

Issues in the Contemporary Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa: The Dynamics of Struggle and Resistance. Graham Harrison. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2002. 208 pp.

In this book, Harrison grapples with the tendency of analysts to homogenize African realities, “make grand generalizations about an ‘African malaise’ or even a dark continent”, and approach Africa as a singular and diseased entity, rather than an amalgam of cultures and entities with diverse experiences, apparent problems and innate promises (p. 14). Owing to this practice, Africans have become passive, helpless and incompetent beings who are subsisting in a violent and poverty-laden milieu, and essentially are unable to wrest themselves from those presumably responsible for their dire conditions.

Harrison’s political-economy approach is dynamic and informed by struggle. He rejects a structural approach, which does not imbue Africans with agency and which ignores (or dismisses) Africans’ novel resistance to and transformation of myriad sources of oppression. He highlights the inauspicious legacies of colonialism, which resulted in corruption, authoritarianism and extra-economic coercion, and which engendered “contradictions between accumulation and political power...as factions fought over patronage, and states extracted such high rent from their citizenry that peasants, traders and others bypassed the state altogether” (pp. 9-10). Harrison concretizes the notion of struggle within the context of the tenuous interplay between ‘peasants’ and the state, and discards the idea that ‘peasants’ are primitive, “isolated or backward, [and far removed] from the intrinsic dynamism of modernity” (p. 25).

In the second chapter, Harrison maintains that “the most rewarding pathway in analyzing peasant politics is to concentrate on the ongoing dynamics of interaction between peasants and other social groups, and pay attention to the ongoing battles within peasant society concerning the control of wealth, capital and power” (p. 40). Nevertheless, we are cautioned not to idealize peasants as ‘virtuous’ individuals engaged in a just war with ‘vicious’ states, as the former routinely “avoid[ed] and bypass[ed] the state, subvert[ed] the effects and purpose of state action, captured the state at the local level and selectively engag[ed] with it where it [wa]s advantageous to do so” (p.48).

Thereafter, Harrison describes how resistance featured in the “politics of debt and social struggle”, democratization and the formation of new political identities. He focuses on the contours of the debt crisis vis-à-vis the state and civil society organizations (CSOs), and analyses the negative effects of the structural adjustment program (SAP) on wage laborers and the vulnerable, its divergent impacts on the peasantry and others, and CSOs’ vociferous reactions to this reality.

For its part, the struggle for democratization stemmed from the unrelenting demand for economic justice that typified the SAP debate, which not only radicalized many African CSOs but precipitated clamors for political liberalization. Furthermore, international financial institutions (IFIs) and other donors, by tying their aid to improved governance, created openings in erstwhile-closed regimes. Consequently, the typical debt-ridden African regime found itself caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, and was forced to adopt ‘democratic’ policies that favored “multipartyism, new constitutions, watchdog agencies [and] articulation [of] some form of moral repentance for their previously undemocratic ways” (p. 79). It is the extent and repercussions of this putative shift in political attitudes that the author takes as his starting point in this section of the text. Probing the extent to which democratization [has] “been implemented in [an] undemocratic fashion through concentrations of power”, Harrison describes if and how the state embarked upon political liberalization, and the responses of various stakeholders to this development (p. 78). Overall, Harrison believes that a holistic discussion of

identity, class and struggle demonstrates their inter-relatedness, reveals how they undergird liberation, and exposes the fact that Africans possess the innate wherewithal to challenge hostile structures. The sixth chapter develops these themes in the Mozambican, Nigerian and Burkinabe contexts.

In describing 'African struggle', the author ignores the global emergence of radical movements and terrorism. Secondly, although Harrison rightly critiques the problematic manner in which Africa was created and is treated in contemporary discourses, he partitions Africa into three regions: North Africa, 'sub-Saharan' Africa and South Africa; the latter supposedly is exceptional, despite the fact that Algeria also connotes deprivation, liberation, struggle and resistance *par excellence*. Nonetheless, the author does not adhere to his artificial division for too long, as he frequently references examples from North Africa and South Africa to buttress his assertions. This confusion is all the more peculiar given the author's insightful comments regarding analysts' tendency to scrutinize the Continent through parochial lenses and select the worst scenarios as embodiments of the 'African' experience.

Thirdly, the author's concern with 'peasants', their resistance to the state or withdrawal into symbolic enclaves is neither fully developed nor original. Although one could take issue with Africa's 'peasantization', which overlooks its urbanization, and the constant interchange between rural, peri-urban and urban areas, to 'freeze' small-scale farmers in a milieu where broad generalizations could be made concerning their supposed ignorance of SAP perhaps is more stifling than the forces that reportedly impede their advancement.

Even though Harrison presents a fairly informed account of 'peasant' life, with all its contradictions, the obsession with the 'rural' seems outdated. His assertion that African Studies should commence with the peasantry is, at the very least, misguided because of the presence of a large number of the urban poor and landless, whose conditions vis-à-vis their 'peasant' brethren are more precarious. Additionally, urban organizations are more threatening to governments because they often can undertake violent actions commensurate with their vitriolic rhetoric. As such, if one were seriously interested in understanding struggle and resistance, one would not always begin with the increasingly shrinking number of citizens residing in rural areas, who arguably are better off than the urban poor. Whilst Harrison suggests that only a few scholars emphasize the centrality of struggle, it is, has been and always will be at the heart of political, economic and societal realities in Africa and elsewhere.

Generally, we are treated to a largely superficial account of the 'peasant' experience: We are somewhat enlightened concerning the nuances of the 'peasantry' argument but learn very little regarding how they have manifested themselves within the three countries under review, which are, oddly enough, banished to the sixth chapter. We also scarcely, if ever, comprehend the far-reaching manner in which 'peasants' reacted to and were affected by seminal economic and political developments. Conversely, Harrison's prototypical African state seems emasculated, devoid of any measurable agency, and unable to circumvent, ignore or undermine contentious IFI policies. In the final analysis, the text's core purpose appears muddled, and the treatment of democratization and other important variables is impeded by an excessively normative stance.

In closing, the Harrison volume is lucid, compact and should prove useful to undergraduate students and others with a limited knowledge of African economic, political and social realities. The 'further reading' section at the end of the first six chapters also is very helpful. Yet, the work would have been strengthened by field research in rural areas to ascertain what 'peasants' know regarding democratization, SAP, struggle and liberation, rather than the author's preference to speak on their behalf.

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