

At Issue

## Jagged Fragments: Imperialism, Racism, Hurt, and Honesty

GAVIN KITCHING

I make no attempt in this 'reply' to write a smoothly integrated disquisition of any kind. I found that in reading all the responses to my original piece - not only the formal responses to it commissioned by the ASQ, but the many emails and letters I have received about it too - my mind simply would not, or could not, construct anything of that kind. Rather the responses, or perhaps my reactions to them, fell into discrete clumps or mounds around a particular issue. To each of these clumps I have a clear, or moderately clear, response that I wish to make. But I do not think that these responses sum to a single argument, or should be presented as one. Perhaps there is no single argument to be made here, so that even to pretend to make one is to fail to face the sheer complexity, difficulty, and pain of the questions my piece seems to have evoked in (at least some) people.

So...

### STRIKING EQUIVOCATIONS<sup>1</sup>

Pearce: "Much ink has been spilt on the slave trade and colonialism but African history did not stop or start with these. Africans are not *tabula rasa*: they are agents with views, approaches and attitudes of their own. African states and peoples have interacted with each other and with Asian and Middle Eastern societies as well as with the west for century upon century. These interactions and influences are by no means limited to causal connections...."

BUT

Pearce: "The destruction of welfarism preceded the intellectual credibility and political collapse of the left in Europe. Blatant corruption was on the rise in the west. It was accompanied by a rise in corruption in the south. The trashing of civic virtue and the rise of corporatism took place at the same time that African states engaged with increasing energy in the destruction of the

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a17.pdf>

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welfare of their own people and focused on material gain. While no-one would claim that the one caused the other the parallels are not coincidental."

So what are they? Causal?

AND

Pearce: "Africans are increasingly seeing themselves in racial terms, encouraged by essentialist generalizations about 'African societies,' the 'African elite,' 'African culture.' In turn, African societies are increasingly seen in racial terms as well. Scholars must use all their efforts to put an end to this (and that means starting by avoiding generalizations about Africa). Such concepts are dangerous and damaging both to scholarship and to the self-respect of the African people."

BUT (next paragraph)

Pearce: "African scholars should be at the heart of African scholarship. Many intellectuals on the continent are stuck with rotten universities and demoralizing, low salaries. They do not have a proper place in the wider society, within or outside Africa, where their contribution is wanted or encouraged. There is an unbridgeable gap between town and gown."

These look like generalizations about Africa to me.

ALSO

Epprecht: "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 external factors (governments, corporations, IFI's, 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."

BUT

Epprecht: "...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."

AND THUS

Epprecht: "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 climate patterns? If we do the latter..."etc.

If you want to know where a person's explanatory heart is, note not the qualifications and disclaimers with which they begin, but the propositions with which they end their logical periods—where they put their last explanatory foot down, as it were.

## EXPLANATION AND FORGIVENESS

But in any case, this is not really an issue about explanation. That is to misrecognize the problem, which is, as so often in the social sciences and humanities, at bottom philosophical. This is really an issue about what we are prepared to *forgive, excuse, or justify* because, or on the grounds, that we can explain it *in a particular way*. Let me take two examples. Neither of them are mine. They come from a recent article by Richard Joseph, published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in early July this year.

In Malawi, as the specter of drought appeared in 2002, it was discovered that the country's strategic maize reserves had been sold without authorization, and for personal benefit, by the very officials responsible for managing them. During a visit in March 2000 to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, where I had taught two decades earlier, I looked across a barren area at what was once a thriving animal farm. It had been pilfered and mismanaged out of existence, a story that can be repeated *ad nauseam* across the continent.<sup>2</sup>

I currently have a favoured *explanation* for destructive African elite (excuse me) behaviour. This explanation, which is, admittedly, hardly very original or unique to me, suggests that in a world of massive global inequalities such elites have, with but few exceptions, and from almost the time of independence itself, been much more concerned to obtain western (and high western, at that) material standards of living and consumption for themselves, than to undertake the difficult, frustrating and self-disciplining long term governance task of effectively superintending the economic development of their countries and populations. What conventionally gets called 'corruption' (and nearly always amounts to looting the treasury in one way or another) was just a (very quickly) discovered short cut to providing for a few what would otherwise take decades, or even centuries, to even approximate for the many.

Now, once I have this particular explanatory bit between my teeth I can elaborate upon it in all sorts of ways. I can see these impatient material aspirations as *themselves* a product (and whether intended or not) of western political and cultural imperialism. I can expostulate on how the most typical colonial experience in Africa exposed African people to "capitalism as a mode of consumption" but not to "capitalism as a mode of production", so that they learned much more about the consumptionist fruits of capitalist enterprise than about the organizational or management requirements (and costs) of producing them (I can also bring in, at this point, the deep ethnic and other cleavages in the colonially created African states, which made the nationalistic commitments of many elites so thin and fragile). Thus, once people so exposed, and so weakly loyal to their 'nation', are put in charge of a governmental apparatus which apparently (*apparently* through the tax/aid/borrowing mechanism) produces money for consumption purposes without the need of any effort (save that required to attain "the political kingdom" whether by the ballot box or the gun), then you have an almost perfect recipe for the

kind of developmentally destructive behaviour manifested by African governing groups across a large part of the continent since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

So now I have a more or less elaborated *explanation* of that behaviour, and an *explanation*, moreover, which does not reduce it to some essential racial or cultural trait of the people in question, but brings in much wider factors, including factors having to do with 'us', 'the west', 'colonialism' etc. And let us, for the sake of argument, suppose that that explanation is true, absolutely true, as an account of why such destructive behaviour is widespread across the continent. Still *none* of that helps me with the issue of how I am to *judge* - morally judge - the actions of those people who sold off Malawi's maize reserves prior to a drought, or who pillaged the University of Ibadan's "once thriving" animal farm. And don't say "don't judge - just report" (which appears to be Carole Pearce's line, and if Tim Burke is right, a line favoured by at least some of the 'postcolonial' analysts of Africa, in a deeply ironical return to the old '*wertfrei*' postulates of positivism).<sup>4</sup> And don't say it, not because it is 'methodologically *undesirable*' to so judge, but because it is epistemologically *impossible not* to do so. One of the things a long term engagement with the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein has taught me is that the activities we call "observing," "perceiving," and "describing" on the one hand and "judging" and "evaluating" on the other, are in fact deeply intertwined (and rightly and properly intertwined) in our lives. To explain why that is would take far, far more time and space than is available here, but a quick way to get the idea is just to reflect on such everyday expressions as "I could see that she was angry", or "the ceiling stretched high above us," or "the signs of massive inequality were everywhere," or "he looked at me furtively. I knew he was up to something."

So, in short, to 'know' that somebody - some specific individuals or groups of African people - sold off Malawi's maize reserves, or to 'know' that they flogged, or stole, animals and machinery that did not belong to them but to a public educational institution, and which were an integral part of the planned education of a body of their fellow citizens, is to know something *disgraceful* (morally disgraceful) about the people in question, and to know *that* is to know something as real and as positivistically indubitable about them as their height or weight or hair colour or gender or ethnic background. And the only way in which such actions would *not* be disgraceful would be if the people who undertook them did not (for some reason) *know* that they were. But does anybody pretend that *anyone* who has ruled or governed in any state in Africa since the 1960s did not (do not) know that such behaviour is wrong? Would they hide it if they did not? Would they bolt out of the country with the swag when the game is (for one reason or another) up, if they did not? Would they demand indemnification as the price of stepping down if they did not? No, of course not. These are modern-day men (and women). They know the rules by which public life and service is supposed to be governed in contemporary nation-states, and they break them, and break them massively. And that is wrong, and they know it is wrong, and it is wrong no matter why (no matter how we, or they, might *explain* their reasons or grounds for, or the background against which) they did it and do it. And economic development in Africa will be made very difficult, if not impossible, until they stop doing it. (Which does not mean that it *will* occur if they *do* stop doing it - i.e. it's a necessary but insufficient condition). So in short, explanation schmekulation (morally speaking).

## OTHER ISSUES RAISED (VARIOUS)

(a) As I have said on a number of occasions, I half hoped that 'Why I Gave Up African Studies' would subside quietly into silence and oblivion. For that would have been (for me) the best sign that the field *had* really moved on, *had* really dealt with these issues, that they *were* really 'old hat.' And as a matter of fact, a couple of respondents to my piece (Chris Lowe and Patrick Wurster) did take this line, - but they were certainly in a minority by doing so.<sup>5</sup> Their assurances however have to contend, not with me, but with Tim Burke's wonderful little bibliographical essay. Sensing, I suppose, that the charge of "Kitching's out of date" would be the one most easily brought in defense of African Studies, (as well as being the one to which I am most obviously vulnerable), he has presented, at any rate to my untutored eye, at least a powerful *prima facie* case that this charge *cannot* be substantiated by reference to the bulk of Africanist literature produced since the 1980s. More significantly, he has identified what I think is the single most common technique adopted by academics who wish to avoid making moral judgements with which, for other reasons (see further below) they do not wish to be identified - what he calls (variously) "a studiously detached and empiricist tone" or "heroic efforts to maintain a level of deliberate cluelessness about their surroundings." And, as he says, what really gives the moral game a way about this technique is that it would *not* be adopted, and often *was not/is not* adopted by the same scholars, when dealing with (for example) apartheid, or the slave trade, or colonialism in general. In Burke's words, "engaging postcolonial misrule is seen as accompanied by a strong imperative to dispassionate study when colonial misrule is not."

(b) But why? Why is it so "accompanied"? Compare this. According to a recent article by Rachel L. Swarns in the *New York Times*, the Afro-American activist group TransAfrica, and its president, Bill Fletcher, is in trouble with at least some of its erstwhile supporters, because it/he recently sent a public letter to Robert Mugabe, strongly criticizing a number of his regime's policies and actions.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on the furor in and around his organization, Fletcher is reported to have said, *inter alia*, "When the enemy was evil white people in South Africa, that was easy. But when the enemy becomes someone who looks like us, we're very skittish about taking that on."

So there is 'skittishness' among (some) AfroAmericans and determined dispassion among (mainly white) academic Africanists. But driven by the same fundamental motive of course - fear of giving aid and comfort (or even apparent aid and comfort) to white racists.

Although I think that is all understandable (bloody *explanation* again!), it is no way to go, morally speaking (or even politically speaking). In the last fifteen years or so I have met and talked with a number of (now very elderly) people who were leaders and activists in the British and Australian Communist Parties. If there is one regret that they all share it was their failure to speak out about what so many of them knew - or at least suspected - was going on in the USSR in Stalin's time because of fear of playing into the hands of "bourgeois reactionaries" etc. For of course the only effect of their silence (or apologetics) in the longer term was that, such people looked even more pathetically bankrupt (in front of their friends as well as their enemies) when Russians, even Russian communists (like Krushchev) started saying what they had always explicitly denied or (furtively) avoided.

And it really is most notable, in that context, that the most eloquent, plainly spoken and unselfconsciously righteous condemnations of corrupt African regimes come from their principled (and brave) African opponents. Let us speak with them, not sullenly hide behind them, or try to dismiss what they tell us as 'mere anecdote' or 'not provenly typical' or something.

And finally,

(c) it became clear, in reading a number of responses to my piece, that a number of younger Africanists (as well as other people) had never heard of me or my work, or were (at best) working on hearsay or guesswork. Among the contributors to the ASQ, this seemed particularly true of David Sheinin, but is also true to some extent of Carole Pearce and Lisa McNee. This is in no way surprising, given that I have not been around the Africanist scene for 20 years, and that Sheinin is not even an Africanist. But if you don't know, it can be dangerous to guess, so let me just say:

- (1) I don't think I was ever "starry eyed" about African socialism, or if I was it did not last very long. In fact, I pride myself on having written one of the first sceptical evaluations of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania (for example) published in the West.<sup>7</sup>
- (2) My enthusiasm for dependency theory was equally brief. Indeed back there in the stone age, before subaltern studies was even heard of, I used to have something of a reputation as one of dependency theory's most eloquent critics.<sup>8</sup>
- (3) Also, I am, academically, a Marxist, but I have never been a communist or even a fellow traveller. My politics were, and still are, more or less solidly social democratic. In fact that was part of what attracted me to Nyerere's Tanzania.
- (4) I am surprised that Carole Pearce feels the need to remind me about globalization. It is, she says "the logical consequence of...the iron cage of capitalism from which no one can flee." I could not have put it better myself! (But have tried to in my recent book, *Seeking Social Justice Through Globalization: Escaping a Nationalist Perspective*, 2001.)
- (5) Equally, I was certainly *not* a "pioneer" of African Studies (whatever that is supposed to mean. Who was Ibn Khaldoun?) And the many who made this point were eminently justified in doing so.
- (6) However, those who read my article carefully will note that I said I was depressed about "what was happening *to* Africa" and by the state of African *studies*, when I left it. I never said that I was depressed by *Africa* or *African people* because that would have been the reverse of the truth. The years I spent in Africa as a young man were some of the happiest and most fulfilling of my entire life, and probably for much the same reasons that Lisa McNee finds doing field research on African arts and music so enriching still i.e. "the cheerful, friendly reactions that seem so typical of Africans even in the face of tragic, sometimes nightmarish circumstances." But I would go further than that. I would say that some of the people I met in rural East Africa

were among the most abundantly intelligent and life affirming human beings I have ever met in my life. But to reflect on that fact, and on the wealth of what I had learned from such people, was no antidote to my depression (yes, I speak figuratively, or in a common place rather than psychiatrically professional way here) about what was happening to such people, or about the failure of the academic field of which I was a part to remotely do them justice. On the contrary, reflection on the former merely deepened the latter.

There is much more I could say - about Mannoni and Fanon, about Wittgenstein (and why everybody should read him), about the way the problems we are discussing here interdigitate with problems in academic 'Black studies' programs in the USA and (to a lesser extent) in the UK- but I have more than exhausted my allotted wordage, so I will abstain.<sup>9</sup> Instead I will simply end with a quotation from one of the intellectual heroes of my youth - the great American political sociologist and historian, Barrington Moore Jr.

"No matter what his unavoidable premises and predilections, any student of human affairs is bound sooner or later to come across evidence that is profoundly disturbing. Then he has the task of coming to terms with it honestly"<sup>10</sup>

This is an observation that I profoundly endorse, but it is also *more* than an observation. If I read Moore's remark aright, it also provides a philosophical *criterion* of what it is to be a *serious* "student of human affairs" (which Moore himself most certainly was), i.e. if, as such a 'student', you have *never*, in your entire career, come across facts which you find "profoundly disturbing" then you probably just ain't serious!

#### Notes:

1. Quotations from "At Issue" contributions by Carole Pearce and Marc Epprecht, in this edition of the African Studies Quarterly.
2. Richard A. Joseph, "Facing Africa's Predicament: Academe Needs to Play a Stronger Role" (<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v49/i26/26b00701.htm>) pp.8-9.
3. Jane Guyer made some very apposite observations along these lines in her e mail responses to my article, as did Ike Okonta in his contribution to the CHE's on-line 'colloquy' about it.
4. "Eyes Wide Shut: Africanists and the Moral Problematics of Postcolonial Societies". See below for some more comments on this piece.
5. Patrick Wurster in particular seems to think that the only theoretical tools around in African studies in my day were either 'modernization' or 'dependency'. That's funny, because I always thought of myself as arguing, even at the time, that that was precisely *not* the case. See, for example, my "'Politics, Method and Evidence in the 'Kenya Debate' in Bernstein and Campbell (eds) *Contradictions of Accumulation in Africa*" (Sage, 1985) pp.115-52.
6. Rachel L.Swains, "Criticism of a Hero Divides Blacks" at: <http://www.iht.com/articles/101932.html>.

7. In my *Development and Underdevelopment in Historical Perspective; Populism, Nationalism and Industrialization* (Methuen, 1982). Not quite the first, Goran Hyden got in a couple of years ahead of me.
8. In the book referenced at 7 above, and in the 'Kenya Debate' piece referenced at 5 above.
9. I received, and have read, a number of (mainly) thoughtful and troubled messages about these matters, which were also raised by a number of contributor's to the CHE's colloquy. I deeply regret that I have no space to comment upon them here.
10. Barrington Moore Jr, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Penguin, 1969) p.522. On the same page one will find some very brief but profound remarks about the deep relationship between academic objectivity and personal honesty in the life of any scholar.

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