

28.02.2024 [FEATURE ARTICLE](#)

## China in Africa and Racial capitalism

By [Masilo Lepuru](#)28.02.2024 [LISTEN](#)

In the first few years of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois once argued that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line”. This problem is about the relation between the darker races and the lighter races. Du Bois was correct about the problem of racism but was wrong about two things. He was wrong about this problem of racism being of the twentieth century and homogenising the

darker races such as Africans, Indians, and the Chinese as victims of white racism. Racism has been in existence for many centuries before 1903 when Du Bois made his famous statement about the colour line. African people have been victims of racism for many centuries at the hands of Asiatics such as Arabs, Chinese and Europeans just to name a few. Asiatics as people from the continent of Asia have enslaved, exploited, and dominated African people for “two thousand seasons”. It is in this sense that the clash of race and civilization is at the heart of the centuries-long interaction between African people and Asiatics.

Debates in international politics and relations are currently dominated by the ascendancy of China as a superpower. While the United States of America is intimidated by this rise of China, Africa in general and South Africa in particular has embraced it by establishing bilateral trade relations which amount to billions of rands. South Africa has even joined BRICS. While BRICS is a topical issue in relation to the current international economic world order, there is no consensus about its nature and potential. But it seems to me that BRICS is participating in the neoliberal world order as established by Euro-American imperialism. There seems to be nothing revolutionary about BRICS as far as radically changing the current Euro-American dominated international economic world order. Both Russia and China as imperialistic superpowers are competing to replace Euro-American

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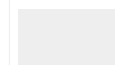
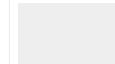

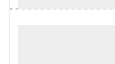

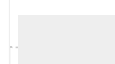
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imperialism on the continent. Africa with its wealth of minerals is coveted by these three superpowers as imperialists in the twenty first century.

China as an imperialistic superpower is spreading its economic tentacles across the continent of Africa. South Africa is replete with China Malls which are controlled by Chinese traders. These Chinese traders symbolise the second coming of China to South Africa. Chinese indentured labourers were used in the 1900s in the mining sector by the white racial capitalists of South Africa. Chinese traders represent what we can call Chinese racial capitalism. The Left in South Africa likes to use the term white monopoly capital to define white racial capitalism which exploits African people. While this term attempts to explain the nature and degree of capital accumulation by white settlers in South Africa, it does not provide an adequate definition of capitalism as an economic system. Racial capitalism as used by Cedric Robinson as opposed to Martin Legassick is a better term. In the current context of South Africa, we have white racial capitalism and Chinese racial capitalism. The Chinese indentured labourers of the 1900s were exploited by white racial capitalism. But the Chinese traders of China Malls are agents of Chinese racial capitalism which brutally exploits African people, especially migrant workers from Malawi and Zimbabwe. While the Ruperts and Oppenheimers are agents of white racial capitalism since the conquest of the Indigenous people in 1652, the usage of the term white monopoly capital runs the risk of marginalising Chinese racial capitalism. It is no doubt true that white racial capitalism is the primary contradiction but this does not mean that it is the only contradiction in the South African political economy.

Both whites and Chinese as Asiatics rely on racial ideas to establish racialised labour relations. They both have a long history of civilizational and racial superiority complex. It is this long history which informs their racist treatment of Africans who work for them. Whites use terms such as “*kaffir*” while the Chinese prefer terms such as “*heigui*” to refer to African people. The racist history of the term *kaffir* is well-known in South Africa. The Chinese term *heigui* which means “black devils” is a less known racist name used by Chinese traders in China Malls to humiliate Africans. Just like their white counterpart, the Chinese have a long history of regarding and treating Africans as animals. They share with their Asian cousins namely whites, the doubt regarding the humanity of Africans. Racial capitalism as a term adequately captures this cultural and civilizational superiority of the Chinese and whites much better than the term white monopoly capital.

White monopoly capital is just a phase of racial capitalism under the dominance of whites both locally and internationally. Capitalism is not just about the concentration of wealth and the hegemony of accumulation. Race and racism precede capitalism. Capitalism is a cultural and civilizational manifestation of an economic system under racist people such as whites and Chinese. Africans especially in Durban have been victims of Indian racial capitalism for many years. White monopoly capital cannot capture this kind of racial capitalism of the Indians. Africans are clearly on their own. Until they restore the land and self-determination both politically, culturally, and economically, they will remain perpetual victims of agents of racial capitalism such as whites, Indians and Chinese. The so-called “China Century” is also characterised by the problem of the colour line, except that the “yellow race” is continuing the exploitation of Africans by the “white race”. The naive multiculturalism and liberalism of the African race will not save it from racial capitalism in all its different forms under whites, Indians and Chinese. Only race-first Pan-African socialism can solve the problem of the

colour line.

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