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## ***NSI's Jelena Vidojević in conversation with Amy Niang***

This exclusive interview is part of **Missing Voices: Critical Thinking in Times of Polycrisis**, a discussion series presented by the New South Institute (NSI).

The series seeks to offer a necessary and fresh contribution to current global debates on the future of the global order, bringing together diverse voices and perspectives that have often been marginalised, oversimplified, or silenced altogether. Here, NSI's Jelena Vidojević is in conversation with Amy Niang.

**Q Jelena Vidojević: Over the past two decades, we have witnessed profound geopolitical shifts, marked by changing power dynamics and the emergence of new actors. Power has become more widely distributed and less structured. Various attempts have been made to capture the current moment. Some refer to it as a "confused international order," others as a state "between orders," or "neither unipolar, but not yet multipolar", "asymmetric bipolarity" to name just a few. How would you describe it?**

**A Amy Niang:** The fact that we don't yet have a language to describe the current moment is quite telling, I think. Most analyses still orbit around the post-1945 order, its architects, the conditions of its emergence, the mechanisms of its enforcement, the extent of its failures, and so forth. There's nothing inherently wrong with that approach, but I find it more interesting to think of this particular moment as the slow unraveling of a 500-year order dominated by the West. What we're witnessing now is the collapse of a false confidence, one conferred by centuries of an unjust global arrangement.

1945 was arguably a turning point. It marked the beginning of one of the most extraordinary political movements in modern history, namely the liberation of the majority of the world from the yoke of a handful of powerful countries. Since that moment, these newly independent nations have acquired formal sovereignty and, in recent years, have sought a more stable and dignified place in the world. Now, more than half a century after their



### **Amy Niang**

Amy Niang is an Associate Professor of Political Science. Her work investigates African political history and thought, particularly in relation to the state and related notions of sovereignty and stateness. Her work also examines various aspects of Africa's international relations and the geopolitics of security in the Sahel.

She is the author of *The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty*<sup>1</sup>, co-author of *Identités sahéliennes en temps de crise: histoires, enjeux et perspectives*<sup>2</sup> and co-editor of *Researching Peacebuilding in Africa: Reflections on Theory, Fieldwork and Context*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Niang, A. (2018) *The postcolonial African state in transition: Stateness and modes of sovereignty*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>2</sup> Lecocq, B and Niang, A. (2019) *Identités sahéliennes en temps de crise: histoires, enjeux et perspectives*. Munster: LIT Verlag.

<sup>3</sup> Rashid, I. and Niang, A. (eds) (2020) *Researching peacebuilding in Africa: Reflections on theory, fieldwork and context*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge Publishing.

liberation, they are insisting that power configurations be rebalanced. Yet this demand remains inaudible to those who have benefited most from five centuries of domination. It is, in essence, a call to embrace the very promise that the post-1945 multilateral order failed to fulfill. To me, the failure of language here also reveals a more fundamental truth: the international order crafted by Western leaders was never truly a single, inclusive space. Rather, former colonies were drawn in through a calculated strategy of capture. Integrated yes, but only in ways that preserved their subordination and maintained their dependence.

**Q Jelena Vidojević:** In light of widespread pessimism surrounding the West's relative decline, to what extent does Western-centrism distort the lens through which the future global order is analysed, particularly by framing the West as indispensable to global stability and agenda-setting? While scenarios of chaos and disorder are certainly possible, does this perspective overlook the historical contributions of non-Western actors that have meaningfully shaped global rules and norms? What are your thoughts on the emergence of a post-Western global order? Will it be peaceful? Is it likely that this new world order will be more inclusive and democratic, or will it reproduce existing hierarchies in new forms?

**A Amy Niang:** There is genuine anxiety that stems from the realisation that neither the West nor its fiercest critics offer any real solutions to our current predicament. There is no mechanism, none at all, to prevent, let alone halt, global crises, genocide included, especially when these are orchestrated by states powerful enough to violate international norms with impunity. Yet beyond its evident decline, it is the West's complicity in crimes against humanity, especially in Palestine, that is driving its rejection by the global majority. The West has forfeited the moral authority to lecture others. Its legitimacy to exercise political leadership is not only compromised, it has become a deeply problematic proposition.

I hope to witness African initiatives that can summon the energy needed to fulfill one of the continent's most fundamental missions: to humanise the world, to affirm humanity where the powerful relentlessly desecrate it. This is an ambition championed by every major African and Black thinker, from Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon to Nelson Mandela and Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. It is a mission within the reach of courageous governments, as South Africa has so recently demonstrated.

The region where I currently live, the Sahel, was once home to some of the world's most prosperous socio-political formations. From Wagadugu to Kanem from Takrur to Mali, and with a tapestry of smaller, decentralised polities, the trans-Saharan trade networks connected the Sahel-Sahara, the Mediterranean, and sub-Saharan Africa. A thousand years ago, Moors, Berbers, and Africans crisscrossed the Sahel, Sahara,

and Mediterranean, weaving a dense tapestry of trade, intermarriage, scholarship, and religious exchange. From Timbuktu's storied libraries to the vibrant marketplaces of Andalusia, they forged a transregional space where ideas and goods flowed with astonishing vitality. It was a cosmopolitan world, sustained by caravans and rivers, and shaped by the mingling of languages, traditions, and innovations that would reverberate for centuries.

This rich tapestry of exchange left its mark in many ways. Berber communities, for example, introduced sophisticated water-extraction and management techniques to al-Andalus. They developed *foggaras* (also known as *qanats*), ingenious underground channels that transported water from aquifers in mountains or hills to lower-lying agricultural areas. They built *saqiya*s, waterwheels powered by animals or flowing water, to lift water from rivers or wells for irrigation.

They also brought with them traditions of collective water rights, equitable distribution of resources, and agricultural innovations that transformed the Andalusian landscape. These practices enabled the cultivation of new crops, sustained urban water supplies, and underpinned a flourishing agrarian economy. The circulation of people, ideas, and objects across regions created a coherence that defined that world.

While the memory of those connections still lingers, the current order of border securitisation, political containment, religious dogmatism, and economic division no longer permits such easy flows. We need to rediscover, and reclaim, that kind of coherence. It is a coherence grounded not in exclusion, but in shared knowledge and mutual exchange.

In our own era, China is poised to become the world's leading economy and Africa the first demographic power with rich minerals and natural resources that many covet. The real question we must ask ourselves is how the world should be reshaped and enriched by this new configuration. The ongoing rupture is at once moral, political, economic, and cultural and it demands that we abandon the deeply ingrained illusion that some nations are destined to exercise violence and dominance over others.

We must confront the structures that have perpetuated inequality and imagine a more just and equitable order, that acknowledges the full humanity of all peoples. Europe, for example, is stuck in a colonial mentality. Its relationship to Africa is deeply extractive. It sees African youth as a threat to its economic and social prosperity. It seeks to contain Africa's demographic dividend. But we Africans see our demographic trajectory as a sure asset.

**Q Jelena Vidojević:** There is a prevailing assumption, particularly among scholars associated with the Third World Approach to International Law (TWAIL), that, given its explicitly Eurocentric origins and historical entanglement with colonialism, international law has primarily served the interests of dominant social forces and powerful states in global affairs. This raises a question: how, and to what extent, can international law and the global governance infrastructure it supports be leveraged to advance the interests of Global South countries, both in shielding them from the excesses of authoritarian regimes and securing their rights on the international stage?

**A Amy Niang:** Needless to say, Africans were among the first and most enthusiastic supporters of the Rome Statute, eagerly ratifying it and championing the establishment of the International Criminal Court. Take that as just one example. The problem of law is not that people outside Europe lack interest in it. Rather, it is that Europe consolidated a system of rules that was already governing people's lives and then refused to subscribe fully to its guiding principles. Instead, it arrogated to itself the right to be the ultimate arbiter and proprietor of those laws.

Nor is the problem that powerful nations have never understood international law. The European powers that occupied the Straits of Malacca from the 16th century onwards diluted the foundational principle of the freedom of the seas. For Grotius, the sea is like the air we breathe; it belongs to no one. Although he was writing in part to challenge the Portuguese monopoly on trade routes to the East Indies at the expense of the Dutch, his formulation of the sea as a commons open to all remains a cornerstone of international law. Yet the Portuguese effectively emptied this principle of its meaning. Access to the sea had always been free in principle, but the Portuguese made it less so.

A similar dynamic can be seen in the principle of extraterritoriality applied almost exclusively to Africa, under the guise of humanitarianism, while strategic alliances elsewhere conveniently render interventions politically unviable.

The language of humanitarianism has long provided a convenient moral justification for the ongoing perpetration of violence. Humanitarian discourse is part of cartographies in which some are granted rights, while others are subjected to arbitrary rule. At its core, humanitarianism is the language used to talk about those who are systematically denied the very protections it claims to guarantee.

Humanitarian wars (an oxymoron if ever there was one) have been deployed to discipline countries in the Global South into submission. The United States, in particular, remains unfettered by the legal, moral, and institutional constraints imposed on others. The fragile peace supposedly 'guaranteed' under a U.S.-led

liberal order after the Soviet Union's collapse and the formal end of the Cold War has been not just eroded but trampled, betraying the very ideals it purported to defend.

That fragile peace, too, has now collapsed. The ongoing realignment of the world is being enacted through short-term calculations, alliances of convenience, and brutal distortions, not unlike the dynamics of the 19th century. Europe and the West more generally, never accepted being part of the symbolic space that we call international law. In the end, international law has failed to become the common global language it was meant to be, a shared framework that could truly bind all nations equally.

18th and 19th Century foreign policy was largely impermeable to the notion of a world order. It operated in a Hobbesian register, that was raw, transactional, and fundamentally predatory. The world was conceived not as a community of nations, but as a vast marketplace of power, where influence could be brokered, traded, or extracted to pursue narrowly defined 'sovereign' ends. Leverage, not law, was the currency of diplomacy and it served as both tactic and ethic. This worldview found its apotheosis in the age of empires, where sovereignty was elastic and often selectively applied. Where African states and diverse political formations were concerned, sovereignty of any kind was only recognised to the extent that it could be relinquished in asymmetrical, unfair and extractive 'treaties'.

Great powers manoeuvred across continents with impunity, carving borders and dictating terms. The apotheosis of this was arguably the Berlin Conference<sup>4</sup>. Order, to the extent it existed, was imperial and it was stabilised through outright domination rather than consensus. Perhaps we are moving back to a configuration like that.

**Q Jelena Vidojević: What role will Africa play in a new post-Western global order? If we consider how the continent currently figures in the geopolitical thinking of BRICS<sup>5</sup> countries, there appears to be limited cause for optimism. Despite the rhetoric of South-South cooperation, Africa often remains on the periphery of strategic decision-making. This raises questions about whether emerging powers will truly break from past patterns of marginalisation or simply reproduce them in new forms.**

**A Amy Niang:** The question is not whether Africa must inevitably choose China or Russia over Washington or Brussels. It is whether it can contribute to efforts to reimagine a multipolar world in which its voice is not instrumentalised but becomes sovereign, where solidarity is not transactional, and where influence is not merely the shadow cast by extractive capitalism.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the Berlin West Africa Conference, this was a meeting of European powers in 1884-1885 to discuss and formalise their claims to territory in Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Africans often lament the African Union's (AU) reliance on external donors, mainly Europeans, to sustain its operations. Yet, ironically, these donors are eager to underwrite the AU's activities, hoping to preserve a seat at the table and shape AU decisions. Their investments come with strings attached, quietly eroding the sovereign ambitions embedded in the AU's deliberative model. A trip to Addis Ababa makes this clear. The city teems with European Union 'partners' determined to 'empower' African institutions - always, it seems, on their own terms.

The aim of globalisation was never to close the gap between rich and poor nations but rather to entrench it. It aimed to codify a system of economic hierarchy that preserves the privileged position of industrialised countries, while consigning poorer ones to the drudgery of low-value production. The so-called 'development' prescriptions of the IMF<sup>6</sup> and World Bank remain deeply indebted to the logic of the Berg Report<sup>7</sup>, which marked a decisive shift away from the possibility of self-reliant strategies outlined in the Lagos Plan of Action. Instead, they imposed a model of structural adjustment that ensures the perpetuation of global inequality.

A similar dynamic shapes Africa's relationship with the BRICS bloc. The continent's engagement with formations like BRICS should not be misread as an embrace of alternative empires. While BRICS positions itself as a challenge to Western hegemony, it does so not to dismantle imperial structures, but to renegotiate a more favorable place within them. In this light, BRICS reveals itself as sub-imperialist. It seeks not to overturn the table, but to claim a larger slice of the cake that is on the table.

Ultimately, to frame Africa, or Latin America, for that matter, as existing on the margins or the periphery reinforces a colonial cartography in which value is measured by proximity to the West. Such language obscures a more vital truth: that the so-called Global South represents the majority of humanity, not merely a fringe. At a time when the West, however broadly or generously defined, accounts for less than 10 percent of the world's population, the persistence of these spatial metaphors reflects an epistemic lag and a stubborn refusal to recalibrate power according to demographic and cultural gravity.

The competition between a declining West and a rising BRICS block is most glaring in the economic transition that's underway amidst great contradictions. Touted as the path to a fossil-fuel free future, the energy transition, for instance, is anything but just or sustainable. It relies on the concerted extraction of

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund

<sup>7</sup> The name most commonly used for the World Bank published report "Accelerated Development in SubSaharan Africa: A plan for Africa", written by Eliot Berg in 1981.

strategic resources like copper, cobalt, and lithium, and it is effectively shifting the environmental and social costs of decarbonisation onto the Global South.

Rich in these resources, Africa has become the stage for a new wave of geopolitical jockeying and devastating resources conflict. In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, the scramble for green minerals risks locking communities into endless cycles of sovereign ambitions exploitation and violence. For a young Congolese living near the lithium mines in Manono, Katanga, or a young Guinean living near the Simandou mountain range, with its rich iron ore deposits, in Nzérékoré, the notion that they live in a condition of poverty is just incomprehensible.