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**Global South Elites, Civil Society, and the  
Democratization of International Development Institutions:  
A Gramscian Analysis of Leslye Obiora and the World Bank**

By Jason Warner

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I met Professor Leslye Obiora in January of 2009 during her tenure as the Coca-Cola World Fund Visiting Professor at Yale University. In our first meeting, Professor Obiora enumerated an impressive list of her life's experiences, including, amongst others: her founding of a non-governmental organization called IRAWCC (Institute for Research of African Women, Children and Culture), her tenure within the World Bank as a Manager for the Africa Region's Law and Gender Program, and her tenure as a Minister of Mining and Steel Development for the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Of particular interest was her final post. Professor Obiora had been called by then President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo to take over the Ministry in 2006. Upon her arrival, Professor Obiora discovered that prior to her coming, her new Ministry had signed a \$120 million loan agreement with the World Bank in January 2005 earmarked for the development of Nigeria's mineral sector.<sup>1</sup> After conducting an appraisal of the feasibility of the pre-established loan, Professor Obiora concluded that the agreement as stipulated would not bring the benefits to her compatriots as it promised, but

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<sup>1</sup> Binniyat, Luka. "Mining: Nigeria's Rising Profile in World Bank Rating." *Vanguard Online Edition*. 23 October 2008. Retrieved 10 May 2009 from <http://www.vanguardngr.com/content/view/19894/143/>

rather place them in further undue debt. She suspended the World Bank loan and set about on her own initiative, which eventually culminated in the passage of the 2007 Mining Act.<sup>2</sup> In response to Obiora's non-implementation of the loan on the terms it desired, the World Bank contacted the Federal Government of Nigeria to express its dissatisfaction."<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of her rejection of the loan adversely affected entrenched interests orchestrated, in concert with various local media outlets, a libelous campaign to discredit her efforts at speaking on behalf of civil society. Leslye Obiora resigned on principle from her Ministerial post in 2007 for a series of reasons, prime amongst which were frustrations with the World Bank.<sup>4</sup>

While discord between the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and African governments is nothing new, Professor Obiora's case was particularly striking. As the Minister of Mining and Steel Development, Obiora's rejection of the World Bank loan was both within her jurisdiction and undertaken on behalf of what she perceived as the best interest of those citizens living within her sovereign nation. However, because a supra-national institution such as the World Bank did not agree with her decision, it leveraged all tools possible—pressure on the national government, local media outlets, and the minds of local citizens—to help abort her critically acclaimed tenure. This situation led me to wonder: What are the possibilities for African elites to reject the development paradigms put forth by international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on behalf of the good of their nascent civil societies? Do African states (and the policy-makers operating therein) still retain a degree of sovereignty or is their development trajectory, as it was nearly a century ago, still subject to the whims of external ideologies?

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<sup>2</sup> Binniyat, Luka. "Nigeria: Appraising Mining and Metal Sector in Yar'Adua's First Year." *Vanguard Online Edition*. 10 June 2008. Retrieved 10 May 2009 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200806100178.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Leslye Obiora. 24 April 2009. Yale University.

While discussing her situation many months after our initial meeting, I proposed to Professor Obiora that perhaps the weight of neo-liberal ideology that drives the policy-making of the IFIs is so heavy as to undercut any capacity for dissent from those not adhering to its prescriptions. Upon my suggestion that a broadly Marxist view of Africa's location in the global political economy could potentially explain her experiences with the World Bank, Obiora responded with the quotation that inspired the writing of this essay. In an attempt to be both academically diplomatic and ideologically dismissive she sought to downplay the centrality of Marxist paradigms to certain ground-level realities, including some of the machinations that culminated in her resignation. Her response: "Jason, I simply fail to see the relevance of Marxist critiques in today's world." Challenge accepted.

Thus, this essay has a duality of purpose. It seeks both to show Professor Obiora how a Marxist-based (Gramscian) framework relating various intricacies of power, ideology, resistance, civil society, democracy, and funding practices can explain the World Bank's reaction to her, and, more importantly, to give her new insight into the forces that may have contributed to her eventual resignation as Nigeria's Minister of Mining and Steel Development. Though the ensuing discussion will better elucidate its meaning, my thesis is this: in rejecting the World Bank's development loan on behalf of the Nigerian state and civil society, Obiora was viewed as a threat to its propagation of neo-liberal hegemony; an organic crisis ensued, and, unable to ideologically co-opt her through the process of "*transformismo*," the World Bank "rejected" her, in favor of a Minister more sympathetic to its pre-established development ideology. Due to their tendency to "reject" African elites who espouse alternative modalities of development for their nascent communities, I argue that the undemocratic nature

of the IFIs leads African civil society to suffer an exclusion from the global development paradigms that are ostensibly intended for their benefit.

Here, I should note that although I seek the application of a Gramscian framework to a real-world case study, this essay is one that is, at its base, concerned with dynamics of power within global development policy-making circles; it is not one that intends to make a value-based judgment on the impact of the neo-liberal economic paradigm on African states or those living in them. My ultimate argument—that the neo-liberal hegemony that drives IFIs causes them to seek specific types of collaborators in national governments—is not a critique of the principles of the neo-liberal economic model as such. Rather, I simply seek to support the claim that a hegemonic ideology pervades the practice of development institutions; that this ideology is neo-liberal is ancillary to the fact that power relations between those “guiding” and “receiving” development excludes elements of civil society that may be engendered by any hegemonic-type ideology. This paradigm need not necessarily be neo-liberal.

I begin by first giving a very brief introduction to the life and thought of the Marxist-inspired political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Following, I proceed by introducing sundry Gramscian ideas (hegemony, civil society, intellectuals, international institutions, transformismo and organic crises) and relate them to the various actors in the contemporary international political economy relevant to Leslye Obiora’s experience. In conclusion, I make explicit how a Gramscian analysis offers one explanation of Professor Obiora’s interactions with the World Bank. Here, I make explicit that this is by no means the only interpretation of her situation that should be viewed as cogent; rather, it is one of many that is paradigmatically useful.

## **An Introduction to Gramsci**

Antonio Gramsci was a Marxist. Born in Sardinia, Italy in 1891, Gramsci was a political philosopher and activist who was instrumental in founding the Italian Communist Party in 1921. Under the guise of a fake assassination attempt on Mussolini, the Fascist Government of Italy called for a state of emergency in 1926 to suppress opposition parties. Gramsci was incarcerated from 1929 to 1940, during which time he wrote his seminal work, *The Prison Notebooks*, upon which much of the following essay is based. Gramsci is considered as one of the leading theorists of Western Marxist ideology, second in reputation only to Marx himself.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hegemony**

At the foundation of Gramsci's work was the notion of cultural hegemony. Whereas predecessors like Marx and Lenin viewed hegemony in terms of a political structure in which ruling classes dominated subaltern classes via indirect imperial rule, Gramsci understood hegemony in terms of culture. For Gramsci, hegemony (or the capacity of one group to dominate another) was constituted by a set of ideas, values, and norms that the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) imposed upon subaltern groups (the working class) in order to maintain its power. Robert Cox is a useful reference when attempting to understand what Gramsci meant by "hegemony." In Cox's view, "world hegemony...is expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down the general rules of behavior for states and those forces of civil society that act across national boundaries—rules which support the dominant mode of

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<sup>5</sup> *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Fifth Edition. 1993. 1,119.

production.”<sup>6</sup> A hegemonic status is thus achieved once a dominant class is able to convince the lower classes that its own specific interests were also in the general interest for society at large. In effect, Gramsci viewed the ruling class as having created a “culture of consensus,” in which it used its control over societal cultural production (government, institutions, the media, etc.) to lead the working class proletariat to accept the bourgeoisie ideology as “common sense,” and the natural order of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Numerous Gramscian scholars have argued that the contemporary world order is characterized by a Western-led hegemonic order based in neo-liberal economic thought, an ahistorical view of Western development, and an Anglo-centric view of human rights. Few political scientists or historians debate the fervor with which the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, France, and other powerful Western states have championed the cause of neo-liberalism in the global sphere for the last three decades. With the assent of Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Reagan in the United States, and Kohl in Germany, Sahle rightly describes that beginning in 1980, the world “ushered in a new phase of globalization underpinned by a neo-liberal economic discourse.”<sup>8</sup> Leveraging its all-out dominance in global political, economic, and social arenas, some theorists argue that the Western bloc has, since that period, maintained a cultural hegemony over the global development discourse, espousing adherence to neo-liberal capitalism as a “common sense” outcome. Nancy Birchfield writes that, “we might argue that the extent to which neo-liberal globalization is hegemonic derives from the combination of structural and material power of capital and the expanding ideology

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<sup>6</sup> Cox, Robert W. “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Methods” in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Towson, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern History: 1789–1945*. 328.

<sup>8</sup> Sahle, Eunice. “African States’ NEPAD Project: A Global Elite Neo-liberal Settlement” in *Neoliberalism and Globalization in Africa: Contestations from the Embattled Continent*. Edited by Mensah, Joseph. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 135.

and institutionalization of market fundamentalism.”<sup>9</sup> When interpreting the profound degree to which neo-liberal capitalist hegemony has been engrained as a cornerstone of the international economic realm, a Marxist critique of power is indeed instructive.

## **Civil Society**

Given the hegemony of the dominant class, Gramsci viewed civil society as the social demographic capable of (and responsible for) the creation of a counter-hegemonic discourse to allow for the emancipation of society’s subalterns. Gramsci defined civil society in terms analogous to what contemporary theoreticians do: as the grouping of political, religious, and social organizations, as well as the media, sports teams, informal associations, and the like, that operate outside of state control. More broadly, Gramsci characterized civil society as “that ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private.’”<sup>10</sup> In effect, Gramsci viewed civil society as being the force that sought to create a new foundation for state-civil society relations by challenging both the material and ideological bases of dominant power.<sup>11</sup> Because the notion of civil society also included such quotidian experiences as “children’s parties, shopping trips and going on holiday,” Gramsci envisioned civil society as having stopped seeing itself as having some sort of interface with the powerful forces governing its day-to-day lives.<sup>12</sup> In short, Gramsci’s conception of civil society is one that sees it constantly engaged in a power struggle

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<sup>9</sup> Birchfield, Vicki and Annette Freyberg-Inan. “Organic Intellectuals and Counter-Hegemonic Politics in the Age of Globalization: The Case of ATTAC” in *Critical Theories, International Relations and ‘Anti-Globalization Movement’: The Politics of Global Resistance*. Edited by Eschele, Catherine and Bice Maiguascha. London: Routledge, 2005. 156.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Steve. *Antonio Gramsci*. London: Routledge, 2006. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Birchfield, Vicki and Annette Freyberg-Inan. “Organic Intellectuals and Counter-Hegemonic Politics in the Age of Globalization: The Case of ATTAC” in *Critical Theories, International Relations and ‘Anti-Globalization Movement’: The Politics of Global Resistance*. Edited by Eschele, Catherine and Bice Maiguascha. London: Routledge, 2005. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Steve. *Antonio Gramsci*. London: Routledge, 2006. 32.



to exert its counter-hegemonic will over the coercive and marginalizing hegemonic ideals of the assumed power.

In the international sphere, Gramsci's analysis is highly relevant as it relates to struggles by global civil society against the hegemonically led development institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. Civil society groups across the Global South have risen up to offer scathing critiques of the development "status quo" as prescribed by the neo-liberal institutions as well as the current nature of their states' location in the contemporary stage of economic and political globalization. As an example, one need only look at the anti-neo-liberal Mali's People Summit in 2005 or the twenty-first century "IMF food riots" that took place in African states such as Sudan, Zambia and Tunisia in reaction to the Washington Consensus currency devaluation.<sup>13</sup> To the extent that global civil society groups are attempting to challenge the dominant ideologies of Western-led institutions, Baker uses a neo-Gramscian view to interpret global civil society as "becom[ing] the battleground in the undecided war of 'globalization from above' versus 'globalization from below.'"<sup>14</sup>

For contemporary global civil society groups, perhaps the most pitched battles being undertaken at the current moment relate to the democratization of international development. With the emergence of the concept of "development" in the post-World War II era, the international sphere has seen Western-dominated institutions prescribing development paradigms to states in the Global South with minimal consultation with the citizens of those countries for whom the development is ostensibly performed. While certain multilateral development institutions like the United Nations do place heavy emphasis on the inclusion of

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<sup>13</sup> Sahle, Eunice. "African States' NEPAD Project: A Global Elite Neo-liberal Settlement" in *Neoliberalism and Globalization in Africa: Contestations from the Embattled Continent*. Edited by Mensah, Joseph. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, Gideon. "Saying Global Civil Society With Rights" in *Global Civil Society: Contested Features*. Edited by Baker, Gideon and David Chandler. London: Routledge, 2005. 126.

the views of civil society, those that are in the business of extending loans to states and thus creating a global economic order, do not. Amongst others, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been particularly averse to the inclusion of non-state actors as it formulates economic policy for states in the Global South. To the detriment of civil society, the WTO explicitly states, “Under no circumstance would non-state actors be engaged in the work of the WTO or its meetings.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the relative exclusion that Global South civil society faces has led it to be engaged in a “persistent struggle for the democratization of leading development institutions.”<sup>16</sup> Its desire for inclusion in the global development dialogue happening on its behalf is thus ironically one of the most pressing issues that global civil society faces today.

## **Intellectuals**

Within the realm of civil society, Gramsci devoted considerable attention to the agents that would be the leaders of challenging the dominant ideology of the hegemonic power. To this end, he delineated two types of “intellectuals”: the traditional intellectual and the organic intellectual. As a starting point, it is worth noting that although Gramsci viewed every person as having intellectual capabilities, he was clear that only certain people were deemed intellectuals in the public sphere. For Gramsci, the traditional intellectual is a scholar who, though viewing himself as an outside commentator on the condition of the world system, is so much a product of the system that he simply legitimates and reproduces the type of knowledge, values, and norms of the hegemonic culture in which he is embedded. Conversely, the organic intellectual possesses a critical consciousness, allowing him to recognize his location within a

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<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson, Rorden. “Managing Global Civil Society” in *The Idea of Global Civil Society*. Edited Randall D. Germann and Michale Kenny. London: Routledge, 2005. 156 – 174.

<sup>16</sup> Sahle, Eunice. “African States’ NEPAD Project: A Global Elite Neo-liberal Settlement” in *Neoliberalism and Globalization in Africa: Contestations from the Embattled Continent*. Edited by Mensah, Joseph. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 145.

certain hegemonically derived set of values and norms. Using this recognition, the organic intellectual is thus in a constant struggle to challenge the dominant ideologies of the dominant class in an attempt to bring about a new social ordering for the marginal groups of society.

Described otherwise:

As theorized by Gramsci, an organic intellectual, unlike a traditional intellectual, is a bourgeoisie scholar who cultivates strong roots in his/her community, working to maintain links with local issues and struggles that connect to the people and their experiences. On the other hand, organic intellectuals openly recognize their location within the dominant ideology and their function in perpetuating it, and use their positionality to cultivate strategies for helping their communities to develop a self-inspired, organic consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

To be considered a Gramscian “organic intellectual” in contemporary terms requires a degree of radicalism that limited numbers of academics actually possess. Indeed, contemporary neo-Gramscians bemoan the overly liberal use of the term to describe those, who, while working towards international social justice, do not fundamentally challenge the linear, Euro-centric vision of “development” as it has always been. Perhaps the seminal organic intellectual was Martinique’s Frantz Fanon, who wrote tireless critiques of the mental colonization endured by Afro-descendants in France’s overseas colonies. A second example of an organic intellectual is Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whose critiques of colonial society and the resulting denigration of the role of African languages fundamentally challenged literary socio-political discourses of the post-independence period. In the African context, contemporary “organic intellectuals” include Seodi White (Malawi), Trevor Ngwane (South Africa) and Femi Aborisade (Nigeria).<sup>18</sup> In Gramscian terms, these scholars and activists contribute to

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<sup>17</sup> Burke, B. “Antonio Gramsci, Schooling and Education” in *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. 1999, 2005. Retrieved 10 May 2009 from: <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Sahle, Eunice. “Re: Organic Intellectuals.” Email. 5 May 2009.

fundamentally challenging the hegemonic ideals of the international financial institutions for the renewal of African states and those civil society groups living therein.

### **International Institutions**

In exerting its cultural hegemony over the working class, Gramsci viewed the ruling class' control of institutions as being paramount in its capacity to retain its hegemonic influence. Given its control over the institutions of the state, the ruling class was able to infuse its own ideologies, preferences, and norms into such public institutions; the result was that the institutional output would be perceived by the governed as unbiased "common sense," whereas in reality, the institutional ideological bias would be in favor of the maintaining the dominant status quo.

In the contemporary global sphere, a neo-Gramscian analysis is frequently applied to international organizations. The contention is that although international organizations (like the World Bank, IMF, and WTO) ostensibly represent the views of larger global society, their neo-liberal approach to economics and politics and their Western view of human rights undeniably derives from a lopsided influence in their inner workings by Western states. In Gramscian terms, Western hegemony is expressed via its propagation of its own set of "universal norms" through international institutions. In his assertion that international institutions "function as the process through which the institutions of hegemony and ideology are developed," Robert Cox delineates the ways in which hegemonic ideals are disseminated through institutions:

Among the features of international organizations which expresses [their] hegemonic role are the following: 1. They embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic orders 2. They are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order 3.

They ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order 4. They co-opt elites from peripheral countries 5. They absorb counter-hegemonic ideas.<sup>19</sup>

The means by which hegemony reproduces itself in international institutions is obvious in subtle and overt ways. For example, the fact that the working language of organizations like the World Bank, IMF, and United Nations are either English or French coincides with the Eurocentric biases that are arguably enshrined within them. Ngaire Woods offers a second example, in her discussion on how “US ‘knowledge’ is embedded in international financial institutions.” She describes the tendency of the IMF and World Bank, in their nascent days, to only hire personnel with fluency in English, thus obviously favoring Anglophone nationals and the modes of thought they brought with them. Even a 1996 survey of World Bank employees showed that although only 41% of employees were born in industrialized English-speaking countries, more than 90% had been educated either in the United States or United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

More overtly, the power structures of the IFIs are highly similar to the hegemonic global power schema that existed more than a century ago between the so-called West and the Global South. As an example, one need only reference the voting structure of the globe’s debatably most important fiscal body, the International Monetary Fund. The IMF, which is charged with creating a stable global financial system, monitoring constituent member states’ exchange rates, and, optimistically, engendering “development,” is structured in ways that often ignore the opinions of those for whom it is intended to work. Voting power in the IMF’s most important body, the IMF Board of Governors, is structured according to member states’ contributions to the fund. Consequently, an African state such as Niger, ranked nearly

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<sup>19</sup> Cox, Robert W. “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Methods” in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Woods, Ngaire. “The United States and the International Financial Institutions: Power and Influence Within the World Bank and IMF” in *US Hegemony and International Organizations*. Edited by Foot, Rosemary et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 109.

universally as one of the poorest states on Earth, is afforded a paltry .04% of all voting sway in the organization intended to abet the impoverished. Contextualized differently, the collective voting pull in the IMF of the ten poorest states on earth (Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau, Somalia, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Niger, and Sierra Leone)<sup>21</sup> is a meager .57%, or about one half of one vote; in contrast, Belgium alone holds 2.09%.<sup>22</sup>

Conversely, the pull within the IMF of what might be referred to as the neo-liberal hegemonic bloc, (i.e., the United States, Western Europe, and Japan) is monumental. For instance, the voting power of even five of the leading neo-liberal powers (the United States, U.K., France, Germany, and Japan) is just over 38 %. When the rest of the European Union, Canada, Australia, and other liberal states like South Korea and New Zealand are factored in to the equation, the extent to which they might be said to constitute a hegemonic bloc is great. That the world's poorest states are excluded from debates on their own economic improvement due to the very poverty that necessitated the dialogue in the first place is a global irony that is lost on few.

### ***“Transformismo”***

Of paramount importance to the discussion at hand are the ways that international institutions interact with intellectuals (organic and traditional) speaking on behalf of civil society. Literature on institutions has long emphasized the fact that institutions are not innate bearers of ideology, but rather, are vessels that carry whatever ideological bearings are instilled

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<sup>21</sup> No author cited. “Poorest Countries in the World.” Aneki.com. Accessed. 21 December 2009 from <http://www.aneiki.com/poorest.html>.

<sup>22</sup> No author cited. “IMF Members’ Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors.” Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. Accessed 21 December 2009 from <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/members.htm>.

by those working within them. Thus, to the extent that ideational orientation of institutions is dictated by its constituent parts, as Steve Jones rightly assesses, “intellectuals work within institutions, and institutions require intellectuals with the specific skills needed to maintain the institution theoretically.”<sup>23</sup> International institutions, dominated by Western countries, are thus in need of individuals willing to adhere to their ideological agendas. But what happens when intellectuals, speaking on behalf of civil society, come into conflict with institutions’ hegemonic ideologies, and are no longer willing to “maintain the institutions theoretically?”

Gramsci addresses this situation specifically in his discussion on “*transformismo*.” In his study on the passive revolution in his homeland of Italy, Gramsci began to view a process he called, “*transformismo*,” or the tendency of hegemonic institutions to ideologically co-opt intellectuals holding opinions that could potentially undercut the dominant class’s ideals and norms. In order to thwart the possibility of a radical leader challenging the pre-established societal norms that benefited the dominant class, “*transformismo*...serve[s] as a strategy of assimilating and domesticating potentially dangerous ideas by adjusting them to the policies of the dominant coalition and can thereby obstruct the formation of class-based opposition to established social and political power.”<sup>24</sup> Thus Gramsci viewed institutions as having the tendency to undertake a process of “*transformismo*” to co-opt individuals who come into conflict with them.

In praxis, numerous scholars have affirmed the tendency of international development institutions to employ just such a practice, particularly with intellectuals from the Global South. As previously mentioned, before entering such global development institutions as the World Bank, IMF, or United Nations, intellectuals from so-called “peripheral” states have

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, Steve. *Antonio Gramsci*. London: Routledge, 2006. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Cox, Robert W. “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Methods” in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 55.

normally already undergone extensive academic training outside their natal communities, most likely in the United States or United Kingdom. Having been imbued with a thoroughly Western-centric education of economics and politics, the globally hegemonic ideas of development have already been instilled into those whose natal states often suffer the most at the hands of development institutions. Those elites from the Global South who don't enter with a Western education and happen to have modalities of understanding poverty, inequity, and economic development that aren't consistent with the neo-liberal Washington Consensus, are frequently subject to the process of "*transformismo*." In this regard, Robert Cox's discussion is worth quoting at length:

Elite talent from peripheral countries is co-opted into international institutions in the manner of *transformismo*. Individuals from peripheral countries, though they may come to international institutions with the idea of working from within to change the system, are condemned to work within the structures of the passive revolution. At the best they will help transfer elements of "modernization" to the peripheries but only as these are consistent<sup>1</sup> the interests of the established local powers. Hegemony is like a pillow: it absorbs blows and sooner or later the would-be assailant finds it comfortable to rest upon. Only where representation in international institutions is firmly based upon an articulate social and political challenge to hegemony—upon a nascent historical bloc and counter-hegemony—could participation pose a real threat. The co-optation of outstanding individuals from the peripheries renders this less likely.<sup>25</sup>

The tendency of *transformismo* within international institutions has been particularly pronounced as it regards African elites. Owing to the fact that the neo-liberal Washington Consensus and the failed Structural Adjustment Policies have arguably brought more ill to Africa than any other region of the world, African elites expressing disdain for the IFIs are particularly susceptible to this co-optation. In questioning the "newness" of the New Partnership for African Development) (NEPAD) scheme, Sahle describes the crafting of NEPAD as a "global elite neo-liberal settlement" characterized by the ideological co-optation

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<sup>25</sup> Cox, Robert W. "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Methods" in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 63.



of African elites by the Western-dominated IFIs intent on institutionalizing and spreading neo-liberal capitalism. In highlighting the counterintuitive tendency for African leaders to bemoan neo-liberal capitalism to domestic audiences yet support its propagation in global institutions, Patrick Bond describes the tendency of African elites like South Africa's Thabo Mbeki to "talk left and walk right."<sup>26</sup> In his discussion on U.S. policy towards Africa, Philip Nel also underscores the degree to which African modes of development and Western ideology have been melded into but one entity:

Gone are the days when African leaders proposed and defended a range of non-capitalist roads to development. Today, the most influential among them—Mbeki, Obasanjo, Bouteflika, seem to have convinced the rest that nothing less than the full integration of Africa into the global economy, on the terms prescribed by neo-liberal ideology, is necessary. US hegemony is thus sage and well in Africa, it seems.<sup>27</sup>

Sahle echoes these sentiments, bemoaning the fact that non-capitalist modes of development espoused by leaders like Tanzania's Julius Nyerere or Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara are "not entertained in this global conjecture marked by a neo-liberal regime of truth."<sup>28</sup>

The necessity of co-opting elites from the Global South happens not only to propagate the ideological "universal truths" of development espoused by the IMF, World Bank, and so on, but also to ensure that the day-to-day business of giving out loans to developing states is carried out smoothly. More than simply replicating Western knowledge, the Bank and IMF must constantly cultivate amicable relationships with those members of national governments who are responsible for accepting and overseeing the distribution of IFI loans. A necessary link is thus forged between the international institutions and domestic personnel, whom the

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<sup>26</sup> Bond, Patrick. *Talk Left, Walk Right: South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms*. London: The Merlin Press Ltd, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Nel, Philip. "Making Africa Safe for Capitalism: US Policy and Multilateralism in Africa" in *US Hegemony and International Organizations*. Edited by Foot, Rosemary et. al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 191.

<sup>28</sup> Sahle, Eunice. "African States' NEPAD Project: A Global Elite Neoliberal Settlement" in *Neoliberalism and Globalization in Africa: Contestations from the Embattled Continent*. Edited by Mensah, Joseph. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 150.

institutions must subject to Gramsci's idea of "*transformismo*" in the event that such personnel seek to challenge the hegemonic ideals of neo-liberal economic development. In her essay, "The US, the World Bank and the IMF," Ngaire Woods explains the historically friendly interaction between Indonesia and the World Bank as being primarily driven by "the close relationship which developed between Bank Staff and their interlocutors in the Indonesian government, a group of young, US-trained economists...[but] once the Bank's technocratic interlocutors lost their influence and power, so too did Indonesia's relationship with the World Bank become a more distant one."<sup>29</sup> Conversely, Woods cites the fact that despite the World Bank's desire to play a significant role in India, its capacity to do so was severely hampered due to the lack of domestic policymakers sympathetic to its mission.<sup>30</sup>

### **Organic Crisis**

Of central interest to this essay, however, is the fate of those elites from the Global South who refuse to undergo ideological transformation vis-à-vis the process of "*transformismo*." For Gramsci, when the ideational hegemony of a ruling class was challenged by agents outside of the class, the resultant outcome was known as an "organic crisis." An organic crisis thus occurs when "something tears the social alliance, economic and political relations, and the ideological glue of a historical bloc goes asunder."<sup>31</sup> Put yet otherwise, organic crises arise at times when the hegemonic class is unsuccessful at convincing marginalized sectors of society that its own interests are also theirs, the result being a subaltern class highly distrustful of the hegemonic group.

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<sup>29</sup> Woods, Ngaire. "The United State and the International Financial Institutions: Power and Influence Within the World Bank and IMF" in *US Hegemony and International Organizations*. Edited by Foot, Rosemary et. al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 106.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, Craig. *Global Institutions, Marginalization and Development*. London: Routledge, 2005. 48.

When the World Bank and IMF suffer organic crises—that is, times at which elites from the Global South challenge their assumed hegemonic development discourse—the institutions have two options. They may first either seek to placate the dissenter(s), or attempt to transform their opinion to match with their own via the aforementioned process of “*transformismo*.” However, in instances where elites refuse to be co-opted, IFIs are prone to redouble the assertion of their hegemony, and thus “reject” those elites whose views don’t match with their own. Such was the case, I contend, with Professor Obiora.

### **Obiora v. World Bank**

To this point, I have laid the theoretical groundings in which to contextualize one interpretation of Leslye Obiora’s dealings with the World Bank. If I have succeeded, the reader has already deduced the relationship between the preceding discussion and the resignation of Professor Obiora. Unsure of my success, the following section briefly contextualizes Professor Obiora’s demission from her Ministerial post within the Gramscian intellectual tradition elucidated above.

The underlying assumption of this analysis is that the world’s most ardent supporters of neo-liberal capitalism have, since the 1980s, been continuously seeking hegemonic status in the international community. This includes asserting their dominance over states in the Global South via the expansion of their neo-liberal ideology. In Gramscian terms, the forces by which the United States has attempted to secure its hegemony are, in opposition to traditional coercive means, through cultural and ideological hegemony. The unabashed commitment to neo-liberal capitalism and the so-called benefits it brings about are the Gramscian equivalent of U.S. ideology, or characteristic of its “culture” in the international community. As discussed,

the United States uses its disproportionately large influence in international organizations like the World Bank and IMF as a platform from which to espouse the ideals of neo-liberalism to developing states as if its reproduction were naturally given. However, as nearly three decades of Structural Adjustment loans have shown, neo-liberal capitalism has served only to the economic and social dislocation of societies of the Global South at the relative benefit of those in the West. Given the dominance of neo-liberal economics in international organizations, few intellectuals working within these institutions are able to challenge the hegemonic ideals they promote.

My contention then is that Professor Obiora should be viewed as an actor working within a world system dominated by hegemonic notion of neo-liberalism, and in interaction with an institution (the World Bank) similarly dominated. In Gramscian terms, Professor Obiora is rightly viewed as occupying a space somewhere between a traditional and organic intellectual. Her work with IRAWCC (which seeks to leverage indigenous resources for the renewal of African communities) is unquestionably an innovative approach to “development as normal;” however, in seeking funding from so-called “hegemonic” institutions (such as the MacArthur Foundation) that reproduce the status quo, she is not attempting to fundamentally re-order contemporary development practices. Her tenure within the World Bank as a representative of its Gender and Law Program, being only a year, did not require any type of ideological adherence or rejection. However, one might claim that her utility was in trying to bring the voices of African civil society into an organization nefarious for ignoring them.

More instructive is her tenure as the Minister of Mines and Steel Development for the Republic of Nigeria. Upon her entrance, the Nigerian government had already accepted a World Bank loan. Upon the completion of a feasibility assessment, Professor Obiora concluded

that its receipt would ultimately be to the detriment of greater Nigerian civil society. Her refusal of the loan was atypical of African elites, who, as the previous discussion has elucidated, are particularly susceptible to ideological co-optation by the IFIs. In Gramscian terms, Obiora's behavior was highly counter-hegemonic, and emblematic of Gramsci's vision of an organic intellectual working to resituate embedded modes of power for the benefit of society's marginalized groups.

Obiora's refusal of the World Bank loan thus led to a Gramscian "organic crisis," in which the dominant neo-liberal ideology of the West was challenged from below. In response, the World Bank had two choices. It may have at first undertaken the process of transformismo, attempting to ideologically re-orient Obiora in order to convince her of the loan's value. Upon the recognition that she was not to be co-opted, the World Bank's response is perhaps instructive: it orchestrated a *rejection* of Obiora. In concert with various forces within the country, the World Bank undertook what may be characterized as a libelous campaign against her through various Nigerian media outlets. With President Obasanjo already on board with its neo-liberal development ideology, the World Bank then used its hegemonic capacities to evince its displeasure for Obiora's counter-hegemonic actions vis-à-vis the Nigerian federal government. The outcome of the Gramscian organic crisis was that the Bank, challenged by Obiora but unable to co-opt her, used its coercive ideological hegemony to ultimately lead to her resignation in place of a more World Bank-friendly domestic Minister. Due to the undemocratic underpinnings of the World Bank, the capacity for African civil society to articulate its goals for development vis-à-vis its homegrown elite in Obiora was thus thwarted.

This essay, while offering no new ways forward, has nevertheless been a modest attempt at offering a Marxist-inspired interpretation of Professor Leslye Obiora's interaction

with the World Bank. As has been underlined in its opening, this interpretation is but one of many that could be put forth to understand the situation. While perhaps still unconvincing to Professor Obiora, it has nevertheless endeavored to show her that radical critiques of the global political realm may have more credence than she and others often believe.

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