

Addis Through the Looking-Glass

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*There is the room you can see through the glass –
that's just the same as our drawing room,
only the things go the other way. Lewis Carroll¹*



Fig. 1: Africa as Alice's looking-glass (original illustration: John Tenniel / montage: Charlotte Malterre-Barthes)



The dynamic of transactions, the hustle and bustle of activities, and the hodge-podge assortment of goods, colors and smells are all simply breathtaking. Corrugated metal roofs cover stalls piled with diverse products offered for sale: woven baskets, coffee, charcoal, manure, used tires, building materials of every sort, and coffins made of wood. Thousands of people crowd the streets and alleys bartering along the way in the hope of making a good deal where possible. As the popular saying goes, "Around here one can even bargain for a new soul."²

While the atmosphere exudes an air of exoticism for any outside observer, a closer look at the everyday lives of the local population struggling to survive reveals the initial perception as deceptive, calling into question the allure of the place as seen by foreign eyes – and a most curious place it is. Actually, we are in one of the poorest countries of the world, more precisely, in Ethiopia, in the middle of the largest African market, the Mercato Edema district of Addis Ababa. Accustomed to the proverbial good life, in the face of this alien form of a market economy we wonder whether its principles are indeed not more sustainable than those promoted in the West. An unexpected mirror-effect comes into play. Whereas the developed world is held up as a universal measure toward which all developing countries must strive, another standard drives the daily workings of this culture. Were we to look back at the world from the vantage point of the Mercato, it would not be from a disposition of envy but rather one of suspicion, for history has already provided a bitter lesson on the consequences of colonization.

The very fact that the name of the market is of Italian descent points to Africa's troubled past when European powers carved the continent into pieces. Although Ethiopia defiantly asserts that it was never a colony, the country was nonetheless under the rule of Mussolini from 1936 to 1941. During this short phase of Italian occupation, the fascist regime undertook an



Fig. 2: Mercato main street (photograph by Darius Karacsony)

Fig. 3: Side alley in Mercato district (photograph by Darius Karacsony)



Fig. 4: New worker's cooperative in Mercato district (photograph by Kathrin Gimmel)

flecting on the case of Addis Ababa shows us that what appears to be backward is actually a forward-looking tactic of how to effectively circumvent the dictates of global capital through the implementation of communicative action in planning.

But just as any mirror can be shattered, so too can this fragile grassroots vision. A new form of colonization is well underway. China, having spied lucrative trading prospects, has now stepped through the window of opportunity opened in Africa. Putting the West ill at ease, an unexpected Sino-African dynamic is building, evoking memories of the European seizure of the continent. Notwithstanding complaints

from Western companies that Chinese bids are impossible to match, the People's Republic has learned to play the game of coaxing African countries along the path of development. In marked contrast to Western investments that tie trade incentives to human rights, China's policy of "no-strings aid" is simply more seductive.

Ethiopia is not immune to this lure: New infrastructures, schools, and factories are being built, favorable trading agreements signed and vocational programs sponsored. On top of this, China recently made a gift worth 150 million US dollars for an annex to the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. However, all of this comes at a price: substandard wages; no

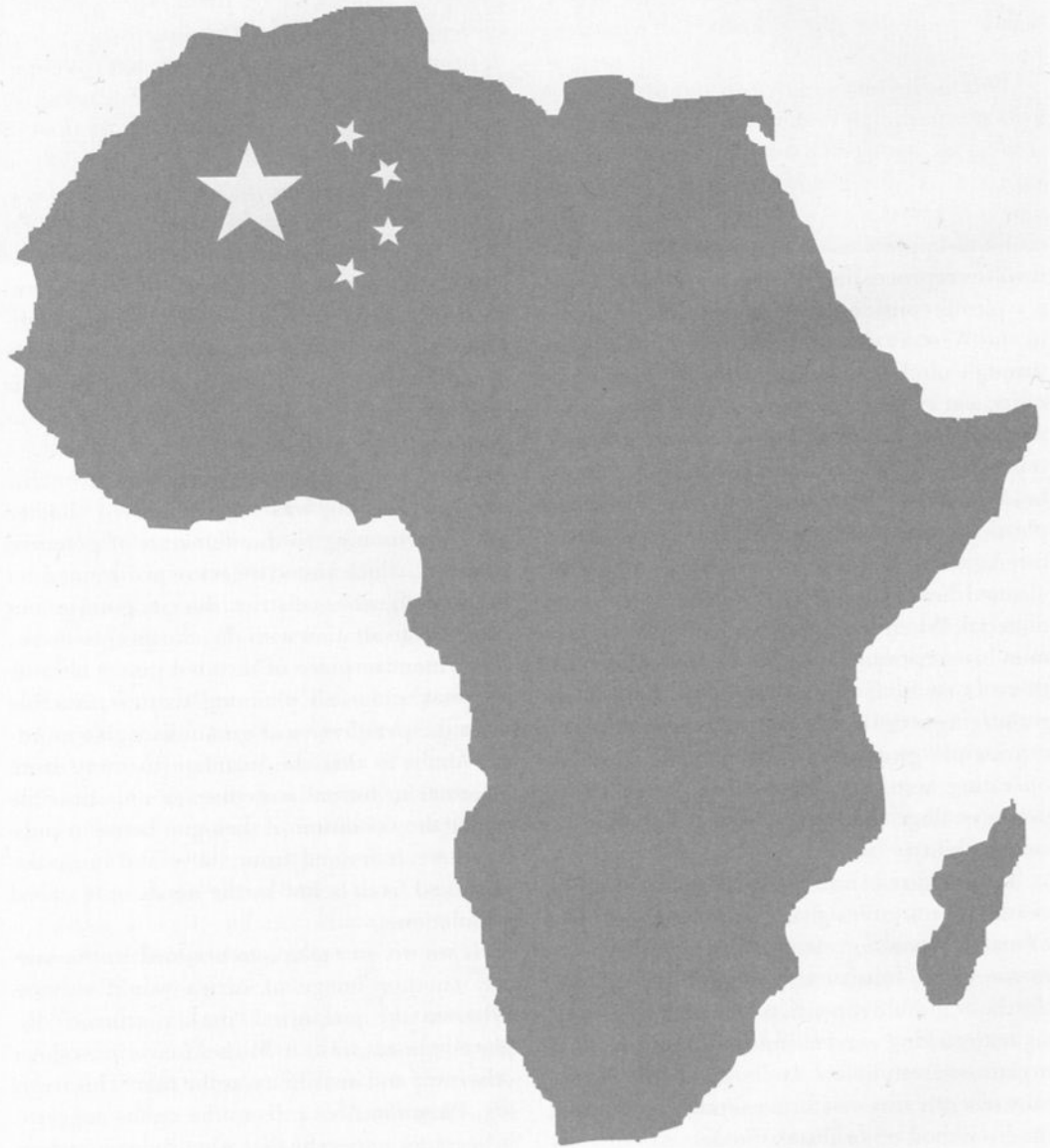


Fig. 6: Sino-Africa

retirement benefits; no customs revenue from imports; no income due to tax-free agreements; and, above all, a general disregard for the rights of citizens. Anyone browsing through the Mercato today should not be surprised to discover artifacts bearing the ubiquitous label "Made in China". In effect, exploitation is the name of the game.

"Let's pretend" that we in the West are out in front in a race, looking back at the rest of the world.¹¹ A second glance in the rearview mirror, however, reveals another player in the fast lane getting set to overtake us. One might do well to recall that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.

Notes

- 1 CARROLL, L.: *Through the Looking-Glass* (first published 1872). London: Penguin Books Ltd. (1998), pp.125–126.
- 2 HILDEMAN, K; FITZENREITER, M. (1999): *Äthiopien*. Bielefeld: Peter Rump Publishers, p.199.
- 3 OFCANSKY, T.P.; BERRY, L. (2004) *Ethiopia. A Country Study*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, p.158–60.
- 4 TEREFE, H. (2005): *Contested Space. Transformation of Inner-city Market Areas and User's Reaction in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*. Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology, p.126.
- 5 "Mercato Local Development Plan", *Addis Ababa Development Plan*. Addis Ababa: City Planning Commission (2002), p.73.
See also VEER, T.: "Masterplan for the Mercato", *Accented. Urban Management*. Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, GTZ (2005), pp.14–17.
- 6 KÜNG, L.; HEBEL, D. (2007): Lernen von Addis Abeba, *archithese*. Zurich: Niggli Publishers, pp.26, 31.
- 7 The authors were informed of the unfolding of events in a series of discussions with representatives from the Association of Ethiopian Architects in Addis Ababa in May 2007.
- 8 Op.cit., *Addis Ababa Development Plan*, pp.5, 43, 73, 74.
- 9 See Jürgen Habermas's thesis pertaining to communicative action in *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Publishers, 1981).
- 10 LEIRIS, M. (1934): L'Afrique fantôme. In LEIRIS, M.: *Miroir de l'Afrique*, edited by Jean Jamin. Paris: Quarto Gallimard (1996), pp.851, 855.
- 11 Op.cit., Carroll, L., p.124.