success and failure of dependency theory"; Ahiakpor, "Rawlings, economic policy reform and the poor".

13 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 5.

14 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 16.

unjustly criticised as Eurocentric and static, by academics who did not understand Marx, he claimed”.¹⁵

False. Botchwey was not an economist but a Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Ghana in 1977. In his 1977 article, “Marxism and the analysis of the African reality,” Botchwey rather chastises African critics of Marxism, including BDG Folson (then head of the Political Science Department at the University of Ghana), Ali Mazrui, and other African scholars who were critical of the application of Marx’s class analysis to African societies. According to Botchwey, “Charlatanism of the most amazing kind, has become the distinguishing feature of [their] anti-Marxist crusade”.¹⁶

- c. “In 1981, Botchwey flipped one of those vulgar Marxist theories, dependency theory, on its head in *Transforming the periphery*, a paper he wrote for the United Nations University. He argued, “social science” was in a “general crisis” and criticised those scholars who considered the unequal economic structures of colonialism to be, “god-given” and precolonial African societies to have been, “classless””.¹⁷

False. Botchwey in this paper rather elaborates his view of the relevance of dependency theory to Ghana. He sketches poorly Ghana’s economic history from 1920 and asserts that, at independence, “every sector of the economy (understood as a complex of social relations defining the ownership of the means of production and the appropriation of the social product) [...] was dominated by foreign, mainly British, capital, and the economy as a whole was firmly integrated into the international capitalist system, with all the structural deformities that this entailed”.¹⁸ Even by 1980, a lesson Botchwey draws is that, “in spite of the physical presence of local comprador classes, the truly hegemonic forces in Ghana’s post-independence history have been the moneyed interests in the metropolitan centres of imperialism. This is demonstrated by the continuing burden of external indebtedness and the interference of the international financial oligarchy in national politics”.¹⁹

- d. “In the *early 1970s*, [Botchwey] exclaimed, ‘the real question is what should a Marxist do when faced with the real situation in Ghana [...] the objective of feeding the people [...] not from the point of view of

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

16 K Botchwey, “Marxism and the analysis of the African reality”, *African Development* 2 (1), 1977, p. 9.

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

18 Botchwey, *Transforming the “periphery”*, p. 9.

19 Botchwey, *Transforming the “periphery”*, pp. 28-29.

any ideal conditions existing in one's head, but the real conditions on the ground?"²⁰

This is a misrepresentation of a statement in Ahiakpor quoting Botchwey's defence of his economic policy reversal in 1983, as reported in *West Africa*, 28 January 1985. The quote is preceded by, "as later explained by the Secretary for Finance and Economic Planning, Botchwey, who had been a persuasive advocate of Marxism since the early 1970s while a lecturer in the Law Faculty at Legon".²¹ Gerits' misrepresentation is just one of several in his article, besides misstatements of the pages for quotes he cites from Botchwey's 1981 paper, e.g. "p. 4" instead of page 1²²; "p. 11" instead of page 2²³; and "p. 12" instead of page 16.²⁴

- e. "The anti-Nkrumah coup [...] had been unable to solve Ghana's problems, Botchwey went on, because, "pre-Keynesian free enterprise" advocates had been strengthened instead of neoclassical free-market adepts like *himself*. Those capitalists had no anti-colonial credentials and only wanted to put the, "interests of foreign capital on firmer ground"²⁵

False. Botchwey, in the 1981 paper, does not claim to be a "neoclassical free-market" adherent. He was a Marxist-Dependency Theory advocate. He there blames Nkrumah for having failed to establish true socialism, and that was why, according to him, "when a group of avowedly pro-imperialist army and police officers overthrew the Nkrumah regime in February 1966, the working classes shed no tears; on the contrary, they joined petit-bourgeois students, traders, civil servants, etc. in jubilating openly in the streets!"²⁶ Actually, the jubilation was because most Ghanaians felt liberated from the economic hardships and political repression of Nkrumah's regime.

- f. "Instead of the, "highly paid Anglo-American liberalism", "the crude anti-Marxism of the right" and the, "neo-Marxist tendencies" of the left, Botchwey wanted to carve out a middle road. What was needed was the

20 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 17. The citation within Gerits' passage is from an Interview given by K Botchwey to African News Wire Service in *West Africa*, 28 January 1985, p. 146, quoted in Ahiakpor, "Rawlings, economic policy reform, and the poor", p. 590. Italics added by the author.

21 Ahiakpor, "Rawlings, economic policy reform, and the poor", p. 590.

22 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 17.

23 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 17.

24 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 18.

25 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 18; The citation within Gerits' passage is from Botchwey, Transforming the "periphery", p. 13. Italics added by the author.

26 Botchwey, Transforming the "periphery", p. 16.

creation of an indigenous capitalism which would avoid imperial ties and theoretical sand castles alike”.²⁷

Incorrect. Gerits cites page 15 in Botchwey’s 1977 article, in which he is most strident in defending the applicability of Marx’s class analysis to African societies, as the basis for this characterisation of him. But what Botchwey argues in his concluding paragraph (pp. 14–15) is a criticism of what he calls “Vulgar Marxism” from both the right and the left. Botchwey wanted a purer and more effective Marxism than what some on the left had stopped at, “a tendency towards academicism — [...] to see Marxism only as a method of analysis to be employed for purposes of careerism and academic brilliance.”²⁸ Thus, Botchwey argues, “If Marxism is to perform its function as the ideology of the oppressed classes in their struggle against imperialism, it is important that at the level of theory, a struggle be waged not only against the crude anti-Marxism of the right, but also against these neo-Marxist tendencies.”²⁹ Among the neo-Marxists, according to Botchwey, are those who believe that “nationalisation [of foreign assets] indicates a society has begun “a transition towards socialism””.³⁰ This is not carving “a middle road,” but going to the extreme left. It is a safe bet that Botchwey now would be embarrassed with being confronted with what he wrote more than 40 years ago.

2. GERITS’ MEANINGLESS AND MISLEADING “ANTICOLONIAL” LABELS

Gerits applies his labels, “anticolonial economist” and “anticolonial capitalist,” to “Frimpong-Ansah, Botchwey and Ahiakpor” for their having, “developed a *new understanding* of the development process that stressed anticolonial liberation could be attained by embracing the market and neoclassical economics”.³¹ But the designations appear utterly meaningless. Applying neoclassical economic analysis to explain the harmful effects on an economy’s growth by a government’s denying producers profitable prices and savers their real interest rate returns, e.g. by Ahiakpor³², should not qualify anyone to be labelled an “anticolonial economist” or “anticolonial capitalist.”

27 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 18. The citation within Gerits’ passage is from Botchwey, “Marxism and the analysis of the African Reality”, p. 15.

28 Botchwey, “Marxism and the analysis of the African reality”, pp. 14-15.

29 Botchwey, “Marxism and the analysis of the African reality”, p. 15.

30 Botchwey, “Marxism and the analysis of the African reality”, p. 15.

31 Gerits, “Anticolonial capitalism”, p. 25. Italics added by the author.

32 Ahiakpor, “Rawlings, economic policy reform, and the poor”.

Indeed, Botchwey came to that understanding in 1983 only after having been confronted with the opposite of the results the Provisional National Defence Council, of which he was the Secretary for Finance and Economic Planning, had anticipated from implementing their market repressive policies; contrast Botchwey's statements before and after the policy reversals in Ahiakpor.³³ But that understanding is not new. It is taught in any good introductory economics textbook; development economics textbooks elaborate, e.g. Dwight Perkins, *et al.*³⁴ As Adam Smith in 1755 explained,

Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice: all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things. All governments which thwart this natural course, which force things into another channel or which endeavour to arrest the progress of society at any particular point, are unnatural, and to support themselves are obliged to be oppressive and tyrannical.³⁵

The economy that emerges from following Smith's advice is "a system of natural liberty" or free enterprise where, "All systems either of preference or restraint [...] thus being taken away [...] Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men".³⁶ Importantly, the government also needs to erect and maintain, "certain public works and certain public institutions, which can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain".³⁷

Karl Marx regarded Smith's economic model as "capitalism," and replaced Smith's explanation of the mutual benefits from voluntary exchange among individuals — "Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer"³⁸— with the "exploitation" of brights version of labour or the property-less by "capitalists" or property-owners. Marx also failed to appreciate Smith's explanation that, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest".³⁹ Thus, frustrating

33 Ahiakpor, "The success and failure of dependency theory"; Ahiakpor, "Rawlings, economic policy reform and the poor".

34 DH Perkin *et al.*, *Economics of development*, 7th ed. (New York: Norton, 2013).

35 A Smith, *The wealth of nations*, E Cannan (ed.), Vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. xl.

36 Smith, *The wealth of nations*, p. 208.

37 Smith, *The wealth of nations*, p. 209.

38 Smith, *The wealth of nations*, p. 18.

39 Smith, *The wealth of nations*, p. 18.

the self-interest of producers and savers causes an economy's crumble, as Ghanaians experienced acutely during 1979 through 1983.

Contrary to Gerits, Smith's model of market freedom or free enterprise is applicable in any country, including those in Africa, without designating that as creating "an anticolonial capitalist economy".⁴⁰ The economies of South Korea versus North Korea, Hong Kong versus China (under Mao), and the former West Germany versus East Germany well illustrate the wisdom and prediction of Adam Smith. Kwame Nkrumah thus was wrong when he declared, "Capitalism is too complicated a system for a newly independent state. Hence the need for a socialistic society".⁴¹ His socialist program rather stymied Ghana's economic development, besides depriving Ghanaians of civil and political liberties.⁴² Gerits is also wrong in concluding,

The activism of Frimpong-Ansah, Botchwey, Ahiakpor and others who were trained outside of Africa, was not animated by anti-Marxism, but rather the product of disappointment. Socialist and Marxist ideas had been poorly implemented and had created a feeding ground for corruption. Moreover, the free market was not seen as a universal model that could be implemented in Africa.⁴³

That observation may apply to Kwesi Botchwey, but not to any African free-market adherent he has cited. Marxism is a poison of the mind that inhibits its adherents' appreciation of the mutual benefits from voluntary exchanges.

3. CONCLUSION

Frank Gerits has misrepresented occurrences and personalities involved in the Ghana drama during 1979 through 1983. His misrepresentations of Jerry John Rawlings and Kwesi Botchwey are the most serious. He appears not to appreciate fully the meaning of a free market. Thus, he attaches "anticolonial" to the clarifications of the prospects for economic development of a government's adopting the free-market approach rather than frustrating producers and savers from reaping their profitable rewards in the marketplace. His erroneous claims cry out for correction.

40 Gerits, "Anticolonial capitalism", p. 25.

41 K Nkrumah, *Ghana: The autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (London: Nelson, 1957), p. x.

42 T Killick, *Development economics in action: A study of economic policies in Ghana* (London: Heinemann, 1978).

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