



The Power of Saviors

Interview with Benedetta Rossi, a historian and anthropologist of Africa. She currently holds a visiting fellowship at Re:Work, a research unit devoted to the study of global labor in Humboldt University, Berlin.



Foto: re:work

Your pitch in a tweet:

I am trying to understand the meaning and value of labor, in Africa and comparatively. What is exploitation?

How would you explain your studies to your mum:

I have argued that it was exploitative of a development project in Niger (from 1983 to 2003) to pay salaries to everybody in the system – the project manager, aid workers, all the staff from abroad – but not to the women from local villages who contributed 12 million workdays to the project's environmental worksites. These women only received food-for-work provided by the World Food Program of the United Nations, that is, the equivalent of one meal per day.

Why should the work of the women engaged in the project not be paid? These women contributed to building public infrastructure like European builders who fix public roads and buildings. Why were they expected to volunteer in the name of development, while

European workers would be paid? How do institutions decide which work should be paid, and which one should not? How is value attributed to different types of work, carried out by different types of workers in different places, historically? I have been exploring these issues in African history from the times of legal slavery to the times of foreign aid.

Benedetta, can you explain the title of your book "From Slavery to Aid" which emphasizes that instead of independence there is dependence again?

The title of my book draws attention to continuities and changes across regimes of labor. We think of slavery as a moral aberration and of aid as an altruistic institution. But the book shows that European abolition was self-serving and happened alongside the introduction of new forms of unfree labor. When forced labor was abolished, the idea of development allowed the colonial administration to demand that African workers continue working for free "for their own development". This continued after independence, as African nationalist regimes expected citizens to volunteer their work in the name of national reconstruction and modernization. I am interested in what kinds of claims can be made on people's labor and what options people have to negotiate the terms of their work.



Women working on the project site in Niger. Foto: Benedetta Rossi

What about differences between women's and men's work?

After the abolition of slavery, for example, male and female ex-slaves in Niger had different opportunities. Because of the gendered division of labor and gender ideologies, women had fewer opportunities to support themselves autonomously than men. People are aware of their limited options and develop strategies and aspirations commensurate with their understanding of their options. In the region of Niger that I studied, it was easier for male workers (including ex-slaves) to migrate for work and control valuable assets than for women. Women couldn't migrate internationally, own valuable resources, and control the labor of others to the same degree that men could. For the poorest of these women the choice was between participating in the project I mentioned, remunerated in food-for-work, or facing hunger. They participated enthusiastically in the project. How do we make sense of this?

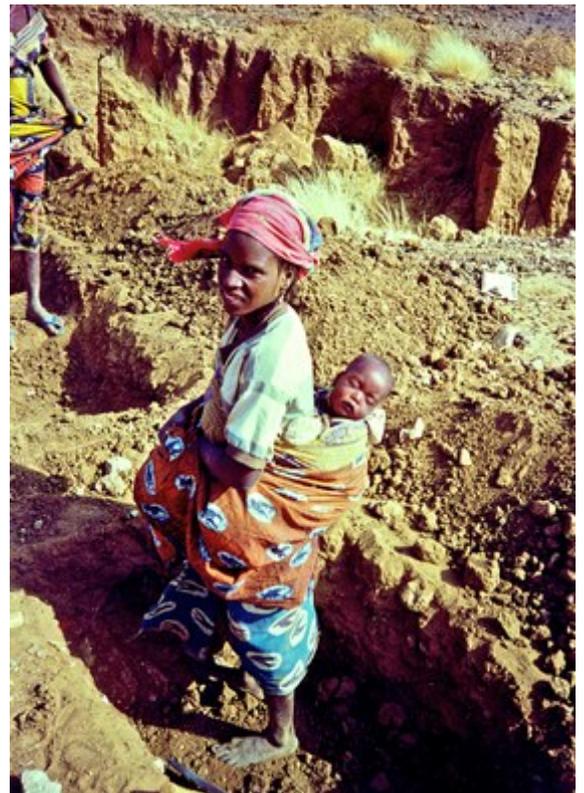
So help is not always helpful?

I think we should ask what comes to be perceived as 'help', why, and with what consequences for different groups of people. There is an accepted idea that development helps the poor. But there are unequal positions within development: who occupies the role of developer and who is seen as in need of being developed? Could it be that development develops the developers more than the poor, that is, that the benefits of Official Development Assistance (ODA) are reaped primarily by those who have the role of developers?

How transparent is development?

Development has been operating for over fifty years, and we can examine how it has fared in the past, as well as how it operates in the present. But relevant information isn't always forthcoming. It is difficult to obtain information about the wage ratio of ODA, and about how the wages of aid are distributed by nationality and level or remuneration within each of the main donor agencies.

Another problem of contemporary international aid is that the developers are not accountable to the so-called beneficiaries: they are unlikely to lose their jobs or be voted out of office if their policies do not work for those they were meant to help. I sometimes use the notion „developmentalism“ (similar to colonialism) to signal that we should not take development at face value. We need to question development, like we question the colonial 'civilizing mission'.



Woman with child working in Niger. Foto: Benedetta Rossi

What do the people in Niger say when you criticize the help?

Most of the good ideas came from the people I met in rural Niger. A man who worked at a lake which was technically supported by a project so that he and over 500 local tomato farmers from 13 villages could continue their production once told me that unless the hydraulic structures that controlled the lake's water were fixed, the entire village would be ruined. When he heard that a cost-benefit-analysis found that fixing such structures was not cost efficient, he said: "I heard on the radio that they

constructed a ski resort in a building in Dubai. Is it efficient to built snow-slopes in the desert in Dubai? Studies and cost-benefit analyses are nothing but excuses. The point is that our lives are not worth the investment required to maintain this lake.” He was right. Neither investors nor politicians had an interest in supporting tomato production in Keita at that time. And in fact, this project was stopped.



Farmers drying tomatoes in Niger. Foto: Benedetta Rossi

Why is change so difficult?

The powerful don't want to give up their power. Change only happens if it is acceptable to those in power. But hierarchies don't reproduce themselves only through open exploitation and oppression. There are incentives for those most vulnerable to accept hierarchies and try to benefit from them, rather than challenge them. Naturalizing inequalities is the most effective way to entrench hierarchy. Hierarchies allegedly rooted in nature or God's will tend to be more acceptable also to those who stand most to lose. This is how power works, in my view, in all regions and societies. African

slave owners were damaged by European abolitionism and racism. But some African slave owners collaborated with colonialists and reaped some benefits from this, and ultimately this increased colonial power. If we turn to African hierarchies, African slave owners supported ideas that naturalized the inferiority of African slaves. But some African slaves obtained protection and support from their African owners through subservience, and this entrenched the power of slavers.

Can you give an example of the reproduction of hierarchies nowadays?

Yes, as I said, hierarchies place a premium on their reproduction. There are high costs for those whose actions undermine accepted norms. Again, this is not only true for Africa. E.g. when high university fees were introduced in the UK, I was teaching in Liverpool. Competition for scholarships intensified. Male and female students reacted differently. A student at some point came to see me and announced that she could not stand the pressure of exams and funding applications, that she would work in a pub and her boyfriend, who had a job, would take care of her. This choice was easier to make for women than for men, because gender ideologies made it more acceptable for a woman to be maintained by her male partner. Yet this might also lead to what has been called the 'domestication of women'.

This was in a country which has a long tradition of feminist struggle. Here no one would suggest, today, that women are biologically not suited for professional positions outside the home. But gender hierarchies continue to exist and reproduce themselves. I am not suggesting that everybody should be equal. But people – men and women, whites and blacks, people of free- and slave-descent – should have the same opportunities. Then, they can choose to be different.

What can be done?

We can try to 'save' the world a bit less, and understand it a bit more? I am suspicious of recipes for saving the world. These recipes tend to be produced by those who arrogate to themselves the role of savior. They essentialize identities and problems. I am skeptical about plans to save "Africa", "women", "the poor": instead, I am interested in what kind of power relations and interventions are sustained by these mantras, with what consequences for the different groups and individuals involved in them. Researchers can contribute to change by providing carefully researched interpretations of the world. These interpretations have the potential to reveal empty rhetorics for what they are, and to make change imaginable, perhaps desirable...

The interview was conducted by Anne Tilkorn.

Further information

Website Re:Work

Benedetta Rossi 's website

New blog-post: Modern slavery, Brexit, migration, and development: connecting the dots

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