

Beyond Blame?

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The rhetoric Africanist scholars bring to bear on their work is insupportable. There may be little or no good news on this vast continent, but it is hard to see where else there is good news today. Is scholarship about bringing good tidings? The attribution of blame in scholarship is an entirely new phenomenon which brings impossible methodological problems (particularly when those blamed are dead) and even more impossible policy recommendations. The search for blame creates a flawed methodology. If African studies are moribund, let us enrich the methodology and put Africans in the lead in Africanist studies.

Anger, anxiety and despair is what a lot of people feel when they look at Africa over the last 30 years. As scholars, our work should be compassionate but dispassionate. Other passions are inappropriate motives in scholarship. By reducing scholarly open-mindedness they decrease our chances of bringing genuine illumination to a phenomenon, the kind of illumination that Weber sought when instructing us to make the familiar seem strange and the strange, familiar. Blaming evades the whole problem. The quick fix, a search for a simple causal connection leading to an agent to be blamed, is contrary to the spirit of scholarship.

CONNECTIONS, MODELS AND BORROWING

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. There is the matter of models, advice and practical suggestions and borrowings, for instance. Unexpected cultural alliances and positive inspiration has developed from this, such as the link between the growth of jazz in America in the early 20th century and the glorious outpouring of township jazz at the same time in South Africa.

Consider, for example, the fact that the large-scale state-led appropriation of wealth in Africa in the last 20 years took place around the same time as anti-socialist models—Thatcherism and libertarianism—were developing and taking hold in Western institutions and in the last gasps of state authoritarianism in the USSR and Asia. This combined to destroy the trade unions and the models of viable welfare states. 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 ideas of

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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 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.

CAUSALITY, AGENCY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES

Let us not restrict ourselves to a monocausal model that stratifies groups (perhaps according to a simple Marxian formulae) and conceives of power relations flowing down the same route. We all know social action is not *caused* in this, or any other, way. It is reached through the interaction of sets of causes, influences, pressures, alliances, and outmanoeuvring. Strategies of resistance are available to both groups and individuals, including subversion and what Merton called “innovation”. It is possible in any circumstance to initiate action. What of the effect of discourse and narrative, either in face-to-face interaction or through the mass media, which creates or recreates reality, opening up or shutting down avenues for action? What of the multiplicity of sites of power? What of the power of bureaucratic state organization in societies that lack a history of formal organization?

In short, the methodological choice is not between thunderously top-down monocausal accounts or purely voluntaristic models. The choice is rich, though it should be principled, not promiscuously eclectic. We ignore at our scholarly peril structural factors and the effect of history, such as the complex effect of the iteration of, say, rules and procedures, leading, as chaos theory shows, to self-replication at greater and smaller topographical scales. Scholars of large-scale phenomena could and should also appropriate the general findings of specific small-scale and ethnographic studies. If we paint with too broad a brush—cross-continent comparisons or even inter-continental comparisons— we obscure the very detail that makes the picture clear. I am unconvinced that a comparison of societies can yield very much genuine understanding: United Nations databases are full of comparative statistics that tell us very little.

SELF-ENTRAPMENT AND THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF ACTION

In addition our methodologies should take into account the self-entrapment of peoples and the reasons for this self-entrapment. For the last 50 years leftist intellectuals have undermined any incipient trust in the west, in white people and in capitalism, let alone any notion of disinterested virtue. This has had three important consequences: firstly, it has justified the growth of (anti-white) racism within Africa. Secondly, it has contributed to a belief that, as “capital is theft”, the only way to acquire wealth is to steal, or, in more sophisticated terms, to jump on the gravy train. Thirdly, it has contributed to an overwhelming mistrust of western governments and institutions. The clear lesson, even before we start to trade, is that western capitalist states are the lying enemies of Africa: how then can Africans take their advice, let alone their pernicious medicine?

If the Left has played this role in shaping the self-entrapping attitudes of non-westerners towards the west, (as well as trapping itself in knee-jerk stereotypes) this is not to say that the Left has brought about these attitudes. I point instead to a darker reality: the ways in which the good intentions, high moral values and indignation and pity can contribute to the net. The most

cursory examination of well-intentioned policies reveals the ways in which unintended bad effects are embedded in the good and, sometimes, good effects are embedded in bad policies. Scholarship needs to be enriched with such considerations and the energies of scholars should be put into the task of understanding and interpreting reality, rather than rubber-stamping prejudice.

GLOBALIZATION

Africans are no more free agents than are non-Africans. Globalization has brought us all closer together, creating mirror-image societies, not just in different continents and societies, but in different parts of the same state. Globalization creates its obverse, fragmentation. Of all the recent catastrophes in countries on the African continent, only poverty was an issue before 1980. Nevertheless these catastrophes have been shared by countries outside Africa. There cannot be any doubt that globalization has affected us. But this is a less than causal statement. "Globalization" is a shorthand reference to an agentless, largely unwilled, multifaceted phenomenon that no one can stop or control. It is the logical consequence of what Weber so powerfully described as the iron cage of capitalism, from which no-one can flee.

WHAT DO AFRICANS SAY?

Africanist scholars bring their own imaginations into the task they set themselves. These imaginations are circumscribed, like those of non-Africans, by their political and ethical commitments and their knowledge. They do not need another barrier. One salient imaginary barrier that people draw around themselves or is drawn around them is "race." This high wall defines what is proper to either side. 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 off by avoiding generalizations about Africa). Such concepts are dangerous and damaging both to scholarship and to the self-respect of African people.

African scholars should be at the heart of African scholarship. Many intellectuals on the continent are stuck with rotten universities and demoralizingly 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. African studies should start by supporting African scholars, providing them with access to libraries through the Internet and massively publishing, critiquing and engaging with their work. Non-Africans should attend carefully to what they have to say and not refuse to listen through embarrassment or hurt. To start with, African scholars know (at least one) of the languages and the cultures, having been bathed in these from birth, and for this reason alone they should lead the research process. This is the only way for real scholarly illumination, texture, and density.

None of this solves the problem of Afro-pessimism. I believe it is not up to scholars to solve this problem. Pessimism, like blame, like optimism, has nothing to do with the task of understanding, describing and explaining reality.

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