

The revolution might be digitized: The role of public opinion in foreign interference

“Fake news”, “hoaxes” and “witch hunts” have become rhetorical staples of the American media diet under the Trump administration, especially amid the 2019 House Impeachment Inquiry investigating allegations of foreign interference involving President Trump’s executive actions. Charges against Trump are related to : his withholding of military aid from Ukraine, abuse of executive power, and corruption/subversive acts by him and his core supporters (Mindock, 2019). The epicenter of this radioactive political spectacle is found in the accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential Election (Justice & Bricker, 2019). Foreign interference in elections is a popular topic in recent American political discourse. Consequently, this essay will examine a seminal text on the societal impact of foreign interference, Kwame Nkrumah’s 1965 book *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*.

Society in the United States is experiencing throes of political polarization and philosophical confusion. Tavernise & Gardiner from the New York Times (2019) report, “many people are numb and disoriented, struggling to discern what is real in a sea of slant, fake and fact” (Para. 7). Moreover, in a 2019 poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and USAFacts found that approximately 60 percent of Americans report regularly seeing conflicting reports about the same set of facts from different sources (The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2019). In the midst of a confusing era often described as “post-truth”, feelings of discontentment and angst have become exacerbated. This chaotic political environment is rife with fake news, alternative facts, misinformation and disinformation campaigns run on virtually omnipresent social media platforms.

Moreover, the U.S. intelligence community accuses Russia as a primary culprit responsible for interfering in U.S. political discourse in a subversive manner (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). While this current American political nightmare might seem novel, philosopher/political theorist and 1st President of the Ghanaian Republic, Kwame Nkrumah, warned of conditions similar to the contemporary U.S. political environment, as the inevitable byproduct of the last stage of imperialism (Nkrumah, 1965). Whereas imperialism describes the use of military force to pressure foreign nations into compliance (Nkrumah, 1965,p.xvi), Nkrumah contends that in a world with nuclear weapons deterring total war, economic and cultural relationships between nations gain greater significance as instruments of control in neocolonial power structures (Nkrumah, 1965). The argument assumes that economic relationships can be controlled through trade, sanctions and so forth. Although the cultural relationships are influenced by public opinion which in this framework is constituted by sentiment and content biases within the information circulating throughout a society. Thus, to vie for advantageous cultural and economic relations, nations will steadily increase in usage of propaganda as a mechanism of foreign interference.

It is important to note that Nkrumah develops the theory of neocolonialism during the Cold War socio-political environment, while traditional structures of imperialism and territorial colonization were both transforming (Nkrumah, 1965, p. xiii). European colonial hegemony atrophied after WWII, allowing the United States and the Soviet Union to rise as international leaders. However, despite cooperating during WWII, both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R wanted global dominance, creating a stark ideological tension between pro-capitalist democracies and pro-socialist communists. Nkrumah argues that this tension was felt throughout the Third World experiencing proxy wars boasting military conflicts accompanying global psychological warfare

for the “hearts and minds” of foreign audiences (Nkrumah, 1965, p. xi). In this post-modern context, hegemonic powers depend upon propaganda as a means of perpetuating existing power structures (Bernays, 1928). Consequently, political interference and propaganda became powerful weapons for statecraft. Nkrumah (1965) viewed the United States as “foremost among the neo-colonialists ... which has long exercised its power in Latin America [often in defense of American enterprise]” (p.269). In America’s case hostile targets were individuals or groups perceived as anti-American, communist or socialist. In a landmark 1965 book by the same title, Nkrumah describes the political economy of a recently sovereign Ghana while condemning Western European nations and the U.S. for pursuing “neocolonial” projects. Nkrumah (1965) contends that

The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from the outside. (p. ix)

In other words, neocolonialism is a socio-political and economic theoretical framework which describes an exploitative phenomenon in which a nation effectively has second-class sovereignty and “is not master of its own destiny” (Nkrumah, 1965, p.x). This phenomenon is reified through the use of psychological warfare to control public opinion in a society. This component of the Cold War battles for the hearts and minds of the Third World sanctioned open limited warfare and deliberate attempts to coerce public opinion (McMahon, 2013). For example, Nkrumah (1965) illustrates situations from Togo and Congo in which the United States restricted both countries’ diplomatic relationships to control the flow of information saying,

The American government backs the United States Information Agency [the chief executor of U.S. psychological warfare] through its direct pressures on developing

nations. To ensure its agency a complete *monopoly in propaganda*, for instance many agreements for economic co-operation offered by the U.S. include a demand that Americans be granted preferential rights to disseminate information [barring interference from sources deemed as hostile to the US] (p. 250).

For the average American citizen in the 21st century, the fear associated with the loss of political agency described by Nkrumah may be best understood by reflecting on the long-term implications of Russian interference in U.S. politics. The concern of a foreign power having greater influence on U.S. political affairs than citizens bears significance because the public sentiment is the glue which crystalizes political systems (Bernays, 1928). Contemporarily there are numerous foreign organizations (Russia, China, ISIS, etc.) weaponizing social media platforms to sow discord within the United States by curating disruptive content for varying American publics. The mediums which American publics use to consume information shifted to low-cost digital mediums facilitating tremendous striking power foreign and domestic terror organizations.

Nkrumah (1965) prophesized that “neocolonialism is a mill-stone around the necks of the developed countries which practice it, unless they can rid themselves of it, it will drown them”. Although, with the advent of digital technology I argue that the neocolonialism has transformed into a radioactive system of power and the modern American socio-political environment is experiencing the fallout.

Marxist Influence

The concept of neocolonialism is built upon a Marxist foundation which critiques capitalism by acknowledging exploitative conditions fostered by capitalist economic systems (Marx, 1848). Marx argued that Capitalism safeguards an elite minority of individuals by

enabling the monopolization of power and resources thereby limiting control over the means of production and structure of organization (Marx, 1848). In other words, surplus value created by organized collective labor is unequally distributed amongst the contributing parties creating class disparity. In Marx's theory, capitalism contributes to extreme societal wealth inequality by creating a wide disparity between the rich (bourgeoisies) and the poor (proletariat). Nkrumah's understanding of geopolitical power structures was strongly influenced by Marxist thought. While Marx focuses his critique on the class intersection of societal division in capitalist systems, Nkrumah expands on Marx argument by investigating the ways in which social intersections (i.e, race, gender, nationality, etc.) complicate international power structures actively experiencing globalization. In the 20th century "the conflict between the rich and poor has now been transferred onto the international scene" (Nkrumah, 1965, p.xvii) Neocolonialism specifically contributes to post-Marxist thought by examining the role ideology and group psychology play in affirming existing international power structures. Nkrumah (1965) contends, that "the dominant ideology is that which in the light of circumstances decides what forms institutions shall take, and in what channels the common effort is to be directed" (Nkrumah, 1964, p. 57). This common effort is a mobilizing power which can be channeled to support the status quo or revolution. In this neocolonial framework, ideologies are constituted by a semi-fluid system of values, ideas and ideals. Nkrumah links neocolonial power structures to the propagation of a particular ideology through all the societal sites of memory when noting

the ideology of a society displays itself in political theory, social theory and moral theory, and uses these as instruments... [which] manifest in class structure, history, literature, art, religion... as instruments of social control. (Nkrumah, 1964, p.59-60).

For example, Nkrumah describes how European anthropologists and historians used “malicious myths” and pseudoscience to dehumanize people from the African continent (Nkrumah, 1965). Mediums enable mobilization and public opinion is impacted by mediums. Therefore, Neocolonialism advocates for position of political non-alignment. By adopting a strategy of non-alignment, a nation and its citizens may better dampen the dissonance of ideological polarization by enabling a proper marketplace of ideas and reducing false dichotomies. Describing the non-alignment position Nkrumah asserted

It is our belief that international blocs and rivalries exacerbate and do not solve disputes and that we must be free to judge issues on their merits and to look for solutions that are just and peaceful, irrespective of the powers involved. We do not wish to be in the position of condoning imperialism or aggression from any quarter (Nkrumah as cited in McMahon, 2015 p. 8-9).

In summary, Nkrumah acknowledges the destructive potential of foreign political interference as a result of neocolonial goals. As social media technology radically usurps monopolies in propaganda, thus societies are now faced with seemingly infinite mediums susceptible to foreign political interference. As the 2019 U.S. impeachment hearings progress, observers should review Nkrumah’s theory of neocolonialism and reflect on the legacy set by the Cold War to articulate the implications political interference has on a society.

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