

At Issue

Why I Love African Studies

MARK EPPRECHT

There is much to be frustrated, heartbroken, and angry about in recent African history. The fact that scholars have sometimes been complicit by legitimizing abusive and corrupt elites on the continent is an undeniable part of this history that needs to be explored. Yet to compare the present unfavourably to the late colonial era in general terms based on select anecdotes is deeply misleading. For example, the United Nations Development Program has comparative statistics on the Human Development Index for 37 Africa countries south of the Sahara going back to 1975 (that is, a point just before the oil shocks started to whittle away the gains of the 1960s). They show slow but more or less steady improvement up to the year 2000 in all but one nation (Zambia). Other UN sources indicate improvements in child mortality rates, life expectancy and access to improved water supplies over 1960 even in some of the most ill-governed countries. In Sierra Leone life expectancy is now 39 years, the lowest in the world, to be sure, but it was only 32 years when the British took leave. In the meantime, people in Africa's most populous country (Nigeria) could expect to live an additional 14 years (or over a third) longer in 2000 compared to 1960. Continent-wide, smallpox has been eradicated, river blindness and polio are on the way out, and vaccines for malaria and HIV are in the pipeline. Fertility rates have declined, in part due to dramatic increases in the use of contraceptives but also in part due to gender and development efforts that have improved women's legal rights and female literacy.

Noting these achievements does not detract from the fact that some countries have experienced serious setbacks. There will almost certainly be further declines in life expectancy and other social indicators in the worst hit countries in the near future. Nonetheless, to paint a uniformly bleak picture or to fetishize disaster is to deny real gains in key areas of health, literacy, and even infrastructure. Consider as well some remarkable, peaceful transitions from dictatorship or oligarchy to democratic, constitutional rule – Mali, Senegal, South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and more. These transitions are incomplete. That they are ongoing, however, is testified by the emergence of a vibrant civil society that includes outspoken feminist associations, gay and ethnic minority rights movements, and a relatively free (indeed, often startlingly bold by lame-stream North American standards) press. One can debate the merits and meaning of these successes, but simply to dismiss or to deny them in sweeping generalizations is hugely unfair. There is evidence to support the belief that hard

Marc Epprecht teaches in the History Department and Development Studies Program at Queen's University. He is the author of 'This matter of women is getting very bad': Gender, Development, and Politics in Colonial Lesotho, 1870-1965. Another book is in press about the history of same-sex sexuality and homophobia in southern Africa.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a16.pdf>

work and good sense and close collaboration with African colleagues can make a difference for the better.

Dr. Kitching's observation of paralysis in African Studies also does not describe the situation as I have experienced it over the past decade or so. In my experience, Africanist academic journals are full of fascinating, sensitive, pertinent, new research. The conferences I attend are lively, colleagues are often highly politically motivated, and stodgy disciplinary and ivory tower boundaries are being torn down. Some of this new research is noticeably better than two or three decades ago, aware, for example, that women and children actually exist and that the environment, gender, and sexuality are important historical issues. In part, the richness of the new scholarship reflects the fact that there are now more Africans participating who forthrightly contest Western Africanists' intellectual hubris (or simply, pointedly ignore it in favour of more pressing concerns).

In common with many Afro-pessimists, Dr. Kitching also errs in presenting a falsely undifferentiated Africa to compare unfavourably to a similarly implicit unity in Asia. Aside from the terrible violence and exploitation that the so-called successes in Asia entailed, they surely owe at least as much to American geo-political obsessions as they do to the probity of their elites. Why then compare apples and oranges?

Speaking of which, who are these "elites" we should be excoriating? Was (British-military-educated) Idi Amin an elite? Can US-educated Kwame Nkrumah and US/Scot-trained Hastings Banda be lumped together with Samuel Doe and Amilcar Cabral? And while it is true that uber-thug Charles Taylor spent time in prison (in Boston) can we legitimately analyze his "elite-ness" as somehow analogous with that of fellow prison-alumnus, Nelson Mandela?

Another misleading analytic device common to Afro-pessimism is the construction of an implacable hostility between external and internal causes for Africa's problems. Having erected this false dichotomy, they then tend decisively to cast their vote in favour of the internalists. Yet Africanist scholars today normally see multiple, often rival external factors (governments, corporations, IFIs, NGOs, MNCs, and so on) interacting with multiple internal factors (class, gender, ethnicity, the physical environment, and so on) in dialectical fashion in differing contexts that change over time. They accept that African elites are responsible for the welfare of the population as a whole (and that more are acknowledging this now by allowing democratic elections and critical media than ever in the past). But they also recognize that African elites are enormously, often fatally constrained by pressure from outside. To suggest otherwise is self-flattering and self-deceiving to the main sources of that pressure in the West.

Tacitly exonerating the West for its role in African frustration is one thing. But Afro-pessimism is even more worrisome when it suggests abandoning African friends and colleagues who seek our help in their efforts to build a better society. They do not seek that help out of dependency on our brilliant ideas or our guilt to milk. Rather, Africans mostly welcome us as allies (indeed are remarkably patient with us) in part because of our ability to bear witness about Africa to students in the West, to politicians in the West, and to media in the West. This is potentially useful to their struggles. Indeed, Africans have ample reason to believe that without us to hold decision-makers in the West accountable for policies and interventions that further marginalize Africa, their struggles may simply disappear from the international political agenda or be betrayed by opportunistic politics in the West.

Here is just one recent example: many Americans might be gulled into believing that African struggles against HIV/AIDS are well-served by President George W. Bush's recent promise of \$15 billion toward their cause. In fact, as South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign has eloquently explained, Bush's "help" may significantly undermine their efforts.¹ By amplifying TAC's voice closer to the political centre of the world capitalist system, Africanists in the West can play a role in alerting concerned voters of this extremely dangerous turn. Perhaps that will motivate some to put their personal energy into throwing the rascals responsible for it out of office next time around (I call this Florida-optimism).

Let me conclude by recalling an astute observation made by a grumpy old white man long before African Studies even existed. Marx noted that the higher and middle rungs of society propagate and eagerly consume an "inversion" of reality that obscures from them an honest understanding of the state of the world. This inversion justifies their continued privilege at the expense of the working class. A clear perception of the violence inherent in capitalism can thus only come from the working class experience, a concept elaborated by Antonio Gramsci, by Walter Rodney and other African or Africa-based Africanists in the 1960s, by feminist standpoint theory in the 1970s and 80s, and by variations of subaltern and queer theory since the 1990s.

Building from this insight (that is, that people in much of Africa are struggling against levels of violence and degradation whose ultimate provenance is obscured by bourgeois inversions), we can appreciate African Studies for the window it opens to the world, and to ourselves. Drought has hit southern Africa hard this year, to give one example. Shall we merely point the finger at African peasants or at leaders like Robert Mugabe who have unquestionably exacerbated the famine that has ensued? Or shall we reflect on who is raising the surface temperature of the South Pacific and changing global climate patterns? If we do the latter, Africans' disproportionate suffering of some of the consequences of global climate change reveals to us the painful inequity of the global capitalist system. People in the West consume a hundred or more times the energy that an African does on average and that, by any objective standard of need, people in the West require for a healthy and happy life. Famine in Africa (aside from its intrinsic tragedy and the spur it provides to humanitarian generosity) can thus make us wonder why our environmental footprint in North America is so vastly, destructively inflated.

In other words, looking at the world through African eyes or through empirical data honestly gathered on the developmental trenches in Africa can provide us with lessons about ourselves here in the West, and about the real as opposed to idealized nature of globalization. We urgently need to learn these lessons. If, in the process of learning, Africanists can contribute to Africans' own efforts to turn things around, all the better.

And that is why I love African Studies.

Notes:

1. TAC Newsletter 29 January 2003 <http://www.tac.org.za/>

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