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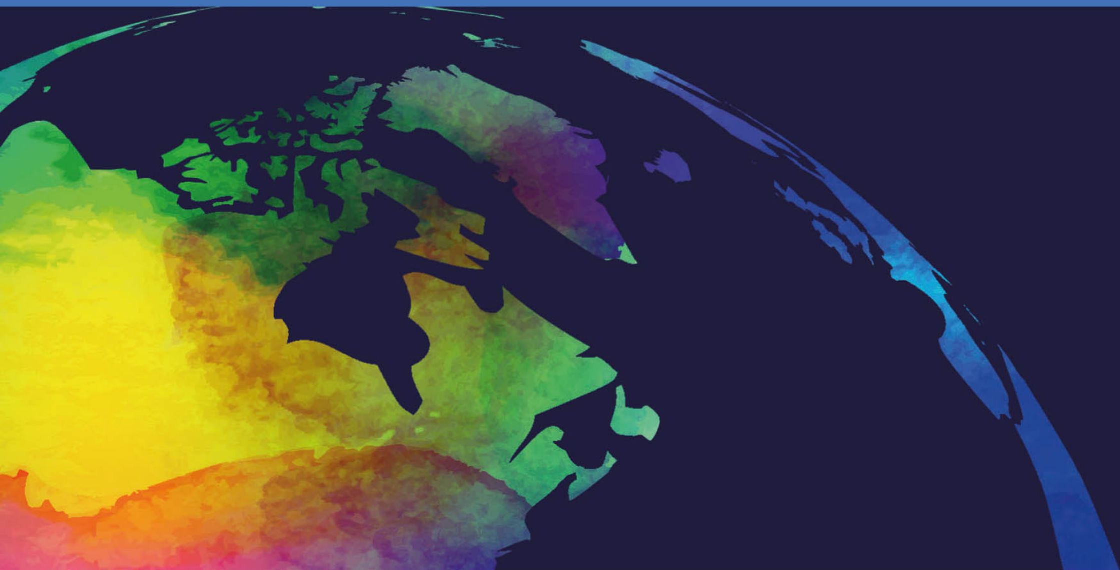

Ujamaa and Ubuntu

Conceptual Histories for a Planetary Perspective

BO STRÅTH

Ujamaa and Ubuntu

For over a decade, the world has experienced an accelerating erosion of a language that took hundreds of years to emerge. It is a language ordering time and space with words, such as enlightenment, reason, rationality, modernization, and the most recent by-word, globalization. However, it is a language that has been accompanied by colonialism, imperialism, racism, the exploitation of people and nature, an unequal distribution of the world's resources, pogroms, genocides, and world wars. There has been a gap between assumptions underlying a visionary ambition and the often-brutal practices that have accompanied it. Moreover, it is a language that expresses European values, with the implicit or explicit suggestion that they pertain to the whole world, a civilizing mission from a European centre. Although the established narrative argued that there was continuous progress, it was a conclusion reached through hindsight. The idea of progress had to be repeatedly recreated through new visionary projects that attempted to live up to the high ideals their predecessors failed to achieve.

Against the backdrop of this meta-normative point of departure, the book argues that a convincing grand narrative has failed to materialize since the discrediting of globalization. In the search for a new narrative, it argues at a meta-normative level for a reformulation of the term 'global' away from its close connection to the globe as an unbounded self-propelling market that exists beyond human influence. 'Global' should no longer be reduced to auto-playing market fiction but instead be connected to the planet, Terra, the Earth. With reference to Latour and Chakrabarty, 'global' and 'planetary' mean cohabitation; life on earth is seen as an infinite symbiotic system, nurtured, and protected, but also destroyed, by human action.

The book argues that a new conceptualization of 'the global' and 'the planet' requires input from African and Asian language cultures. The book explores in depth the history of the two political African key concepts of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* and argues that they are cases showing how work on a new global/planetary narrative might look. The investigation of the two concepts demonstrate that translations are juxtapositions that point up what is shared and what isn't between concepts in two or more languages. The point of comparison is not to develop a uniform, global perspective, even if that were possible, but to develop a global understanding of

difference and, through that, to begin to look for a common ground. Translations of political key concepts are the source of a growing understanding of difference.

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Epilogue

Can we learn from *ujamaa* and *ubuntu*?

Why did the visions of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* ultimately fail? And can we learn anything from their failure? In answering those questions, it is instructive to revisit Willy Brandt's North/South Commission and the work it did between 1977 and 1983 on a new world order. The commission was initiated by the World Bank as a think-tank tasked with finding ways to extinguish world poverty and the means to level North/South inequality. The Brandt Commission's work in the 1970s coincided with the collapse of the Western post-war dollar-centric economic world order. The collapse triggered a major push by the Third World (which is what the Global South was called at that time) to establish a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the 77 states representing the Third World were organized as the G77, and with the NIEO, their goal was a fairer distribution of the Earth's resources. They felt confident that it was their time to shine, but the instinctive reaction by the political leaders of the Transatlantic North was to ward off what they perceived as an attack on their old world order which, in today's retrospective view, had just collapsed To that purpose, they formed what later became the G7 to confront and dilute the claims of the G77. However, the situation was not quite as black and white as that, and many in the North considered the South's claims justified and fair. Siding with this minority view, the Brandt Commission proposed a new world order based on the G77's NIEO.[1]

The histories of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu*, as well as the Brandt Commission, all expose the gap between normative power on the one hand and economic and political power on the other. They point to the chasm that lies between visions and dreams of a better future and the political and economic power necessary to realize them. All three ideas had discursive power, which gave them political power, but it was not enough to control economic power. The Brandt Commission had a much more elaborate idea of institutions and rules required for the implementation of its one-world vision of a redistributive, political world economy than the *ujamaa* project had about how to realize its vision. The latter certainly possessed a clear vision of an agrarian economy that would provide national self-reliance through a web of village communities, but it was vague about how that vision would be implemented. The *ubuntu* discourse dealt with a post-apartheid meta-norm of reconciliation,

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forgiveness, and moving on. Although the new post-apartheid government was aware of the need for expansive social policies, it failed to carry them out, and, anyway, the awareness of the need was not expressed in the *ubuntu* discourse.

The Brandt Commission's proposal and the *ujamaa* project were introduced during a highly transformative period in which a paradigmatic shift took place from Keynesian ideas of political management of the economy to the market-radical escape from political management that, in the 1990s, came to be called neoliberal globalization. One might describe the transformation as one in which capitalism escaped the position it had been assigned to since 1945 and was set free from being embedded at the national level to enjoy unrestrained global movements of capital, commodities, and labour. The *ubuntu* discourse coincided with the break-through of the new approach that emerged in response to the 1970s crisis, the break-through of the neoliberal argument that politics should steer clear of market interventions. One might even say that the *ubuntu* discourse was absorbed by the triumphing neoliberalism with its end-of-history euphoria. By then neoliberal practices had adopted a laissez-faire approach.

Although the Brandt Commission supported monitoring the economy globally and proposed international taxes as a tool for redistribution, its weakness was that it circumvented the question of how global corporations could be controlled and what post-Fordist capitalism meant. For instance, its proposal for international taxes did not cover corporations. Not dissimilarly, the *ujamaa* project was based on the illusion that global corporations could be nationalized by a national government without intergovernmental coordination. Of course, when Nyerere launched the project in 1967, few had the foresight to realize that a major shift towards the transnationalization of economic power (which would circumvent national political control) was about to occur.

The lesson of all these projects is that visions and meta-norms require institutions and political action for their implementation. Neither visions nor their underlying concepts achieve anything alone. Euphoria alone does not mean implementation. Another lesson is that national economies are too small to monitor and manage redistributive politics and that therefore there is a need for global monitoring and the coordination of the world's economy through the synergy of improved norms, institutions, and policies. The issue of capitalism's border-transcending power needs to be addressed not shirked. A global political economy requires not only a global market but also politics that transcend national borders, monitoring and managing the global market and its powerful agents from a social and redistributive perspective. There was a deficit on this point that had impact on the preconditions to realize both the *ujamaa* and the *ubuntu* goals.

Here one must add that politically managing the global market does not mean dreams of a world government but norms and institutions organizing and coordinating planetary cooperation in what Chakrabarty describes as the many worlds (Introduction). One might think of a reformed UN as a model. The shortcomings of the existing UN are well known and don't need to be repeated here. One might reflect on the vitality of the UN around the NIEO in the 1970s asking why it failed

and what we can learn from the failure. This conclusion is obvious also in the assessment of the Brandt Commission and its unspoken circumvention of global corporations.

The *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* cases show that the national framework was too narrow for sustainable success. Against advancing neoliberal power, national politics was quite helpless. The problem with *ubuntu* was not the national framework per se, but its lack with a link to political economy with a social profile and for such a political economy the national framework was too narrow.

Politically powerful concepts, such as *ujamaa* and *ubuntu*, full as they necessarily are of ambiguity and contradiction, are hard to pin down. Inviting a variety of interpretations, they defy any simple clear, precise definition. The struggle to give meaning to key concepts such as those, is the core of politics. Nietzsche described this condition by saying that concepts that can be defined have no history. Having a history means being ambiguous. The ambiguity is thus not a problem but the point of departure for discursive struggles about interpretation and meaning.

Translations increase the ambiguity. There is a political potential in the ambiguity through translations, as Benjamin reminded us in the Introduction: mimesis, the principle of imitation, is a source of richness, because it is a source of thinking in terms of alternatives. The target is as the Introduction argued not sameness and identity but understanding difference. Both *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* contribute to a planetary understanding of difference.

A greater understanding of difference would, as the Introduction argued, be a major achievement in the work for a new conceptualization of the world. A planetary understanding of difference would be the basis for inclusive planetary visions and the policies necessary for their implementation (with the term planetary as defined by the Introduction). The early missionaries' ambition to convert the indigenous people, when, in what is today South Africa, they found *ubuntu* while searching for a language that could describe *their* religious experience, is not a useful point of reference anymore. The issue at stake is not about converting to sameness but understanding difference. The planetary perspective should emerge through an intellectual exchange of experiences and values, taking and giving, learning and understanding, rather than teaching and proclaiming. The exploration of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* shows how, through translation, concepts such as these can be a crucial tool in the development of a global approach to the understanding of difference and, on that basis, promote questions about what is shared and what is not. Understanding of difference and of the Other must underpin the search for common ground, common norms, and institutions. This argument is certainly meta-normative, and even if it is far from congruent with existing practices, will nevertheless be vital in our debate on alternative futures.

Understanding difference connects the planetary perspective to the reality of the many worlds, to use Chakrabarty's dichotomy. Understanding difference is not the goal but the point of departure for the Kantian non-utopian work on a better world. One might say that this argument is wishful thinking and expresses delirious desires without substance. However, one might also say that the planet's condition and the declining prospects of long-term survival of the species *homo sapiens*

necessitates it. On this point, one might refer to Latour's despairing sigh, rather than encouraging optimism, before he departed (Introduction).

Can we learn from history? Nobody emphasized more than Nietzsche that humans are condemned to repeat their disastrous and ill-fated mistakes. They never learn from them. From a more epistemological perspective than Nietzsche's philosophical one, one could echo him by arguing that history never precisely reiterates itself, because even if there are reiterating elements and structures, they occur in new contexts, never exactly as they were. So, in the sense that every situation is new to a smaller or greater degree, we cannot learn from the past.

However, this pessimistic view must not go unchallenged, even if its core is undeniable. Other views on the past emphasize history as a learning process, enforcing us to come to terms with our experiences and giving us a chance to learn from them. Reinhart Koselleck, quoted in the Introduction, distinguished between the experiences of history's losers and winners, arguing that the losers had more reason to reflect on their situation than the winners. Learning from mistakes in the past meant reflecting on how they could be avoided in the future. The winners took their situation for granted without any further reflection or ambition of learning from the past. The problem for the losers, however, is that their experiences are continually connected to new experiences in such a way that makes it difficult for them over a longer period of time (two-three generations) to accurately remember the old experiences and translate them into an action plan for the future. After two or three generations, the memory of the experience fades, and the filter of continuously new contexts dilutes it. This circumstance is a factor to consider but not an obstacle when reflecting on why a project failed and trying to learn from it.

A way of ameliorating our human condition and responding to our difficulty in learning from the past might be to interpret learning less instrumentally, more creatively. Reflecting on the past, particularly on lost opportunities and failures, opens one's eyes to alternatives in history, to opportunities that were not fulfilled, and invites one to reflect on why they were missed. Other questions raised by such reflection include whether the opportunities could be revised and updated or where the alternatives are in the present and how they could be approached. In this way, the past could be a source of inspiration and positively impact our own time and situation.

A new planetary understanding of difference, as the Introduction laid it out, does not argue that a new universalism should follow the failures of neoliberal globalization. Reinhart Koselleck's approach to conceptual history is a source of inspiration for this short book, as is his work on a theory of historical time in which he reflects on the two world wars, various global economic crises, the Cold War's nuclear balance of terror and the ecological crisis. He uncovers the teleology of the enlightenment project and its ideologies – communism, liberalism, socialism, and nationalism – which saw history as inherently bound towards a predetermined goal, which, in their secularized versions of the Christian eschatology, was only achievable after a final climactic crisis (the hypocrisis that is triggered by hypocrisy). He looks for a history of alternatives, the (never realized) possibilities in history, history in the plural, which doesn't have a reason, or a cunning as Hegel believed.

As the Introduction outlined, instead of spouting utopian futures which are derived from historical reason and achieved through apocalyptic transitions, Koselleck searched empirically rather than theoretically for alternatives that would emerge in the gap between experiences and expectations, which too often became a gap between expectations and disappointment. The deep empiricism of his thinking on the continuous revision of the past and the future, in a kind of learning process, where the learning has a limited duration, was not very optimistic, and he warned not only of new ahistorical utopias propelling man towards a predetermined goal, but also that the day might come when the experiences of disappoint become so great that the capacity to outline new expectations is exhausted.[2] Even so, he insisted that the future remains open and unpredictable, which also leaves room for hope, whether big or small. This thought provokes action because it makes clear that humans have their futures (in the plural) in their own hands. There are several ways the future could be shaped. Koselleck shows how planetary cohabitation could be built with empiricism and experiences rather than utopia, bottom up rather than top down, Kant rather than Hegel. *Ujamaa* and *ubuntu* recall another of Koselleck's arguments, that history's losers learn more about how to cope with the future than its winners. In a time of crisis, with growing social fractures within and between nations, his reflection on the conditions of possible histories, on alternative histories, becomes urgent.

The point is not to construct a new revolutionary utopia of eternal planetary peace, but pragmatically to build new communities beyond nation states which have the capacity to respond to the big challenges of our time, of which the biggest is the fact that it is digitized nanosecond-driven unrestrained capitalism that is the allocator of scarce global resources. The governments seem to have reduced their roles to legitimize this development. There is a need for a new understanding of the relationship between resource-coordinating and resource-distributing politics and border-transcending capitalism. The conceptualization for the planetary perspective we are looking for should not be conceived as a multicultural add-on to the Eurocentric modernization perspective through indigenous cultures and languages. The search should be for the 'in-betweens' within cultures and nations and unions of nations, such as the African Union and the European Union, and for the conceptual borderlands transcending the borders, the conceptual overlaps connecting differences and the in-betweens of the approximations in translations. Benoît Challand and Chiara Bottici refer to the interstices between nations and cultures in their argument for an interstitial global critical theory and use a metaphorical musical language to illustrate what they mean. They quote jazz musician Miles Davis ("don't play what is there, play what is not there") and Claude Debussy's definition of music as "the space between the notes."[3] On that basis, the task is to conceptualize moderating, regulating redistributive politics for peaceful planetary cohabitation; *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* politics, as opposed both to the politics of economic laissez-faire and xenophobic nationalism.

The understanding of difference might also imply learning from it. One thing that connects the *ujamaa* and the *ubuntu* discourses, but distinguishes them from the West, is the relationship between community and individuals. In mainstream

European philosophy, community is derived from the individual. Community is an aggregate of individuals. The focus is on the individual in expressions like human dignity, human rights, and human values. In the concepts of *ubuntu* and *utu* (the latter of which provided a core dimension to *ujamaa*), it is not the I that constructs the We, but the We that constitute the I.[4] Hannah Arendt is as we saw an exceptional voice in Western philosophy on this subject, building a bridge to African philosophy, although she was probably unaware of the link herself.

The African pattern goes beyond Swahili and Xhosa. The Xhosa saying, *umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other people"), has corresponding expressions in other African languages. *Botho* is the Sotho* version of *ubuntu*. (*The language of the Bantu ethnizes in northern South Africa, Botswana, and Lesotho.) The corresponding phrase in this region is *motho ke motho ka batho*, meaning that to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others, to establish human relations with them. In Zimbabwe, Samkange's *hunhuism*, referred to in the previous chapter, relies on the corresponding concept in Shona, *hunhu* or *unhu*, which has the same meaning. The founding president of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, integrated what he called African humanism into his state ideology, reinterpreting it in a distinctly socialist way.[5]

In African languages, the common denominator of these concepts of humanism is the primacy of a normative definition of humanity: being human means having social and moral attributes. Biological definitions are absent or irrelevant. The focus is on human qualities and interactions in an anthropocentric philosophy, and it transcends a focus on humans as individuals.[6]

At first glance one might think that there are strong connections between this African philosophy and ethical principles in Christendom (cf. Sermon on the Mount) or even in any other religion in which there exists the idea of 'what you want people to do for you, you must do for them.' However, this ethical norm is an individual action imperative. The responsibility for complying with it is with the individuals. Moreover, African philosophy that sees the human as part of a community is more about demonstrating an empirical fact than proposing a normative appeal.

Ultimately, the final facet of the work from a planetary perspective brings us back to Bruno Latour's despairing but powerful argument in the Introduction and deals with our conceptual tools. The story of *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* – and the Brandt Commission – deals with the capacity to come to terms with global capitalism. When we talk about establishing institutions and norms to politically control global capitalism, we cannot avoid a reference to Karl Polanyi. His *The Great Transformation* was written in response to the European crises that led to the Second World War. Towards the end of the war, he talks about the embedding and disembedding forces of governments and capitalism. Politics (or governments), and the political pressures they are exposed to, which drive politics, embed, while capitalism tries to disembed itself.[7] However, in the pure form Polanyi imagined, these categories do not exist. Politics (or governments) and political pressures represent capital as much as they monitor and control it. Didn't post-1980 radical market-liberal politics, which were adopted by governments in the North as well as the South, promote

capital's escape from their political control, i.e., they were disembedding forces? The goal of capital's disembedding, not against politics but promoted by politics, is to subordinate everything – commodities, services, and labour – to market principles where everything is treated as a commodity. However, Polanyi argued, humans are unwilling to accept that they have become commodities. They will in the end, before they reach the status as commodities, resist, which in turn, will interrupt the process of disembedding, so embedding can begin again. However, isn't a considerable part of the global labour today treated like commodities? Aren't they in fact commodities? Even in his time, Marx thought that they were. However, he also imagined that being commodities, people would develop class consciousness which would help them confront their situation, and this doesn't seem relevant today. To a considerable degree, global capital has succeeded in the commodification of labour. Polanyi's seesaw doesn't function. The ends of the seesaw move up and down like Polanyi's disembedding and reembedding. However, capitalism is not at one of the seesaw's ends but constitutes its constant balance point. That is the big problem needed to articulate and confront. Polanyi's theory was path-breaking and is still thought-provoking, but it requires conceptual revision and updating. A different but related question: What does universal in universal human rights mean? Is it there just to remind us of an ideal which was never realized? It is indeed Latour's desire for a new Copernican conceptual revolution that should guide our shaping of the future. The (re)conceptualization is key. The stories of the ultimate failure of the *ujamaa* and *ubuntu* projects could inspire the work.

Notes

1 For an assessment of the Brandt Commission's proposal, see Bo Stråth, *The Brandt Commission and the Multinationals. Planetary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2023).
2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973 [1959]), English translation *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000 [1988]); Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979). English translation *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003). For a comprehensive outline of Koselleck's work, see Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, *Der Riss in der Zeit. Kosellecks ungeschriebene Historik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023).
3 Benoît Challand and Chiara Bottici, 'Toward an Interstitial Global Critical Theory,' *Globalizations* 2021: 1–23. DOI:10.1080/14747731.2021.1989140.
4 Alena Rettová, 'Cognates of *Ubuntu*: Humanity/Personhood in the Swahili Philosophy of *Utu*,' *Decolonial Subversions* 2020: 31–60.
5 Ibid., 34.
6 Ibid., 5–37.
7 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1944).

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