The Nobel Prizes, Racism and the Economy of Prestige

Wandia Njoya
Daystar University
Kenya

Before Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee won the 2019 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, their use of randomized trials in social experiments among vulnerable populations in the developing world had already raised eyebrows. That the Swedish Academy of Sciences chose to award them the Sveriges Riksbank (and not Nobel) sponsored prize, while disconcerting, is not surprising.

The 2019 laureates were the latest in a line of economists to whom the Sveriges Riksbank has offered the prestige and monetary compensation that comes with the Nobel prizes. However, the point is not merely that their research approach has methodological and ethical faults; it is that this is not the first time that the prize has gone to people whose ideas have had a devastating impact on real people. The gurus of neoliberal economics and free-market policies, such as Frederich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan, are all Nobel laureates, even though their ideas have wreaked havoc on black and other peoples of colour worldwide. And just like in 2019, the Swedish academy ignored the public concerns in their nominations. In the case of Milton Friedman, there was public uproar and international protests, and during the award ceremony, a member of the audience protested when Friedman stood up to receive his award and was promptly carried out of the hall.

An ambiguous prize

This chequered history of the Johnny-come-lately to the Nobel Prize in Economics party has led to questions and outright opposition to the economics prize. Hayek's co-recipient, Gunnar Myrdal, whose work was the polar opposite of Hayek's, called for an end to the prize for economics, arguing that economics was not an exact science and was necessarily political; therefore, aspiring for an apolitical discipline was irresponsible (Feldman 2000). Peter Nobel, a descendant of the Nobel family, has repeatedly criticized the economics prize, calling it a "a PR coup by economists to improve their reputation" and an award that is "most often awarded to stock market speculators" (*The Local 2005*).

Peter Nobel's observations would seem to be confirmed by Bo Rothstein, a professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg. In an open letter to the Swedish Academy of Science (Rothstein 2015), he called for a moratorium on the award of the prize until investigations are carried out to determine the link between the economics prize and the rise in corruption worldwide. Citing his own research and numerous studies, he argued that corruption is responsible for poverty, poor standards of living and even conflict, but corruption abounds because of its link to economics as a discipline and the prestige now compounded by the Nobel prize. Rothstein presented evidence that "studying economics increases tolerance for corruption and fraud" and that economics suffers from "self-isolationism" that makes students severely limited in understanding "the importance of ethics and social norms from disciplines such as sociology, political science and philosophy, where these issues have a central role" (p. 4).

Clearly, the Swedish Academy did not heed to Rothstein's concern, and in 2019, the recipients of the award would embody his observations, and painfully so. The work of Duflo, Banerjee and Kramer, and especially its key ingredient Randomized Control Trials (RCTs), raise ethical and moral concerns for the people who are impoverished by poor policy and governance. Researchers have raised the methodological and ethical issues with using RCTs, even demonstrating the negative impact of such "corrupt experiments" on people (Hoffmann 2018), but Duflo and Banerjee's accolades increase from strength to strength (Chelwa, Hoffmann, & Muller 2019), culminating in the award of one of the world's most prestigious prizes.

Despite the celebration of the laureates' work as an appropriate response to poverty, the world's vulnerable and poor are not the subject of the RCT-driven studies; rather, they are the objects of the studies. The subjects are the donors and banks who are concerned that their philanthropy and policy interventions are not producing the outcomes intended for the people in developing countries. Indeed, Duflo and Banerjee's projects are not about society but about accounting (Chelwa 2020), because the ultimate goal is to provide data and evidence that the donors and philanthropists achieved their mission in giving out their resources for intervention in developing countries. The poor are therefore simply the mirror to reflect back to the rich the image of development or magnanimity that the rich want for themselves.

To illustrate the issue here, l refer to the deworming experiment by Miguel and Kramer (2004) which is cited by Duflo and Kramer (2008) in their presentation to none less than the World Bank. Reporting on a study in collaboration with a deworming project with the Government of Kenya's Ministry of Health (which raises concerns about informed consent, Hoffmann 2020) Miguel and Kramer analyze the administration of deworming medicine across three groups and its impact on school attendance.

There are two major philosophical problems here. One is that health should be an outcome with its own intrinsic value, independent of school attendance. If it was determined that the children needed the medicine, then it should be administered so that the children get well and do everything that children do, including attending school. Administering the medication in phases for the purpose of answering the researchers' questions is a gross violation of the dignity of the children.

Second, Duflo and Kramer acknowledge that there is a multiplicity of factors that affects children's attendance, but deworming is simpler and cost-effective compared to other interventions to improve school attendance and education, interventions with regard to curriculum, resources and teaching personnel. Surely, do those children not deserve to have their education improved now that they are seated in the classroom? That is not the concern of the article, and presumably not of the donors. The goal is to make a sales pitch to the World Bank: "all that you need in order to obtain visible and provable outcomes of your intervention in complex social issues such as education is to get more children in the seats by providing children with a simple medication."

The retort to my concerns here, which is commonly expressed in Kenyan public life, would be this: "Who cares, as long as the children get the medicine they clearly need?" An additional caustic question would be "What have you done for those children, except complain when they are helped?" Such questions are still locked in the same logic of assuring donors, not of helping the children. Children attend school not simply to fulfil attendance quotas or to meet development goals; they attend to get an education that is appropriate in developing their skills and affirming their humanity for the rest of their lives. Those who limit the achievement of education to the number of children in the classroom, do so in order to tick the MDG box and move on to the next goal to achieve. The concern about a child's entire life requires seeing the child as a human being; not as a problem to solve. Instead, achievable outcomes are about short-term and selfish targets such as obtaining "useful answers to our policy questions" or "a different and better strategy," as Burtless (2019) would say in defence of the Nobel economics laureates. Indeed, Duflo (2011) constantly deflects similar questions by dismissing them as "ideology and inertia."

But what Duflo's impatience is really attacking can be summed up in one word: politics. Politics is about the commitment to the humanity of all people to their participation in the decisions that affect them. It is a belief in the idea that all people have experiences and knowledge and have something to contribute to society. In fact, what is striking about Duflo's media appearances, for example her Ted Talk, is that her starting point is not the poor and the injustice from which the poor suffer, but the rich who want value for their money. Her implicit argument is that she has correctly identified the problem and its solution, and any questions that stand in the way of administering that solution are "ideology and inertia."

The contempt for the poor in her research, and its celebration by the Swedish Academy, among others who have showered her with accolades, defies belief. When they ignore the problems with methodology and ethics of research, and the impact of that research on real lives in the developing world, and then celebrate that research with the most prestigious of prizes, we are led to reflect on the structure of academy that makes such research popular, and the world that considers that research worth celebrating.

It is to these issues that the rest of this paper now turns. I will argue that the Nobel Prize illustrates ritual celebrations of Eurocentric power which affirm the yet to be broken relationship between the university and European aristocracy.

Celebrity, the Academy and the Aristocracy

It is fair to say that the Nobel Prize is the epitome of prestige and achievement in the academic world. The prize comes with the highest monetary compensation (just under USD 1 million), and the perks include a lifetime of prestige for both the laureate and the host university. In general, winning the prize becomes the brightest medal in the array of other rungs of the academic ladder, such as a rise in the academic hierarchy, publication in well ranked journals and prestigious presses, number of citations and size of grants received, and awards.

It would be expected that when it comes to the Nobel Prize in Economics, the prize would boost these aspects of the careers of its laureates. However, Offer and Soderberg (2016) demonstrate that for most of the laureates, the citation of the laureates peaks around the time of the award and drops. The real impact, they argue, is in the cumulative effect of conferring authority and prestige to the market economics which were championed by conservatives in Sweden and the rest of the Western world and imposed on the developing world.

With the award, the Sveriges Riksbank gave economics the prestige of science, and then "created an aura of authority around the winners" (Offer and Soderberg, 2016: 142). The Mont Pellerin Society, the source of many reactionary economic policies which have caused misery in the world, counts several of its economists as Nobel laureates. The Nobel prize literally rescued the career of Hayek, the society's founder, from a downward spiral of depression, financial insecurity and dispensation to drink (Offer and Soderberg, 2016: 130).

Why would economics need this prestige and authority? From Offer and Soderberg's analysis, one would conclude that with the pressure for social democracy around the world in the 1960s, the ability to order economic life around private self-interest needed cultural acceptance. The first Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded in 1969, at the end of that decade, and its award in 1974 to Hayek, the founder of the Mount Pellerin Society, catapulted his declining career to the global stage.

This historical significance leads us to speculate that the fast-rising career of the 2019 laureates could have been largely driven by the fact that increasing poverty and inequality of this millennium, in the wake of the depression and market bursts, has exposed the clear failure of market economic policies. To save the reputation of the flawed economic model, the Sveriges Riksbank, as representative of global financial sharks like the World Bank, would leap at the promise of a cheap, cost-effective and apparently painless antidote to global and racialized poverty that ignores politics, ethics and social justice. One can see why the RCT-dominated economics research, with Duflo's dismissal of social concerns as "ideology and inertia," would sound like music to the ears of global creditors.

How is this apparent camaraderie between academics and financiers able to achieve an aura of science and prestige? The answer, I will argue, lies in the symbolic power of Eurocentric aristocratic culture in which the academy and the financial elite remain embedded, and which is now mediated by the media.

The relationship between the aristocracy, the academy and the financial elite is immediately visible from the award ceremony itself. The dress code is strictly white tie, and the Nobel Committee in Stockholm provides a detailed description of what men must wear (although Banerjee wore a dhoti-pajabi with a black coat while Duflo wore a saree). The ceremony is an opportunity for academics to "glam up" and brush shoulders with royalty adorned in studded crowns, tiaras and jewellery, gowns and tuxes, sashes, badges and medals. The gestures are all inscribed in royalty – standing for the entrance of the King of Sweden, classical music played by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, and the menu of the banquet composed of Swedish haute cuisine. The ceremony is televised live.

The Nobel Prize activities and their mediatization essentially package the scientist as a celebrity, but the real celebration is that of Sweden in its class, gender, ethnic and political dimensions. Ganetz (2018) observes that together with the Swedish royal family, the Nobel prize, its ceremonies and especially the banquet, all symbolize "a small nation on the northern fringes of Europe…for one day … having the attention of the world" (2018: 1060). Further, Ganetz observes, "the notion of the nation of Sweden is whiteness."

Ganetz's observations points us to the reality that the Nobel embodies the manner in which race, class and science intersect.

The prize and its celebration ascribe "a high status to science" despite the claims of science to neutrality and universalism (p. 1056). To compound matters further, the Nobel Media was created to use the royal family to popularize the Nobel Prize among the public and turn the prize into a brand (Ganetz 2018).

The cultural, class and historical specificity of the Nobel Prize brings us full circle to the initial concern of this article, which is the overt alienation of African and developing countries in the accolades of the Nobel Committee. It is not just that the celebrated research is problematic for the continent. It is also the fact that despite aspiring for global prestige and universalism, the prize has not feted any of the big names in economic thinking in Africa, such as Samir Amin and the recently departed Thandika Mkandawire. Instead of turning its eye to the macro-economic issues raised by such brilliant economists, the Swedish Academy continues to celebrate researchers who promise that addressing poverty does not need such knowledge but requires controlled experiments. While the ideas of other Nobel economics laureates have been addressing macro-economic issues at a global scale, the Nobel Prize accepted Duflo and Banerjee's argument that macro-economics in developing countries raises questions "which are too difficult to answer" (Webber & Prouse 2018).

And the overall record of the Nobel Prize in the rest of the disciplines is not much better. None of the Nobel laureates for medicine and the sciences have been resident of the continent when they received, and all but one are of European descent. Similarly, of the eight literature laureates, Wole Soyinka (winner 1986) is the only black African, and Naguib Mafouz is the only Arab. The others are split between two white Southern Africans (Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee) and Europeans born in African colonies (Claude Simon, Albert Camus and Doris Lessing). The rest of the African laureates all received the prize for peace.

When one considers that that two of the black African recipients to receive the Nobel Prize were scientists exercising their profession (Wangari Maathai was an environmentalist fighting injustice through tree planting, and Denis Mukwege is a doctor treating female victims of rape inflicted as a weapon of war), it suggests a specifically European and aristocratic definition of science that is restricted to laboratories isolated from the public rather than its application for "the greatest benefit to humankind," to adopt Alfred Nobel's words. With the kind of resources required to meet such criteria, the Nobel Prize in the sciences is unlikely to feature in the foreseeable future an African scholar based on the continent.

But these contradictions are not simply racial and limited to Africa. They point to an unfinished revolution within Euro-America itself. The need to resort to royalty to celebrate knowledge points to Mayer's (1981) observation that despite its revolutions and its republics, Euro-America's knowledge, culture and identity are still dominated by the symbols of the ruling class of the old regime. Mayer argues that the rising bourgeoisie of capitalism and the industrial age ended up deferring to the landed aristocrats for symbols of taste, culture and social status, and the education system was one of the main institutions that facilitated this class assimilation.

Even in France, the country in western Europe that most successfully removed the monarchy, the vestiges of the old regime are still embedded in academic life. The Royal Academies may have been forced to take a two-year hiatus after the French revolution, but they returned simply rebranded under the Institut de France but with the same prestige as before (Bonnefous 1983). The members of the Academies under the Institut de France still use royal symbols of l'habit vert et l'epée (the green coat and the sword), and the costs of these accessories could go as high as €135,000 (Brunon 2014). In 2015, the academies under the Intitute de France made headlines when the national Court of Audit raised questions about the unchecked expenditures of the Academy, for example on salary hikes and accommodation costs (SudOuest 2015).

Not surprisingly, the class structure remains intact in Britain, with the universities – especially Oxford and Cambridge – serving as the tool of assimilation for the non-aristocratic families to climb the social ranks through education (Whyte 2005). In the United States, these hierarchies are sufficiently distanced from their roots in the aristocracy, but are experienced as a "system of academic celebrity" that ranks researchers over teachers, elite universities above the others, because these rankings are tied to "social status and the generosity of patrons, donors and governments" (van Krieken 2012:7).

The Nobel Prize's affirmation of research that is politically, ethically and technically flawed points to an equally flawed global system which bestows prominence and accolades on specific types of knowledge through Eurocentric cultural rituals of power. While it is crucial for us

to critique the political message of the 2019 prize in economics, we also need to have a conversation, albeit uncomfortable, about the way the university as an institution is a cog in the wheel of Eurocentric hegemony that contradicts the demands for democracy and social justice all over the world today. The hoops academics must jump through, of professorship, publication, citation, recognition and funding, are not culturally neutral. They are complicit in the structures of hierarchy, inequality and social injustice which the bulk of the world's population is now fighting to uproot.

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