Dispatches from Senegal: Analyses of Postcolonial Political Economies and Unsustainable Global Economics in the Context of Study Abroad Experiences

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Introduction

Almost exactly a year ago (as of this writing, 1/2021), I left for Senegal. For four months I was to be living, learning, studying, interning, and experiencing in a new culture, country, and continent. And I did just that — taking in its squat buildings and burnished colors, vibrant dress and rich food, craggy beaches and controlled cacophony — for two of them. Clichéd though it may sound, those months touched some of the greatest peaks and toughest valleys I've known; none harder than my sudden departure due to COVID-19.

But nearing a full year of pandemic-ridden life, Senegal feels like an entirely *different* life. I'm a senior now — a second-semester one — and tracking back on all I've experienced in undergrad, my shortened time abroad remains the best encapsulation of the learning and growth I've been fortunate to have.

Over these four years, numerous themes have become particularly pronounced; but sustainability — and environmentalism in general — has risen above all others as both an academic and personal passion. It's a lens through which I view and analyze the world: a focus on ecology and human society, and the teetering relationships between them; our oft-abusive relationship to land and non-human beings; senses of place, time, and culture, and how they affect the treatment of our planet. But above all, given the context of my Global Studies education, I consider the unjust unfolding of recent human history, and the unsustainable nature of those who have most profited from widespread plundering of resources, wealth, and the lives of others.

As the title suggests, this is what my thesis will be centered on — analyses at the micro level of various injustices surrounding postcolonial political economies, with Senegal as a case study; and at the macro level, analyses of the overall unsustainability of a global economic system based in extractive, growth-oriented capitalism.

My time in Senegal — even if unintentionally — happened to shine a light on these dual themes, and I recorded my thoughts and experiences through blog-essays while there. These were the inspiration for this project, and will be its undercurrent. Each of the four pieces will act as a kind of vignette, an on-the-ground, in-the-moment spotlight on what I was doing and observing during my summative experience abroad. Interspersed between them are three lengthier interludes — a zoom out from the vignettes — which elaborate on the blogs, offer in-depth context and scholarly research, and act as the core of the thesis. Lastly, I attempt to tie it all together with some final thoughts and conclusions.

But what about the ‘why’? Why this project? Why do I care about these topics, and why should others? My personal answers are somewhat simple. Because to me, in an age of rampant ecological destruction, climate crisis, socio-political unrest, and more, the stakes are too high to organize my work around anything else. I have an intense love for people and society, don’t get me wrong; the vignettes will demonstrate this. But I also have an intense love for the planet we inhabit, and feel a need to call out our many human fallacies relating to this little blue orb. As for others: I hope to convey a sense of urgency and passion to anyone reading this, and maybe even a call to much-needed action. I want you to reflect on the privileges we have in the modern-day, but recognize their ephemerality given our societal trajectory.

Finally on the most personal level, I find that time has simply passed in crazy ways, and this is my attempt to sign and seal not just this pandemic year, but the past four.

It’s my hope that you enjoy — and take something away from — this collection of writings, pleas for more just, caring relationships with our world; odes to times, places, and teachings both in memory and very much alive. There’s much to be concerned of in this crisis-wrought world, but there’s just as much to cherish, to fight for, to love.

1/25/20 - New’s + Not’s

It’s 6:30AM, and I’m starting to wonder why I even bother to set alarms. Blinking my eyes open reluctantly, my brain meanders its way through several sleep-addled thoughts:

1. *Early mornings and I don’t get along…*
2. *Why does my bed fold itself around me like a taco shell?*
3. *When will this crazy cat shut up?!*

Let me explain. I love cats, which is the weird thing, but on and off for what feels like three hours I can only believe that someone’s beating the poor rooftop stray with a bag of rocks: a bone-chilling yowl, followed by a period of rest for the beater, repeat.

It's not in fact, though, nearly the only element of cacophony that's pulled me from dreamland. In quick succession, I've also heard the two goats next door bleat, a rooster start caw-cawing with cat-like vigor, and the day's first call to prayer echo throughout the neighborhood.

This neighborhood is Mermoz, and this house — in all of its craziness — is my family's. My host family's. Sandwiched between two other tall-skinny row-house-type buildings, *chez moi* resides squarely in one of Dakar's bustling residential areas.

The rooster seems more urgent, so I sit up and rub the grit out of my eyes. Outside my window to our open-air, courtyard-style dining room, I hear the first strains of hushed Wolof passing back-and-forth between family members. Soon, my Maman will be downstairs with tea and baguettes, and I'll greet her warmly — with only a few stumbled words. The trickly shower I take will be cold, but the food warm.

For the moment, though, as I soak it all in, I'm hit with a wave of something extremely peaceful.

If I wanted to, I could view the past week as a series of "nots". I was *not* expecting family living to be so radically different, *not* prepared for the onslaught of people I'd be asked to know; I'm *unable* to communicate with my family in their primary language, and *not* prepared to navigate maze-like Dakar myself. I am — quite simply — not *Sénégalais*, and never will be.

Yet, a hop, skip, and 5000 miles later, I'm here. Life is different, but life is good. Around a knee-high wooden table that Maman rolls out from the corner, we eat from the same platter with our bare, right hands. I talk NBA basketball with my adult brother, and Playstation FIFA with my teenage one. My two-year-old sister snuggles up close when we watch *Rio* en français. And, our study abroad group of 16 newly minted Senegalese *toubabs* (see: foreigners) — despite it all — is finding our way.

Through our first walking commutes to the West African Research Center, and hair-raising cab rides weaving through colorful markets + polluted dust clouds + cows roaming the street. Through learning the hard way which drinking water can be trusted, and which sketchy people cannot. And, outside the urban oasis that is our shaded, French colonial-style school, by being left to our devices to figure the rest out. The good, the bad, the awkward, the confusing, exhausting, nerve-wracking, and new.

New… that's a good way to put it. *New*, not *not*. A series of news pulling us every which way this first week of this new experience. So much is in store, I know; but amazingly, so much has already occurred. Senegal is a place with a highly complex history of French colonial rule, liberation, neocolonization, and modernization — to paint only the broadest strokes — and I know already that living here will open my eyes to it in ways otherwise impossible. The process of humbling, learning, and changing is well underway.

For now, though, the rooster's crow cuts through, reminding of the hour. I rock off the bed and slide on a pair of sandals. A rendez-vous with icy water awaits, then breakfast and greetings. Finally, I'll shoulder my backpack, open the front door, and enter the bustle of this city — and life — that I know in due time, surely won't feel so new after all.

Interlude #1

Arriving in Senegal, one may not at first see the many remnants of its recent past. But this past is very much present today. And just like so many peoples and nations put under the control of 'Western' powerhouses, Senegal's recent history is one of colonialism — both through the direct subjugation of imperialism and the more indirect influence of neocolonialism. It was not always this way, which must be acknowledged; the people and cultures of Senegal have had millennia of history completely outside the influence of European subjugation. Their history does not start upon the arrival of white invaders. However, invasive forces have had an outsized impact on Senegal's postcolonial politics, economics, environments, and society.

To begin tracking these immense power dynamics, and systems of injustice, we must go back several centuries. The first permanent French factory was built along the Senegal River in 1659. By 1677, the communities of Saint-Louis and Gorée would be taken over by the French from the Dutch, who had previously installed trading companies there. A period of intense British occupation would follow, but the two trade hubs were returned to France in 1816, whereupon the burgeoning colonial economy could solidify and expand. By the mid-1860s, France held control over most of the territory of modern Senegal, with peanut cultivation and export offering particularly significant economic returns (Cappelli and Baten 2017, 921).

Similarly to techniques employed during this period by other colonial powers, intensive railway expansion by the French would follow. With newly linked networks spiderwebbing not only Senegal but much of French West Africa, the European powerhouse was consolidating more direct control over its territory (Parvanova 2017, 97). All across the African continent, the age of direct European imperialism was being ushered in. At the Berlin Conference of 1884 and again at the Brussels Conference of 1889-90, the so-called African 'pie' would be sliced up and distributed amongst seven nations: France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Belgium (Parvanova 2017, 97).

Seemingly for both better and worse, Senegal would maintain a 'preferred' status in French West Africa, something discussed early and often by my teachers in Dakar. Due to their unique coastal location (being the westernmost country in Africa), as opposed to landlocked nations like Mali, Senegal offered France both a strategic portal into West Africa and a hub for trade flows out of it (Lee, Braithwaite, and Atchikpa 2020, 29). This created uneven development not only between Senegal and other, less-preferred West African nations — who received less infrastructure and other financial investment from France — but between regions of the country itself. Research supports this unique circumstance: when analyzing the heterogenous development of what they term 'human capital' in Senegal, Gambia, and Western Mali between 1770 and 1900, researchers Gabriele Cappelli and Joerg Baten find clear links to patterns of French investment in Senegal. They find French presence in Senegal to increase regional divergence, with coastal areas of Senegal developing much more quickly than inner areas (Cappelli and Baten 2017, 920). Local populations were under the thumb of their colonizer, so the social and economic incentives provided (or not provided) by France determined much of the colony's political-economic standing both during and after the imperial period.

But Senegal was not only a strategic port; France did not ignore the opportunity to influence and control the nation's internal systems. Throughout the imperial period, France maintained a policy of 'assimilation' in Senegal. Through this 'civilizing' mechanism, they *"taught their subjects that, by adopting French language and culture, they could eventually become black Frenchmen"* (Lee et al 2020, 29). The so-called 'Four Communes' — the Senegalese communities of Gorée, Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Rufisque — exemplified this policy. They were the sole places in French West Africa in which all African citizens were automatically granted the status and rights of full French citizens. These *'originaires'* could hold political and administrative positions so long as they adopted French language, education, and customs. It was a blatant attempt to sow discord within the Senegalese population — many of those in the

‘Communes’ developed disdain or disregard for Senegal’s indigenous traditions (Lee et al 2020, 28).

As we know, though, this period of direct imperial control would not last. Nationalist freedom movements accelerating elsewhere in Africa were also taken up in Senegal by local leaders in the mid to late-1940s. It was an independence movement with real teeth: labor strikes began spreading across Senegal in 1945, culminating in an eleven-day strike in January 1946 that began to throw into question the longevity of French reign (Cooper 1990, 166). Léopold Senghor — soon to become Senegal’s first president — was among leaders who would bridge this grassroots resistance with political action, spearheading diplomatic progress with the French National Assembly (Harshe 1980, 161). Under ever-increasing pressure the next decade, France would concede and allow for the short-lived Mali Federation in 1958, merging their colonies of Senegal and French Sudan (soon renamed Mali). But in 1960, Senghor and other appointed Federation leaders claimed and received independence before breaking apart into two sovereign nations (Lee et al 2020, 30). After much struggle and sacrifice by the Senegalese, they had at last reclaimed their sovereignty.

Such a watershed moment would seem, then, to signal the end of the colonial story. But as is true the world over of the relationship between colonizers and colonized, this is not the case. As important as Senegal’s difficult colonial history is to unpack, it is the half-century to follow that is most connected to the problems and possibilities of a post-colonial, growth-oriented, globalized and capitalist world.

Just several years after Senegal’s liberation from French colonization, Kwame Nkrumah — the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana — would publish one of the first comprehensive books on the new form of exploitation succeeding direct imperialism: neocolonialism. In his view, the essence of neocolonialism is that while a subjected state or population is in theory independent from outside control, its economic system and therefore socio-political policies are directed by external forces (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.). It is based upon the principle, he says, of “*breaking up former large united colonial territories into a number of small non-viable States which are incapable of independent development”* (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.).

Nkrumah describes this as a nefarious practice that has very real effects, but which is difficult to combat. It is perhaps *“the worst form of imperialism”* because it allows for extreme power without direct responsibility for those who practice it, and often irreparable exploitation for those who suffer it (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.). Though French forces were much less physically present

post-independence, their political and economic interests — the initial drivers of their colonization efforts — remained. As a first step towards securing these interests, France began to concretize continued relations with its former colonies through comprehensive economic, political, militaristic, and cultural accords (Harshe 1980, 159).

It was the beginning of a new world order, shaped perhaps more strongly than anything else by changes in global politics and economics. Senegalese independence happened to unfold in the midst of what the United Nations terms the 'Golden Age of Capitalism,' a period lasting approximately from the end of World War II to the mid-1970s — when neoliberalism first came to rise (UN WESS 2017, 23). With the post-war era ringing in a competitive climate of rapid economic growth and wealth creation spearheaded by highly industrialized nations in Europe, East Asia, and the Americas, recently decolonized nations like Senegal were left scrambling. Their economies were fragile, many of their governments unstable, yet suddenly they were cut loose to sink or swim in the global economy.

In the eyes of Western leaders and economists, it was a rosy time of prosperity, growth, and productivity. But fundamental and structural problems of the post-war, post-colonial period were just as rapidly emerging: a growing gap between industrialized and less-industrialized countries; rapid population growth coupled with low rates of agricultural production in 'developing' areas; pervasive poverty and income inequalities; highly volatile commodity prices and deteriorating trade between 'developing' countries (UN WESS 2017, 24).

In Senegal specifically, post-independence was characterized by a decentralization and fragmentation of governmental power, leading to a weakening of the post-colonial state. One of the *"defining features of the colonial state"* — coherence as a centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic organization — transitioned to eroding and undercut political-economic structures (Boone 1990, 342). And it wasn't as if France simply retreated, pulling out all interests in Senegal: various neocolonial socio-economic barriers were *"institutionalized in Senegal's decolonization arrangements with France"* (Boone 1990, 345). This took numerous forms, all of which ensured profitable economic continuity for the ex-colonizer. Variously, Senegal's theoretical independence guaranteed French control over Senegalese fiscal policies; allowed for privileged access of French exporters to Senegalese resources and markets; and prevented threats to French industrial investments by Senegal's transition to a self-ruling state (Boone 1990, 345).

This type of exploitative neo-capitalist behavior is a central driver of the 'unsustainability' of present-day global economics, and thus human society as a whole. As a result, understanding the

basics of neoliberalism — the dominant theory ever since the 1970s —becomes essential to understanding its ties to neocolonialism in Senegal and beyond. At its most basic, neoliberalism is an ideological and policy framework that stresses the value of free market competition (Antonio 2013, 22). It has its roots in the classical liberalism of the 19th and early-20th centuries — championing the individual liberties of laissez-faire economics and the 'invisible hand' of the market — but is distinct from modern liberalism, which is more supportive of direct government intervention. Neoliberalism keeps state action to a bare minimum, placing faith in the markets to regulate themselves and thereby produce desirable socio-economic outcomes (Antonio 2013, 23).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are four key principles underpinning neoliberalism (WHO 2004, n.p.):

1. Economic growth is paramount
2. Free trade benefits all nations — rich or poor
3. Government spending is largely inefficient and wasteful
4. Individual responsibility supersedes public/community goods in economic distribution

The centrality of economic growth is perhaps the most distinctive feature of neoliberalism. Following a significant recession in 1973 — the first great slump since the 1930s — Western political leaders and ruling classes felt a need to prevent future collapses of growth, as negative interest rates and plummeting profits were direct threats to their power (Harvey 2007, 28). The 'Washington Consensus' of the 1990s — a set of free-market policies supported by prominent financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank — further solidified neoliberalism as the primary ideology of modernization, globalization, and development (Harvey 2007, 27).

Ostensibly, every individual and country is granted equal opportunity under this free market-based system. But for postcolonial nations, freedom and opportunity were still severely lacking. Struggling to upgrade their fragile economies, ex-colonies needed *"capital, technical know-how and entrepreneurial skills,"* but these exact needs made them dependent upon their former colonizers (Harshe 1980, 160). Outside investments were needed; but operating within a system dependent on extraction and growth, *"Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world"* (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.). Foreign capital flows but does not stay in local communities; rather, investment returns go primarily back to the investors through loan repayments and/or physical resources and commodities gleaned from the poorer nation. These communities soon become dependent on the

meager returns they are offered, being unable to build local economies around these resources which are exploited by outside entities (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.).

Marcus Power's book "Geopolitics and Development" lends support to theories regarding the nefarious impacts of postcolonial political economics between former African colonies and their colonizers. A particular type of economic engagement by Western nations has prevailed all across the continent: *"a 'new scramble for Africa' based on resource extraction, renewed exploitation, accumulation, the marginalization of African economic actors and the corruption of African elites"* (Power 2019, 35). This means that not only economically, but socially and politically, Africa as a whole is treated unjustly by dominant systems and institutions. There exist many persistent colonial representations which treat the continent as a backwards, deficient, and even infantilized space of poverty and underdevelopment; representations which are equally ignoring of *"the complexity, heterogeneity and rich diversity of African cultures and politics"* (Power 2019, 37).

As demonstrated, this can certainly be seen through the history of Senegal, and its relationship to France both pre- and post-independence. Senegal — and French West Africa as a whole — was no more than *"a 'chasse guardée' for France,"* or a kind of guarded monopoly ripe for exploitation by private French interests (Boone 1990, 344). True decolonization has never taken place; rather, the colonial state has been transformed and consolidated into a site for postcolonial regime-making (Boone 1990, 342). And it's something I saw first hand, too, even through just one week of classes at our French colonial-style school in Dakar.

Much more could be said, and will be in later interludes, about the myriad injustices of these systems. The interplay between postcolonial political economies and the unsustainable global economic order of our modern-day forms a core element of each interlude, building off my observations and research on Senegal as a microcosm of this interplay. That first crazy period of "New's and Not's" in Dakar, I certainly wasn't considering all of this. But I did begin to see Senegal's diversity, history, and vibrancy — and how it's not some homogenous 'other' world, but a nation facing its own set of challenges just like every other, no less at a unique and perilous time in human history.

2/2/20 - Tendances + Inattendus

Today's alarm clock isn't one of the usual suspects. After just over one week of becoming accustomed to the requisite pattern — rooster, crazy cat, goat, crazy cat, human, crazy cat — this new morning sound piques my interest.

As sandal-clad and bleary-eyed as ever, I jimmy the old iron key and peer out at one of the last sights one would expect on a Wednesday before breakfast: their host cousin, huffing down the common room stairs in his nightshirt and underwear, yanking on the leash of one very pissed-off sheep. Mentally filing this away to the "Something to Write Home About" category of memory, I register simultaneously another interesting revelation — that I'm not altogether surprised.

There is "*une tendance à ne rien faire*" here in Senegal — a "tendency to do nothing," to move slowly, to go about life deliberately. Although nothing, admittedly, is smooth about Papa's sheep-herding, the reason for the animal's being here is the ultimate in thoughtful and communal.

See, my family, like the vast majority of the population, is Muslim, and exactly eight days ago, Papa's wife Coumba gave birth to a baby girl. She's beautiful, and healthy, but as of yet unnamed. All of which is to understate that today is a very important day — the baptism, an all-day celebration and naming ceremony with well over a hundred guests expected to be in and out of our small house over the next 12 hours.

So perhaps you've put two-and-two together: sheep + religious protocol + many mouths to feed = bad news for sheep.

Despite the animal's resistance, her eyes are soft, pretty, and something clenches in my gut. A ridiculous thought floats to mind: *Couldn't we, like, sacrifice a bushel of soybeans and cook those instead??*

The feeling certainly isn't lessened when, upon rushing back from morning class, I'm promptly made to hold a dripping sheep leg (file that image away, too). But I know that this tradition, like so many aspects of life here, is simply an *inattendu* — an "unexpected." These things manifest randomly, in every place you don't think to look; say, out your bedroom door.

They're also, quite literally, around every corner. In Dakar, one quickly learns that a taxi hails you, rather than vice-versa. Armed with cute- but ever-sounding horns, a penchant for rapid

bartering, and never the right amount of change their patrons need (Senegalese society is almost entirely cash-based), Dakar's drivers prowl the streets day and night for unknowing prey.

To take one is both a step back in time and a helluva wild ride; as most cabs themselves are beat-up, black-and-yellow Renault's and VW's decades out of production. The hoods sometimes smoke, seatbelts are discouraged, yet drivers wind expertly — almost casually — between the street-cows, narrow market alleys, and legions of other motorized bumblebees clogging their way.

When walking the streets, everyone's always trying to sell you something — from bagged peanuts to knockoff football jerseys to literally *themselves* for marriage — and taxis are no exception. They beep, the vendors spout, hopefully and sometimes aggressively, then you usually signal them away. It's the delicate city dance, except instead of sugar plum ferries it's wide-eyed students and men hollering in Wolof.

If the traveling is hectic, however, the arrival almost never is. 'Senegalese Time,' as it's affectionately teased, cannot be described as punctual. Starting a little bit (or a lotta bit) later than expected isn't rude, it's relaxed. Lunches equate to siestas, and siestas can run all the way to the next meal. The stress is low, and contentedness high. It's a marked change for many of us, so used to overflowing Google Calendars, meals-on-the-run, and our implied academic and cultural necessity of constant productivity. Here, though, a strict schedule is more an interruption of resting time, rather than vice versa. It goes against the grain of what Western society is accustomed to. I can imagine the French colonial rulers being none too pleased either about such a different cultural value. How — they might ask — can a population possibly achieve economic growth if they laze around all day, content with what they have?

In our case there's been something difficult, and a little uncomfortable, about this. My family isn't there to coddle me, or be my personal tour guides and entertainers — after all, they're busy prepping sheep and cooking up feasts. Our teachers and program staff aren't either. They're wonderful, but life outside the classroom is ours to fill, which can be daunting. Compound this with the fact that many of our families have little or no wifi, no TVs, video games or Netflix, and you create a concoction for a lot of time: free time, thinking time, presence time.

In this way, it's an *inattendu*, but it's also really refreshing.

After all, the "unexpecteds" are why I'm here — why any of us *toubabs* are here. The point of studying abroad isn't to mold the host culture to your values and lifestyles, it's to be a sponge for theirs. Some days you soak it all up — the French, the Wolof, the sensory overload that is your city and your family — while others you feel wrung out to dry. No matter how much soap you apply, somehow you're still papered with residues (ah, Dakar's famed dustiness…). Finally, after all the day's dishes are done, you're left somehow different from before — and ready to do it all again tomorrow.

There is "*une tendance à ne rien faire*" here, but that doesn't mean that nothing ever gets done. After all, I have a baptism party to get back to. And if all that actually means is sitting around, sharing words, food, and time together — sponging it up as best I can — then really, I couldn't hope for anything more.

Interlude #2

What makes a person productive? What makes a community productive? Or a society? What, in the end, does productivity even mean? And how may it differ based on cultural values and priorities?

These were questions often pondered during my first weeks in Senegal, and my notions of them were consistently challenged. A good start in analyzing productivity — and its problematic relations to unsustainable economics — may be to look at the root of the word.

Product. Simply taking this root is revealing of the connotations productivity holds in American culture. Under our dominant political-economic system of capitalism rooted in exponential growth, what — and how much — we collectively produce and consume is considered perhaps *the* key measure of societal progress. This is because neoliberalism, as theorists such as Robert A. Antonio note, *"is rooted in a growth imperative stressing exponential economic expansion"* (Antonio 2013, 20). Given this imperative, there is one metric perhaps more dominant than any other which measures economic growth: Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

GDP has long been a widely accepted hallmark of neoliberal capitalism. In the mid-1940s, somewhat concurrently with the breaking up of imperial colonies and rise of neocolonialism,

GDP rose to prominence, becoming the standard tool for measuring each nation's economic well-being (Antonio 2013, 20). The Bretton Woods Conference of 1944 would establish the global financial institutions of the IMF and World Bank, and thereby concretize GDP as a measure of productivity and economic success. Given neoliberal capitalism's belief in the maximization of freedoms under the frameworks of private property, free markets and trade, and individual liberty (Harvey 2007, 145), such a metric fits the bill. The theory goes like this: if everyone and every nation is granted equal opportunity under this free market-based system, then growth of profits, productive powers, goods and services, and even human population is a shared benefit for all (Antonio 2013, 21).

But to scholars and theorists studying neocolonialism and extraction-based capitalism, the idealism and bias of this perspective is clear. For a nation like Senegal, entry into the neoliberal global economy was not based on a desire to maximize their 'entrepreneurial freedoms,' but a result of post-colonial necessity. As noted, many less-industrialized ex-colonies were left socially, politically, and economically fragile following this period. Having been heavily extracted in service of their colonizer's interests, they entered global markets at a distinct disadvantage — a baked-in dynamic of industrial capitalism that historian Gareth Porter describes as being *"stuck at the bottom"* (Porter 1999, 133).

This is one of the many vicious cycles under the postcolonial growth imperative: to stay competitive with long-industrialized, wealthy nations, industrializing nations must often specialize in undesirable and pollution-intensive industries. However, raising social or environmental standards to benefit their citizens is seen as detrimental to their competitiveness, given their high barriers to entry in neoliberal markets (Porter 1999, 133). It's a catch-22 for these countries, and signifying of the unsustainability of such a global economic model organized around social and ecological extortion. Overall, this dynamic creates a kind of hierarchy between the so-called 'developed' and 'developing' nations of the world (Porter 1999, 134).

Some scholars refer to this dynamic as the 'development paradigm': an organizing principle of capitalist modernity wherein all nations find themselves somewhere on a spectrum of 'underdeveloped' to 'developed.' One prominent theorist in the field of literature that is critical of this paradigm is Arturo Escobar. His book "Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World" takes on notions of industrialized nations being the *"indubitable models"* for nations in the so-called 'Third World' — what we would now consider the 'Global South' (Escobar 1995, xlv). He does not attempt to refute the existence or influence of the

development discourse; he acknowledges full well its status as *"an integral part of the socioeconomic, cultural, and political life of the post–World War II period"* (Escobar 1995, xlv). It has been somewhat the magic formula ever since, but should be undoubtedly less and less so as the decades have passed and its many promises have gone unfulfilled (Escobar 1995, xlv).

So what exactly were these promises made by the most 'developed' societies? And how are they actually a fatally flawed paradigm forcibly imposed on the least 'developed'?

In 1949, President Harry Truman addressed the former: *"I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life…What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing"* (Escobar 1995, 3). To him and other Western leaders, the lives led by such primitive, undemocratic peoples could not possibly be satisfactory in comparison to their own 'developed' ones. He gave but one ultimate key to a successful development: *"Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace"* (Escobar 1995, 3).

Bingo. Truman laid it out plainly: without a full-hearted pursuit of extreme economic production and growth, necessitating in many cases an almost *"total restructuring of 'underdeveloped' societies"* (according to a 1951 UN Report), then no nation can ever achieve prosperity (Escobar 1995, 4). But this paradigm pushed by the world's most wealthy towards the world's least wealthy — even if well-intentioned by some — was initially and forever a destructive sham. Instead of the *"kingdom of abundance"* theorists and politicians promised, the strategies and discourses of development resulted in the opposite: massive and widespread underdevelopment, impoverishment, exploitation, and oppression (Escobar 1995, 4). Crises of famine, malnutrition, war and instability, and ecological destruction are among the signs of many decades of developmental failure (Escobar 1995, 5).

Seeing the reality of the nefarious development paradigm — which markets itself quite well as achievable, desirable, and infinitely sustainable — can be difficult, especially when it unfolds slowly over years and decades. Rob Nixon's book "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor" deals exactly with this temporal aspect of so-called development, productivity, and progress. As a theory, 'slow violence' is any *"violence that occurs gradually and out of sight"* (Nixon 2011, 2). It encompasses institutions and actions whose violence and destruction — in social, ecological, or economic terms — is often delayed, dispersed, and *"typically not viewed as violence at all"* (Nixon 2011, 2).

To Nixon, slow violence has characterized the essence of recent human history — from imperialism to the modern-day. Throughout the postcolonial age this violence has tended to fall under the cloak of 'development' (Nixon 2011, 37). Such a developmental agenda is codified within organizations like the World Bank, which produces annual reports analyzing the economic standing of historically 'underperforming' nations like Senegal (World Bank Group 2018, 1). In their 2018 report, Senegal has a *"historical backdrop of lackluster economic growth and poverty reduction,"*; though in the eyes of the World Bank, *"recent progress contrasts starkly with decades of paradoxically modest development"* (World Bank Group 2018, 1).

Senegal's 'recent progress' has much to do with their increasing competitiveness. 'International competitiveness' is a major buzzword throughout the World Bank analysis, connecting back to both Porter's 'stuck at the bottom' theory and the 'sink or swim' nature of decolonization. Postcolonial political-economics stacked the cards against those already most exploited by the Global North, an entirely unfair game. Under the guise of 'aiding' in maximizing their competitiveness — a core tenet of the neoliberal development agenda — wealthy nations could continue benefitting their interests by puppeteering the interests of 'underperforming' nations.

This brings back into focus the prevalence of exploitative neocolonialism. These practices go hand in hand with capitalist dynamics, collectively forming the injustices faced by less-industrialized nations like Senegal. Neocolonialism prevents social, political, and economic conditions for true and optimum development; as a result, less-industrialized nations are unable to maintain markets supporting their domestic interests (Nkrumah 1965, n.p.). It has been, and is still a losing battle for less-industrialized nations: capitalism and modernity are hegemonic forces, and *"resisting and subverting"* the pressures they place is exceedingly difficult (Escobar 1995, 225).

Fortunately, the unsustainable nature of this growth mindset is becoming more and more widely accepted. Simply taking the numbers, sustaining 3% global GDP growth annually would mean doubling the size of the global economy about every 23 years (Hagens 2015, 21). In a world already facing a myriad of resource shortages and ecological crises, even maintaining — without growing — GDP seems impossible in the long-run. So believing we can ***double*** our extractive, productive, and consumptive strain in such a timescale seems a grave fallacy. Infinite growth on a finite planet is expected to magically occur under these models, but in reality, future forecasts of energy and resources *"look considerably more ominous"* (Hagens 2015, 32).

So who must change their behaviors the most drastically under these ominous forecasts? The numbers make it quite clear: wealthy nations. At the time of Escobar's publication, industrialized countries, *"...with 26 percent of the population, account for 78 percent of world production of goods and services, 81 percent of energy consumption, 70 percent of chemical fertilizers, and 87 percent of world armaments"* (Escobar 1995, xlv). In the 26 years since, very little has changed. In 2019, the average U.S. citizen consumed 40 times more energy than the average Senegalese citizen, and 13% of the world (almost entirely in sub-Saharan Africa) still did not have access to electricity (Ritchie and Roser 2019, n.p.). We operate under the same political-economic model of rampant extraction and production — often taking place in nations inherently 'stuck at the bottom' — that has been espoused from the beginning as the epitome of 'developed.' Alternative ways of being and doing are necessary, but they must be conceived and implemented outside of the realm of traditional development discourse. This is because considering 'sustainable development' to be a viable alternative simply reframes and maintains the exact way of thinking that produced 'development' in the first place (Escobar 1995, 222).

In this fashion, postcolonial political economics and unsustainability are once again tightly linked. Under the threat of continued conventional development, capitalist extraction, and violence, less-industrialized nations must valorize economic needs and opportunities outside of those that fall under profit-making and market creation (Escobar 1995, 225). Defending the local must come before just, sustainable engagement with the global; but this is not prioritized when driven by capital accumulation — *"capitalism's core competitive logic"* (Antonio 2013, 20).

These injustices go beyond politics and economics, however. Due to its hegemonic dominance over modern-day society, neoliberalism can perhaps even be thought of as a form of 'creative destruction.' It's a destruction not only of other political-economic frameworks, but includes: ways of life, divisions of labor, social relations, charity and welfare-giving, technological opportunities, attachments to land and place, ways of thought, and more (Harvey 2007, 145). The growth imperative has swept like a tidal wave during this brief period of societal acceleration, changing the *"commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world"* (Harvey 2007, 145).

All of this in consideration, maybe it's okay if — like I experienced in Senegal — we collectively slowed down. Or more than okay, necessary. By popular Western definition, Senegalese are perhaps more 'unproductive' in their day-to-day lives, and should be 'developed' into more effective participants of industrial capitalism. But it is this growth mindset, not the Senegalese *"tendance à ne rien faire"* which is most unsustainable, and needing of change.

2/10/20 - People's Republics + People's Gyms

Stumbling upon Sino-Senegalese relations in Dakar really wasn't purposeful.

Let me preface: To the huge surprise of no one more than myself, I've been running a fair amount over my first three weeks here. Many evenings have caught me pounding dangerously uneven pavement, dodging vendors waving faux leather wallets in my face, and frequenting one gym in particular.

This gym, though, isn't *really* a gym at all, and also sports a curious name: *Espace Sportif de l'Amitié Sino-Sénégalaise*

Roughly translated as: Athletic Area of Sino-Senegalese Friendship

Huh.

Now, I like to think that I'm a little bit more familiar with China than the average American bear. I spent three incredible weeks in and around Beijing during high school on a summer abroad program. I'm still closely connected to a number of friends and contacts over there. I've since read books and follow news on China closely. It's a global superpower, and has its hand in places the world over — including, I know in somewhat controversial neocolonial terms, Africa. But of all the pockets of Chinese influence I may have foreseen in Senegal, this one would never have struck.

The friendly workout space is a small strip of land, pasted like a peel-off mustache in between two formidable forces: la Corniche, a backed-up Dakarian vein of a road, and the Atlantic Ocean. Each evening, however, the unassuming demilitarized-like zone perhaps 60ft at its widest transforms into its own cacophony. Hundreds of locals pour in with religious-like fervor: young men in tautly stretched football jerseys pumping out pull-ups and bench presses on rusty racks, middle-aged women clustered tightly in yoga mat circles for ab sessions, elderly men walking slow laps around the organized chaos.

The entrance sign I trot by proudly proclaims that the area is a "*gift from the Embassy of the People's Republic and Chinese Enterprises to the Mayor of Dakar, 2016*."

It's no lie — the Chinese-Senegalese friendship, whatever side effects that may entail, has certainly funded quite something here: exercise equipment spanning at least a hundred yards, all slightly spartan in their utilitarianism and hard use.

As a whole, I can tell that Dakar is many things — noisy, dust-choked, rapidly expanding — but unfit is not one of them.

Long-established isn't one of them, either. In its current form, Senegal is a very young country. Sitting President Macky Sall is only the fourth in the nation's history. France formally withdrew in 1960, yet still wields major sway over the economics, politics, and development of their former colony — the widely disdained CFA currency (originally standing for *Colonies Françaises d'Afrique* [French Colonies of Africa] and fixed to the Euro) being but one infamous legacy. Senegal is relatively resource-poor, exports very little, and rarely makes headlines: I mean, when was the last time you heard them covered by international news?

Which is what makes it all the more bizarre the first time I pulled to a stop, huffing lungfuls of exhaust-tinged air, and glimpsed this random product of globalization and international affairs. You can't ignore the irony: *What is China, by numerous metrics the world's top polluter, doing financing a random outdoor fitness area in a polluted zone of a polluted African city?*

Because yes, the pollution, second only to the humming energy of the people here, is unmissable. I know full well that running in a city with known particulate levels exceeding five-fold the recommendations of the World Health Organization probably does me as much harm as good. The craggy ocean breeze tries its best, but the stench of backed-up traffic can't be fully masked. It also can't sweep away another sobering aspect of the amicable arm farm: the trash.

The country has a major problem with waste. Micro-plastics, intact plastics, rotting food, household wastes, industrial wastes, unidentifiable wastes, you name it… they all choke the arteries of Dakar like cholesterol the exercising masses are trying to avoid.

Fairly recently, China imposed restrictions on imports of almost all U.S. recyclables — causing huge backlogs in many U.S. cities already stretched at the seams. That's not a problem here, though, because in Senegal there is no recycling — at least not in the widespread municipal sense we know. My host family trashes everything with a potential for recycle, from light bulbs

to Coke bottles, and the government has done practically nothing in the way of policy development over the past few decades.

Plastic pollution on both land and sea is especially bad, which poses grave environmental and social costs for a nation relying heavily on fishing and coastal-related tourism. It's a tragic dichotomy to experience at the gym: I'm able to do pull-ups facing the setting sun over the Atlantic, while in the foreground, a rainbow of garbage tarnishes the panorama.

An environmental ethic, or at least basic concept of sustainability, simply isn't present here — which pains me viscerally. But then again, as with so many aftershocks and continuations of colonialism — from the most macro to most micro levels — perhaps the people just haven't been afforded the opportunity to form one yet.

In a country where the annual per capita GDP is about $1500, and issues of caste, gender, inequality, and corruption scar deeply, the lifecycle of a plastic bottle just isn't the most pressing concern. The term *minimum vital* came up in our first environmental class here: living necessities, or basic needs. If these aren't adequately met, and staying afloat socially and economically is all-consuming, then the ability of individuals to engage with environmental issues is impossible.

In other words, sustainability is reserved to the privileged.

Is it out of environmental ignorance, then, that Senegalese sip water from little plastic bags the perfect size for a sea turtle's head? Or out of spite that thousands upon thousands of single-serve plastic Nescafe cups are literally tossed on the ground every day by local residents?

I don't know.

Better questions, maybe: given that the entire African continent contributes only 2-4% of annual global carbon emissions, yet bear their effects unduly, would a certain amount of passivity from Senegalese in regard to ecologically sound behaviors be understandable? Is the slow violence wrought by the neoliberal economic development agenda preventing sustainable efforts in Senegal, or across the Global South?

This problem, then, is both Senegal's fault, and it's not. It's both China's fault, and the U.S's fault — and every modern consumer's fault — and it's not. Sustainability is the ultimate long

game, characterized by a violence of delayed destruction, and entangled between *very* different global actors that are difficult to pinpoint and prosecute.

Because it does sometimes feel like an entirely different world here. This city doesn't have the fortune of green space, at least not according to the definition of wealthier nations. The Dakar peninsula juts out like a micro-plastic fragment of the continent itself, all pavement and squat buildings, faded dirt and crazy cats and oh so many people. There is no Central Park to bask in, no Mississippi riverfront, no well-kept natural refuges. Already, I miss the sanctity of sweet air, cool grass, and days lived under forested canopies. Yet these places we may take for granted are their own form of privilege, a function of surplus wealth, land, and time acquired throughout industrialization.

But somehow, it all seems to work out okay here. The kids across the street from my house kick around happily in rough sand pockmarked by litter — *le foot* in this footing is a better workout, anyway. Rusty hoops awning dirt courts look like tetanus-in-a-dunk, and surely lopsided, but teenaged LeBron James' sport their #23 jerseys nevertheless, living out hoop dreams under a sweltering sun. The ladies in their mat circles don't seem to mind their lack of idyllic nature vistas, or the swirling chaos surrounding them.

Which wheels back around to the Sino-Senegalese Athletic Area that, lest you forgot, is steeped in Friendship. All sarcasm aside, this isn't far from the truth. It's a genuinely enjoyable place. The people-watching is second to none. I'm able to shake out my legs at the edge of scenic cliffs. Everyone is focused but affable. There, you feel a part of something bigger, even if dwarfed by your surroundings — or perhaps especially so.

I guess this is just another one of those *inattendus*. You lace up your dusty sneakers, pound on cracked pavement, and find yourself some curious links between past and present, oppression and sustainability, Senegal and China, these hard-sweating people and the outside world.

So, I'll keep coming back (as long as my lungs will allow). The finding wasn't purposeful, but the returns certainly will be.

Interlude #3

A “random product of globalization and international affairs": this is truly how *l’Espace Sportif de l’Amitié Sino-Sénégalaise* felt when experiencing it. It should seem somewhat simple on the surface — a place for locals to work out, gifted by the Chinese Embassy and Enterprises, straddling a thin strip of land in a humming city.

Yet globalization — what it is and how it operates in post-colonial Senegal and beyond — is a somewhat nebulous thing to define. There have certainly been attempts to. A recent study from researchers Figge, Oebels, and Offermans (2017) cites a commonly accepted definition: *“the intensification of cross-national interactions that promote the establishment of trans-national structures and the global integration of cultural, economic, ecological, political, technological and social processes on global, supra-national, national, regional and local levels”* (864).

But what exactly does all that jargon mean? And how is neoliberal globalization a core driver of the myriad socio-ecological crises of recent decades, as specifically faced by Global South nations like Senegal?

To Figge, Oebels, and Offermans, globalization can be approached with two main factors: interconnectedness and systems complexity. According to their study, both of these factors are rapidly growing and increasing under globalization (864). Essentially, international interactions — whether social, political, economic, ecological, or other — are intensifying in ways previously impossible without innumerable trans-national forces at play. Or as a similar study states, globalization is how *“human dynamics, institutional change, political relations and the global environment have become successively more intertwined”* (Martens and Raza 2010, 280).

It is perhaps this intertwining which creates such complexity. And to some theorists, it may be the rise of complexity in such a compressed time period which creates — at least in part — the myriad of socio-ecological problems humanity is now facing.

William E. Rees, a professor at the University of British-Columbia, offers a strong stance on the inextricable links between ecological crises and unsustainable global economies in his paper “Globalization and Sustainability: Conflict or Convergence?” He argues that there are dual drivers of impending collapse for modern humanity: a human necessity for elaborate myth-making; and a predisposition to expansionism (Rees 2002a, 3). Analyzing the former results in going back to our biological roots. Humans may be seen to have *“a genetic predisposition for*

unsustainability" which is *"encoded in certain human physiological, social and behavioral traits that once conferred survival value but are now maladaptive"* (Rees 2002a, 1).

It is important to note; his is a starkly anti-capitalist position. He is not arguing that our physiology excuses the unsustainable nature of extractive capitalism; simply that it is maladaptive. Our brains and bodies were never evolved to be compatible with the expanse of modern technologies allowing for the destructive relationship between *"techno-industrial society and the ecosphere"* (Rees 2002a, 2). In other words, modern human systems and their complexities are somewhat fundamentally incompatible with the ecosystems we are dependent on (Rees 2002a, 2).

Myth-making is a behavioral trait which plays a central role to human cohesion and survival. Cultural stories were, and are, the glue to tribal identity — but one of the central fallacies of industrial society is that modern nations are no longer constrained by these myths (Rees 2002a, 3). And of all of the cultural myths that have developed and endured in recent centuries, the neoliberal myth of eternal growth — centered on *"unlimited economic expansion, 'free' trade and technological fixes"* — is perhaps the most prevailing (Rees 2002b, 1). This model equates ever-increasing material well-being with human welfare and has given direction to the social and political spheres of both industrialized and 'developing' countries since the 1970s (Rees 2002a, 4).

But many of the socio-ecological changes under this Global North-catalyzed system have unfolded slowly, largely out of sight, or have been simply ignored by institutions of power. It's what Nixon seems to be getting it with his theory of 'slow violence'. Conventional notions of what violence is are normally *"event focused, time bound, and body bound"*; stories we can latch on to of *"visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power"* that slow violence occurring over years, decades, or centuries cannot stand up to (Nixon 2011, 3). This is similar to what I observed and pondered in Dakar: that sustainability is the ultimate long game, and that perhaps this is exactly how our short term-focused global economic order wants it to be. Because as discussed in Interlude #2, one critical element of slowly unfolding environmental catastrophe is that it is typically not viewed as violent or unjust to the people, places, and other beings most implicated — and least culpable.

As Nixon brings up, affecting huge areas of the planet is *"a pervasive condition of empires"*; and much of that impact goes unnoticed by the empire's populace, who may even be unaware that the affected people, places, or other beings exist at all (Nixon 2011, 35). In other words, when one

doesn't directly see these negative impacts, they may as well not exist. Nixon touches on this dissonance when discussing the divide between the 'environmentalism of the rich' and 'environmentalism of the poor.' Eco-activism has a very different connotation when one is wealthy, fed, and living in stable environments — in short, when one is privileged. He finds that a *"rich-country conservation ethic"* is often uncoupled from the devastation wrought by their nation's consumption and behaviors, even if the environmentalism of the rich is well-intentioned (Nixon 2011, 23). Such activism differs greatly from the resistance movements that emerge *"from those who bear the brunt of the planet's ecological crises"* (Nixon 2011, 23). This is 'empty-belly' environmentalism, activism that arises out of necessity and desperation rather than privileged ability.

All in all, such ignorance by many in the Global North — the 'empires' driving postcolonial globalization — does not excuse the destructive actions of their nations and industries over recent decades. But perhaps this is also part and parcel of the system: exporting the most visible of negative environmental effects to places unseen or uneconomically valued.

All across the Global South, the negative socio-ecological impacts of globalization are often more visible than those in the Global North. We can take Senegal as a clear example. Unlike our common practice in the United States of offshoring recyclables and other wastes to places like China — calling to mind the 'environmentalism of the rich' — Senegal is not able to do so. As I saw every day in the trash-caked streets of Dakar, they have little ability to hide the pollution there. There's also no hiding other colonial remnants — like, as mentioned in the previous blog, the problematic CFA currency passed between hands every single day.

Which perhaps signals why to some scholars, 'postcolonial' really should not be considered 'post' at all. Words have power: each and every culture has their own unique stories explaining their existence and making sense of the world (Rees 2002a, 3). As many in the Global North see it today, and as the neoliberal story tells it, colonialism is a thing of the past: the word 'postcolonial' demonstrates this. But as Nixon points out, *"For if the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post"* (Nixon 2011, 8). The slow but rapacious violence of the growth-oriented global economy signals a new kind of imperialism: in which a neoliberal order has widened either through direct, unregulated plundering or under the more accepted *"camouflage of developmental agendas"* (Nixon 2011, 37).

This neoliberal widening is certainly reflected in the growth of international aid and development assistance programs. As more and more countries — but disproportionately those in the Global

South — face a *"host of slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes"* (Nixon 2011, 3) such as climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation, and biomagnification, adaptation intervention projects are on the rise. Within the adaptation project sphere — which encompasses internationally funded programs, policies, research projects, and other investments — climate change has become a main priority peddled by Global North institutions over the last few decades (Webber 2016, 1). While this has occurred, however, these projects have become increasingly synonymous with the 'development project' itself. Indeed, as climate change adaptation has quickly become central in the realm of international policy-making, adaptation on the whole has been *"folded into the world of development"* (Webber 2016, 401).

This cuts once more to a core critique of the postcolonial neoliberal agenda, in which 'development' is equal to 'progress,' and 'underdeveloped' is equal to 'underperforming.' Adaptation and development are folded together in various ways, but a primary one is through *"problematizations that identify 'poor' and 'underdeveloped' countries and peoples as the most vulnerable to climate change"* (Webber 2016, 404). Though the vulnerability piece is true — less-industrialized nations like Senegal <u>are</u> more vulnerable to certain climate-related problems (sea rise as one example for Senegal) — what is not true is that this renders them in need of development (Webber 2016, 401). Because what is often overlooked by those who believe that development is the best form of adaptation is that fossil-fuel intensive development — the absolute status quo ever since the Industrial Revolution — has caused the problem it's trying to fix!

So one might rightfully wonder… how can such a model <u>*possibly*</u> be sustainable?

Well… it's not. Research supports that this systemic vulnerability is being produced — or at least furthered — by the development project itself. Pointing fingers at specific culprits is tricky, though, like I observed in Senegal's case. Many existing development activities are being rebranded as adaptation, while new adaptation projects are *"co-opted to support existing development agendas"* (Eriksen et al 2021, 8). This 'retrofitting' common to the development project does not address the root causes of social, economic, or ecological vulnerability. To adequately do so requires fundamentally changing vulnerability-producing paradigms and institutions (Eriksen et al 2021, 8).

Such failings are nothing new, though. For centuries, those with the most to gain from a political-economic model of growth at all costs have done what they can to not substantially alter it. The Global North continues to worship GDP growth as an inherent 'good,' and this prevails in their

economic engagement with Africa (Power 2019, 35). This capitalistic engagement is a modern manifestation of imperial-age perceptions that *"all the continent needed was to be 'opened up' to free trade"* (Power 2019, 35). For Global South nations, it's a difficult conundrum, reflective of past injustices but taking a modern form. In "Global South: Predicament and Promise," scholar Arif Dirlik explores these complexities. Internal as well as external forces are pushing Southern societies towards greater globalization and assimilation into neoliberal capitalism (Dirlik 2007, 17). However, there are also vital forces pushing for autonomous development — development on the terms of Global South nations which favor greater equity, social justice, and environmental protection (Dirlik 2007, 17). These are what should be pursued and promoted, not external puppeteering.

All of which makes me think once more to Senegal. What deeper connotations might the Chinese-funded gym have? How is the gym a positive development for the local community, but equally a precedent for more fundamental meddling by China in Senegalese affairs?

There are certainly two sides to the issue; it's not at all black-and-white. Proponents of development theory may genuinely believe in improving the well-being of others. But in Rees' words, it's a theory rooted in expansionism (Rees 2002a, 3). Centuries ago, before human impact on the planet could ever reach its current scale, this may have been acceptable. But continued expansion — of population, material consumption, resource use, waste production, and so much more — is long past possible. Thinking of development in this manner is simply wrong. If anything should be strove for, it's the *un*-development of the world's biggest, most ecologically destructive nations.

To return to the Martens and Raza study (2010), globalization really boils down to intertwining: of *"human dynamics, institutional change, political relations and the global environment"* (280). But heightened complexity does not equal sustainability, particularly within systems rooted in past and present subjugation, exploitation, and short-sighted growth. No nation-state is entirely innocent regarding the unsustainability of this global economic model. Like I observed in Senegal, everyone has a role to play; Senegalese must reckon with their behaviors, too.

So maybe a new paradigm is necessary for us all. A new cultural myth which better conforms to our psychological make-up, biophysical global reality, and *"humanity's place in the overall scheme of things"* (Rees 2002b, 44).

3/12/20 - Masked People, Masked City

I wish I could remember *le quartier*. Dammit, I should know its name…

As I slump my head heavily against the window of yet another taxi, I can't shake this thought, and a weird sense of guilt. Briny ocean air ripples over the sooty glass, slicking my hair back. It's baking hot, of course, but I really shouldn't have it open at all. See, our first Dakar dust storm arrived today — though dust blanket might be a more accurate term.

The stormy part was yesterday. Unusually high winds buffeted the peninsula in strong waves, and those combined with unseasonal clouds created mild temperatures. What was brought by the front, however, was not rain (as that is near impossible during the dry season), but dust — a desert mixture that's suspended over the cityscape like burnished fog. It reminds me a bit of the first snowfall back home, a soft papering over everything and everyone that causes overreaction en masse.

So maybe due to this, I must admit that my morning kicked off a bit arrogantly. Compounded with some five weeks of swallowing sand gusts, eating exhaust fumes for dinner during la Corniche runs, and simply taking like a champ the daily barrage to the senses that is life in the city, hearing from my host aunt that *la poussière* had arrived initially caused little alarm. At 08:20 sharp, I bid her a *bonne journée*, tucked half a baguette in my backpack, walked myself out the front door, and five minutes later walked my sorry ass back in.

Whoops.

Even with a sheepishly taken handkerchief over my face, being outside just, well, sucks… Nothing, and no one, is impermeable to the choking blanket. But interestingly, everything else seems perfectly average, as if some higher power's thrown down a special effect on a looping film: *Now Playing! Groundhog Day: Dakar Characteristics.*

Left and right, people are simply going about their business. The fruit vendors beat off their products nonchalantly with little whisk brooms. Traffic might be slightly slower, and the car horns less cutesy, but the plodding street cows don't seem to mind. Taxi drivers and customers barter as rapidly as ever over prices, gesturing animatedly around the obstacle of DIY face coverings.

In essence, the delicate city dance is moving exactly as expected. It's just a masked dance, I guess.

Taking all of this into account, *le jour de poussière* has already been one of those "Something to Write Home About" kind of days. Oh, and to top it off, it's Mardi Gras.

Go figure.

As the coastline continues to rush by, and my eyes lilt blearily open and closed, I feel a strong hit of déjà vu — conjuring up the morning of my departure, looking tiredly out the train door en route to the airport. My mind is plunged back to the Minnesota's icy winter. But perhaps that's just wishful thinking.

For what I'm seeing, and what I've only just seen, are so different from the Mississippi or my campus; my home region or home life.

Despite the unfortunate conditions, our Environment & Sustainability class is just returning from a field excursion to an outskirt of Dakar that's hard to define. Slum isn't quite the right word; ghetto isn't either. Those imply forced, or at least de facto habitation by a certain minority group of people. That's not the case here. Two long hours ago, when we first turn onto the alley street marking our entrance to the area, our professor describes it differently, and succinctly: *non-planifié*.

This, finally, is the right word, as what we're seeing embodies the nature of "unplanned." No one, physically, is supposed to live here — the local government doesn't encourage it whatsoever. Some years back, the land was built on, then abandoned, as it turned out so geologically unstable that many buildings began submerging into the soil. But a place to live is a place to live, especially in a congested metropolis, so people have returned nevertheless, attempting to make the best of the piecemeal infrastructure. It's a form of adaptation, just one very different from the kind pushed by the international development project.

At this particular street, a long, uneven tongue of dirt pack offers a snaking channel into the neighborhood. Following the quick briefing from our professor, we begin to slowly make our way through. I'm already sweating bullets, and each huff into my mask is infused with a slight mineral tang. None of us say much.

As we balance beam our way around a smelly, stagnant pool spanning most of the alley's width, three little girls in matching, immaculate Mardi Gras dresses pass in the opposite direction. They trail their mother like colorful ducklings as she too navigates the rust-colored water.

This neighborhood has grossly inadequate sanitation, with its streets often turning to sewage channels, yet most ramshackle houses open directly onto them. You can read their history by their appearance, since the majority have undergone continuous sinking and rebuilding. It's a bit like pulling ice core samples: the newest constructions are on top, with clear delineations between time periods as you go down — each marking a sad losing battle with nature. The residents, though, are friendly, with several asking curiously what a group like ours is doing, no less on a day like today. Many maintain little street-side boutiques and storefronts, which look no less inviting than those in other areas of Dakar.

The dichotomy, then, between these people and this place is shocking: well-kept vs. sordid, proud vs. neglected. Yet this, we've learned, is often the case around Senegal: cleanliness and personal presentation are culturally critical, no matter if one's surrounding environments are polluted or left to the wayside.

As we continue, a huge patch of green space, easily the largest I've seen in Dakar, pops up around a corner. I get excited, and then not, for it's no lush park. This is a retention marsh to help stem rainy season floods — filled with reedy plants resembling mid-season corn — but it's filthy. Like so many shared outdoor spaces around the city, our teacher tells us, residents have made it their collective dumping ground.

As if to prove this point, a woman tips an enormous wash bin of wastewater directly over the fence as we pass. When I look closer I see a young man, perhaps my age, bucket bathing completely naked amongst the floating trash and sewage, no more than 15 feet from the spot. Disbelieving at first, I do a quick double take. A hard lump knots in my throat.

We move along nevertheless, but *la poussière* is taking its toll. Soon, we complete our loop, and pass a different neighborhood border crossing. Here the vibe takes a 180 degree turn. This is a busy market street with bright colors and aggressive vendors. The dust seems only to amplify the chaos, with cars and scooters and shoppers rushing quickly from A to B. In short, it's the last place I want to be right now. I feel quite shellshocked, and overwhelmed with everything we've experienced.

Many people are masked today, but those we've seen in this *quartier non-planifié* seem perhaps the most. These are people who simply go unseen.

While at first glance everyone's more homogenous with covered faces — anonymously facing the same suffering — this is its own sort of mirage. Because even in dust storms, there's a divide between the have's and have-not's. Each time one occurs, we learn, stores everywhere run out quickly of their more expensive, N-95 industrial masks. Our program staff, in fact, were barely able to acquire them for us.

This means that less-fortunate folks here have to largely make do themselves. In front of one small shop, for instance, I glimpse a man handing out bright blue Delta Airlines eye masks for makeshift breathing protection. He throws each wrapper on the ground. Like usual, this isn't the only out-of-place, Western relic that pops up: another man has an "insight.com bowl" college football polo pulled up over his nose and mouth. And as we pile into a taxi for home, our driver chucking his plastic coffee cup aside, Obama's '08 campaign logo becomes visible on a nearby brick wall. Globalization is a confusing force, I'm realizing; so much is intertwined, and its tendrils reveal themselves in unexpected places and ways.

But perhaps this is beyond the point. The immediate concern is this dust storm, yet in this poverty-stricken area, many people choose not to cover up at all. I'm not really sure why. Maybe they're more used to living out the conditions; or maybe they've just faced worse than some dust.

I learned the name of this neighborhood today, and then immediately forgot it. I still can't shake the guilt. Through this experience, a veil was lifted oh so momentarily — but already, this place is going back to being as masked as it ever was.

Conclusion

While I, and the Dakar neighborhood I visited, was masked during *le jour de poussière*, my overall time in Senegal was quite the opposite: an experience of unmasking.

This certainly happened in a direct fashion. Left and right, every day, I saw and experienced things entirely new to a person of my background — things previously hidden from view, like a mask to one's face. I saw greater levels of pollution and waste in Dakar than I'd ever before seen in a major city. I saw the extreme care and pride Senegalese take in regard to dress, food preparation, cultural norms, and religious celebration — no matter, again, if the environments surrounding them are much less taken care of. And I saw myriad influences and relics of the Global North — like Delta eye masks and college football polos — that one might never expect there; much less be drivers of Senegalese youth trends, sports, economics, internal politics or international affairs. In short, drivers of Senegal's present and future.

Which gets at unmasking in a more metaphorical sense, as well. Though it was something that had begun to crystallize prior to study abroad, the unsustainability of the global economic model became much more solidified by all that was revealed those two months. The Senegal-specific plights of extractive economics shone a spotlight on the real-world impacts of globalization. Theories are one thing — and many abound regarding the socio-ecological crises of the Global South — but seeing polluted waters, ramshackle infrastructure, and desertifying lands is quite another.

But whether or not I viewed these issues first-hand is far less important than how Senegalese themselves are resisting their negative impacts. Senegal's fishing community presents a poignant example of local actors and activists combatting a global issue. Senegal's fishing sector has been drawn into the competitive industrial system via neoliberal development pressures, which has rapidly weakened the nation's small-scale, traditional fishing communities (Jönsson 2019, 214). Foreign fleets have descended on Senegal's coastal waters, overexploiting fish stocks, and big players like the European Union have forced fishing agreements on Senegal and other coastal nations (Jönsson 2019, 223). However, organizing and demonstrating amongst local fishers against foreign investment has steadily grown in recent years. Not only has this resulted in changing regulatory laws and garnered international attention from organizations like Greenpeace, it has also spurred an upswell of community social work in Senegal. Many local associations are now addressing the negative socio-economic consequences afflicting fishing

communities, such as increased poverty, demographic changes, and community disintegration (Jönsson 2019, 224). Much work is left to be done, but the movement has been mobilized.

This is only one example of one Senegalese industry, and cannot be representative of all local activism or resistance efforts; each intricate problem requires a unique intervention. It's heartening to see, though, the rise of Senegal-based organizations across sectors, spawning projects such as community-owned solar in rural areas, female-run micro-finance lending, and biodiversity protection in Saloum Delta National Park. But with so many complex forces — both human and planetary — at play in globalized society, pinpointing specific risks and tailoring solutions remains a difficult challenge. No one knows exactly what impacts global climate change, for example, will have on this small West African nation. And thinking beyond even the physical impacts, how can we come to take into account their wrongfulness? The slow violence of ecological destruction wrought by Global North-led fossil fuel industrialization is a grave injustice to a nation like Senegal who has played but a tiny part in it.

As I wrote in my final paper for the Environment & Sustainability class, *"I see two types of unsustainability in relation to globalization: the surface level and the cellular level."* No matter how dirty, polluted, 'under-developed,' or overcrowded Senegal may seem to be, these are much more surface-level issues. Visible, yes; critical to address, yes. But it is dominant Global North behavior under this extractive capitalist model that is most fundamentally destructive — or unsustainable at the 'cellular' level. Under this model, developing beyond the point of having or seeing surface-level issues equates to harnessing a greater share of global economic production and ecological destruction. Development hides visible issues, or exports them elsewhere.

Perhaps, then, development and sustainability have an indirect relationship: the more 'developed' a nation is within a system of growth and profit, the less sustainable they become.

It's just not seen this way, despite the clear intertwining of economic growth with ecological crisis. Dominant Western perspective is largely blind to this, showing once more the value of shifting out of this perspective and towards the knowledge and needs of the Global South — those least culpable in the rise of extractive capitalist ways of being.

If anything gives hope, though, it's that there <u>are</u> so many alternative ways out there, all more sustainable than our currently dominant one. This period of frenetic activity makes up but the tiniest sliver of Earth history; no previous society or way of being has been nearly as destructive. So while anthropogenic impact on the planet has ramped up at unsustainable speeds, the world

remains ancient, biodiverse, and resilient. We need it infinitely more than it needs us. Untold generations have successfully come and gone prior to this acceleration, and untold more should follow us. We just need to break our current paradigm, and shape a new one — or maybe return to ways of old.

There is much to cherish in the modern world, but our Western- and growth-centric political economies are not among them. Change is necessary, and shifting away from these models is vital. There is simply too much at stake. Whether future generations are to live in a beauteous and thriving world now depends first and foremost on ours.

I, for one, will certainly fight for them to.

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