

## The development of a smart political moral economy in Africa: discourse, legitimization, disciplining, and hegemony

### Le développement d'une économie morale politique intelligente en Afrique : discours, légitimation, discipline et hégémonie

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This paper uses and expands the concept of a 'political moral economy' to better understand elite attempts to justify and promote capitalist development strategies linked to the proliferation of 'smart technologies' such as big data, mobile communications, and the construction of hi-tech cities. Drawing on an Ideology and Discourse analysis perspective on hegemony introduced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, it aims to show how market-based 'smart development' across the African continent have discursively incorporate resistance moralities associated with popular critiques of elite corruption, foreign exploitation, and local economic marginalization for its overall political success. To do so, it will focus on the case of 'Leapfrogging development' discourses and the planned construction of the Technopolis Konza in Kenya. The key advance of this article is showing how dominant ideologies – and the domestic and foreign regimes of elite power they support – can be strengthened through processes of 'moral legitimisation' and 'moral disciplining'. Specifically, this moral dimension of hegemony involves the ongoing incorporation and strategic redeployment of existing and emergent normative discourses for the purpose of providing political legitimacy to these governing ideologies and further attempting to normatively regulate populations in accordance with their core values and interests – even in the face of their practical and ongoing failures as policies.

**Keywords:** moral economy; smart technology; neoliberalism

Cet article utilise et élargit le concept d'« économie morale politique » pour mieux comprendre les tentatives des élites de justifier et de promouvoir les stratégies de développement capitalistes liées à la prolifération des « technologies intelligentes » telles que les mégadonnées, les communications mobiles et la construction de villes de technologies de pointe. Il s'appuie sur une perspective d'analyse de l'idéologie et du discours sur l'hégémonie introduite par Ernesto Laclau et Chantal Mouffe, et vise à montrer comment le « développement intelligent » fondé sur le marché dans l'ensemble du continent africain a intégré de manière discursive les morales de résistance associées aux critiques populaires de la corruption des élites, de l'exploitation étrangère, et la marginalisation économique locale pour son succès politique global. Pour ce faire, il s'intéressera au cas des discours du « Développement de dépassement » et du projet de

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construction de la Technopolis Konza au Kenya. L'avance principale de cet article est de montrer comment les idéologies dominantes - et les régimes nationaux et étrangers de pouvoir des élites qu'elles soutiennent - peuvent être renforcées par des processus de « légitimation morale » et de « discipline morale ». Plus précisément, cette dimension morale de l'hégémonie implique l'incorporation continue et le redéploiement stratégique des discours normatifs existants et émergents dans le but de donner une légitimité politique à ces idéologies gouvernantes et de tenter davantage de réguler normativement les populations conformément à leurs valeurs et intérêts fondamentaux - malgré les échecs pratiques et persistants des politiques.

**Mots clés:** économie morale; technologie intelligente; néolibéralisme

## Introduction

This paper explores how the recent development discourses promoted by African elites represent an emerging and evolving capitalist moral economy. Digital technologies including ICTs and big data along with planned technopolises such as Konza are increasingly trumpeted as the pre-eminent drivers of the continent's economic development. Significantly, these market-driven discourses of 'smart' development have begun to incorporate and to a growing extent emphasize seemingly progressive principles of environmental sustainability and financial inclusion. Revealed are the potential ways these technological discourses reflect a broader and quite dynamic market based 'moral restructuring' of African development strategies (Wiegratz 2010) in the face of persistent inequality and renewed charges of foreign exploitation (see Asongu and Odhiambo 2019; Mboup and Oyelaran-Oyeyinka 2019). In particular, this phenomenon highlights the importance of politically linking these capitalist ideologies and policies to evolving hegemonic 'moral' discourses.

This article, thus, draws attention to the use by economic and political elites of seemingly non-market moral values and desires (Bloom 2017) to discursively create and perpetuate what will in this paper be referred to as 'political moral economies' – a term first introduced by Wiegratz (2016). Drawing on the insights of discursive hegemony popularized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1986), the analysis expands upon the concept of a 'political moral economy' to better untangle and explain the relationship between politics, economics, and morality. It highlights the socially constructed character of popular moralities as well as their potential political role for challenging and strengthening existing dominant ideologies, policies, and practices. Moral economies, in this respect, exist as an important part of hegemonic discourses that dominant popular and policy understandings (e.g. free market economics) through being able to strategically incorporate resistance values into a broader shared narrative of unity and progress. A key advance of this work, theoretically, is to show the crucial role that normative discourses can, therefore, play in legitimizing hegemonic ideologies and attempting to discipline populations in line with these dominant ideologies.

Technological change, such as the greater introduction of 'smart technologies' as a driver of economic development in contemporary Africa, exemplifies this emerging and evolving 'political moral economy' where hegemonic capitalist principles of profit, privatization, and (foreign) exploitation are discursively linked to progressive demands for environmental sustainability, economic equality, and social inclusion. For this purpose, this paper will introduce the concepts of 'moral legitimisation' and 'moral disciplining'. The former refers to the ability of elites to justify dominant economic ideologies and values through aligning them with existing and emerging popular moralities. This idea will be investigated through the attempt to link the relatively empty signifiers 'leapfrogging development' with ethical values of transparency, sustainability, and equitable growth policies. The latter denotes the use of these moralizing processes to seek to normatively regulate populations to better practically reflect these hegemonic economic

ideologies and values. Such efforts at ‘moral disciplining’ will be examined in relation to the building of the technopolis ‘Konza’ in Kenya for producing more ‘entrepreneurial’ citizens in the name of fostering national unity, attracting empowering foreign investment, and spurring inclusive local development.

To make this argument, this paper will be structured in the following way. It will begin by critically expanding on the concept of a ‘political moral economy’ – highlighting the role that moral economies play in promoting ideological hegemony. It will then use this concept to explore how smart technologies are forming a dynamic contemporary ‘moral economy’ within a growing number of African contexts. These broader insights will be explored empirically through the case study of the ‘political moral economy’ surrounding discourses of ‘leapfrogging development’ and the Konza technopolis. It will highlight how this market driven hegemonic development discourse and policy strategically engaged in strategies of ‘moral legitimisation’ and ‘moral disciplining’ through linking neoliberal values of entrepreneurship and private foreign investment with popular moralities of national pride, financial inclusion, global innovation, and sustainable local development. These cases will provide an empirical snapshot of common features of this political moral economy in the play of hegemony related to shaping the dominant meaning of empty signifiers, discursively incorporating potentially antagonistic moralities, and creating a shared unifying fantasy of capitalist progress (see Bloom 2016). It will conclude with a wider reflection on the importance of this political moralities for hegemony and the contribution this perspective can make to the current use of political moral economies for reinforcing and spreading neoliberalism globally and within Africa, specifically.

### **The importance of the political moral economy**

While capitalism is often described in relatively amoral terms, from its earliest emergence it was always connected to a diverse set of cultural values and social duties – ranging from fair conduct within the marketplace to differing ethical expectations of the ‘ideal worker’ (see Hamer 1998; Watts 1986; Yates and Hunter 2011) and the moral agency of all economic actors (Wiegatz 2016). E.P. Thompson famously introduced what he called the ‘moral economy’ referring to the non-market interactions and cultures pre-dating capitalism which could challenge its hegemony. Writing of the food riots in England in the 19th century he proclaims

these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action. (Thompson 1971, 79)

Since its introduction, this concept has been drawn upon by scholars such as Scott (1977) to explain why the oppressed resist and revolt when their ‘moral economy’ is seen to be violated. These ideas have extended to mature market economies, attributing the political support of the late 20th century welfare state to a shared popular commitment to moral principles of justice and shared prosperity (Mau 2004). Theoretically, the ‘moral economy’ has been deployed as an opportunity to establish a new ‘radical political economy’ based on moral principles rather than the crass exploitation of capitalism or the material class struggle of socialism (Sayer 2000).

More recently, scholars have used this concept as an analytical lens to illuminate the broader ways ‘political moralities’ are used to justify and reinforce dominant, and often contested,

economic values and practices. Schiller-Merkens and Balsiger (2019) have referred, for instance, to the ‘contested moralities’ of markets. They note that even within contexts where the dominance of capitalism as an economic system is relatively accepted and assured, there are still profound moral disagreements over what it produces, its institutional power dynamics, and its justification as severing the overall public interest. For this reason, they note that these moral contestations ‘constitute political struggles’ and ‘are related to two broader social processes: market moralization and market expansion’ (Schiller-Merkens and Balsiger 2019, 1). Importantly, their analysis highlights how economic systems are at once inherently moral and political in so much as they must be continually normatively justified and negotiated in relation to embedded and emerging cultural values.

Building upon but ultimately expanding on these insights, Wiegratz (2016) has explicitly introduced the concept of a ‘political moral economy’. He shows how the embedding of a market economy in Uganda contributes to the creation of a new moral economy which fosters widespread practices of economic fraud. For this type of ‘analysis of actually existing capitalism’ he presumes ‘that all economic practice has a moral underpinning or, in other words, is related to notions of standards of interaction regarding other’s welfare and what constitutes acceptable/unacceptable practice’ (Wiegratz 2016, 7). Hence, he declares that.

... moral norms – together with other norms (professional, social, cultural, practical, and operative), values and action orientations in interaction with political economic factors including structures of power and conflict or patterns of resource access, use and distribution – shape the concrete form and characteristic of economic relationships and practices including their economic outcomes in a local setting including how workers are treated by managers in their factories, farmers by traders or small local firms by transnational firms. This includes practices ranging from exploitation, fraud, violence, to cooperation and solidarity. (Wiegratz 2016, 6)

In another paper, Wiegratz and his colleague Cesnulyte (2016) specifically explore the socio-cultural conditions which allow for the ‘significant moral dominance of money, self-interest, short-termism, opportunism and pragmatism’ among traders in Uganda and sex workers in Kenya who operate in moral economies of earning a living within a rapidly neoliberalising contemporary African context.

The ‘moral economy’ – or moral milieu, moral climate concerning matters of economy, economic activity (exploitation, profit, prices etc) (Wiegratz 2016, 2019) – in this sense, represents a constant, context-specific, and dynamic aspect of capitalism, including present day neoliberalism. It is helpful to return again to the original insights of Thompson where explicitly notes the political dimension of moral economies, noting that

While this moral economy cannot be described as “political” in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common wealth — notions which, indeed, found some support in the paternalist tradition of the authorities; notions which the people re-echoed so loudly in their turn that the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people. (Thompson 1971, 79)

Consequently, capitalism as a material system of relations is constantly discursively and politically engaged with existing and emergent ‘on the ground’ moralities – ‘prisoners of the people’ – reflecting a continually evolving discursive project of hegemony. The notion of the ‘moral economy’, thus, according to Salverda (2021, 79) ‘helps to analytically grasp how exploitation is, at least to a certain extent, “stabilized” as a result of what actors consider morally (un)acceptable practices.’ In this respect, these insights offer us potentially new ways to understand how these popular moralities can politically reinforce or challenge economic ideologies.

### Political moral economy and discursive hegemony

A key hoped for contribution of this paper is to give greater theoretical and empirical attention to the discursive and political dimensions of ‘moral economy’. Methodologically, this entails highlighting the value that an ideology and discourse perspective associated with notions of ‘hegemony’ can add to anthropological and sociological perspectives of this phenomena that stress its evolving and dynamic character. It also aims to show how neoliberalism relies on politically incorporating emergent popular ‘moral economies’ (See Bloom 2016, 2017).

This analysis builds specifically on the ground-breaking work of scholars, most notably Wiegratz (2016), emphasizing the political and hegemonic aspects of moral economies. Palomera and Vetta (2016, 413) specifically theorize the moral economy as a ‘dynamic concept’ that ‘can enrich the concept of hegemony because it pays attention to the often-contradictory values that guide and sustain livelihood practices, through which cultural domination is reproduced or altered’. Likewise, Wiegratz (2016) highlights the complexity of moral economies, encompassing not only diverse values and practices but also structures and power differentials between actors. An ideology and discourse approach is valuable precisely for critically illuminating how these different dimensions are combined into a coherent, though always evolving, hegemonic discourse of shared progress.

The concept of ‘discursive hegemony’ introduced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1986) is especially helpful for critically understanding this phenomenon. They contend that the social is contingently formed in the ongoing ‘play of hegemony’ between discourses competing to be culturally dominant. Accordingly, the ‘political’ is always considered primary in that any set of economic values and practices must be discursively constructed as part of a broader hegemonic narrative – representing both a dominant set of norms for ordering the social and how these values reinforce dominating economic and political relations rooted in inequality. Hegemony, is thus, ‘a space in which bursts forth a whole conception of the social based upon an intelligibility which reduces its distinct moments to the interiority of a closed paradigm’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1986, 93).

The ‘political’, here, refers to the disruption of an existing hegemonic regime, its revealing as socially constructed rather than being ‘objective’ and, thus, changeable. These insights have potentially profound significance for the theoretical understanding and practical analysis of the ‘moral economy’. It allows for its fundamental reconsideration as a cultural discourse involved in the ongoing hegemonic ordering of the social. It is a crucial part of the effort to ‘weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or structure a field of meaning, thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in a particular way’ (Howarth 2000, 102). This hegemonic construction is done, in particular, through the giving a prevailing ‘empty signifier’ such as ‘democracy’ or ‘development’ with a dominant social meaning.

A crucial question, then, is whether a particular moral economy exists as a disruptive ‘element’ or reinforcing ‘moment’ of a prevailing dominant discourse. For Laclau and Mouffe (1986), the former represents those discourses which challenge the discursive coherency of hegemony, and hence open it up to greater contestation, while the latter are those ideas and beliefs which have been incorporated (often through processes of political co-optation) into a broader dominant narrative of society and progress. At stake, then, is how capitalism both historically and contemporaneously, can construct and incorporate different moral discourses as complementary ‘moments’ of its hegemony.

The ‘political moral economy’, hence, can be understood, in this sense, as the ability of a dominant ideology to legitimise its principles, practices, and techniques through the deployment of popular moral discourses. In their work, Laclau and Mouffe refer to this hegemonic strategy as a ‘logic of difference’, by which a prevailing ideology can include different and even initially

resistant ideas into its dominant world view. These different discursive strands are ‘weaved together’ as Howarth puts it through the construction of a shared cultural fantasy (Glynos and Howarth 2007). These fantasies are both affective and aspirational, transforming ideologies into internalized social desires that motivate individual and collective actions.

Importantly, these fantasies are often manifested as an accepted moral order that becomes naturalized as representing a given culture. Specifically, they construct a ‘narrative framework, that a shared emotional engagement can be mobilized in conformity with institutional desires’ (see Bloom and Cederstrom 2009, 164). Critically, the power of these fantasies is that they seek to discipline individuals and populations in pursuit of an elusive ideal, one that can never be perfectly attained. Nevertheless, it is precisely in its impossibility that it is so ideologically strong, as it continually regulates people’s desires and behaviour in the ongoing though never obtained attempt to achieve these ideals.

A hegemonic political moral economy then is formed through a process of ongoing discursive articulation that seek to shape how populations understand their social environment, in what ways they would like to change it, and how they can achieve these goals. These strategies are usually undertaken by political elites based on efforts to respond to and reframe popular discourses in line with their official interests. In particular, it involves the identification of an ‘empty signifier’ that can be used to unite the population (e.g. ‘development’, ‘inclusion’, or ‘smart technologies’) and filling it with new or revised meanings in support of dominant ideologies. It also entails linking these empty signifiers to a broader moralized narrative of socio-economic progress and turning critiques and resistances into compatible parts or moments of this official story. Finally, it is reinforced through transforming these hegemonic narratives into affective cultural fantasies for shaping people’s desires and, in doing so, disciplining their actions.

It is, thus, possible to begin drawing out some general political features of this relationship between the ‘moral economy’ and discursive hegemony. The first is to note that while the discursive content of this legitimization is contingent and often quite variable over time and space, the process in which it is accomplished may be relatively similar. It involves a regular and responsive identification and incorporation of existing moral discourses into a normative hegemonic story of shared benefit and progress. However, there is a further, and just as important component, of this concept – notably its attempt to politically regulate populations and shape their behaviour in line with this hegemonic morality. Both these features are reflected, as will be shown, in the construction of a dynamic contemporary ‘smart political moral economy’ within Africa.

### **The ‘Smart’ African political moral economy**

There has been a range of studies on the ‘moral economy’ of Africa. Sardan (1999), for instance, links ‘cultures of corruption’ on the continent to logics of ‘overmoneterisation’ and ‘shame’. Historically, Austen (1993) explores the contrasting ‘moral economy’ of witchcraft between Europe and Africa in order to tell alternative stories of capitalist cultures and accumulation. More recently, this theme of the ‘moral economy’ of witchcraft in the context of South Africa has been drawn upon to explain how this helped to fuel xenophobic violence against immigrants (Hickel 2014).

These analyses do well to focus on contemporary events and the underlying moral cultures which helped make them possible. Yet they also risk subsuming ideas of the ‘moral economy’ to ‘traditional’ moral discourses – and in doing so reproducing quite colonial rooted perspectives of African culture and populations. These perspectives have been challenged by ongoing work within fields such as economy anthropology that focus specific attention on the social construction of modern economic moralities (see Elyachar 2005; Piot 1996). Roitman (2006) critically



links morally permissive practices of illegal and informal economic exchanges in Chad to emerging hyper-capitalist cultures of ‘unregulated commerce’. Similarly, Watts (2018) has explored the dynamic ways that ‘ethical capitalism’ has had to discursively navigate and to extent incorporate local normative views in the context of Tanzanian farmers.

This analysis contributes to these insights by exploring how existing moral discourses are being used to legitimise or resist existing dominant ideologies and policies. In particular, it is interested in the dynamic role of moral economies for the ongoing establishment of hegemony. The African moral economy, in this respect, is linked to the different normative discourses utilized by key stakeholders on the continent as a means of politically supporting or challenging a prevailing status quo. The ideology and discourse perspective presented in the above section is focused precisely on identifying these moralized discourses and understanding their role in attempting to reinforce hegemony within a particular context.

For this purpose, it is important to understand the capacity of capitalist actors and discourses to incorporate and co-opt a wide range of moral values and practices. Doing so means shifting the conversation away from traditional morality to what I term here ‘political morality’. This term refers to the political construction, use, and promotion of moral language and sentiments – based on normative judgements of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ – for strengthening or challenging a status quo. These efforts build upon the contemporary work of African scholars to reveal how capitalist ideologies have strategically appropriated resistance discourse – such as the current attempt to link South African mining interests to anti-colonial and anti-apartheid discourses of ‘Black Economic Empowerment’ (Makgoba 2022).

In the present context of neoliberalism, it is instructive for this purpose to study what scholars have referred to as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (see Brenner and Theodore 2002, 349) which ‘emphasize the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects in so far as they have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by legacies of inherited institution frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles’. Crucial and specifically relevant to this investigation is recognizing the varieties of neoliberalism and its ‘mutability’ for spreading free market values and relations within differing cultural and political contexts (see Ong 2007; Rowe et al. 2019).

The over-arching goal of this paper is to better understand the dynamic and diverse ‘political moral economy’ associated with the ongoing efforts to make neoliberalism hegemonic within Africa. Specifically, it will focus on the use of development discourses associated with notions of ‘leapfrogging’ and entrepreneurialism linked to the development and use of ‘smart’ big data and digital technologies. These hegemonic discourses have been employed by a range of African elites to normatively justify and expand hyper-capitalist values and policies, often in the face of wide-spread popular resistance. At a more macro level, the use of moral discourses to politically legitimise these strategies has been evolving and multi-faceted. Indeed, technological innovation as a central factor for development on the continent has had to both navigate and tactically incorporate traditional African discourses and practices (Goody 1980). The ‘politics of technology’, furthermore, has continually attempted to associate smart technological advances to a variety of moral ideals.

Tellingly, though, the emphasis has increasingly been less on what makes individuals praiseworthy and instead how the technology itself is morally valuable such as M-PESA which claims that it is digital currency can foster greater financial and, therefore, social inclusion through ‘banking the unbanked’. These efforts to ethically legitimise smart development are rooted in growing popular and scholarly critiques concerning its negative social and economic impact (Asongu and Odhiambo 2019). As a result, the new focus is on the broader role that these technologies can play in helping African countries develop in a way that promotes sustainability and economic justice alongside goals of wealth creation and poverty reduction. The investment in

smart technologies has shifted from a rather inscriptive market oriented economic programme into a force for opening up various political possibilities for shaping African development (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2018; Welsch et al. 2013).

These efforts reveal an important aspect of the ‘political moral economy’ within processes of discursive hegemony. Notably, existing popular moralities can threaten dominant ideologies and practices. In this context, the role of neoliberal strategies rooted in marketization, financialization, and privatization for increasing economic inequality and environmental damage, has catalyzed desires for a more inclusive, fairer, and sustainable system. The discursive presentation and reframing of ‘smart technologies’ as able to deliver upon these moral values becomes, therefore, a significant part of the broader hegemonic justification for capitalism within these contexts. As such, the survival and spread of hegemony depends on the identification of potentially resistant moral discourses and their inclusion within a compatible political moral economy.

The use of mobile phones, for instance, as a tool of political resistance has a now established history throughout Africa in the new millennium. However, these practices were coalescing into a vibrant and dynamic technology driven ‘moral economy’ based on values of elite transparency and accountability. The South African based NGO ‘Livity’ which in 2011 launched a live media channel ‘Live Magazine SA’ which pushed for greater government accountability through its weekly ‘Live from Parliament’ segment. Similarly, in Nigeria there was the new SMS and web platform ‘Shine Your Eye’ which directly connected the public with elected officials through using texts to highlight their record while in office and providing detailing information for users to freely explore on their website (see Mourdoukoutas 2018).

These examples reveal the dynamic political character of moral economies. They are not stagnant nor ‘traditional’ but rather socially constructed normative discourses that contingently arise from specific socio-historical conditions to reinforce or challenge a status quo. In the contemporary, African context the attempts to link a free market ideology with the development and use of ‘smart technologies’ has had to respond to a range of emerging moral demands questioning its overall normative legitimacy. Its success depended then on effectively crafting an evolving moral economy that could politically incorporate and neutralize these resistance discourses. They gesture toward two of the key contributions of this paper – the reinforcing of hegemony through processes of ‘moral legitimisation’ and ‘moral disciplining’. These significant dimensions of the ‘political moral economy’ will be respectively explored in more detail in the case studies of ‘leapfrogging development’ and the Konza technopolis.

### **‘Smart’ moral legitimization and moral disciplining in Africa**

The remainder of analysis will focus its attention on the contemporary political moral economy of Africa. As with broader questions of the morality, or lack thereof, of capitalism; an exhaustive examination of moral norms and economic development across such a vast and diverse continent exceeds the scope of any one work. Yet the focus on discourses of ‘leapfrogging development’ and the Konza technopolis associated with smart technologies such as big data and mobile phones offers an interesting example of how dominant ideologies can be politically strengthened and concretely spread through respective processes of ‘moral legitimisation’ and ‘moral disciplining’. As will be shown, the previously optimistic ideas of using these cutting-edge technologies for speeding up or ‘leapfrogging’ economic development were increasingly met with charges of elite corruption, foreign exploitation and economic injustice leading to emerging resistance moralities utilizing these technologies focused on creating greater ‘bottom up’ transparency of those in power, anti-colonialism, and sustainable local development strategies. However, these resistance moralities were also increasingly incorporated within a broader



moralized discourse of smart African progress which could be used to help guide policies for hi-tech market development.

To bear out this argument, this paper will primarily rely on secondary data, specifically in the form of statements from politicians, corporate elites, and official policy statements. The reason for relying on these documents is not to assume that they provide an exhaustive account of how either elites or the wider population view questions of economic development or their own moral beliefs and actions. Rather, it is to reflect how justifications for these policies have discursively shifted by attempting to adapt to and include various moral demands and goals. Moreover, comparing and contrasting the more over-arching discussions of leapfrogging development with the particular complexities of attempting to apply these within the concrete context of Konza critically reveals the role of political moral economies for translating dominant ideologies into disciplining hegemonic discourses.

### ***Moral legitimisation: the evolving discourse of leapfrogging development in Africa***

The concept of ‘leapfrogging development’ has become increasingly popular for countries throughout the ‘Global South’. It promises the ability of new technologies to help nations quicken the pace of their economic development – skipping over several traditional stages. By the end of the last century, Singh (1999: 3) presciently observed that since the 1980s new technologies such as those linked to telecommunications ‘can help developing countries “leapfrog” or accelerate their pace of development and “connect” with the world economy while also facilitating economic and other transactions in the domestic sphere’. Applied to economic development it was seen as a ‘magic bullet’ for allowing colonized countries to ‘catch up’ and in doing so overcome their past (see Soete 1985). Understandably these dreams of ‘leapfrogging’ into a prosperous future has catalyzed a renewed focus on how nations can improve their institutions and culture in order to maximize the prospect for this ‘technology catch up’ (see Manca 2010).

Here ‘leapfrogging’ acted as a type of empty signifier for uniting different African populations in a common vision of progress. It linked rapid technological progress to broader and evolving hegemonic justifications for market-based development strategies, filling the this well-known signifier with a shifting set of meanings over time. The idea of ‘leapfrogging’ in the region continued a historical legacy starting in the post-colonial era linking African development with broader discourses of ‘technological utopianism’ in which ‘The era of tractors was replaced by the era of broadcasting and television, and the latter by the era of new information and communication technologies’ (see Alzouma 2005, 340). To this end, the empty signifier of ‘leapfrogging’ echoed and played a similar discursive role as theories of ‘take off’ through technology introduced by Rostow (1960) in the 1960s.

Significantly, the signifier of ‘leapfrogging’ was consistently associated with evolving sets of moralized discourses. Its early use by African political elites as part of the 2001 ‘New Partnership for African Development’ focused less on technology and more on the normative importance to creating a stable global economic order. Its initial announcement proclaimed, ‘The poverty and backwardness of Africa stand in stark contrast to the prosperity of the developed world. The continued marginalization of Africa from the globalization process and the social exclusion of the vast majority of its peoples constitute a serious threat to global stability’ (UN Economic Commission for Africa 2001, n.p.). Here, the emphasis was on better including Africans in the benefits of globalization, specifically ‘to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalizing world’ (UN Economic Commission for Africa 2001, n.p.).

Yet these discourses began to subtly shift as the new century progressed. In particular, the rapid introduction and adoption of technology was increasingly meant to provide more than

simply quick and dramatic economic growth or strengthening economic globalization. Rather, its justification was based on the moral requirement of these technologies for meeting the social needs of Africans in the face of a profound lack of infrastructure. Sandvik (2015), for instance, links this emerging moral economy with the growing arguments of the drone industry to use this airborne technology to provide humanitarian and medical aid in African countries without adequate transportation infrastructures. Critically, the deployment of drones for this purpose would not simply ‘leapfrog’ structural gaps but also undermine the power of immoral and corrupt elites (see also Chow 2012).

Over the next two decades, this discourse continued to change dramatically in light of the ongoing critiques of such globalization. It was progressively critiqued for minimizing or seeking to ‘cover over’ the structural problems of elite corruption, colonialism, and economic exploitation. ‘Some leapfrogging claims smack of “solutionism”, the idea that technology can fix even the most intractable of problems’ observes author David Pilling (2018, n.p.) writing from Cape Town in the *Financial Times*. Exposed were the deeper assumptions and concrete power relations actually driving this agenda. Alzouma (2005) noted that it was rooted in ‘the ideology of developmentalism and the interests of particular groups of actors, even though it is based on technological determinism’ (350) reflecting the rise of a ‘professional elite’ who had infiltrated government championing marketization and privatization even in the face of mounting inequality. These broader critiques were reinforced by on the ground movements such as the ‘anti-eviction campaign’ in the Western Cape that involved the ‘creative appropriation’ of mobile phones (Chiumbu 2012, 204). They also fed into a counter-hegemonic political morality in which digital media fuelled a new ‘African journalism epistemology’ rooted in principles of ‘localization, creativity, and navigating socio-political cultures’ (Mabwezara 2016).

Consequently, governments combined techniques of brute repression with discursive strategies of ‘moral legitimisation’. Specifically, elites such as politicians, corporate leaders, and international decision-makers began reframing the meaning of ‘leapfrogging’ development to now include, if not prioritize, addressing issues of elite accountability and government transparency; positive foreign social investment; and local sustainability and prosperity. In 2017, Makhtar Diop, Vice-president for Africa World Bank Group rhetorically asked.

Can Africa leapfrog its way into the future? There is no doubt that technology and innovation are transforming Africa. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, phones now act as banks for millions of Africans who cannot even dream of opening a traditional bank account. With the touch of a button, small farmers can find out how much they should be charging for their crops. People can buy solar energy using a phone, get their hearts examined in rural Cameroon using a medical tablet, or get blood delivered by drones in Rwanda. (n.p.)

However, he did strike a note of caution, noting ‘but these achievements mask a tougher reality. For Africa to leapfrog further into the future, a number of conditions must be met, including investment in infrastructure, having the right regulatory environment for new business models to be tested, and paying deliberate attention to research and development, science and technology’ (Diop 2017, n.p.).

These statements echoed an evolving official moral legitimization of ‘leapfrogging development’ centred primarily on attracting private investment. These views were exemplified in the report by the ‘Investing in Africa Forum’ that was tellingly created by the World Bank and Chinese Development Bank. Trumpeted was the view that leapfrogging required a moral transformation of the African population generally. ‘We must give ourselves the means to positively and sustainably transform our production system’, Senegal President, Macky Sall, proclaimed (quoted in Ndiaye, Li, and Svirina 2017: n.p.), ‘This will inevitably

require innovation, and a new mindset that translates into a real willingness to break with established ideas, practices, and habits. It can no longer be “business as usual”, as our Anglophone friends say’.

Specifically, this capitalist economic objective was discursively associated and ultimately conflated with the moral need to ‘invest’ in Africa’s youth. The focus was unleashing the continent’s untapped potential, especially its youth. What was necessary was a normative commitment to doing what was necessary to achieve this change in fortunes. A 2020 World Bank supported ‘Digital Economy for Africa Initiative’ report puts this problem in stark and urgent moral terms,

Africa should think big on digital development. At the current, incremental pace of economic and social advancement, too many of Africa’s expanding youth population will be denied the opportunity to live up to their potential. Digital technologies offer a chance to disrupt this trajectory – unlocking new pathways for rapid economic growth, innovation, job creation and access to services which would have been unimaginable only a decade ago. (The World Bank 2020, n.p.)

These would further be linked to ‘measures for access’ that combined these moral aspirations with market friendly key performance indicators including. In this way, economic values, skills, and practices were increasingly associated with a moral economy of shared prosperity and empowering personal and collective development.

Capitalist policies which had been subject to political resistance were, therefore, transformed into a neutral set of policies and practices for achieving moral economic ends. What was required for realizing these common values was nothing less, according to international experts and elite policy-makers, than a novel business approach that harnessed the power of the private sector for public good – specifically, a ‘new type of investor’ who can use private-sector debt funds to finance Africa’s rapid growth (Arditti and Hruby 2022). Digital advances in the financial sector were now discursively framed as moments in the continent’s overall moral and material development, representing ‘infinite opportunities’ for countries on the continent that according to the Former Governor of the Central Bank of Kenya Njuguna Ndung’u ‘embrace digitization, invest in the required infrastructure, and introduce commensurate regulatory technology’ (Ndung’u 2018, 84).

What was emerging was an officially sanctioned fantasy of moral progress through capitalist development. This hegemonic story of market driven moral progress increasingly encompassed an ever-widening range of policies and developmental goals – even those not traditionally aligned with foreign investment and capitalist growth strategies. A critical example is the enhanced push for the massive adoption of renewable energy production and use within Africa. The influential ‘International Renewable Energy Agency’ encouraged African nations to take advantage of these ‘renewable energy markets’ by adopting new business models for promoting ‘innovative financing’ and entrepreneurship. Further, renewable energy sources and production would continue to be privately owned and run, though now for the wider benefit of community members and the environment (Ferroukhi et al. 2022). At stake was the attempt to incorporate laudable and much needed aims to enhance sustainability through the greater use of renewable energy to ongoing capitalist discourses of private investment and entrepreneurialism.

There was also a perceptible shift in emphasis from technological to moral solutionism. A 2020 report by the Berlin Institute epitomized this subtle but significant shift, arguing that while ‘only rapid leaps in development’ can help the continent escape its historical development ‘trap’, that such leaps will only be possible if governments and populations ‘catch up quickly, learn from the mistakes of others, (and) move forward under your own steam’.

In practice, this entailed creating its own companies and doing what was necessary to attract financial investment (Klingholz et al. 2020). Whereas leapfrogging originally focused primarily on the capabilities of technological advances to rapidly economically transform the continent, greater attention was now on how the adoption of this technology could support and bring to the fore Africa's 'home grown solutions' to urgent and longstanding development challenges (see Ume 2021). Such beliefs were representative of efforts to discursively promote an updated version of an African 'moral economy' and one that strategically discursively incorporated previous resistant ideas of emphasizing local creativity over having to conform to the demands of international funders. Instead, private investment in African technology development was framed as a lucrative opportunity to not only improve the continent materially but also ethically meet the demands of its populations demands as customers (Chakravorti and Chaturvedi 2019).

Critically, how and in what ways 'smart' technologies would actually aid in such inclusive development, often remained ambiguous. They ranged from the promise that it would make public services more convenient and accessible as they move online to the use of data collection for ensuring that these services were more efficient and met the needs of the entire populations. In this respect, the term 'smart' became an empty signifier that could be filled with a range of different meanings linked to ideas of rapid and inclusive economic development within a diverse range of African countries.

This case reveals the ways the discourse of technological 'leapfrogging' was part of an evolving political moral economy in support of capitalist development. It represented the strategic use of this signifier to construct an expansive hegemonic discourse that could morally legitimise enhanced private investment strategies. The early emphasis on rapid economic growth shifted into a moral narrative of progress linked to values of sustainability, equality, and local solutions. Here the hegemonic success of this hi-tech agenda relied upon identifying critiques and discursively incorporating them into a political moral that was at once dynamic in its justification and dogmatic in its ideological commitments.

### **Moral disciplining: Konza technopolis**

These efforts at 'moral legitimisation' reflect attempts to strategically promote a neoliberal moral economy of hi-tech capitalist development. These technological solutions are incorporating moral critiques of this agenda by promising to deliver an expanding range of social benefits from financial inclusion to government transparency to affordable public goods. Tellingly, while those questioning these policies used moral language and ideas as a force for resistance, elites have sought to redeploy these values for not just justifying this hi-tech neoliberal agenda but also expanding it as a force for moral disciplining. Significantly, the ability of these discourse to actually be disciplining remains very much for debate and requires ongoing critical investigation. However, this attempted process of 'moral disciplining' is exemplified in the discourses associated with 'smart city' initiatives such as Konza in Kenya. In particular, it reflected a utopian cultural fantasy for regulating Kenyans as 'smart' market subjects.

The city was notably featured as a centrepiece of Kenya's '2030 Vision' and was quickly nicknamed the 'Silicon Savannah' with the belief that it would lead to a 'just and cohesive society with social equity in a clean and secure environment' and help 'realise a democratic political system founded on issue-based politics that respects the rule of law, and protects the rights and freedoms of every individual in Kenyan society'. These sentiments represented a hopeful development discourse of transforming Kenya and by association the 'technological desert' (Edwards 2013) of the African continent into a vibrant hi-tech hub for innovation and market based prosperity. Referred to as 'satellite cities' smart technopolises such as Konza

were presented as the literal embodiment of a futuristic society, allowing people to escape their present inequalities and underdevelopment through spurring ‘technology-enabled urban sustainability’ (Mora and Deakin 2019). It was held up as a hegemonic example of an empowering futuristic ‘cyber city’ that would usher Kenyans into a new more exciting and inclusive age (see Boniburini 2015).

Yet this fantasy was undercut by issues of elite corruption, foreign exploitation, and local displacement. It has been plagued by legitimate popular critiques of elite corruption and land speculation, foreign profiteering with the city owned by 10 global companies (including US tech giant Cisco) and 85% funded by the Export-Import Bank of China (Splinter and Van Leynseele 2019). More broadly, the actual construction of these technologies have been criticized for failing to incorporate ‘bottom up approaches’ and ‘are poorly adapted to accommodate the local needs of their area, and consider issues of privacy and security inadequately’ (Angelidou 2017, 3). In the case of Konza, residents were angered for failing to be properly compensated for the sale of their land in the surrounding areas and feelings of being ignored by government planners.

These failures gave rise to new political critiques of this strategy that highlighted their immorality. Specifically they were described as the ‘failed promise of Kenya’s smart cities’ (Baraka 2021) where the hyper-capitalist ‘McKinsey model’ driving the construction of these modern hi-tech cities primarily focused on creating an exploitative investment opportunity for global corporations and domestic elites. Repeating an increasingly common refrain of using digital technologies to turn Africans into economic ‘lions’, a 2013 McKinsey report heralded the ability of the still being planned city for attracting major investments from leading global hi-tech firms such as IBM (Manyika et al. 2013). However, in practice the result was a highly dynamic situation in which historically marginalized populations were further excluded from decision-making reinforcing existing inequalities (Noorloos et al. 2019).

Yet far from changing ideological course, elites strategically used these failures to construct a new hegemonic discourse focused on ‘morally disciplining’ populations to achieve these elusive development goals. These efforts echoed similar efforts to blame populations and their ‘outdated’ ways of thinking for the practical shortcomings associated with the leap-frogging agenda. Needed, above all else, was national unity for realizing this techno-utopian dream. While Konza was from the beginning framed as ‘a way of attracting investment from international tech companies and inspiring domestic entrepreneurs, but also as a way of reducing the corruption that has been endemic in the nation for several decades’ (African Renewal 2013), President Uhuru Kenyatta is now proclaiming that ‘... it will be an incubator for the next big-global technology disruption ... The challenge to each one of us is to continue doing our very best to bring Kenya’s great destiny into reality. This requires that we come together as one nation and one people, putting aside partisan interests and divides by building bridges between our communities’.

A central part of these efforts was the hegemonic construction of narrative of future capitalist progress through present day social and economic discipline. Emerging was a ‘political economy of heterotopias’ (Carmody and Owusu 2016) where technopolises exist as ‘city doubles’ whose promise of prosperity is undercut by realities of unequal capitalist development. Konza, in this respect, stands simultaneously as a ‘seductive’ vision (Smith 2020) for many Kenyans while also being popularly critiqued for contemporary corruption issues such as the widespread use of counterfeit land claims and share certificates and bid rigging as well as procurement scandals linked to local politicians (Mulupi 2012; Onyango 2018). For this reason, Smith (2019:, 180) notes that contemporary Africans are ‘caught up in a meantime between promises of futurity and the remains of empire.’ Crucially, though, this sense of uncertainty and fundamental ‘ontological insecurity’ – the tension between an imperfect present and a ‘smart’ utopian future on the

horizon – is also a ‘highly productive force as it engenders hope and possibility’ that can be deployed by elites to justify their hi-tech neoliberal policies (Van den Broeck 2017, 210).

In the case of Konza, these utopian promises were crafted into an official fantasy by elites, one whose benefits could only be realized through the present moral transformation of contemporary Kenyans. The government has attempted to promote local capitalist enterprise as a cure-all for driving national progress and overcoming any and all obstacles for the country’s economic development. ‘Entrepreneurship is increasingly promoted as a salve for the political problem of jobless growth and shrinking state coffers’, observes Dolan and Gordon (2019, 301), ‘But, its contemporary position at the frontiers of African capitalism is premised on nearly a century of attention on the African “economic man”, figured and reconfigured through efforts of governments and international development institutions.’ To this end,

an ideal of selfhood as individualistic, industrious and future-oriented, the productive economic man has come to represent a set of ideas about the future of the nation, and is deeply entwined with moral valuations of Kenya’s citizenry and with idioms of development and economic growth ... the productive and enterprising subject is continually invoked as a response to shifting economic and political dynamics, and invested with a perennial capacity to reinvigorate the nation. (Dolan and Gordon 2019, 301)

In the present context of Konza, this meant morally linking entrepreneurship with innovation and leadership. The 2022 signed partnership between the – Konza Technopolis Development Authority (KoTDA) and the Thunderbird School of Global Management (Thunderbird/ASU) exemplified this disciplining fantasy which placed good ‘leadership and management’ at the forefront of creating the country’s ‘newly industrialised economy’ (Konza Technopolis 2022, n.p.). This strategy was also apparent in the official promotion of an ‘Konza Enterprise Innovation Challenge’ in 2018 that would provide Kenyans with an intense entrepreneurship three month ‘boot camp’ that simultaneously aimed ‘to harness the innovative space for “techies” and start-ups to commercialise their ideas’ and ‘contribute towards transforming science and technology practices for increased productivity and job creation’ with ‘clear benefits for end users, and in particular base of the pyramid consumers’ (KoTDA 2018, n.p.).

Similarly, charges of foreign exploitation were transformed into disciplining moral discourses of doing what was necessary to encourage international knowledge exchange and global innovation through external private investment. The development of ‘sustainable’ future cities – powered by ‘smart data centres’ funded by loans from foreign firms – required Kenyan citizens to build the necessary market and technological skills to not only run this city but continue to make it attractive to foreign investors. The government has committed to creating a new university called Kenya Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (Kenya Kaist) primarily funded by the South Korean Government whose aim, according to its global president Sung-Chul Shi and quoting Konza Technopolis Development Authority (KoTDA) Chief Executive John Tanui, is ‘to make Konza investor-ready as requested by global tech companies which plan to put up campuses to host research labs and manufacturing units’.

What is revealed is the proactive use of moral discourses to discipline populations in line with elite ideologies and desires. The case of Konza is particularly interesting in that such disciplining was directly related to the ongoing failures of these policies to be effectively implemented in practice. Put differently, the fact that the promised ‘Silicon Savannah’ of Konza has yet to materialize, has politically necessitated a dynamic political moral economy in which this failure is blamed on people and governments. Accordingly, what is required is a greater ethical commitment to these hyper-capitalist principles rather than their fundamental rethinking or replacement.



### Concluding discussion

This paper sought to critically provide a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of the ‘political moral economy’ – revealing its crucial role in the broader processes of discursive hegemony. The hope for key advance of this article is showing how dominant ideologies – and the powerful regimes they support – can be strengthened through processes of ‘moral legitimisation’ and ‘moral disciplining’. This moral dimension of hegemony involves the ongoing construction and incorporation of normative discourses for the purpose of providing ethical legitimacy to these governing discourses and policies and further disciplining populations in accordance with their core values and interests.

A key hope for the contribution of this paper is to give greater theoretical and empirical attention to the discursive and political dimensions of ‘moral economy’. Methodologically, this entails highlighting the value that an ideology and discourse perspective associated with notions of ‘hegemony’ can add to anthropological and sociological perspectives of this phenomena that stress its evolving and dynamic character. ‘The political economy and the moral economy are interlinked in historically specific ways,’ notes Wiegratz (2016, 36), ‘In fact ME and PE are more interwoven than mainstream sciences currently acknowledges, i.e. moral norms are political, ruling class domination has a moral character, economic reform is moral reform and so on ...’ In this spirit, this paper sought to reveal how concepts such as ‘empty signifiers’ linked to hegemonic narratives and cultural fantasies could better illuminate this political aspect of the moral economy.

It also aims to show how neoliberalism relies on politically incorporating emergent popular ‘moral economies’ (See Bloom 2016, 2017). These insights build and expand upon recent scholarly work that critiques neoliberalism for repressing alternative non-market moral economic frameworks for creating sustainable and egalitarian futures. Neoliberalism ‘seeks to channel all forms of futurity, hope and promise into market-based mechanisms, such as credit, risk, derivatives, business models and so on’ according to William Davies (2017, 1) ‘This way of instituting “the future” presents a blockage to all alternative forms of planning, design or imagination, where the latter seek noneconomistic, potentially incalculable forms of long-term commitment (for instance to future generations).’ Yet as the case of ‘smart’ technologies in African development discourses and policies reveal, the marketization of the future politically relies upon context-specific and dynamic processes of hegemonic moral legitimization and disciplining. These efforts are especially needed as a means for continually justifying and reinforcing these neoliberal values in the face of their practical failures. It also gestures the political role that ‘public storytelling’ can play in creating counter-hegemonic moral economies (See Erwin 2021).

This better critical understanding of the political moral economy, hence, illuminates the ways ‘smart’ technologies are being developed and deployed in support of capitalist development. These moral economies should be seen not as inherent or static cultural norms but living and evolving political technologies. Foucault (1990) refers to the existence of ‘social technologies’ – denoting not just the social basis of technological discoveries but now cultural discourses can be utilized to reinforce or challenge existent power relations (see also Mader 2007; Willcocks 2006). Similarly, these emergent moralities are political technologies, a set of capabilities intervening against a prevailing status quo and its legitimizing ideology. This echoes the distinction made by Bloom and Sancino (2019) between technologies which are ‘social innovations’ or ‘political disruptions’. Likewise, a political moral economy perspective analysis the role of these technologies for either morally challenging or strengthening an existing hegemonic status quo.

This contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions of the ‘domestication’ of mobile technologies inside and outside of Africa (see Haddon 2006; Ling and Pedersen 2005). These

perspectives stress how such technologies become socially embedded in the everyday practices and cultures of particular population. This analysis points to the ‘moral domestication’ of mobile technologies – both as a socializing force connected to hegemony and then as a disruptive force linked to a counter-hegemonic ‘moral economy’. Highlighted, in turn, are how African are themselves shaping the use of these technological artefacts (see De Brujin et al. 2009; Kriem 2009). Specifically, they are doing so as ‘moralised’ object that they can use for quite political ends. Building on these insights, this paper offers a new political lens to view this the social embeddedness of smart technology within Africa. Through discourses of ‘leapfrogging development’ they are being discursively legitimized as part of an optimistic political narrative of social development that incorporates and supposedly promotes values of sustainability, financial inclusion, national prosperity, and global progress.

This article also offer an expanded understanding of the ‘moral’ dimension to the contemporary study of politics and technology in Africa. The last decade has produced a range of excellent and insightful research into the diverse implications of mobile technologies for transforming politics across the continent. Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013), for instance, show how the enhanced co-ordination and communication capabilities of cell phones contributed to greater and more effective ‘organised political violence.’ At the level of the political economy, Park (2019) recently has suggested that Africans can adopt a more empowering development focused ‘mindset’ based on the ‘Korean Model’ that embraces long term value creation, community empowerment, and a more activist state. The ideas of a ‘political moral economy’ shows how ‘moralised’ discourses and practices are key political components for the shaping, contesting, and transformation of existing economic ideologies and strategies. Yet they also reveal the ways they can be critically redeployed for reinforcing these hegemonic values. This analysis highlighted, hence, how ideas of ‘leapfrogging development’ and the construction of ‘smart cities’ such as Konza in Kenya have sought to link neoliberal values and practices including entrepreneurship and foreign investment with ‘on the ground’ moral desires for greater social transparency, against contemporary colonial exploitation as well wider economic injustices associated with intensified marketization.

This analysis sheds light on the discursive, dynamic, and hegemonic character of moral economies. The aim, therefore, was to provide a theoretical perspective and analytical lens for exploring the evolving and context-specific relation of politics and economics with morality. The use of the concept of a ‘political moral economy’ for such investigations reveals that moral economies are social – and often disciplining – discourses reflecting contemporary issues and struggles. While this paper focused on Africa, it could also be critically applied to countries and contexts around the world. Consequently, it remains to be seen to what extent this ‘smart’ development will bolster an expanded moral economy of neoliberalism or forge a counter-hegemonic political moral economy that can radically redefine equality, cooperation and human flourishing.

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